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A Review of *Burnout Society*

Burnout Society, by Byung-Chul Han, Stanford University Press, 2015, 72 pages, 978-0804795098, \$14.

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Since the second half of the 20th century, social theorists have attributed different names to the society they saw before them, stressing the features they judged to be decisive. Guy Debord coined the expression “society of the spectacle” (1967), Jean Baudrillard wrote about “consumer society” (1970), Ulrich Beck discussed “risk society” (1986) and, more recently, Christoph Türcke talked about “excited society” (2002). To these characterizations, Byung-Chul Han’s book adds the idea of “burnout society” – at least according to the translation into English by Erik Butler, as the original German title of the book actually refers to the “society of tiredness” (*Müdigkeitsgesellschaft*). Han was born in Seoul in 1959 and moved to Germany in the 1980s, where he developed his academic career: he studied Philosophy and German Studies at the universities of Munich and Freiburg, obtained his PhD at the latter, and currently teaches on occasion at Berlin University of the Arts. He develops his arguments in dialogue with authors as diverse as Friedrich Nietzsche, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Martin Heidegger, Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben, among others.

The core argument of Han’s book is that contemporary society requires more positivity and frenetic endeavor than it can ultimately sustain. The capacities of contemplation and resistance – which, in Han’s framing, constitute an interruption and are the *locus* of negativity – are nowadays cast aside by phenomena such as hyperactivity, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and a continuous demand for high performance, and multitasking. The prevalence of such demands in different fields (from work to friendships), Han argues, makes life into a series of unreflected reactions to stimuli. The required sort of attention is shallow, dispersive, and quickly changing. In the aggregate, instead of representing progress in civilization, these hyperactive processes signify civilizational regression: “Recent social developments and the structural change of wakefulness are bringing human society deeper and deeper into the wilderness” (p. 13). According to Han, the animal, when eating, copulating, or guarding its offspring, “is forced to divide its attention between various activities” (p. 12), and “[t]hat is why animals are incapable of contemplative immersion” (p. 12).

The two first chapters of the book engage in presenting what Han considers to be a double epochal change: The first one is the transition from an immunological age to a neuronal age and the second is the transition from a disciplinary society to an achievement society. Regarding the first change, Han argues that the last century was characterized by Medicine's fight against bacteria and viruses and, in the geopolitical realm, by the Cold War. Both phenomena imply a clear distinction "between inside and outside, friend and foe, self and other" (p. 1). According to Han, "[a]ttack and defense determine immunological action" (p. 1). Whereas, in the immunological age, the foe must be eliminated due to its otherness, the contemporary era is characterized by the disappearance of otherness and strangeness and by the arrival of post-modern *difference*: this no longer requires an obliteration of the other but rather neutralizes and assimilates it by means of consumption and hybridization. Immunological society was marked by the dialectics of negation, in which the affirmation of the self takes place through the negation of the other. Presently, according to Han, a reaction to the excess of positivity is taking place under the form of neuronal violence, which is concurrently systemic and self-imposed: "The violence of positivity does not deprive, it saturates; it does not exclude, it exhausts" (p. 7). Depression, ADHD and burnout syndrome are reactions to the saturation by omnipresent positivity. Burnout syndrome, writes Han, "occurs when the ego overheats, which follows from too much of the Same" (p. 7). Because, as Han stresses, "[a]ccording to Hegel, negativity is precisely what keeps existence [*Dasein*] alive" (p. 24).

Discussing the second transition – that is, the one from a disciplinary to an achievement society – Han engages in a debate with Foucault. He argues that disciplinary society was a society based on negativity, in which the latter presented itself as prohibition. In achievement society, "[p]rohibitions, commandments, and the law are replaced by projects, initiatives, and motivation" (p. 9). Its inhabitants "are no longer 'obedience-subjects' but 'achievement-subjects'. They are entrepreneurs of themselves" (p. 8). However, Han identifies continuity rather than rupture between these two paradigms, to the extent that the achievement-subject was duly prepared by the disciplinary stage.

At this point in the discussion, the question of freedom is presented as a central issue. Han considers that freedom, in its most profound sense, is connected to negativity: it means being free of the constraints imposed by the immunological other. If negativity gives way to positivity, freedom becomes self-referential. "Thus, the achievement-subject gives itself over to *compulsive freedom* – that is, to the *free constraint* of maximizing achievement" (p. 11). Exploiter and exploited, perpetrator and victim can no longer be distinguished, and this self-exploitation is more effective, "for the feeling of freedom attends it" (p. 11). Han argues that the "psychic indispositions of achievement society are pathological manifestations of such a paradoxical freedom" (p. 11). The depressed individual believes that nothing is possible precisely because achievement society promises them that anything is possible: "No-longer-being-able-to-be-able leads to destructive self-reproach and auto-aggression" (p. 11).

An unfolding of the opposition between activity and contemplation is another important leitmotiv in *Burnout Society*. Han refers to Arendt's discussion about *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa* through the lens of a Nietzsche-inspired critique. Arendt seeks to rehabilitate *vita activa* as opposed to *vita contemplativa*, which, according to her, has triumphed over the former. "According to Arendt, modern society – as a society of "laboring" [*Arbeitsgesellschaft*] – nullifies any possibility for action when it degrades the human being into an *animal laborans*, a beast of burden. Action, she maintains, occasions new possibilities, yet modern humanity

passively stands at the mercy of the anonymous process of living” (p. 17). However, Han claims that “Arendt’s explanation for the ubiquity of *animal laborans* does not hold up to recent social developments” (p. 17). He maintains that the “late-modern *animal laborans* is equipped with an ego just short of bursting” and “is anything but passive” (p. 17-18). Achievement society, Han argues, is precisely an active one, and “the loss of the ability to contemplate – which, among other things, leads to the absolutization of *vita activa* – is also responsible for the hysteria and nervousness of modern society” (p. 20). In itself, activity merely reaffirms that which already exists, making it “an illusion to believe that being more active means being freer” (p. 22). In contrast, Han sides with Nietzsche’s claim that *vita contemplativa* should be reinvigorated. He highlights the phrase from *Human, All Too Human*: “The active role as the stone rolls, in obedience to the stupidity of the laws of mechanics” (p. 22). The contemporary world is in need of pauses, of interruptions, in short, of negativity.

The corollary of Han’s discussion is the spread of tiredness and exhaustion throughout achievement society. This sort of tiredness renders people incapable of actually doing anything, and, to this extent, it differs from purposeless tiredness, which is connected to contemplation. The latter form of tiredness goes hand to hand with negativity – one clear representation is the interruption of all activities carried out on the Sabbath. Han’s book has the potential to frustrate the reader if one tries to understand why we should call our society a society of tiredness or burnout as the argument for this new label is shaky. Other questions he raises in the book such as the dawn of an achievement society or a neuronal age seem to have a greater significance in his analysis than tiredness or burnout. Notwithstanding, *Burnout Society* is a thought-provoking book. And I do not think it is mere coincidence that it was written by an author who originally comes from South Korea: the second half of the past century saw the country put on the march of an authoritarian catch-up modernization that resulted in a breathtaking acceleration of life, in the blurring of lines between work life and private life – leading to the round-the-clock availability of the employee in respect to their boss. Is it any wonder that South Korean society has ended up having one of the highest rates of suicide and depression in the world?

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