



Szymon
WOZNICA

Trapped in One's Own Warmth –
in the Spirit of Pierre Bourdieu.

Middle-Class Homeostasis in the 21st Century●

Homeostasis of the Middle Class in the 21st Century

Trapped in Its Own Warmth

— journalistic version —

Szymon Woźnica

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Note: references to the concepts and names of Pierre Bourdieu, Byung-Chul Han, Nancy Fraser, Eva Illouz and others are descriptive and interpretive in nature — they do not imply authorization or co-authorship.

This publication is a version rewritten in journalistic language, intended for readers outside the academy. The theses and conclusions remain consistent with the second edition; what has changed is the register, not the content.

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A Note from the Author

Why This Version Is Different

The first version of this book was a long, technical argument. I wrote it with the anxiety of a researcher who knows that if he gets a single footnote wrong, someone will catch him out for it. It was a defensive language. An academic cloak, lined with quotations and tables.

After it was published, I started getting emails I didn't know how to answer. They came from people who hadn't studied sociology, who had never read Han or Bourdieu, and who nonetheless knew exactly what the book was about. They wrote things like: "you described my office," "you described the last three years of my life," "you described my mother, and I don't know what to do with that."

That was when I understood that a theory a cashier, a teacher, a nurse, or a middle manager cannot read — does not exist. It exists within the milieu of those who create it, and that milieu is, paradoxically, exactly the one this book is about: a closed bubble, warm and impermeable.

This version, then, is an attempt to step out of that bubble. The same theses, the same conclusions, the same arrangement of chapters — but written in language as if I were telling a friend about it on the train from Warsaw to Kraków. Without walls of citations. Without the appendix on Polish sociology, which had its place in the academic edition but here would blow up the pace. Without the long,

technical chapters on the computer simulation — of that simulation, the appendix keeps only what really follows from it for the reader.

The footnotes stay, though sparser. The concepts stay. The diagnosis stays. Only the temperature at which I serve them changes.

The book is about the same thing it always was: about a middle class that defends its own warmth so effectively that it suffocates everything in it that might be a future. About the fact that exclusion no longer happens by shouting, but by atmosphere. And about why this quietest of all ways of excluding is at the same time the cruelest.

This is a book written for anyone who has ever felt that "something is off" — in the office, in a circle of friends, at a family dinner — and could not name it.

Naming is the first step to reclaiming language. Language is the first step to reclaiming agency.

Introduction

Homeostasis — The Middle Class Trapped in Its Own Warmth

I am not writing this book to tell, one more time, the story of how the world has split apart. We have all heard about social fractures by now. In a sense we live them every day: Warsaw versus the provinces, "coastal elites" versus "deplorables," progress versus tradition, city versus countryside.

The greatest change of the 21st century, it seems to me, lies elsewhere. The dividing lines today no longer run along political or purely economic borders. They run along thermal borders. We no longer ask "who is right" — we ask "who is compatible." Power no longer operates through law. It operates through climate.

That is why I called this book *Homeostasis*. In it I describe a system that has stopped fighting for a future and started fighting to maintain equilibrium: calm, comfort, soft predictability. Homeostasis is not an ideology. It is a way of life that has become a defense mechanism.

Let me start with a picture. Imagine a living room that is exactly 21 degrees. The lamps set to a warm hue. It looks friendly. Someone opens a window — in comes the cold, the smog, the noise of the street. The host's first reaction? Not a substantive debate about air quality. Not a question of

whether the street really exists. Just a wave of the hand and a sentence: "shut that, it's getting cold." That's all.

That single gesture contains this entire book. The middle class of the 21st century is exactly that host. It has built itself a room where it is pleasant — and it defends the temperature of that room with a determination that surprises it once it finally looks closely. It lets in no topics, no people, no emotions that might change that temperature. It doesn't shout. It doesn't exclude. It simply closes the window.

I owe a great deal here to Byung-Chul Han and his diagnosis of the burnout society. Han showed that we no longer live in an age of discipline but in an age of achievement — one in which no one beats us anymore, because we flog ourselves with the imperative of growth, optimization, and becoming "a better version of ourselves." That is true. But I have one serious quarrel with Han. Han claims that social immunology — the defense mechanism of the age — has died, because the "stranger" in the classical sense has vanished. In my view it has not died. It has changed its code. From the identity-based to the affective.

This mechanism is what I call, in the book, doxic immunology. It sounds academic — forgive me the word, but I need one precise term. It works like this: the protection of "our own" no longer happens through open violence, walls, barbed wire, or prohibition. It happens through the subtle

control of atmosphere. The system selects presences. It separates the "light" from the "heavy." It manages the vibe. The stranger is no longer an enemy to be destroyed. The stranger has become someone who is simply not admitted into circulation. The stranger is "cold."

In this new order, the crucial question becomes whom we want close to us. Who is "fun," "cool," "authentic" — and who is "stiff," "creepy," "not one of us." Power operates through the attractiveness of presence. Climate becomes politics. And the middle class — that tired, urban, well-educated class, English-speaking, the one that goes on mindfulness retreats — plays a central role in this process. It is "warm." It knows how to regulate tension, manufacture comfort, simulate normality. Except that it is at the same time utterly exhausted — and precisely for that reason it defends its warmth like a strategic resource.

The exhaustion I am writing about is not a side effect of capitalism. It has become its steering mechanism. An overloaded person has no strength for a conflict about the future. He clings desperately to whatever brings immediate relief. A community of goals gives way to a community of affect. Instead of politics, we get therapy. Instead of a dispute over resources — a dispute over tone. Instead of a civilizational project — mood management.

The mechanism is visible both in Poland and in the United States, though in each place it speaks a different language.

In Poland the access code is often "Europeanness" — used as a filter on circulation. In the US — "wokeness," used as a tool of distinction. The structure, however, is strikingly similar. In both cases the point is one thing: to maintain the affective status quo. The culture war, from this perspective, is theater rather than real revolution. It is safe emotion, in which one can bathe as long as it does not disturb the room's temperature.

There are, however, stimuli that can be neither simulated nor neutralized by aesthetics. The war in Ukraine. The climate crisis. The swings in energy prices. These are stimuli I call cold: too real, too costly, demanding hard decisions. And decisions, in the age of homeostasis, are unwelcome. Hence the middle class's twofold reaction: either soft denialism ("I know, but I can't deal with it anymore"), or performative care — gestures that soothe the conscience without changing anything.

This book's ambition is simple. I want to describe a mechanism in which there are no longer strangers in the old, hostile sense. There are only those we do not invite to the party. Only when we see this process will we understand why democracy weakens without a bang. Why — even though elections are still held, parliaments still sit, and freedom of speech is formally protected — we live with the feeling that something essential is passing us by.

What passes us by is the dispute. The real dispute. The dispute that would actually settle something. It disappeared not because someone banned it — it disappeared because it became rude. Mood hygiene took the place of politics.

This is the question I want to leave you with at the outset: how do you survive in homeostasis while being "cold"? A conservative bringing heavy topics. A precarious worker reminding everyone of real poverty. A person without the code, without the right accent, without knowledge of the latest podcasts. Someone whose presence demands effort from the group.

I will give my answer at the end. Or rather, I won't — because this book ends not with a prescription but with a diagnosis. Homeostasis loves prescriptions. It loves everything that closes a subject. A diagnosis that promises nothing and closes nothing is, to it, a foreign body. I hope it is one for you too.

Chapter 1

Han Was Right — But Not Entirely

The burnout society as the forefield of a new immunology

Byung-Chul Han has a rare gift. He can name an epoch by touching its most painful nerve. When he writes about the "burnout society," he is not producing one more academic definition — he is diagnosing a state we feel in our bodies before we manage to name it. You don't need to read the statistics. It's enough to listen to the conversations in corporate kitchens, to overhear colleagues at lunch, to hear what parents really say once they are left alone with their coffee. "I have no strength left" has stopped being a private sentence. It has become the sentence of the age.

Han begins with a brutal distinction. Earlier centuries were defined by viral and bacterial diseases — an attack "from outside." Our century is defined by neuronal conditions: depression, ADHD, burnout. These are not diseases of an enemy. They are diseases of excess. In a world that, instead of "you must not," constantly says "you can," violence has not disappeared. It has turned inward. No one stands over us with a whip anymore. We flog ourselves with the imperative of growth, of optimization, of becoming "a better version of ourselves." Here Han is entirely right: contemporary power has stopped beating us and started "activating" us.

In the same intellectual move, however, Han advances a thesis I have to dispute. He claims that the 20th century was an "immunological century" — built on a clear division into the familiar and the foreign, the inside and the outside. In the age of globalization and networks — he argues — this paradigm wears out, because "otherness" fades away. The world becomes smooth, stripped of negativity. The stranger ceases to be an enemy; at best he becomes an exotic curiosity for the tourist with a camera.

And this is exactly where we part ways. I believe Han declared the death of immunology far too early. The fact that classical identity-based immunology — built on the hard borders of race, nation, hostile ideologies — has vanished does not mean that the defense mechanisms dispersed. They did not die. They changed their code. From the identity-based to the affective.

Imagine the difference between a wall and a smart air filter. A wall is visible. It has a beginning and an end. You can go around it, tear it down, bomb it. An air filter is silent. It works in the background. No one knows when it switches on. You only know that you are breathing good air — and that it really is good, because something has been removed from it. Only you no longer remember what.

That is how contemporary immunology works. The stranger is no longer the one who must be destroyed. The stranger is the one who is not admitted into circulation.

Han is wrong on one more point. He claims that negativity has disappeared. It has not. It has only changed form. The old negativity was visible: a border, barbed wire, a ban on entry, a propaganda poster. Today's negativity is quiet. It is "no chemistry," "the wrong vibe," "being toxic," "too heavy." In a society where everyone is on the edge of an energy deficit, the greatest threat is not physical attack but psychological discomfort. That is why contemporary institutions and groups defend not so much territorial borders as emotional temperature.

The Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito will be helpful here — a thinker Han criticizes but who, in my view, gives us the right tool. Esposito showed that immunization is not only a struggle against disease but a legal-political mechanism: the way a community protects itself, sometimes at the cost of the community itself. Han rejects this paradigm as outdated and militaristic. I propose reading Esposito differently — not militarily but therapeutically. Today's *immunitas* does not shout, "kill the strangers." It whispers, "let's protect our own from discomfort."

And that is the essence of the change. In the world of homeostasis, people are not excluded through hatred. They are excluded through protection. We protect the "good climate" in the team. The "safe space" in a discussion. The "good vibe" at the party. Someone who disturbs that state — a conservative bringing "heavy" topics, a precarious worker reminding everyone of misery, a person who is

"incompatible" in terms of energy — gets filtered out. He doesn't go to prison. He goes into oblivion: he stops being invited, tagged, seen. This is civil death in white gloves.

A classic example is recruitment. The American sociologist Lauren Rivera spent several years observing how elite law firms and consulting firms choose candidates. She expected to find merit-based criteria. She found the criterion of "someone you'd want to be stuck on a long business trip with." "Someone you'd pick up from the airport." That is not an exam in law or finance. It is an exam in being "one of us." And "us-ness" is defined affectively.

Han is right that the system needs flow, and that borders block it. My thesis is different: the system needs flow of a particular quality. Everything that is "rough," "cold," or that puts up resistance must be smoothed out or removed. That is why the 21st century is not the end of immunology but its totalization at the micro scale. Every recruitment in which a candidate is rejected for "lack of culture fit," every dinner where someone is left out because he's "creepy" — these are immunological acts. A thousand times smaller than war. A hundred thousand times more frequent.

Han is right: we have become a burnout society. But it is precisely this exhaustion that makes our defense mechanisms so tense. An exhausted organism — individual or social — has no strength for confrontation with the Other. Instead of fighting it (which costs energy), it simply avoids

it (which saves energy). That is the homeostatic strategy: minimize friction.

Let's sum up this first step. Han described a world in which otherness has vanished. I am describing a world in which otherness has become a stimulus that is simply not admitted into consciousness. Immunology has not died. It has become quieter, more elegant, and — most disturbingly — fully naturalized as care for "wellbeing."

In the next chapter I will show how this new, soft immunology works in practice. How we are ruled by something I call the dictatorship of the vibe — and why even the best-educated, most empathetic part of society cannot free itself from it.

About the Author

Szymon Woźnica (b. 1983, a graduate of the University of Wrocław) is a sociologist and systems analyst. He is the creator of the multi-volume research project Affective Feudalism, which combines classical critical theory with modern simulation tools (ABM). In his work he draws on the tradition of the Frankfurt School, Pierre Bourdieu, Byung-Chul Han, and Nancy Fraser. He focuses on the mechanisms of power, status, and pressure in the societies of the 21st century.

This work was prepared to the standard of Reproducible Research — the full ABM model is available to the scholarly community: <https://github.com/woznicaszymon-af/>

About the Project: Affective Feudalism

A project devoted to the analysis of contemporary forms of power, work, and conflict in the age of late capitalism. The author advances the thesis that the present social order can no longer be fully described solely through economic or institutional categories. The key regulatory resources today are affects: exhaustion and fear, shame and recognition, loyalty and emotional conflicts. They form the "infrastructure" of contemporary power and work.

The project is developed on three complementary levels:

1. An essayistic systemic diagnosis — describing the condition of contemporary society.
2. A full social theory — situated within the current of critical theory.
3. A formal operationalization — agent-based modeling (ABM) and code in Python.

This book — in its journalistic version — belongs to the first level. The academic version (second edition) additionally contains the empirical, statistical, and methodological appendices, as well as the supplement on Polish sociology, to which I refer readers seeking the full conceptual and bibliographic apparatus.

