

**The Far East as Resource:  
On Byung-Chul Han's and François Jullien's Critical Philosophy**

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**Abstract**

The turn to non-Western thought is a phenomenon among Western philosophers (such as François Jullien in France and Byung-Chul Han in Germany) in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, especially in the face of the development and expansion of neoliberal capitalism that has led to mental pathologies and ecological and financial crisis. From the late 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards, many critical social philosophers have turned to ideas from the Far East as a resource to help analyze, criticize, and find a way out of the crisis of global neoliberal capitalism. Byung-Chul Han, a Korean philosopher who teaches in Germany, has emphasized the role of Eastern philosophy, particularly in the Far East, as a resource for analyzing the global capitalist economy. Though he mobilizes the Far East as a resource for thinking, he does it differently from Jullien. This paper aims to analyze why the two thinkers, Han and Jullien, have different stances on the Far East. And to answer the question, this paper will go back to the traditions of critical theory and philosophy of ontology they differently belong to.

**Keywords:** the Far East, Chinese philosophy, François Jullien, Byung-Chul Han, resource

**Introduction**

The turn to other non-Western ideas has been a trend in the Western academic world. What has been called the Ontological Turn in anthropology has turned to indigenous ontology in response to a more Western-centered approach to thinking, such as in the work of Phillippe Descola, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Tim Ingold, etc. These non-Western thoughts include Ancient Chinese philosophy and African, American Indian, and Amazonian wisdom. These ideas have been mobilized to react and help provide solutions to the contradictions and crises within the current stage of global capitalism and ecological crisis in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The turn from Western philosophy and the return to non-Western thoughts is an emerging trend in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries (See Lloyd and Zhao, 2018).

Contemporary crises, including economic, pathological, ecological, and political crises, become topics of contemporary philosophy and social theory. The Ontological Turn in anthropology directly tackles Climate Change and tries to find a way out of the crisis. French theorists like François Jullien view globalization or global uniformism as a crisis of humanity. Global uniformity is eroding the universal common value. In addition, Byung-Chul Han, the Korean-born philosopher, has become a well-known thinker who criticizes digital

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capitalism. The digital economy has completely failed to help lead to more freedom and democracy and it brings about mental pathologies such as depression and panic. One task of contemporary critical philosophy is to find the way out of this crisis. Han is an important contemporary philosopher along with Boris Groys, Franco Bifo Berardi, Yuk Hui, and Matteo Pasquinelli who encounter the problems that humanity is facing in the digital world.

This paper would like to point out Han's philosophical base in comparison with Jullien in relation to their respective returns to the Far East as intellectual resources for a critical understanding of globalization. In *Shanzhai: Dekonstruktion auf Chinesisch*, a book published in German in 2011 and translated into English in 2017, Han points to Chinese philosophical thinking as a resource for understanding global capitalism. In the opposite direction, Jullien has used Chinese philosophy as a tool to critique Western metaphysics. With such contrasting views, we can see that they have opposite stances despite their shared focus on returning to Chinese philosophy.

This article will be divided into three parts as follows: The first part outlines the analysis of global capitalism in their work. This will serve as a basis for further understanding the critical thinking they both have. The second part compares Han's and Jullien's ontological foundations on three topics including perspective on the Other, the role of critical theory and community, and views on social change. And the last part will answer the question of how the two thinkers articulate their intellectual stances on the Far East and why they end up with opposing views.

## Outline of the Critique of Capitalism

Critical theory has developed in responses to each phase of the evolution of capitalism. An analysis of the capitalist system and the theory of change cannot be separated from the development of capitalism. From the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, critical theory was born out of a humanist foundation (Anderson, 1976). Foucault (in Chomsky & Foucault, 2006) traced the birth of human nature in the 18<sup>th</sup> century; since then, the concept of human essence/nature became widespread as a core idea of modernity. According to Georg Lukács, the Hungarian humanist, human "nature here refers to authentic humanity, the true essence of a man liberated from the false, mechanizing forms in society: man as a perfected whole who has inwardly overcome, or is in the process of overcoming, the dichotomies of theory and practice, reason and the senses, form, and content; a man whose tendency to create his forms does not imply an abstract rationalism which ignores concrete content; man for whom freedom and necessity are identical" (Lukács, 1971, pp. 136-137). Based on this essentialist idea, the critique of capitalism was a critique of the commodity and the machine which were placed as an opposite and a threat to human essence. This is what Lukács called objectification and reification which is the condition that "modern critical philosophy springs from the reified structure of consciousness" (Lukács, 1971, pp. 110-111). Machinic dominance objectifies human beings and reduces them to mere objects of production.

The rise of Structuralism in the 1960s and 1970s was a terminal period that started to question and challenge humanist traditions in philosophy. Structuralism directly attacks the essentialist core of humanism. Louis Althusser was one of the structuralists who pointed out that the concept of the Subject is an illusion in itself. According to Althusser, "the category of the

subject is only constitutive of all ideology insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of ‘constituting’ concrete individuals as subjects” (Althusser, 1984, p. 45). There is no free Subject, but only subjection to an ideology. This idea directly attacked Lukács and also Jean-Paul Sartre at the time. According to Althusser, Foucault, and the structuralists, the concept of human essence is problematic in itself. There is no thing’s essence, only a subject that is constructed by structures. Althusser’s critical theory laid the ground for further theoretical development in the following decades. During the same period, American academia turned toward identity politics which also distanced itself from essentialism. It was also the rise of identity politics and cultural studies in the English-speaking world. This helped to wipe essentialism from the academic scene and turned the focus on the concept of identity and differences. In terms of politics, there was a rise of new social movements which questioned the economicistic concept of the working class. In short, the 1980s ended essentialism in critical theory, and the hope to overthrow capitalism was over.

In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, critical theory was reborn as a reaction to neoliberal capitalism. The financial crisis in 2008 was a catalyzing event that helped critical theorists turn to Marxism and the problem of revolution. The revitalization of Marxism has led to the rise of a thousand schools of Marxism which have two main goals; first, to give a new theory of capitalism; and, second, to provide an updated theory of the revolutionary subject (Bidet & Kouvelakis, 2009; Keucheyan, 2013). During this period, Gilles Deleuze (with Félix Guattari) was an inspiring figure who gave a new and up-to-date theoretical tool to analyze the current stage of global capitalism. According to Deleuze and Guattari (1984; 1987), global capitalism is not territorializing, but continuously deterritorializing. It stops being transcendentalizing and stops hierarchicalizing things but expands immanently without a center. This is what Deleuze and Guattari called the Body-Without-Organ (BWO) to the extent that the current stage of capitalism has no center and no hierarchical organism. It can create new organs and suddenly destroy them to zero degrees again. That’s why capitalism has no rigid structure or organism.

According to Andrew Culp (2016), there are two interpretations of Deleuze; *Happy Deleuze* and *Dark Deleuze*. The Happy Deleuze is the one who propagates the metaphysics of positivity which establishes “a whole of canon of joy. In the canon of joy, the cosmos is a complex collection of assemblages produced through ongoing differentiation processes. The effect of the Joyous Deleuze’s image of thought is a sense of wonder, accompanied by the enjoyment of creating concepts that express how the world really exists.” On the contrary, the Dark Deleuze “refashions a revolutionary Deleuze: revolutionary negativity in a world characterized by compulsory happiness, decentralized control, and overexposure” (Culp, 2016, p. 2). Han’s Deleuze is a positive one who was a thinker that follows the logics of capitalism. For Han, Deleuze’s philosophy of immanence “is the *void*, which can neither be psychologized nor subjectivized. Immanent life is *lighter, and richer – indeed, freer* – for such emptiness” (Han, 2017b, p. 86). According to Han, Deleuzean philosophy is monistic. There is no layer, no structure, no relationship between subject and object, no self and the Other. Only flat ontology exists. Therefore, to Han, Deleuze is not an alternative to global capitalism.

Contrary to Han, for Jullien, the GLOBAL of globalization is disastrous. Globalization does not create an unbounded flat world but establishes uniformity and hierarchy. As Jullien said in his book *On the Universal*, “the uniform is a concept of production (such as the standard or the stereotype), not of reason. It arises not from a necessity but convenience: it is less costly because

it is produced on an assembly line" (Jullien, 2014, pp. 10-11). That's why uniformity is an economic and management logic and such logic is common in capitalism. Such uniformity obsesses with the repetition of the One and repeatedly destroys the plural and the multiples (Jullien, 2021, pp. 1-7). The repetition of the One has resulted in uniformity and hierarchy which might happen in the form of the dualism of Two or more than Two hierarchism. This is a European legacy inherited from Greek philosophy, Roman law, and Christianity (See the detailed discussion on the Western legacies in Esposito, 2018). All of the traditions tend to promote the idea of uniformity and hierarchy. Therefore, today's capitalist world is the product of Western metaphysics. So, this tradition of thought must be radically challenged. Even though we can learn from the West, the West alone is not enough. Learning from other or multiple traditions is urgent now. For Jullien, globalization is not monistic, as Han believes, but hierarchical. Therefore, Jullien's analysis of the globalized world and philosophy of pluralism and immanence is more similar to the Dark Deleuze than the happy one. And it aims to radically negate the global uniformity of globalization, not to follow its logic.

Byung-Chul Han	François Jullien	
The Global	Monistic/Flat	Uniformity/Hierarchy
Immanence	(Deleuze's) Immanence is emptiness.	Immanence is pluralistic and radical.
Solution	Back to Humanism	Beyond Humanism
		(and Structuralism)

In short, the differences between Han and Jullien in three points must be emphasized here. First, as Han portrays global capitalism as flat and monistic, Jullien views the global as uniform and hierarchical in many aspects. Next, though Deleuze's philosophy of immanence becomes an inspiration for anti-capitalism today, there are different interpretations. As Han criticizes immanence as a capitalist logic, Jullien, akin to Deleuze, tends to think of immanence as radical and critical of the global economy. Finally, Han, like Lukács and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century humanists, urges us to go back to (Western) humanism as a foundation of the critique of capitalism, while Jullien (and Deleuze) tends to go beyond essentialism or humanism at all costs. By welcoming non-Western thought which is anti-transcendentalist, Jullien turns to Ancient Chinese philosophy as an intellectual resource for thinking beyond the global economy. Though Han and Jullien have an agreement that the Far East is a resource, by leaning on radically different traditions of ontological thinking, their respective stances on the Far East will be sharply distinct.

## On Different Ontological Foundations

This part aims to show how Han's and Jullien's different views on the globalized world are informed by their different views of ontology. While Han derives his critical theory from German phenomenology which is based on the dualistic ontology which divides Being and the world,

Jullien's philosophy, based on immanent thought, rests on pluralist ontology. As a result, this difference in the view on the ontology of Han and Jullien leads to their completely different views on the Far East, which will be elaborated on later in the final part of the paper. Here I will compare Han's and Jullien's critical theory on three points; first, the perspective on the Other and the problem of the relationship between self and the Other; second, an alternative to globalization and the role of critical theory; and last, debate on what change and transformation we need today.

### Problematizing the Other

According to Han, "The Other as a secret, the Other as a temptation, the Other as eros, the Other as desire, the Other as hell and the Other as pain disappears" (Han, 2018, p. 1). The Other is a necessary condition of self-formation. But global capitalism tends to destroy and exclude the Other and focuses on establishing the Self which is based on sameness. In short, global capitalism rests on governmentality that focuses on sameness rather than differences. As a result, "The Same lacks a dialectical counterpart that can limit and form it, and thus proliferates into a formless mass" (Han, 2018, p. 3). This fear of negativity of the Other becomes an enemy to human beings as a being-in-the-world-with-the-Other. "In the hell of sameness, *no desire for the Other* is possible" (Han, 2018, p. 8).

To Jullien, the Other is not an absolute being separated from the Self. Self and the Other share spaces and places in the world. They mutually establish each other in the interspaces. Though there is a divide between things, all the things can share and commonize with each other. It is because all things are not distinct or separated from each other from the beginning. It is the undifferentiated state in that none is absolutely different from the others. Otherness is something that does not exist in the first place because of the original non-dualist state but Jullien conceptualizes the Other as an "absence," in which something disappears, that coexists with "presence," in which the others appear. The relationship between absence and presence is not the same thing as self and the Other. Something can be presented because the other is absent (Jullien, 2012; and see Derrida, 1976). The otherness is either to be or not to be because it is all affirmed and not affirmed at the same time. Similarities and differences, and separation or opposition, are not the original state, but the product of the formation of relationships that are later created.

In short, for Han, global capitalism is disastrous because it disintegrates the boundary and distance between self and the Other, which are fundamental ontology. But for Jullien, the fundamental ontology is not dualistic but exists as the undifferentiated. In contrast to Han, Jullien's main concepts do not derive from Phenomenology such as self and the Other but rather the concept of absence and presence from Ancient Chinese philosophy (See Cheng, 1994, pp. 41-59).

### Critical Theory, Community, and the Common

Han's solution is that while we must maintain boundaries and distance between self and the Other, we also need to welcome and hospitalize the Other. To welcome the Other is not decomposing an object into an emptiness that ends up being *the non-thing* (Han, 2022). In this sense, the separation between things is still ontologically important, but the task is to keep

it at a proper distance. This keeping the Other at a proper distance will prevent us from falling into the monist plane as global capitalism does. According to Han, today's global capitalism is a system that overpraises diversity and pluralities. But "diversity only permits differences that conform to the system; it constitutes an otherness that has been made consumable. And it perpetuates the Same more efficiently than uniformity does" (Han, 2018, p. 28). Celebration of diversity and differences is a trap that we need to avoid. To him, going back to dualism, not pluralism, is a real solution.

But for Jullien, countering the global uniformization and hierarchy is essential to focus on breaking down, or blurring, dividing lines and opposite poles. He urges us to return to the fundamental ontology, that is, the undifferentiated. It's not something that happens automatically. Rather, the undifferentiated common must be created through dialogue between subjects. According to Jullien,

*"Dia-logue brings about the gradual emergence of a shared field of intelligence, where each can begin to hear the other. ... By integrating the other's position within its own horizon, each in effect sets its own perspective into tension, withdrawing that perspective from the solitary self-evidence .... By listening to the other, from the exterior that is the other – each comes to perceive its own position, and consequently discovers that it is unilateral"* (Jullien, 2021a, p. 70).

The dialogue is therefore not the given but is a never-ending process of invention and recreation, and the result of the dialogue is the formation of the undifferentiated common which is singular and immanent to the specific relationship of each step of the dialogue. In the end, it is not the sameness (or difference), but the plurality of all things by means of which they can maintain their heterogeneity, along with still sharing something in common.

This is why Jullien (2021a, pp. 63-75) harshly criticizes communitarianism, which views the community as bounded and limited. According to Jullien, the community is therefore different from the common. While the community is pre-given, the common is a result of continuous actions and the unending process of co-creation. In this sense community is a state which tends to close itself and draw a dividing line between us and them. Here I propose that this communitarian legacy still exists in Han's critical philosophy. Therefore, this is the political difference between Han and Jullien. For Jullien, the common is an open state without any exclusion. Although there is tension within the formation process of the common, it is not a permanent and fixed state. This non-fixation of the common allows itself to commonize in rather infinite ways. Therefore, the creation of the common, or the commonization, that is open to pluralities and non-fixed is the ultimate goal of opposing today's global uniformism.

### What kind of change do we need?

Following the Kantian inspiration, Han proposes that

*"It is, therefore, necessary to invent a universal order that also opens up to the singular. That singular, which irrupts violently into the system of the global, is not the Other who would permit a dialogue"* (Han, 2018, p. 15).

While real change is a rupture as an event, changes in the capitalist world are vague and too gradual which in itself is anti-event. No breaking point can be noticed. Without a point or a break, thinking and truth cannot be formed in today's society. To Han (2018, p. 4), "True thought is eventful." But the global economy destroys the possibility of true thought. Accordingly, the Other is a source of true thought and event. As global capitalism excludes the Other as negativity from thinking, the pursuit of truth as the mission of philosophy is made impossible. Therefore, for Han, the revival of truth in the post-truth world has to bring the Other as negativity back in. His conceptions of truth and event come directly from Western philosophy which perceives change as discontinuity and rupture (See Badiou, 2006). Whereas Jullien perceives the formation of the common as anti-capitalist, and to commonize is a long, silent, and gradual process rather than a sudden rupture. According to Jullien,

*"In Chinese thought transformation is global, progressive, and situated in duration, resulting from a correlation of factors. Since 'everything' within it transforms itself, it is never sufficiently differentiated to be perceptible. We do not see the wheat ripen, but we do notice its result when it is ripe and should be cut" (Jullien, 2011, p. 8).*

The sharply distinct perspectives on these three points between Han and Jullien are significant here. Accordingly, this part is the background for what I would like to argue in this paper. In the final part, I will answer the main question of this paper: Though Han and Jullien turn back to Chinese philosophy and the Far East, why did they do it in opposite ways? On the one hand, Han welcomes the Far East as *a resource for analysis* of global capitalism, Jullien, on the other hand, exploits the Far East in a more radical way as *a resource for a critique* of the global economy.

### Why and Why Not to The Far East?

For Jullien, philosophical ideas as part of culture are intellectual resources, which means things that "do not belong, but one available to all. They go to whoever takes the trouble to exploit them" (Jullien, 2021b, p. 50). An idea as a resource is no one's property but "it retains a measure of potential because it counts on a future in which to deploy, a resource is not something to delimit or define from the start" (Jullien, 2021b, p. 14). So, resources are common to all. Everyone can use or exploit them to build something in the future. That's why we can learn or use the potentialities in cultures that are ours and which are different from ours. To think of culture as a resource is to undermine identity- or truth-thinking. Culture is not identity or dogmatic truth. It is not limited to use but is free for all. So, resources are plural and multiple, not identity or the One's property. Moreover, there are always MANY resources within Christianity, Buddhism, the West, and the Far East. This is the starting point to reconsider the potential of the Far East as an intellectual resource in contemporary critical theory. My argument is that both Jullien and Han use the Far East as *a resource for thinking*. While Jullien attacks the dogmatism of the West by exploiting the Far East as a resource, Han takes a detour to the Far East in order to analyze global capitalism.

To Han, "Chinese philosophy is deconstructivist from the outset to the extent that it breaks radically with Being and essence" (Han, 2017a, p. 2). According to the Chinese, there is no concept

of beginning and creation, because there is no God. There is the eternal essence of Man or Nature but there is only human essence which “is moveable, adjustable, and provisional” (pp. 5) Contrary to the West or Greek-inherited thoughts, Chinese thought does not lean on the dualistic mode of thinking. No opposition between Nature and Culture, Subject and object, Man and non-human, Self and the Other, etc. According to Han (2017a, pp. 11-13), “Far Eastern thought *begins with deconstruction.*” It has no Being, but “only multiform, multilayered *process.*” That’s why “a Chinese masterpiece never remains the same in itself … Rather it is *fluid.* The *trace* makes it *fluid.* The *trace* is opposed to *presence*” (Han, 2017a, p. 13). Such Chinese deconstructionism is the same logic as global capitalism.

For Han, Chinese capitalism is not specific to China or Chinese culture, but it becomes universalizing by dismantling the boundary between the West and the East. Therefore, Chinese philosophy is in accordance with global capitalism. Consequently, deconstructionism in Chinese philosophy is an enemy of human nature. It destroys binary oppositions which have shaped the world from the beginning. For Han, who is dissatisfied with Deleuze’s and Guattari’s immanent philosophy, global capitalism is a system that extremely accelerates the process of flattening the world. There is no more distance and boundary between self and Others in this flat world. As “being-human means being-connected to Others … the abolition of distance does not create more closeness, but rather destroys it” (Han, 2018, pp. 5-6). There is no differentiation between the Self and the Other. No layer and no deep structure. Only a flat world. It follows that “in hypercommunication, everything is mixed with everything else. The boundary between inside and outside becomes increasingly permeable” (Han, 2018, p.28). Global capitalism with *Chinese characteristics* is being universalized and becoming a threat to human nature. According to Han, handling this problem is an urgent task of contemporary critical theory.

In contrast, Jullien’s immanent philosophy views Chinese thought as a resource for critique. There are lessons we can learn from the Ancient Chinese in the time of the current global crisis. According to Jullien (2012, p. 10), “Chinese thought de-subjectifies as much as it de-objectifies and thus allows us to clear a path in language and to dissolve these opposites.” Like Deleuze’s immanent thought, Jullien’s ontology is not based on duality or binary opposition. Fundamentally, Chinese philosophy starts from a stage at which there is no differentiation between self and others, between subject and object, and between nature and culture (See Daston, 2019; Descola, 2013). This is what Jullien calls *the nonobject* which means “the undifferentiated and, as a result, cannot be fixed or represented, cannot have the consistency of an in-itself, cannot be composed of ‘being’” (Jullien, 2012, p. xv). The undifferentiated

*“is ‘empty,’ devoid of differentiating marks but, starting from it, a certain effect constantly does its work, a certain reality arises, but without ever becoming saturated or exhausted. … It is the foundationless fount from which everything emerges, or rather seems to emerge”* (Jullien, 2012, p. 29).

This emptiness of the undifferentiated is, as I’ve already stated above, what Han is not satisfied with in Deleuze’s immanent philosophy. According to Han, Being is always being-in-the-world which must be at least a differentiation between being *and* the world or being *and* the others. To Han, the One has to become Two, but for Jullien (and Deleuze) the One must become multiple and plural, and, then, become the common one again. In my opinion, Han confused monism, in Deleuze’s analysis of capitalism, with pluralism. His mistake is a result of the fact that

he misinterpreted Deleuze's pluralism as monism. According to Han, Deleuze is a thinker of capitalism, not an anti-one. To Han, as capitalism is monistic, anti-capitalism must not be dualistic. However, according to Deleuze and Jullien, the critique of capitalism must go beyond dualism and align itself with pluralism.

To conclude, to Jullien, Chinese philosophy based on the ontology of undifferentiated is a resource for critique. It allows us to be able to find the way out of global uniformism. Chinese thought is a valuable resource for a critique of the global economy because it brings us back to "the foundationless fount from which everything emerges." My argument here is that though Jullien agrees with Han that the Far East is a resource for thinking, they do so in opposite directions. While Han views the Far East as *a resource for analysis* of the current stage of capitalism, Jullien proposes that the Far East can be mobilized as *a resource for critique*.

## Conclusion

This paper argues that, although Han views Chinese philosophy as having the characteristics of deconstructionism, Chinese philosophy is incapable of counteracting the expansion of the global economy and neoliberalism. Today's global capitalism is deconstructivist in itself. One task of critical philosophy is to encounter the deconstructive capacities of global capitalism. To Han, it is absolutely wrong to deconstruct the dualism between subject and object; instead, we must salvage and reinvent the original duality to render the digital economy's deconstructivism inoperable. In this respect, Han's argument is distinct from Jullien's. Jullien sees that responding to the state of globalization requires Chinese deconstructivism in order to break the stark boundary between opposing parties and form pluralistic interspaces that would allow all people or subjects to have in common. This way of thinking requires the demolition of dualistic essentialism to lead to a common, or commoning, that everyone can share. Unlike Jullien's interpretation of Chinese philosophy as an alternative to uniformity of the global economy, Han's proposal leads to the opposite, that is, he offers us a return to the "before" state of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century where the modern world is firmly based on dualism (and humanist essentialism). In this sense, while Jullien persuades us to escape the dualism of the Western world and to learn from the Far East's deconstructionism, Han warns us of the danger of the Far East's deconstructionism and argues for returning to the West. This is how differently the two thinkers perceive the Far East as resource.

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