

THE BURNOUT SOCIETY

BYUNG-CHUL HAN

Translated by ERIK BUTLER

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BEYOND DISCIPLINARY SOCIETY

Today's society is no longer Foucault's disciplinary world of hospitals, madhouses, prisons, barracks, and factories. It has long been replaced by another regime, namely a society of fitness studios, office towers, banks, airports, shopping malls, and genetic laboratories. Twenty-first-century society is no longer a disciplinary society, but rather an achievement society [*Leistungsgesellschaft*]. Also, its inhabitants are no longer "obedience-subjects" but "achievement-subjects." They are entrepreneurs of themselves. The walls of disciplinary institutions, which separate the normal from the abnormal, have come to seem archaic. Foucault's analysis of power cannot account for the psychic and topological changes that occurred as disciplinary society transformed into achievement society. Nor does the commonly employed concept of "control society" do justice to this change. It still contains too much negativity.

Disciplinary society is a society of negativity. It is defined by the negativity of prohibition. The negative modal verb that governs it is *May Not*. By the same token, the negativity of *compulsion* adheres to *Should*. Achievement society, more and more, is in the process of discarding negativity. Increasing deregulation is abolishing it. Unlimited *Can* is the positive modal verb of achievement society. Its plural form—the affirmation, "Yes, we can"—epitomizes

achievement society's positive orientation. Prohibitions, commandments, and the law are replaced by projects, initiatives, and motivation. Disciplinary society is still governed by *no*. Its negativity produces madmen and criminals. In contrast, achievement society creates depressives and losers.

On one level, continuity holds in the paradigm shift from disciplinary society to achievement society. Clearly, the drive to maximize production inhabits the *social unconscious*. Beyond a certain point of productivity, disciplinary technology—or, alternately, the negative scheme of prohibition—hits a limit. To heighten productivity, the paradigm of disciplination is replaced by the paradigm of achievement, or, in other words, by the positive scheme of *Can*; after a certain level of productivity obtains, the negativity of prohibition impedes further expansion. The positivity of *Can* is much more efficient than the negativity of *Should*. Therefore, the social unconscious switches from *Should* to *Can*. The achievement-subject is faster and more productive than the obedience-subject. However, the *Can* does not revoke the *Should*. The obedience-subject remains disciplined. It has now completed the disciplinary stage. *Can* increases the level of productivity, which is the aim of disciplinary technology, that is, the imperative of *Should*. Where increasing productivity is concerned, no break exists between *Should* and *Can*; continuity prevails.

Alain Ehrenberg locates depression in the transition from disciplinary society to achievement society:

Depression began its ascent when the disciplinary model for behaviors, the rules of authority and observance of taboos that gave social classes as well as both sexes a specific destiny, broke against norms that invited us to undertake personal initiative by enjoining us to be ourselves. . . . The depressed individual is unable to measure up; he is tired of having to become himself.¹

Problematically, however, Ehrenberg considers depression only from the perspective of the economy of the self: the social imperative only

to belong to oneself makes one depressive. For Ehrenberg, depression is the pathological expression of the late-modern human being's failure to become himself. Yet depression also follows from impoverished attachment [*Bindungsarmut*], which is a characteristic of the increasing fragmentation and atomization of life in society. Ehrenberg lends no attention to this aspect of depression. He also overlooks the *systemic* violence inhabiting achievement society, which provokes psychic infarctions. It is not the imperative only to belong to oneself, but the *pressure to achieve* that causes exhaustive depression. Seen in this light, burnout syndrome does not express the exhausted self so much as the exhausted, burnt-out soul. According to Ehrenberg, depression spreads when the commandments and prohibitions of disciplinary society yield to self-responsibility and initiative. In reality, it is not the excess of responsibility and initiative that makes one sick, but the imperative to achieve: the new *commandment* of late-modern labor society.

Ehrenberg wrongly equates the human type of the present day with Nietzsche's "sovereign man":

Nietzsche's sovereign man, his own man, was becoming a mass phenomenon: there was nothing above him that could tell him who he ought to be because he was the sole owner of himself.²

In fact, Nietzsche would say that that human type in the process of becoming reality en masse is no sovereign superman but "the last man," who does nothing but *work*. The new human type, standing exposed to excessive positivity without any defense, lacks all sovereignty. The depressive human being is an *animal laborans* that exploits itself—and it does so voluntarily, without external constraints. It is predator and prey at once. The *self*, in the strong sense of the word, still represents an immunological category. However, depression eludes all immunological schemes. It erupts at the moment when the achievement-subject is *no longer able to be able* [*nicht mehr können kann*]. First and foremost, depression is creative fatigue and exhausted ability [*Schaffens- und Könnensmüdigkeit*].

The complaint of the depressive individual, “Nothing is possible,” can only occur in a society that thinks, “Nothing is impossible.” No-longer-being-able-to-be-able leads to destructive self-reproach and auto-aggression. The achievement-subject finds itself fighting with itself. The depressive has been wounded by internalized war. Depression is the sickness of a society that suffers from excessive positivity. It reflects a humanity waging war on itself.

The achievement-subject stands free from any external instance of domination [*Herrschaftsinstanz*] forcing it to work, much less exploiting it. It is lord and master of itself. Thus, it is subject to no one—or, as the case may be, only to itself. It differs from the obedience-subject on this score. However, the disappearance of domination does not entail freedom. Instead, it makes freedom and constraint coincide. Thus, the achievement-subject gives itself over to *compulsive freedom*—that is, to the *free constraint* of maximizing achievement.³ Excess work and performance escalate into auto-exploitation. This is more efficient than allo-exploitation, for the feeling of freedom attends it. The exploiter is simultaneously the exploited. Perpetrator and victim can no longer be distinguished. Such self-referentiality produces a paradoxical freedom that abruptly switches over into violence because of the compulsive structures dwelling within it. The psychic indispositions of achievement society are pathological manifestations of such a paradoxical freedom.

PROFOUND BOREDOM

Excessive positivity also expresses itself as an excess of stimuli, information, and impulses. It radically changes the structure and economy of attention. Perception becomes fragmented and scattered. Moreover, the mounting burden of work makes it necessary to adopt particular dispositions toward time and attention [*Zeit- und Aufmerksamkeitstechnik*]; this in turn affects the structure of attention and cognition. The attitude toward time and environment known as “multitasking” does not represent civilizational progress. Human beings in the late-modern society of work and information are not the only ones capable of multitasking. Rather, such an aptitude amounts to regression. Multitasking is commonplace among wild animals. It is an attentive technique indispensable for survival in the wilderness.

An animal busy with eating must also attend to other tasks. For example, it must hold rivals away from its prey. It must constantly be on the lookout, lest it be eaten while eating. At the same time, it must guard its young and keep an eye on its sexual partner. In the wild, the animal is forced to divide its attention between various activities. That is why animals are incapable of contemplative immersion—either they are eating or they are copulating. The animal cannot immerse itself contemplatively in what it is facing

[*Gegenüber*] because it must also process background events. Not just multitasking but also activities such as video games produce a broad but flat mode of attention, which is similar to the vigilance of a wild animal. Recent social developments and the structural change of wakefulness are bringing human society deeper and deeper into the wilderness. For example, bullying has achieved pandemic dimensions. Concern for the good life, which also includes life as a member of the community, is yielding more and more to the simple concern for survival.

We owe the cultural achievements of humanity—which include philosophy—to deep, contemplative attention. Culture presumes an environment in which deep attention is possible. Increasingly, such immersive reflection is being displaced by an entirely different form of attention: hyperattention. A rash change of focus between different tasks, sources of information, and processes characterizes this scattered mode of awareness. Since it also has a low tolerance for boredom, it does not admit the profound idleness that benefits the creative process. Walter Benjamin calls this deep boredom a “dream bird that hatches the egg of experience.”¹ If sleep represents the high point of bodily relaxation, deep boredom is the peak of mental relaxation. A purely hectic rush produces nothing new. It reproduces and accelerates what is already available. Benjamin laments that the dream bird’s nests of tranquillity and time are vanishing in the modern world. No longer does one “spin and weave.” Boredom is a “warm gray fabric on the inside, with the most lustrous and colorful silks”; “[i]n this fabric we wrap ourselves when we dream.” We are “at home . . . in the arabesques of its lining.”² As tranquillity vanishes, the “gift of listening” goes missing, as does the “community of listeners.” Our community of activity [*Aktivgemeinschaft*] stands diametrically opposed to such rest. The “gift of listening” is based on the ability to grant deep, contemplative attention—which remains inaccessible to the hyperactive ego.

If a person experiences boredom while walking and has no tolerance for this state, he will move restlessly in fits and starts or go

this way and that. However, someone with greater tolerance for boredom will recognize, after a while, that walking as such is what bores him. Consequently, he will be impelled to find a kind of movement that is entirely different. Running, or racing, does not yield a new gait. It is just accelerated walking. Dancing or gliding, however, represent entirely new forms of motion. Only human beings can dance. It may be that boredom seized him while walking, so that after—and through—this “attack” he would make the step from walking to dancing. Compared with linear walking, straight ahead, the convoluted movement of dancing represents a luxury; it escapes the achievement-principle entirely.

The term *vita contemplativa* is not meant to invoke, nostalgically, a world where existence originally felt at home. Rather, it connects to the experience of being [*Seinserfahrung*] in which what is beautiful and perfect does not change or pass—a state that eludes all human intervention. The basic mood that distinguishes it is marveling at *the way things are* [*So-Sein*], which has nothing to do with practicality or processuality. Modern, Cartesian doubt has taken the place of wonder. Yet the capacity for contemplation need not be bound to imperishable Being. Especially whatever is floating, inconspicuous, or fleeting reveals itself only to deep, contemplative attention.³ Likewise, it is only contemplative lingering that has access to phenomena that are long and slow. Paul Cézanne, a master of deep, contemplative attention, once remarked that he could *see* the fragrance of things. This visualization of fragrances requires profound attention. In the contemplative state, one steps outside oneself, so to speak, and immerses *oneself* in the surroundings. Merleau-Ponty describes Cézanne’s mode of contemplatively observing a landscape as a kind of externalization or de-interiorization [*Entinnerlichung*]:

He would start by discovering the geological structure of the landscape; then, according to Mme Cézanne, he would halt and gaze, eyes dilated. . . . “The landscape thinks itself in me,” he said, “and I am its consciousness.”⁴

Only profound attention prevents “unsteadiness of the eyes” and yields the *composure* capable of “join[ing] the wandering hands of nature.” Without such contemplative composure, the gaze errs restlessly and finds expression for nothing. That said, art is “expressive action.” Even Nietzsche, who replaced Being with Will, knew that human life ends in deadly hyperactivity when every contemplative [*beschaulich*] element is driven out:

From lack of repose our civilization is turning into a new barbarism. At no time have the active, that is to say the restless, counted for more. That is why one of the most necessary corrections to the character of mankind that have to be taken in hand is a considerable strengthening of the contemplative element in it.⁵

THE SOCIETY OF TIREDNESS

Tiredness has a broad heart.

—Maurice Blanchot

As a society of activeness [*Aktivgesellschaft*], achievement society is slowly developing into a doping society. In the meanwhile, the negative expression “brain doping” has been replaced by “neuro-enhancement.” Doping makes it possible to achieve without achieving, so to speak. Now even serious scientists claim that it is irresponsible not to employ substances of this kind. A surgeon able to operate with greater concentration by using neuro-enhancers would make fewer mistakes and be able to save more lives. Nor is the general use of neuro-enhancers viewed as a problem. One need only ensure fairness—namely, by putting them at the disposal of all. If doping were also permitted in sports, it would degrade into a pharmaceutical race. For all that, simple prohibition cannot prevent both the body and the human being as a whole from becoming a performance-machine [*Leistungsmaschine*] that is supposed to function without disturbance and maximize achievement. Doping is just one *consequence* of this development, whereby being alive [*Lebendigkeit*] itself—an extremely complex phenomenon—is boiled down to vital functions and capacities.

As its flipside, the society of achievement and activeness is generating excessive tiredness and exhaustion. These psychic conditions characterize a world that is poor in negativity and in turn dominated by excess positivity. They are not immunological reactions presupposing the negativity of the immunologically Other. Rather, they are caused by a *too-much* of positivity. The excessiveness of performance enhancement leads to psychic infarctions.

Tiredness in achievement society is solitary tiredness; it has a separating and isolating effect. Peter Handke, in “Essay on Tiredness,”¹ calls it “divisive tiredness”: “already the two . . . were irresistibly recoiling, each into . . . private tiredness, not ours, but mine over here and yours over there” (8). This divisive tiredness strikes one “mute and blind [*mit Blickunfähigkeit*].” The isolated I [*das Ich*] fills the field of vision entirely:

Never in all the world could I have said to her: “I’m tired of you”—I could never have uttered the simple word “tired” (which, if we had both shouted it at once, might have set us free from our individual hells). Such tiredness destroyed our power to speak, our souls. (8)

Tiredness of this kind proves violent because it destroys all that is common or shared, all proximity, and even language itself: “Doomed to remain speechless, that sort of tiredness drove us to violence. A violence that may have expressed itself only in our manner of seeing, which distorted the other” (9).

Handke sets eloquent, seeing, reconciliatory tiredness in opposition to speechless, sightless, divisive tiredness. As “more of less of me” [*Mehr des weniger Ich*] (41), the first tiredness opens a *between* by loosening the strictures of the ego.² I do not just see the Other; rather, I also am the Other, and “[t]he Other becomes I” (38), too.³ The *between* is a space of friendliness-as-indifference, where “no one and nothing dominates or commands” (19).⁴ As the I grows smaller, the gravity of being shifts from the ego to the world. It is “tiredness that trusts in the world” [*weltvertrauende Müdigkeit*] (33),⁵ whereas I-tiredness—“solitary tiredness” (5)—is

worldless, world-destroying tiredness. The trusting tiredness “opens” the I and “makes room” (34) for the world. It reestablishes the “duality” that solitary tiredness destroys utterly. One sees, and one is seen. One touches, and one is touched: “tiredness as a becoming-accessible, as the possibility of being touched and of being able to touch in turn” (25). It makes lingering, abidance, possible in the first place. Less I means more world: “Now tiredness was my friend. I was back in the world again” (28).

Such “fundamental tiredness” (37) brings together all the forms of existence and coexistence that vanish in the course of absolutized activity. However, it hardly amounts to a state of exhaustion in which one proves unable to do anything. Instead, it represents a singular capacity. “Fundamental tiredness” *inspires*. It allows spirit/intellect [*Geist*] to emerge. Thereby, the “inspiration of tiredness” involves *not-doing*:

So let's have a Pindaric ode, not to a victor but to a tired man. I conceive of the Pentecostal company that received the Holy Ghost as tired to a man. The inspiration of tiredness tells them not so much what they should, as what they need not, be. (41)

Tiredness enables the human being to experience singular calm [*Gelassenheit*], serene not-doing. It is not a state in which the senses languish or grow dull. Rather, it rouses a special kind of visibility. Accordingly, Handke speaks of “candid tiredness,” which grants access to long and slow forms that elude short and fast hyperattention: “My tiredness articulated the muddle of crude perception . . . and with the help of rhythms endowed it with form—form as far as the eye could see” (29). All forms are slow. Each form is a detour. The economy of efficiency and acceleration makes them disappear. For Handke, deep tiredness rises to become a form of salvation, a form of rejuvenation. It brings back a sense of wonder into the world: “The tired Odysseus won the love of Nausicaä. Tiredness makes you younger than you have ever been. . . . Everything becomes extraordinary in the tranquillity of tiredness” (41).

Handke sets the hand at play—which does not grasp resolutely—in opposition to the laboring, gripping hand: “every evening . . . I watched the growing tiredness of the many small children . . . : no more greed, no grabbing hold of things, only playfulness” (42). Deep tiredness loosens the strictures of identity. Things flicker, twinkle, and vibrate at the edges. They grow less determinate and more porous and lose some of their resolution. This particular in-difference lends them an *aura of friendliness*. Rigid delimitation with respect to one’s surroundings is suspended: “in such fundamental tiredness, the thing is never manifested alone but always in conjunction with other things, and even if there are not very many, they will all be together in the end” (37). This tiredness founds a deep friendship and makes it possible to conceive of a community that requires neither belonging nor relation [*Verwandtschaft*]. Human beings and things show themselves to be connected through a friendly *and*. Handke sees this singular community, this community of singularities, prefigured in a Dutch still life:

I have an image for the “all in one”: those seventeenth-century, for the most part Dutch floral, still lifes, in which a beetle, a snail, a bee, or a butterfly sits true to life, in the flowers, and although none of these may suspect the presence of others, they are all there together at the moment, *my* moment. (38)

Handke’s tiredness is not “I-tiredness”; it is not the tiredness of an exhausted ego. He calls it “we-tiredness” (15). I am not tired “of you,” as he puts it, but rather I am tired “with you” (26): “Thus we sat—in my recollection always out of doors in the afternoon sun—savoring our common tiredness whether or not we were talking. . . . A cloud of tiredness, an ethereal tiredness, held us together then” (15).

The tiredness of exhaustion is the tiredness of positive potency. It makes one incapable of doing *something*. Tiredness that inspires is tiredness of negative potency, namely of *not-to*. The Sabbath, too—a word that originally meant *stopping* [*aufhören*—is a day of

not-to; speaking with Heidegger, it is a day free of all *in-order-to*, of all care. It is a matter of interval [*Zwischenzeit*]. After He created it, God declared the Seventh Day holy. That is, the day of in-order-to is not sacred, but rather the day of not-to, a day on which the *use of the useless* proves possible. It is a day of tiredness. The interval is a time without work, a time of, and for, play [*Spielzeit*]; it also differs from Heidegger's definition of time, which is essentially a matter of care and work. Handke describes this interval as a time of peace. Tiredness is disarming. In the long, slow gaze of the tired person, resolution [*Entschlossenheit*] yields to a state of calm. The interval, in-between time, is a period of in-difference as friendliness:

I have been speaking here of tiredness in peacetime, in the present interim period. In those hours there was peace. . . . And the astonishing part of it was that my tiredness seemed to participate in this momentary peace, for my gaze disarmed every intimation of a violent gesture, a conflict, or even of an unfriendly attitude, before it could get started. (29–30)

Handke conceives of an *immanent religion of tiredness*. “Fundamental tiredness” suspends egological isolation and finds a community that needs no kinship. Here a particular rhythm [*Takt*] emerges that leads to agreement [*Zusammenstimmung*], proximity, and vicinity [*Nachbarschaft*] without familial or functional connections: “A certain tired man can be seen as a new Orpheus; the wildest beasts gather around him and are at last able to join in his tiredness. Tiredness gives dispersed individuals the keynote” (41).⁶ The “Pentecostal company” that inspires not-doing stands opposed to the society of activity. Handke pictures it as “tired to a man” (41). It is a society of those who are tired in a special way. If “Pentecostal company” offered a synonym for the society of the future, the society to come might also be called a society of tiredness.