# The palliative society



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## **The Palliative Society**

### **Pain Today**

Byung-Chul Han

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polity

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#### **Dedication**

Of all the corporeal feelings, pain alone is like a navigable river which never dries up and which leads man down to the sea. Pleasure, in contrast, turns out to be a dead end, wherever man tries to follow its lead.

Walter Benjamin\*

## **Algophobia**

Tell me your relation to pain, and I will tell you who you are! This line from Ernst Jünger can be applied to society as a whole. Our relation to pain reveals what kind of society we are. Pain is a cipher. It contains the key to understanding any society. Every critique of society must therefore provide a hermeneutics of pain. If pain is left to medicine, we neglect its character as a sign.

Today, a universal algophobia rules: a generalized fear of pain. The ability to tolerate pain is rapidly diminishing. The consequence of this algophobia is a *permanent* anaesthesia. All painful conditions are avoided. Even the pain of love is treated as suspect. This algophobia extends into society. Less and less space is given to conflicts and controversies that might prompt painful discussions. Algophobia also takes hold of politics. The pressure to conform and to reach consensus intensifies. Politics accommodates itself to the demands of this palliative zone and loses all vitality. 'There is no alternative': this is a political analgesia. The vague 'centre ground' has a palliative effect. Instead of argument and competition over the better ideas, there is a surrender to systemic compulsion. Post-democracy, palliative democracy, is spreading. This is why Chantal Mouffe demands an 'agonistic politics' that does not shy away from debate.<sup>2</sup> Palliative politics is incapable of implementing *radical* reforms that might be painful. It prefers quick-acting analgesics, which only mask systemic dysfunctionality and distortion. Palliative politics lacks the courage to endure pain. So all we get is more of the same.