

Byung-Chul Han and Burnout

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Thank you.

Andrew White

STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university.
To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

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Date: 25/10/2022

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ABSTRACT

BYUNG-CHUL HAN AND BURNOUT

Andrew White

Burnout is a pervasive phenomenon associated with modern work culture. In this thesis burnout is analysed through the philosophy of Byung-Chul Han. Han argues that neoliberal society is creating pathologies engendered by an obsession with maximising achievement and performance and an inability to engage in negative (or Other) experiences. For Han, ours is a society of excessive positivity that is to be contrasted with the disciplinary society. The (idealised) achievement subject is conditioned by new power relations to express unbounded freedom. But this creates a paradox—the free constraint of maximising individual achievement and self-optimisation. Burnout arises from this paradoxical form of freedom, which becomes an immanent form of violence—the violence of positivity. Han supports this argument with an original concept of power and the claim that psychopolitical power has become invisible and has replaced class struggle with an inner struggle of the self. The solutions proposed by Han, rely on the value of experiences of negativity, which can provide the impetus to counteract obsessive activity and burnout, and a reengagement with the Other. This can be enriched by the view that contemplation and periods of inactivity can give expression to autonomy and meaning.

The thesis presents and critically analyses Han’s original approach in contemporary critical theory, drawing on other seminal references (notably Foucault and Agamben) and the emerging secondary literature dedicated to his work.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

This thesis is the result of an interest in the philosophical writings of Byung-Chul Han and his theory of the burnout society. Han (2015a) argues that the transformation into contemporary society has engendered new pathologies that stem from a cultural obsession with achievement and self-optimisation. Conditions like burnout are caused by an excess of positivity.¹ This is a general state of fatigue and exhaustion resulting from the internal demand of freedom. It has produced an army of burned-out workers who are exhausted by their own activity and are unable to confront negative experiences that would constitute meaningful change.

Han's analysis of burnout is therefore a critique of power and hidden forms of domination found in smart power and psychopolitics. Smart power is a form of psychopolitical power that seduces subjects into becoming dependent and productive through the positivity of unbounded freedom. However, the unbounded freedom of the achievement subject creates a paradox. Han (2015a) calls this the "free constraint of maximizing achievement" (p. 11). Neoliberal smart power is simultaneously a system of freedom and a system of control. The achievement subject, under the guise of freedom, willingly engages in self-exploitation. Class struggle is turned into an inner struggle with the self, the new site of conflict. Rather than rebelling against the system we burnout or become depressed. Burnout hinges on this paradoxical mode of freedom.

Han says, to escape this fatal dialectic, we need to reinvigorate our relationship with negativity. Negativity has a constructive dimension and is necessary for meaningful change. It counteracts the obsessive tendencies of affirming one's agency through the unlimited freedom of achievement, which creates burnout. We find negativity outside of ourselves in others, in

¹ Han (2015a) also sights depression, bipolar disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder among his pathologies caused by an excess of positivity.

contemplation, reflection, and stopping, and when we engage with others in rituals, community practices, and political engagement. These form the basis of autonomous action which counteract the unfreedom of frantic activity, that has become disguised as self-empowerment.

In this thesis I present and critically analyse Han's original approach in contemporary critical theory. I address this task by examining the phenomenon of burnout, drawing on other seminal references (notably Foucault, Lukes, and Agamben) and the emerging secondary literature dedicated to his work.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

The aim of chapter one is to describe burnout as an occupational condition and then a social pathology. Firstly, burnout is reviewed as an occupational condition resulting from badly organised work, but this cannot completely explain the condition because the workplace forms part of a complex interconnected social environment. Next, I employ Byung-Chul Han's *Burnout Society*, a society of excess positivity where an obsession with maximising achievement and self-optimisation has become pathological. Burnout is produced by the violence of self-exploitation, creating an infarction. Finally, I enlist the help of Pascal Chabot to show that the *Burnout Society* overlooks a distinction between two kinds of human progress, and this criticism reveals an analysis of gender inequality missing in Han's work.

Chapter two examines the hidden causes of burnout. First, it examines Han's theory of power to show that unbounded freedom can become a form of control. This explains how domination can go unrecognised when freedom and coercion coincide. Next, I give an analysis of neoliberal psychopolitics which describes invisible and seductive forms of power and control and how they shape the achievement subject. Here, it is uncovered that psychopolitics inverts freedom into compulsive achievement, laying the groundwork for burnout. Finally, the last section engages in some secondary literature on Han that helps to enrich this analysis.

The purpose of Chapter three is to argue that constructive value of negativity as an antidote to burnout. First, I analyse negativity and positivity drawing on Han, Hegel, and Sennett. Next, I examine how impoverished negativity has altered our social conditions through transparency and digital technology. Here the claim is that thinking, freedom, action and politics require the negativity of the other. Finally, we will reflect on Han's solutions that rely on the value of experiences of negativity. Here we consider the value of contemplation, stopping and listening as antidotes to burnout.

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WHY BYUNG-CHUL HAN?

While this thesis is focused on burnout, why Byung-Chul Han? Firstly, Han's writing on burnout captures a form of deficient social rationality found when subjects have an impoverished relationship with negativity. His most famous book, *The Burnout Society* (2015a), directly addresses burnout as a symptom of neoliberal society. Secondly, Han is an outlier in the world of philosophy. He does not publish in academic journals, has not been studied widely, and his approach to philosophy reflects an intersection of East Asian Buddhist aesthetics and ethics blended with his training in German philosophy (Suetzl, 2017).

Han's style is unique. It is minimalistic with compact and clear writing that is rich in philosophical content. His books are very short. This reflects Han's determination to compress his sentences down to their essentials. He often employs techniques like haiku to create an evidence effect that makes sense to everyone. While Han may read like "a mixture of Martin Heidegger and Zen" (Han & Borchardt 2021), his approach seems to reflect the blend of Eastern and German philosophical tradition.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The aim of this thesis is to understand burnout from the perspective of social pathology. The method of Critical Theory will inform a reflective assessment and critique with the purpose of uncovering forms of domination and provide some form of emancipation. The concept of social pathology is a metaphor for diagnosis, aetiology, and prognosis of the phenomenon of burnout. This will draw on the critique of social pathologies model developed by Honneth (2004b) where social pathologies result from deficient rationality.

In this analysis I want to acknowledge the dangers of generalising about the human condition and the prevalence of burnout. While the philosophy of Byung-Chul Han provides a theoretical model for burnout this kind of analysis will always give a very generalised picture of the situation, even if the interpretation might represent the dominant one. Nevertheless, it is the goal of this thesis to identify the social pathology, determine its causes, and offer a prognosis with the perspective of human emancipation.

CHAPTER 1. BURNOUT

INTRODUCTION

In the western world, at least it would seem, burnout is a prominent feature of modern work society. It is fair to say most people are subjected to a degree of overload or exhaustion and if not burnout, then something approximating it. Workplace burnout is a hot topic in occupational scholarship as a condition of poorly organised work where individuals often struggle against unreasonable demands. This describes the conditions of neoliberalism as work intensification. However, confining burnout to the workplace would be a mistake. The workplace doesn't exist in a vacuum. Rather, it is part of an interconnected social environment in which our behaviours and attitudes influence each other. A broader perspective can reveal hidden forms of domination that implicate subjectivity and the social environment as much as the workplace itself.

In this study I attempt to show how the concept of a Burnout Society (Han, 2015a) captures this broader perspective. Burnout can be like holding a mirror to society showing us our deficiencies in social rationality. This captures burnout as a systemic malaise affecting work, society, and the human condition. We can trace this, according to Han (2015a), to the transformation into late modern capitalism where new systems of power have altered our subjectivity and relationships. This perspective brings into focus a conflict between capitalism and the experience of being human.

For some authors, capitalism produces an unhealthy human society (Olivier, 2020; Chabot, 2019; Janning, 2014). We may not be working longer hours, but work has become more intense and pervasive, creating a social and biological imbalance. Our society may be focusing too much on material goods and consumption and not enough on overcoming human suffering. This is what Chabot (2019) calls a pathology of civilisation, an “ill-defined malaise experienced

by certain individuals as a response to social conditions they cannot tolerate” (p. 67). This broad analysis is largely absent in the occupational literature which focuses on the world of employment. Han (2015a) however, claims that it is not intolerance, but the surplus positivity of it is “*too-much-of-the-Same*” (p. 5) that is causing a breakdown.

In this chapter I review the conceptual and experiential nature of burnout through the claim that it results from badly organised work. This historical and contemporary analysis encompasses characteristics of the condition, and generally accepted diagnosis, pointing towards reforming the workplace. However, burnout seems to be more than badly organised work because the workplace forms part of a complex interconnected social environment. I then deploy an analysis of Han in the Burnout Society. This metaphor claims we live in a society of excessive positivity. Burnout is a non-immunological psychological pathology engendered by a culture obsessed with achievement in which we are unable to engage in negative experiences or external constraints. For Han, we have become achievement subjects who are shaped by the unbounded freedom of maximising achievement and self-optimisation, but this becomes paradoxical and switches into violence against the self. Finally, I will highlight some shortcomings of this view drawing on Pascal Chabot (2019). Chabot characterises burnout as a symptom of increasing conflict between two domains of human existence, useful progress concerning development of science, technology, and the economy, and subtle progress concerning the reproduction, maintenance, and purpose of life itself. This exposes an analysis of gender inequality missing in Han because subtle progress has historically been overrepresented by women, which has also been constructed by men who dictate the terms.

I conclude with the view that burnout is more than a workplace pathology. It signifies a crisis of the human condition that stems from the re-shaping of subjectivity by unbounded freedom that serves the interests of capital.

OCCUPATIONAL BURNOUT

The Impact of Burnout

I will begin with a description of the impacts of burnout to provide some initial orientation. While burnout is a common feature of modern work it affects people more in the human services sector. The most at risk are carers, nurses, doctors, police, and teachers. The prevalence in healthcare is high with one study reporting forty-four percent of U.S. doctors showing symptoms of burnout (Hoffman, 2018) and others suggesting as high as eighty-nine percent of psychiatrists have experienced the threat of severe burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

While the term has broadly coincided with the neoliberal transformation its prevalence has prompted inclusion in World Health Organisation Classification of Diseases as an occupational syndrome. Research has shown higher levels of burnout in countries with greater globalisation, privatisation, and liberalisation. This coincides with countries that follow the neoliberal model and work intensification (Han, 2015a; Schaufeli, 2009).

While care work has been historically more susceptible to burnout, Leiter et al. (2014) show that the prevalence of burnout has expanded beyond this kind of work. Digital technology has altered working conditions increasing the interaction between people, producing more stress and anxiety. This trend can also be attributed to the growth of large-scale projects, workgroups, and portable work. These have decreased individual sense of accomplishment and recognition when projects become large, and recognition is thinly distributed. Working from home also introduces isolation and the problem of maintaining a boundary between work and personal life which has added a new level of stress and anxiety.

Burnout can have severe consequences, for both the individual and others, as it impacts an individual's wellbeing and can involve cognitive impairment (Parker, 2021). Lacy and Chan

(2018) claim it can cause an extended disruption to a person's life, plans, and happiness with extreme effects such as depression, insomnia, addiction, and suicide.

People suffering burnout can become contagious and have a negative impact on people around them (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). It affects social relations and produces antagonism between friends and work colleagues, which can spread when one person's condition or dissatisfaction affects others. Burned out workers are generally less productive and difficult to work with. This is captured in the concept of presenteeism which involves being present at work but not performing duties properly due to illness or other difficulties. This produces lower morale, less engagement, increased errors, and poor communication (Brower, 2022). Increased conflict and ongoing disruptions overall, produce a general reduction in workplace performance and satisfaction (Maslach, 2016).

What is Burnout?

Burnout is a theoretical construct. It describes the psychological state of a person who is ineffective, detached, and exhausted. It is said to be caused by workplace stressors and burnout itself is a stress-response in which the sufferer cannot return to homeostasis, a condition of balance despite outside changes (Janning, 2014). Early references are found in a fourth century condition known as *acedia* that affected monks. *Acedia* is described in similar terms as a "loss of meaningfulness and empathy, as well as exhaustion and cognitive impairment" (Parker & Tavella, 2021). Pascal Chabot (2019) notes that a 1932 dictionary of Catholic Theology defined *acedia* in the same category as sloth, as one of the seven deadly sins. Monks suffering *acedia* did not just become exhausted, but they lost interest in God. According to Chabot (2019), this lack of faith was serious and represented for the church that which burnout symbolises for the business world today.

While fatigue is a common feature of humanity, as an intrinsic counterpart to activity, burnout has its own specific qualities over and above fatigue, particularly the idea of imbalance.

It is a state of psychological, physical, and emotional exhaustion that is caused by prolonged periods of stress and anxiety from which the body cannot recover. This distinguishes it from periods of hard work and exhaustion from which one can rest and recover.

While prolonged experience of chronic stress and anxiety are common features in human society some like Maslach and Leiter (1997) have argued that the workplace itself is the major driving factor.

The Truth About Burnout

Modern research tends to implicate badly organised work as the main factor behind burnout. Christina Maslach developed the earliest measure for diagnosing burnout called the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Schaufeli et al. 2009). This diagnostic tool is a series of questionnaires that assesses burnout across three dimensions; overwhelming exhaustion, detachment from work (sometimes called cynicism), and reduced performance (sometimes called reduced professional efficacy) (Schaufeli, 2009; Maslach 2016). Although there are other measures of burnout (Kristensen et al. 2005), this has become the standard tool for research (Maslach 2016).

Maslach and Leiter (1997; 2016) argue against the common view that workers are solely responsible for their fatigue and burnout. They claim responsibility and accountability should be placed on the shoulders of the organisation. They detail how increasing workplace demands, ambiguity, conflict, stress, workload, and pressure, have increased workplace stressors. When work overload becomes chronic, this reduces a person's ability to rest and recover and to meet future job demands. Lack of autonomy at work has been linked to a reduction of engagement and identified as a correlate to burnout. Insufficient recognition and reward reduce the perceived value of work and the contributions made by workers. This also been associated with inefficacy and vulnerability to burnout. When relationships at work have eroded, there is a higher risk of burnout.

Maslach and Leiter (1997) detail other workplace stressors including imbalances between demands and resources, and between the stated organisational values and values in action. The first of these antecedents concerns energy. When job demands increase but personnel, equipment, or supplies do not increase appropriately, exhaustion results, particularly from insufficient time to rest and recuperate. The second concerns the gap between the stated values of an organisation and the organisations values in action. When an organisation fails to support their own ideals, employees often struggle in the face of complex, hostile, and often contradictory environments.

Responses to Burnout

When monks experienced *acedia* they were redirected back to faith in God. The stigma of sloth may have been like the failure to be successful in the modern world. Today, various forms of mitigation and strategies are developed to increase workplace engagement and to return people to work. Recently, research has turned to the positive antithesis of burnout, reframing it as an “erosion of engagement” (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Bakker et al. 2014; Schaufeli et al. 2009). This approach turns engagement into the normal and therefore any erosion of engagement is labelled as abnormal. Engagement is defined as a state of high energy, strong work involvement and efficacy. Burnout prevention programs become methods to increase workplace engagement (Bakker et al. 2014; Schaufeli 2009). This is a subject focused diagnosis aimed at recovery and return to productive work through the identification of a mismatch between personality and the workplace. Form the point of view of a critical reading of neoliberalism, for instance along Foucauldian lines, this appears nothing more than psychological steering under a different name.

If burnout symbolises for the business world what *acedia* did for the church, then we could read the claim “burnout interventions are paramount to organisational productivity” (Bretland & Thorsteinsson, 2015) as a strategy to reaffirm faith in the system. There is a clear

priority in burnout research to make people more productive (Maslach, 2016; Bakker et al. 2014; Schaufeli et al. 2009) and this demonstrates the reach of economic thinking. It reveals how much we have become obsessed with economics as a measure of value. When the objective of capitalism is efficiency and productivity, and when all we do is patch people up and return them to work, don't we run the risk of pushing the bar even higher and amplifying the process of burnout? Mitigation does not seem to address this and the underlying causes.

Very often the management for burnout is placed on the shoulders of workers, with organisations protecting their profits and resisting change. This has resulted, according to Tottle (2016), in increased forms of psychometric profiling to filter out those at risk rather than changing the way organisations function. This move risks a skills shortage and can exacerbate the burnout cycle when demands on people increase due to less available, or skilled, labour and this produces more pressure and stress on existing employees.

In our individualistic and competitive society, the individuals usually blame themselves for failure (Chabot, 2019; Sandel, 2020; Verhaegh, 2014) and becomes convinced that what is needed is more work on the self. This can take the form exercising, time away from work, meditation, or mindfulness, and even antidepressant medication which are forms of de-stressing strategies that seem to work according to one report (Parker & Tavella, 2021). However, while eating well, yoga, meditation, or getting more sleep and exercise might be beneficial in themselves, this is not going to transform our working conditions.

Maslach and Leiter (1997) argue that solutions to burnout should focus on the organisation and the promotion of human values. First, there is an economic argument for this, as it is economically costly when workers are exposed to burnout. We live in a climate where economic values trump other dimensions of life so appealing to the economic cost of burnout will also appeal to organisations. But there is also a moral argument, as human values matter both for the success of an organisation and for building a sense of community.

Burnout as a Functional Pathology

Rather than something being wrong with the structures of work, some authors argue that something is wrong with our modern individualistic and competitive society and burnout is a functional pathology (Han, 2015a; Verhaeghe, 2014; Sandel, 2020). Ekstedt and Fagerberg (2005) indicate that prior to burnout the Self becomes detached from signs of fatigue, either from their own experience or warning signs from others and they are driven by an inner incentive to achieve workplace goals at any cost. This is a phenomenon known as cutting-off. Han (2021) argues that burnout assumes the same function as revolution once did because burnout and revolution are mutually exclusive states.

The functional pathology argument more directly addresses how we organise society and the limitations of the demands that this is placing on human beings. Both Ehrenberg (2009) and Janning (2014), view depression and burnout as functional pathologies in this regard. Ehrenberg (2009) argues depression is a limitation of the human mind and body, beyond which normative demands become illegitimate. The depressed person, under the pressures of individualism, becomes exhausted by their own sovereignty and no longer has the power to become themselves. Depression functions as a defence mechanism. Janning (2014) argues that burnout is a gradual process that occurs from relentlessly pursuing goals that are artificially imposed by society rather than an expression of our own authentic drives. He concludes that burnout is a survival strategy, but the experience can also be emancipatory because it provides the possibility of recovering from living a life we should not have been living.

To summarise, the occupational literature provides a diagnosis of burnout from within the workplace. Even with conceptual ambiguities, a consensus exists that the condition relates to increased workplace stressors associated with efficacy and performance in modern society. Diagnosis is focused on how it manifests as an experience of work and how antecedents can be mitigated within the workplace, or in the appropriate matching of personality types to

employment. The process of rehabilitation figures prominently as a mechanism for returning people to productive work, but this can be interpreted as a form of psychological steering. Absent from this literature are broad social critiques, particularly questioning how current ideology fosters individualism and competition as ideals. While individualism and competition—and a range of dispositions they encourage—might be good for the economy and profit, we should ask who, or for what purpose, does this vision ultimately serve. Is it for our good, or for the rich few? Is it in service of our freedom or a hidden form of enslavement?

In the next section, I draw on the work of philosopher Byung-Chul Han who has argued that burnout reflects what he calls the Burnout Society where individual subjectivity is mobilised instrumentally to increase productivity, causing a range of psychological illnesses.

THE BURNOUT SOCIETY

“Burnout, which often precedes depression, does not point to a sovereign individual who has come to lack the power to be the ‘master of himself.’ Rather, burnout represents the pathological consequences of voluntary self-exploitation” (Han, 2015a, p.44).

Exhaustion in a Culture of Positivity

This section describes Byung-Chul Han’s theory of the Burnout Society. For Han (2015a), burnout is the result of a culture obsessed with achievement and performance in which we are always pressured to do more. The hallmarks of neoliberal capitalist society are an excess of positivity and an impoverished relationship with negativity. An excess of positivity, for Han, is where “everything grows and proliferates beyond its goal, beyond its purpose, indeed, beyond the economy of use” (Han, 2017f, p. 90). This includes the internal demands for freedom that manifest as over-achievement and over-performance. Rather than burnout being externally caused by the structures of work (Maslach & Leiter, 1997), Han depicts it as a form of internal saturation caused by this excess of positivity.

In previous periods what threatened people was the negativity of the Other, intruding from outside the Self, like an infection, producing anxiety and violence. Historical forms of this are found in structures of control, tyrannical leaders, powerful capitalists, or within exploitative relationships such as men dominating women. These phenomena follow an immunological schema because the purpose of immune defence, the reaction against transgression, is to fight off that which is foreign (Han, 2015a). Today psychological illnesses are the result of an excess of positivity, stemming not from infections but from infarctions, as an internal blockage caused by the saturation of the Same. The excess of positivity is more serious according to Han because there is no immune response as the “Same does not lead to the formation of antibodies” (Han, 2015a, p. 4). For Han, this signals a paradigm shift in the genesis of social pathologies. If we

interpret burnout as an immunological condition, we will miss something critical about its genesis.

Our period is marked by an excess of positivity and the disappearance of Otherness or foreignness. Otherness, according to Han (2018a), has diminished and has been replaced with difference where difference is closer to conformity. When Han talks about Otherness, he means this in the strong sense of someone or something unknowable, unpredictable, with radically different ideas or ways of being in the world. But for Han, difference is not an immunological category. The Other, or the one who is radically different, has been reduced, or shaped, into something commodifiable (Han, 2018a). For Han, difference means commodifiable differences. The Other does not really exist anymore according to Han. Conformity has discarded anything that is negative or hostile to capitalism. When Otherness has disappeared, we are left with a hyper-culture, where everyone is a tourist and a consumer, and no one feels truly at home.

Han argues that to understand the modern world and the genesis of burnout we need to move beyond a Foucauldian analysis of disciplinary society. Disciplinary society is characterised by external power structures that produce obedient subjects. It normalises behaviour and defines what is abnormal. It is governed by the negativity of *no* and *should*. To explain this, Han gives an original reading of Foucault according to Alphin and Debrix (2021). The targeting of the human body and the species body, which are identified as two separate moments in Foucault's work, Han (2015a) collapses into the same kind of disciplinary power configuration. He then uses the general term "disciplinary power" to refer to a society based on a *dialectic of negativity*. Here, prohibition and structures of control are immunological power relations because the Other intrudes into the Own and seeks to negate it for the purposes of normalising behaviour. The Own confronts the negativity of the Other and the "immunological self-assertion of the Own proceeds as the negation of the negation" (Han, 2015a p. 3-4). Some of the Other is retained in the Own

and this prevents the proliferation of the positive. This Hegelian construction of subjectivity is always in a process of navigating between external imposed discipline and internal desire.

Today, society is governed by the positive dialectic of achievement and performance—called the achievement society (Han, 2015a). Subjects are no longer obedience subjects but achievement subjects. There is an increasing social pressure for each of us to become entrepreneurs of ourselves—to be the best we can be. This is expressed by the modal verb *Can* which represents the unlimited potential of the psyche. We have become obsessed with neural enhancements and other forms of efficiency because enough is never enough and we can always do more. We are now self-disciplined and do not need outside systems of control. We could say that Foucault's discipline society has been completely internalised. We each carry a labour camp inside us, and we force ourselves to work and achieve, and to always maximise ourselves even when we are at our limits. The achievement subject is like the Hegelian slave in all but one respect (Han, 2017d). The achievement subject does not work for a master but is an entrepreneur of the self who exploits itself—it is an *absolute slave* who is both master and servant in one. Han (2017d) argues that Hegel did not consider this unity in his dialectics. The battle between the master and slave as a metaphor for the struggle between life and death, or freedom and servitude, is one where the victor becomes the master, rising above the concern for bare life, which will be explored at the end of this chapter. The master is the embodiment of freedom and sovereignty and does not fear death. For Han (2015a), the achievement subject is enacting the rights of the sovereign and turning himself into bare life.

According to Han (2015a) burnout is the inevitable consequence of a social configuration based around the excess positivity of unbounded freedom. Not only does the achievement subject always maximise achievement and performance but this manifests as a compulsive freedom. Compulsive freedom becomes paradoxical because it is based on new power relations in which achievement is a positive affirmation of agency and power. But because achievement is

indefinite, it has no ends, it becomes compulsive and produces self-exploitation. As Han says, “the achievement subject gives himself over to *compulsive freedom*—that is, to the *free constraint* of maximizing achievement” (Han, 2015a, p. 11). It is much more efficient to condition people into exploiting themselves, under the guise of freedom, rather than exploitation by others.

Achievement society also cultivates hyperattention in its subjects. This is a broad and flat mode of attention that prevents subjects from contemplative immersion (Han, 2015a). An excess of stimuli radically changes the structures of attention, so that perception becomes fragmented and scattered. Han (2015a) says that multitasking does not represent progress but is a sign of regression. Multitasking is a necessary condition of wild animals who need to divide their attention between numerous tasks on which their survival depends. However, what makes humans distinct from animals is our capacity for contemplation that has contributed to the many achievements of humanity.

Today, however, we have become restless and have no tolerance for boredom. For Walter Benjamin, boredom is the peak of mental relaxation and is the basis for creativity and a “community of listeners” (Han interpreting Benjamin, 2015a, p. 13). Frantic activity without pause does not produce anything new but only replicates and accelerates what already exists. It represents a continuation of the Same. Han (2015a) argues, we need to rediscover the contemplative life, which is a radical break in continuous activity, where we can marvel at the ways things are rather than their practically. It is through the contemplative life that we can connect to the experience of being and listen to others, which has been lost in the achievement society.

The claim is that continuous frantic activity becomes hyperactivity, and this produces subjects that are passive. This might seem paradoxical, but because we are always working to maximise achievement, we never stop and reflect on our activities. It is reflection that allows us

to evaluate our actions and make autonomous decisions. Hyperactivity produces subjects who are on autopilot, caught in a cycle of continuous activity that becomes a pseudo-action and is limited to a repetition and acceleration of the Same. This renders the achievement subject passive. He not only carries his workcamp inside, producing auto-exploitation, but through repetition he forecloses the contemplative life that is required for genuine freedom, and action.

The Society of Tiredness

Han elaborates on exhaustion with a distinction between two kinds of tiredness, solitary tiredness [*I-tiredness*], and fundamental tiredness [*We-tiredness*]. What he calls fundamental tiredness is a tiredness of negative potency. This is a form of general exhaustion that can also be inspiring. This is the tiredness of *not-to*, when we stop and become capable of action because stopping in this sense is a conscious choice against the act of labouring. It is exhaustion often experienced in a community of others, and where individuals can see outside of themselves and make room for the world. To quote Han (2015a), “[a]s the *I* grows smaller, the gravity of being shifts from the ego to the world” (p. 31). This tiredness makes lingering and contemplation possible because it creates a break from repetitive activity. Han argues, only through the autonomous decision to stop work, in the community others, can our actions become more meaningful. Inactivity and contemplation, with others, provide the distance required to reflect on our actions and to evaluate them in the context of life.

To explain this, Han introduces the Sabbath (which originally meant stopping) as a heuristic device. This is a day free from work in which the community decides to stop and redirect attention towards God and religious practice. In other words, we suspend our ego after the process of labouring and redirect ourselves towards engagement in communal practices. In this sense, religious practice can be viewed as a metaphor for a period in which we make the choice to stop the activity of labouring. By engaging in a day of rest we also assert the freedom to stop and engage with others and it is on such a basis that labour can become meaningful

because we can reflect on it from a distance. This inactivity differs from the modern achievement subject who only stops work to continue working in another form or is forced to stop by exhaustion.

Solitary tiredness is a tiredness of positive potency, in which the *too-much* of an activity makes people incapable of action. It is a tiredness experienced by the isolated individual in which the self turns in on itself and the ego fills the whole field of vision (Han, 2015a). This form of exhaustion becomes separating and isolating—it is world destroying. It is a tiredness where the ego exhausts itself and retreats from the world. In this dialectic, stopping is not an autonomous choice but is forced on the individual through sheer exhaustion. Solitary tiredness produces subjects who are “*no-longer-able-to-be-able*” (Han, 2015a, p. 10).

Solitary tiredness forms the basis for burnout and depression as conditions of excessive positivity—understood as self-reference and exhaustion in which subjects are conditioned to always work, or, to work on themselves. Solitary tiredness appears in a society that has been atomised and subjected to individualistic forms of achievement and performance. In terms of the reproduction of the system, it is “the best defence against revolution” (Han, 2021, p. 13).

Ehrenburg (2009) captures the first kind of exhaustion experienced by the self in a society in which articulating the self, or becoming an *individual*, has become a social imperative (Johnsen, 2011). Here, the weariness of the self is a defining malaise of our time in which the chronic incapacity to act is expressed through constant activity and exhaustion. This solitary exhaustion immobilises our cognitive ability for thought and action. Bernard Stiegler (Referenced in Olivier, 2020) has drawn a similar conclusion described as a breakdown in “Spirit” where a degradation of human thought and action, caused by relentless consumerism, has increased conformity, and produced inaction where one would expect to see action.

This demonstrates that continuous activity, like perpetual motion, can become a form of non-autonomous action. While constant activity and the ability to multitask might be viewed by modern productivity gurus as a kind of superhuman ability, this is arguably a regression of human capacity into a form of bare life (Han, 2015a). To continue one frantic task after another is to act as if we are completely determined by forces outside of our control. This does not seem like an expression of freedom but of servitude. For Han (2017a), freedom is experienced when moving from one mode of living to another but if we linger too long in any one state it turns into another form of coercion. Freedom for Han (2017a) is a process rather than a fixed state. This is where the autonomous decision to stop is an expression of freedom and a way to balance frantic activity. Without it we get caught in a state of perpetual activity that he calls achievement and are exposed to internal forms of violence called positive violence (Han, 2017f).²

Positive Violence

Burnout for Han is a new mode of violence, the violence of positivity. It is a violence that occurs when the positive potency of over-achievement and over-performance become excessive, and results in an infarction. Han's theory of violence defines harms as occurring across a spectrum from the negative harms to the positive harms (2015a; 2019; 2017c) signalling his roots in Hegel and Marx. Violence does not have a fixed structure but is a dialectical *form* in which different manifestations of harm arise depending on the social formation or situation.

Historically violence has generally assumed a negative form. The negativity of the Other, like that of a virus or an enemy, comes from the outside. Violence takes the form of an immunological schema in which the object of this invasion fights off the invader. As Han (2019) elaborates, “[a]n external cause never achieves an effect without a contribution or decision from

² Han (2017f) calls positive violence within the self, microphysical violence. He contrasts this with negative violence which he calls macrophysical violence.

the inner” (p. 3). The inner contributes, or reacts, to this external cause in a negation of the negation. The inner tries to negate the foreign intruder—the virus—and the result retains something of the encounter.

However, violence is not necessarily negative violence. Violence can occur through surplus positivity, from “*too-much-of-the-same*” in which the saturation causes a blockage or a shutdown and “negativity plays no role” (Han, 2015a, p. 5). This is illustrated by Ekstedt and Fagerberg (2005) where subjects are driven relentlessly to meet deadlines, ignoring all the warning signs of fatigue from others and their body, until they collapse.

Burnout, as a form of positive violence, does not derive from external hostility and therefore does not elicit an immunological response. As Han (2015a) explains, “[t]he violence of positivity does not deprive, it saturates; it does not exclude, it exhausts” (p. 7). The burnout condition can unfold invisibly in a pacified or permissive society because it is *systemic*, that is, it is a system-immanent form of violence. It is found in the social structures of work, the social institutions, the social practices, and the individuals who make up moments of this unity.

Han (2015a) argues that we are all under the social pressure to orientate our lives towards the positivity of achievement and performance and this produces a general state of exhaustion caused by excess. Burnout is not simply a result of structural problems in the workplace (Maslach & Leiter, 1997) but follows a more pervasive logic of achievement and efficiency maximisation that we apply to all aspects of our lives. This reduces our ability to confront or manage negative experiences. This broad and totalising theory does tend to generalise too much and overlook some specific details about burnout in certain contexts or the fact that not everyone necessarily falls victim to the subjectivity Han describes. For instance, the question of why burnout affects people more in care work, which historically predates the neoliberal period, or why women appear to suffer burnout more than men. The theory of the burnout society could be said to be both gender neutral and occupation neutral, which is perhaps its greatest weakness.

CRITIQUE

Useful and Subtle Progress

In *Global Burnout* (2019) philosopher Pascal Chabot argues that high rates of burnout in care work, particularly for women, can partially be attributed to the high emotional demands of this type of work and the over-representation of women in these roles. But it can also be explained with a distinction between two kinds of progress, Chabot suggests, useful and subtle progress. The term useful progress refers to a general categorisation of the human material world that includes science and technology, the economy, and material culture, all of which form the backbone of the materialist dimension of capitalist reproduction. This is where we build buildings, aeroplanes, computers, the internet, exchange commodities, invest in futures, develop pharmaceuticals, and produce movies and put on sporting events. Progress, however, is not just confined to this material dimension. It was an error, according to Chabot (2019), that humanists linked the achievements of humanity to the achievements in the material world alone.

Alongside useful progress sits subtle progress, which is concerned with endeavors less tangible but equally important. In this domain we find the individuals themselves, their education, their way of caring for themselves, their way of life, their experience and treatment of neuroses, and the way they prioritise their lives and their happiness (Chabot, 2019). This second kind of progress differs from the first because it must always start fresh with each newborn individual as they learn how to live and acquire knowledge and experience. In contrast to this, the domain of useful progress does not stop nor start anew, but always builds incrementally by inheriting characteristics from the previous generation. The second kind of progress must always navigate itself against the downward pressures from the first and already we can see the seeds of conflict.

Chabot argues that burnout is a symptom of an increasing conflict between these two kinds of progress in which the material world of capitalism is placing enormous pressures on the fragile human sphere found in the reproduction of life itself. The achievements of subtle progress are not grand by comparison, nor are they profitable in an economic sense, but they operate in the space between beginnings and endings, along the path of existence experienced by individuals. When a mother cares for a baby, when a teacher educates our youth, and when a doctor explains an illness and the finality of the cycle of life to a person at the end of their life, we experience this form of subtle progress that is constantly nurturing and repeating itself but nevertheless always starts again and develops slowly.

The demands of our current material mode of production are placing enormous pressure on this realm to conform to its standards, which creates the conditions for higher levels of burnout. It is not surprising that members of the caring profession, who devote themselves to one of the most difficult domains of work, should experience the highest levels of burnout when they are always struggling against the pressure of economic thinking. Chabot (2021) notes that society, on behalf of capitalism, also represses the contributions of subtle progress and reminds people in the care and education professions that their contributions are relatively minor compared to the grand achievements of the material world of production and consumption. This is often reflected in lack of funding for schools and hospitals, salaries, and recognition. We could interpret burnout as resulting from a crisis of recognition, which results from austerity measures that reflect the overall devaluing or lack of recognition for the value and purpose of these public services.

While the achievement subject clearly represents this first kind of progress which is manifested in a form of ideal subjectivity instrumental to capitalism, Chabot demonstrates that not all dimensions of society are willing to be shaped by it. There is a sense in which two kinds of burnout coexist, and it may be important to distinguish between them. The first results from a

new form of subjectivity found in the achievement subject who is shaped instrumentally as a self-entrepreneur. This is the dimension of Han's primary argument, that burnout is non-immunological and result of self-exploitation and saturation. The second, however, is perhaps the historical form that is caused by power structures to conform to some dominant ideology. This we could call immunological burnout that appears as intolerance. Today, neoliberal capitalism assumes this role and is reconfiguring all dimensions of society to adhere to its economic and market driven way of thinking. Social pathologies are quite varied, and people experience them for different reasons and in different circumstances, so it stands to reason that they do not all share the same genesis. However, there may be a common link between historical forms, such as *acedia*, care work and Han's achievement subject. In all these cases a deficiency of negativity and an excess of positivity is experienced when say, monks are overloaded with religious devotion, or care workers are subjected to the positivity of economic austerity that makes their work so much more difficult.

Finally, Chabot (2010) captures the historical role of women that is missing in Han's analysis. Women not only have to navigate the male constructed domain of useful progress, but they are also generally more invested in the domain of subtle progress, such as non-paid work, making them doubly susceptible to burnout. This imbalance we find represented in the occupational literature where women tend to incur a higher percentage of burnout.

The conflict between these two kinds of progress indicates that the achievement society is not as totalising as Han might have us believe. It shows that some areas of human life are more sensitive and resilient to the pressures of the achievement society, often because accomplishment or value is measured in the care and maintenance of life rather than economic success. When the pressures of neoliberal capitalism come into conflict with our human impulses to care for others, we see people willing to resist the economisation of life and prioritise others and their own happiness above economic thinking. However, this criticism may not adequately address Han's

central claim, that the achievement subject represents a form of idealised subjectivity which has become dominant, and we are all under increasing social pressure to conform to it. The pressure to continue to achieve and be productive, without end, seems to be reflected in our social conditions from education to the workplace.

Bare Life

Is burnout then, the inability to cope with the demand to become oneself and therefore an expression of discontent in the face of an unjust system? In other words, is burnout externally caused by the demands of idealised subjectivity? Perhaps not. The achievement subject, for Han is entirely self-referential and this escalates into a state of absolute competition—competition with oneself. The achievement subject does not seem to agree with an external view of burnout. This subject is susceptible to burnout because of the internal demand for unbounded freedom of achievement. This produces an inability to confront negative experiences, as in experience of the radical Other, or in different ways of being, and this prevents the achievement subject from meaningful change. This continues an internal burnout cycle as a positive dialectic of self-exploitation. This is a very nihilistic and animalistic picture of society where people are caught in a process of bare life where only things of instrumental concern have value.

Bare life, which Han derives from Aristotle, is life reduced to vital animal functioning and subsistence labouring. This life is concerned merely with health and survival, and any avenues or even desires to transform oneself into the good life are blocked. Han (2017d) comments that burnout is a commentary on modern-day slavery, the condition of the self-entrepreneur. The achievement subject is not a free human being, but rather a subject who believes it is the master and as such a master who has become enslaved (Han, 2017d).

In ancient politics, the good life was obtained through the subject's inclusion within the power of the sovereign. At any time, however, the sovereign could retract these rights through a state of exception and the subject would be reduced to a condition of bare life (Agamben, 1995).

When human beings are reduced to bare life they are exposed to the sovereign's power over life and death. The slave in ancient society was always in a state of bare life and could be killed at any time without the perpetrator incurring punishment. Agamben (1995) argues that a state of exception is becoming the norm. When we are denied the possibility of a good life, he says, then all we do is labour endlessly to merely survive.

Agamben (1995) reminds us that the Ancient Greeks had two words for life, called *zoē* and *bios*. *Zoē* is a term for the simple fact of being alive shared with all living beings. It is natural biological life and the basic life process of reproduction and subsistence. *Bios*, on the other hand, is a way of living proper to the group to which the individual belongs. It is here where we form a community of others, with higher values and purpose to life, and this constitutes a higher development of humanity from that of our basic animal processes. The entry of *zoē* into the sphere of the *polis* constitutes the decisive moment of transformation to modern society. When bare life becomes the object of political power this makes the process of bio politics possible—that of the administration and regulation of the life of the human species. Only when we interrogate the link between bare life and politics, a link that seems distant, but which secretly governs all modern ideology, can we reveal the real nature of political and human thought and action. Here Agamben (1995) captures the idea that politics, thought, and action are conditions of the good life, and these come about through the negativity of the Other and the negativity of struggle.

Han (2015a) argues that the modern economy makes survival absolute and has no concern for the good life. It sustains the illusion that more Capital means more life. The removal of the good life reduces subjects to mere biological processes of labouring and subsistence. Life becomes stripped of all narrativity and ideal values which leaves only the exhibition value of the ego, which must be kept alive and healthy at all costs. The key point here is when all teleology

has vanished from life, so too does all the reasons why one should be healthy. Health and safety become “self-referential” or purposiveness without purpose (Han, 2015a).

Both Han and Agamben argue that the sovereign is reducing existence to bare life through a permanent state of exception. For Han, however, the achievement subject is enacting the state of exception on its own and turning itself into bare life by becoming its own sovereign master and slave. This is the consequence of unbounded freedom in which the internal master is now forcing the internal slave to work. The internal sovereign removes all higher values through the obsession with achievement and this reduces the subject to a state of bare life in which self-empowerment itself is expressed through self-optimisation.

CONCLUSION

Whilst the views of Byung-Chul Han are rather totalising—we are all subjected to it, or under pressure to conform to it—we should caution that just because something is dominant does not mean everyone is entirely subjected to it. However, for Han, the proliferation of burnout, (depression, and hyperactivity disorder), presents strong evidence for the dominance of the achievement society. Han concludes that conditions like burnout have a new genesis specific to the neoliberal achievement society and are the result of unbounded freedom to maximise and self-optimize. It also explains why resistance against the system appears to be diminishing because in the social configuration of achievement, when domination is hidden, blame is directed towards oneself and not the system.

The achievement subject provides an explanation of the genesis of modern psychological disorders in a society in which freedom is supposedly the guiding principle. Prior to the modern period these disorders existed but at significantly lower numbers, so something has clearly changed in recent decades. Han’s theory may not describe the genesis of all occurrences of these disorders today, as some people still suffer from burnout from other sources—disciplinary

power, external conflict, or pressures in work caused from visible forms of domination. However, Han's argument does claim that the achievement subject, who seeks achievement and self-optimisation out of a feeling of freedom, has become the idealised form of subjectivity and is prone to self-exploitation. According to Han, this signifies a new genesis of social pathologies such as burnout.

This theory also gives an account of why resistance to the system has been minimal and fleeting, as observed by numerous authors (Gros, 2020; Stiegler, 2012; Olivier, 2020). Neoliberal capitalism harnesses freedom both as a means of increasing productivity and as a mechanism to protect against revolution. For Han, class struggle has turned into an inner struggle with the self. Historical forms of resistance, explained as class struggle, are forms of discontent in which subjects directed hostility towards an outside, or visible, form of domination. Now it is not clear where domination is coming from, and subjects that are self-dominating, tend to blame themselves for failure rather than something outside of the Self (Verhaeghe, 2014; Ehrenberg, 2009; Becker et al. 2021). Violence is then experienced as burnout and depression. While traditional forms of resistance may still exist, Han argues this new form, which includes burnout, has replaced them.

In this chapter I argued that the burnout society explains a new genesis of social pathology. In the literature on burnout, the structures of the workplace are usually implicated. The theory of the burnout society does not deny that there is, or can be, badly organised workplaces but instead argues that modern subjectivity causes burnout through excess positivity, and this feeds back into the structures of the workplace, perpetuating this systemic malaise. But what has changed? For this we need to delve into the theory of psychopolitics and new relations of power which is the topic of chapter two.

In the next chapter I will examine the theoretical and aetiological dimension of burnout in the theory of psychopolitics. Here I explore how power functions in modern society, shape

subjectivity, and create new forms of violence which are hidden from view but give rise to a burnout of the human condition.

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CHAPTER 2. PSYCHOPOLITICS

INTRODUCTION

The aim of the previous chapter was to establish that burnout, for Han, is caused by an obsession with maximising achievement and an inability to engage in negative experiences. I identified that burnout is not just badly organised work. I questioned the non-immunological view burnout against an immunological view found in historical appearances of the condition. I cautioned that burnout is an ancient condition with a long history and varying causes. For Han, however, the positive dialectic of the achievement subject is a new genesis of burnout where the master and slave have been internalised. This self-referentiality develops into self-destructive traits which manifest in the non-immunological condition he calls burnout. The state of continuous activity has reduced the life of the achievement subject to a process of animal labouring where he is assuming the role of the Sovereign and turning himself into bare life. This is not a state of freedom but one of servitude in which all concern for the good life evaporates. Burnout is a pathology of the achievement subject's enslavement to his own activity.

In this chapter I will further the investigation into burnout in an analysis of psychopolitics to determine the cause of the achievement subject's enslavement to his own activity. Firstly, I will describe Han's critique and theory of power as a theoretical basis for the view that freedom can be a form of compulsion and constraint. When freedom and coercion coincide, domination goes unrecognised. Freedom that is supposed to be the opposite of domination is bringing forth new forms of compulsion and constraint in the form of obsessive achievement, producing burnout. The analysis of power moves on to psychopolitics which describes invisible and seductive forms of power and control in neoliberal society and how they shape the achievement subject. Here, psychopolitics has turned its attention to psyche, and freedom is now a means of control and to increase productivity. This will involve analysing the achievement subject through

a historical account of the entrepreneur. The achievement subject is then defined as a Project, as a continuous work in progress. The hidden cause of burnout for this subject is the inversion of freedom into compulsive achievement. This represents the state of positivity or Sameness. I will finish by addressing some criticisms of psychopolitics that can help illuminate Han's position, and the view that real freedom involves a fruitful relationship with the negativity of the other.

POWER

“When it comes to the concept of power, theoretical chaos reigns” (Han, 2019 p. vii).

Our intuitions on power might say that power finds its most direct expression in the negation of freedom. When I impose my will on another, against their will, I deprive the other of some freedom. But power that is visible, or that uses force or violence as coercion, is not the highest kind of power according to Han (2019). When power draws attention to itself it is already weakened. Its visibility means others can form a will against it. However, when power operates quietly in the background, it becomes invisible. This is the highest form of power. It exists without question (Han, 2017b; 2019). This overview captures the broad spectrum of power relations.

Han (2017b; 2019), however, wants to explain something more fundamental. All power relations share a common underlying structure—the continuation of the Self in the Other. According to Han (2019), chaos within the writings on power have prevented theorists from articulating this in a basic theory of power. They often mistake ‘power relations’ for power itself according to Han. Foucault (2019/1982) had already recognised this distinction even though he turned his attention to the former. For Han, a simple concept of power is needed to unite other power relations and describe new ones.

The power relation, freedom as coercion, is an important concept for Han. It explains self-exploitation and burnout. But before elaborating on Han's theory of power we should first look at his criticisms of other theories to show why they do not explain the basic nature of power.

Foucault on Power

Michel Foucault is a name most associated with theories of power. In his works on power, he moved away from discrete categories (subjects, structures, sovereignty) to the idea that power comes from everywhere, diffused and embodied in our discourse, knowledge, and regimes of truth (Foucault 1997). Power is nominalistic, because it has no universal essence that is reduceable to an institution, a structure, or a certain strength. Rather it is a name we give to a "complex strategical situation in a particular society" (Foucault, 1976, p. 93).

For Foucault (1977), the study of power takes the form of genealogy tracing how power emerged, changed, and functioned. In this analysis, power is both a negative concept that is repressive, exclusionary, concealing, or prohibitive and a positive concept that is responsible for the creation of subjects, objects, and "rituals of truth" (Foucault, 1977, p.194). Power is productive, it produces reality, and therefore it could be argued, it produces the conditions for burnout.

Foucault (2019/1982) also made an important distinction between how power is exercised (relations of power), and its basic nature. Mostly, he argued, when people talk about power, they mean three interrelated and mutually supporting relationships of power, power relations, relationships of communication and objective capacities. While Foucault identified the scope of power, tracing it from sovereign power to bio-power and disciplinary power, and the historical relationship between power, knowledge, and truth, he did not give a distinct theory of the basic nature of power (2019/1982, p. 336).

Foucault isolated disciplinary and biopolitical power as a power relation that normalises behaviour in an “ideological representation of society” (Foucault, 1997, p. 194). Unlike the sovereign in Thomas Hobbes,³ in which the disobedient faced the sword, discipline subtly alters behaviour to produce “docile subjects” (Foucault, 1997). In the prison studies, people under constant surveillance (rigorous timetables, inspections, work shifts, and free time), would regard themselves as subject to correction. Foucault was less interested in power as class domination but as “a machine in which everyone is caught, those who exercise power just as much as those over whom it is exercised” (Knowledge/power p.156; Dews 1984 p. 79).

While Foucault’s genealogy demonstrated the complexity of power relations, the basic nature of power is hard to pin down. Theories of power are in a state of “theoretical chaos” (Han, 2019, p. vii) according to Han because the phenomenon itself is ambiguous. Critique of the following three dimensions of power should demonstrate this ambiguity. Then I will describe Han’s concept of power which can account for freedom as coercion and unite other theories of power.

The First Dimension of Power

The first dimension of power is defined as a causal relation, when A causes a change in B against B’s will (Dahl, 1957; Torres, 2021, p. 117). This coercive or overt model of power involves persistent, direct, and observable conflict where winning or prevailing over others demonstrates which party has more power (Lukes, 2005). It is a mode of action which operates on the actions of others (Foucault 2019/1982 p. 340-341). However, for Han (Han, 2019), this power is already weakened by the visibility of antagonistic relationships. In Han’s terms, it is

³ Sovereign power is already biopolitical according to Agamben. Partly this is because *zoē* (natural reproductive life) is included in the polis but more so because bare life, that is both included and excluded from law, is constitution at the threshold of the political order. (Agamben, 1998, p.9)

low in mediation between the *ego* (Han's terms for the source of power) and the *alter* (Han's term for the subject of power) (Han, 2019).

This view of power is too narrow because it does not include all possible relations. Overt power does not account for a superior power in which those subjected to power explicitly want what the holder of power wants out of a feeling of freedom (Han, 2019). Also, in describing how A causes a change in B against B's will, other factors are left out of the relationship between A and B. It does not address how A was in a position of power over B, or how might B contribute to the outcome of the power relationship.

This means that overt power is insufficient at describing complex relationships (Han, 2019). In the dialectical account of organic life, power cannot be understood simply as a causal relationship. An external cause never influences an organism without the organism also contributing something to the outcome. Unlike the transmission of kinetic energy that can be precisely modelled, the continuation of the *outer* into the *inner* cannot be exactly measured. Because the complexity of mental (or social) life cannot be translated directly into cause and effect, this model of power is inexact. What these objections reveal, however, is that power has a common structure. This structure is the continuation of the Self [*ego*] in the Other [*alter*] (Han, 2019).

The Second Dimension of Power

The second dimension of power is covert power. What makes A "A" and B "B." It is attributed to Bachrach and Baratz (Torres, 2021, p. 119) and is a form of agenda control or the power to decide what is decided (Lukes, 2005/1974). When Foucault (2008/1979) described the disciplining of the body and the regulation of the population, he was describing a form of agenda control. Who gets to decide what gets normalised?

Han (2019) argues this is insufficient because there are forms of power that go beyond agenda setting. For example, A does not need to coerce B, if B already believed it was his idea to begin with. As Han explains, “it is a sign of superior power that those subjected to it explicitly *want* what the holder of power wants, and those subjected to power follow the will of the holder of power *as if it were their own*, or even *anticipate* that will” (Han, 2019, p. 2).

The Third Dimension of Power

Steven Lukes (2005/1974) described the third dimension of power as ideological power in which domination plays a key role and those subject to it accept it without protest (Torres, 2021, pp.121-125). This power relation shapes the desires and beliefs of subjects. The parties involved may or not know they are dominating others or being dominated. It describes the reasons or motivations for relationships of domination, and the basis of people’s beliefs (Torres, 2020, p.122). Lukes (2005/1974) has argued that ideological power can explain why people willingly submit to power even when it works against their interests.

Lukes (2005) has cautioned reading ideological power as totalising because power that comprehensively creates reality, and its subjects, cannot be studied scientifically. In Foucault, Subjects are constituted through their subjection to power (Lukes, 2005). In this view, power assumes a “monolithic image of unidirectional control” (Lukes, 2005, p.93). There two issues with this view according to Lukes. Firstly, what scope is there in this view for human agency? Foucault did give a response to this question, he said “where there is power, there is resistance, and yet...resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (Foucault quoted in Lukes, 2005, p. 95). The second problem is because there can be no external point of view from which to view power, because we are always inside it, then it becomes something that we cannot study objectively.

Han's Theory of Power.

Now that we have examined the problems with overt, covert, and ideological power, I will show how Han develops his own concept. This concept both unites these other theories and brings to light a power relation previously obscured.

Han (2019) argues that the basic nature of power is conceptualised as a *form* in which the *mediation* between the *source of power* [ego]⁴ and the *subject of power* [alter] is what changes according to the social configuration. Distinct power relations emerge from particular social dynamics and display characteristics of mediation particular to those epochs. This formalises Han's view that all forms of power are the *ego* acting on the *alter* to extend itself or its spatial influence. The vehicle or means of this continuation is what Han calls mediation.

This concept is simple and flexible and can synthesise different, and sometimes conflicting, views on power (Torres, 2020, p. 116) by modifying the internal structure so that different interactions of mediation occur, in different degrees, for different social formations (Han, 2019, p.vii). When there is a high degree of mediation subjects experience a feeling of freedom. According to Han (2017), however, neoliberal psychopolitics has hijacked freedom as a coercive and productive force. Power and control are disguised as freedom to shape and condition characteristics that are friendly to neoliberal capitalism. Freedom, on this view, is a form of coercion.

Smart power, Han (2017) says, harnesses emotions and seduces subjects with unbounded freedom, so that they become more efficient and productive. When the *alter* is an autonomous human being then the mediation between the power of the *ego* and the *alter* becomes complex. The *alter* can actively interpret the will of the *ego* and realise it in his own actions rather than

⁴ Han uses the term ego and alter in his works to describe source of power and subject of power. There is no indication in the relevant works that he is referring to Sigmund Freud conceptualization of ego.

“suffering it passively” (Han, 2019, p. 44). When the “*alter* turns the *ego*’s will into its *own* will. The *alter* thereby also acquires a feeling of freedom” (p. 44). The subject of power now expresses the will of the source of power *as if it were* an expression of its own freedom. Therefore, smart power becomes hidden and does not exhibit the characteristics of inside and outside, friend and enemy, perpetrator, and victim, as found in other power relations.

Smart power does not have to present itself as violence or repression. Disciplinary and biopolitical power are negative forms of power. They are directed *against* subjects from the outside making them compliant. This constitutes a low degree of mediation because visible power structures, or dispositifs,⁵ exclude, prohibit, and censor.

Neoliberal smart power turns subjects into a master and a slave of the self. It seduces subjects by giving them unlimited freedom to be, or have, whatever they like. Subjects internalise a form of power that gives them the sense of unbounded freedom, but it is precisely through this freedom that power shackles them to the system because this freedom is framed in individualistic terms and in terms of project. This power produces subjects structured by positivity, who relate only to themselves, and this impoverishes their relationship to the other—an external form of negativity. This is a diabolical feature of the system. It atomises individuals and produces subjects who, when they fail, blame themselves. This explains the stability of the system and the genesis of burnout.

This power relation is a critical dimension of burnout as a pathology of the self. Smart power assumes the guise of friendliness towards the subject of power. It creates what Han says is the fundamental aspect of power, the creating of a continuation of itself (i.e., the ideology of

⁵ Dispositif is a term used by Michel Foucault to refer to the institutional structures, administrative mechanisms, and knowledge structures which strengthen and maintain the exercising of power within the social body. Han argues that these dispositifs have now been internalized, as if these power structures form a part of the self, rather than being exercised and maintained from the outside.

neoliberal capitalism) in the achievement subject. Mediation is increased because the subject experience it as freedom and his life feels like a self-chosen project. But, according to Han, this 'feeling of freedom' is an illusion that hides a sophisticated form of domination. Domination through freedom and domination through violence are the two extremes on the continuum of power.

PSYCHOPOLITICS

“Neoliberal psychopolitics is a technology of domination that stabilizes and perpetuates the prevailing system by means of psychological programming and steering” (Han, 2017b, p. 79).

The Theory of Psychopolitics

Biopolitics is a technology of power whose main goal is to impose discipline and control on the social body, to defend and consolidate the nation, normalise behaviour, and make subjects productive (Riemann & Rossi, 2022). It is a technology of negativity that works by imposing institutions, prohibitions, and duties on its subjects. Psychopolitics (Han, 2017b), on the other hand, is a technology of power that harnesses the unlimited potential of the psyche and unbounded freedom to maximise productivity and make people voluntarily dependent. This is a technology of positivity because it removes the negativity of obstacles for maximising capitalist yield, and its reproduction.

Neoliberal psychopolitics is less concerned with the population as a body, or in acts of nation building, and more concerned with exploiting psychological characteristics, such as the desire for unbounded individual freedom, as a coercive device to pressure subjects into higher achievement and increased performance. The resulting achievement society, a society of positivity, results in the atomisation of individuals rather than producing a cohesive social group.

The connection to burnout can be seen in the formation of subjects who internalise power which is then interpreted as freedom. For Han, this is because the achievement subject is not a *Subject*, dominated by external disciplinary structures, but a *Project*. As a *Project* the achievement subject dominates itself by seeing its life as a work in progress, to be continuously improved, and re-fashioned according to the demands it places on itself. This positive dialectic becomes a never-ending struggle with the self that leads to a repressive form of individualism

(Riemann & Rossi, 2022; Han, 2017b). Where a disciplinary subject might divide failure appropriately between itself and the disciplinary structures, the *Subject-as-a-Project* interprets failure as an individual failure which can only be overcome by more self-improvement. According to Han, this positive dialectic creates a deficiency in negativity making the *Subject-as-a-Project* susceptible to burnout.

Foucault detailed how *technologies of the self* are instrumental in the creation of subjects who set their own rules to transform themselves and give their lives meaning in the context of disciplinary structures (Riemann & Rossi, 2022). The ethics of the self are mostly detached from power and domination and present a genealogy of how individuals act upon themselves (Han, 2017b). According to Han, Foucault did not see that the neoliberal regime claims these technologies for its own means (Han, 2017b). They are maintained and enforced through the digital panopticon, which is a metaphor for the neoliberal system that takes its form from Bentham's panopticon. In the digital panopticon there is no outside observer, but through technologies of power such as Big Data, social media, surveillance and transparency, subjects actively participate in its creation and maintenance. This produces conformity, self-surveillance, and a repressive mode of individualism in which perpetual self-optimisation is nothing more than a “highly efficient mode of domination and exploitation” (Han, 2017b, p.28).

According to psychopolitics, neoliberal smart power does not oppress individuals directly, but rather it says, ‘yes’ more often than ‘no’ and calls on positive emotions and exploits them. It guarantees complete subservience by assuming this friendly and seductive appearance (Han, 2017b). This was already foreshadowed by Foucault who argued that the success of power is “proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms” (Foucault quoted in Lukes, 2005, p.90). Freedom for the achievement subject, however, does not mean the disappearance of domination. Instead, there is a confluence of freedom and submission as self-optimisation and exploitation. This is a “crisis of freedom” in which “the achievement subject gives itself over to

compulsive freedom—that is, to the *free constraint* of maximizing achievement” (Han, 2015a, p.11).

The Neoliberal Subject and the Self-Entrepreneur

For Han, the achievement subject is a development of the neoliberal entrepreneur, a form of subjectivity widely discussed in the literature (Brown, 2015; Christiaens, 2020; McGuigan, 2014; Scharff, 2016). It has been argued (McGuigan, 2014) that every era has a preferred self, an idealised subject who reflects the dominant ideology. The preferred self may never be completely realised, but there is always a social pressure to display its characteristics. For Han, the achievement subject is an evolution of the entrepreneur and is now the idealised self.

The entrepreneur was not always a preferred self but developed alongside capitalism. We find early descriptions in Foucault in which “entrepreneurs of themselves” began to develop as a product of neoliberal governmentality (Christiaens, 2020). In economic theory this idea predates Foucault. The equilibrium of the market, where normal actors are utility maximisers in perfect competition, is disrupted by the entrepreneur, an outlier who acts out of instinct and seizes opportunity with a keen sense of judgement in which he benefits from market imperfections (Christiaens, 2020).

Tim Christiaens (2019) has argued that Foucault relied too heavily on rational cost benefit analysis as a means of maximising market returns when he formulated core elements of his neoliberal entrepreneur. What is missing from Foucault is the non-calculating and risk-taking dimension, (Christiaens, 2019). This instinctual and non-calculative dimension is found in the following three core economic theories (School of Economics, Knight, Schumpeter) as described by Christiaens (2019). In the Austrian School of Economics, human ignorance and imperfections in markets create possibilities for the entrepreneur to exploit. For Knight, the realm of uncertainty in markets and production allow certain individuals to exercise the mastery of probability and good judgement where others cannot. For Schumpeter, the focus is on individuals who disrupt

the market by establishing new or more efficient markets or new materials and techniques. The entrepreneur is, in these views, someone who expresses the unlimited boundaries and possibilities of capitalism.

The history of the entrepreneur, according to Wendy Brown (2015), involves the logic of capitalism progressively diffusing into the whole social consciousness. Brown argues that *homo oeconomicus* began its ascent as an actor who represented the school of classical economics, and pursued self-interest as a trader exchanging goods. They then traversed through a stage of pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain, utilising a cost-benefit analysis in the style of Jeremy Bentham. At the dawn of neoliberalism, as noted by Foucault, entrepreneurialism was now being shaped as human capital. Finally, in Brown's own formulation, and while retaining much of what came before, *homo oeconomicus* is defined solely as financial human capital (Brown, 2015 p. 33). This subjectivity now focuses on self-investment, to improve one's economic value, attract investment, and strengthen one's competitive position in the market. The economisation of the subject, according to Brown, has now permeated across every domain of the subject's existence.

The Achievement Subject

Han (2015a; 2017a; 2017b; 2018a; 2021) argues that today we have all become hyperactive subjects who are obsessed with achievement. The achievement subject is a performance *project* who expresses the positivity of the achievement society. This idealised form of subjectivity reflects and affirms the logic of neoliberalism through the freedom of individualism and the unlimited possibilities of the market and self-optimisation. The achievement subject conducts life and relationships as an enterprise and is obsessively driven by flexibility, achievement, performance, and self-optimisation as instrumental means of self-realisation. This subjectivity departs from previous formulations in one important aspect, it does not just act as cost-benefit utility maximiser in instrumental terms but does so out of a feeling of

unbounded freedom. But this feeling of freedom obscures a sophisticated and hidden form of domination and control by neoliberal power relations.

According to Han, neoliberal power is seductive, and we feel the pressure to conform to it. But in our willingness to embrace the “free constraint” of maximising achievement, that is well on its way to permeating across every aspect of our existence, we have become “reproductive organs of capital” (Han, 2017b). Burnout is the result of a systemic manipulation of the social and economic conditions that re-configure subjectivity in the interests of capital. The scope of this extends beyond the entrepreneur of the market and now defines our relationship to work, our education, leisure, and our relationships with others. Burnout is both a feature of the system and the subjects themselves.

The negativity of Foucault’s disciplinary society cannot fully account for these psychic and topological changes. At a certain point, according to Han, the negativity of prohibition puts limits on production. Drawing on Deleuze, Han (2015a) says “the positivity of *Can* is much more efficient than the negativity of *Should*” (p. 9), therefore, to increase efficiency the social unconscious switches from *You Should* to *You Can*. The verb *Can* creates a feeling of liberation and unlimited potential. Achievement subjects feel free because they are lord and master of themselves and are not subjected to the will of others.

The perceived disappearance of domination, however, does not really mean freedom. Liberation for the achievement subject becomes paradoxical. This unbounded individual freedom turns into compulsive traits and inverts into a form of control and self-exploitation. The achievement subject, driven by this internal compulsion, becomes exhausted, oversaturated by these demands. Burnout derives its genesis from this positive dialectic. Han takes his point of departure from Ehrenberg’s study of depression in which individuals become overwhelmed by the demand to become themselves (Ehrenberg, 2009/1998). But for Han (Han, 2015a), burnout

is more than this. It is the manifestation of this paradoxical freedom in which the internal pressure of achievement remains unchecked by the absence of the negativity of the Other (Han, 2015a).

At this point we can formulate the hidden cause of burnout as an inversion of freedom into compulsive achievement. This insight is not necessarily original to Han. It was Honneth (2004a) who articulated how individualism has placed a heavy burden on people to become authentic selves and this has inverted into a form of compulsion and constraint. The process of continually feeding an inner drive for authenticity eventually leaves people feeling empty inside. Honneth (2004a) traces this process to the rise of individualism as a form of self-realisation that first takes shape as an ideology, and once established, morphs into a productive and economic force. With this inversion into compulsive productivity (and perhaps consumption), which has become the norm, individuals can only simulate their originality and authenticity, staging it for strategic reasons, or fall into depression or pathological shutdown. Honneth (2004a) agrees with Ehrenberg that depression sets in the moment we become overburdened by the diffuse and widespread demand to draw meaning from our inner lives when our inner lives can no longer feed this inner demand.

Honneth (2004a) connects the feeling of emptiness with the failure to live up to the demand to produce one's own authenticity. But while the demand of individualism is a journey of self-discovery it is also an ideology that is externally imposed. According to Honneth, "the expectations individuals had formed before they began to interpret their own lives as being an experimental process of self-discovery now recoil on them as demands issued from without" (Honneth, 2004a, p. 474). We are urged to always keep our goals and options open and to adapt to new forms of flexible capitalism that differed from regulated capitalism. For Han, the achievement subject differs in a subtle way. The achievement subject stands free from external commands and prohibitions, so these goals and options do not feel externally imposed but instead feel like freedom. The feeling of emptiness, which we could connect to burnout by calling it a

loss of meaning, is produced through a failure of the internal demand to be free. For Han, (2018a) the logic of authenticity should be understood primarily as a neoliberal advertisement that appears in an emancipatory guise. Here Han interprets the neoliberal form of authenticity as meaning the desire to form one's identity free from any preformed patterns of behaviour originating externally from the self. But more importantly, the "I" is free to, and must, constantly produce and perform itself as a mode of neoliberal self-production. The only externally imposed standard is the co-opting of universal values, such as freedom, as a means of increasing productivity. The imperative of independent self-production develops into a self-directed form of compulsion which intensifies in narcissistic self-reference (Han, 2018a, pp.19-26). However, the drive for authenticity does not really produce free and autonomous individuals but rather individuals that are 'entirely co-opted by commerce' (Han, 2018a, p.21).

While this interpretation does not divert much from Honneth and Ehrenberg's formulation there is more of an emphasis on freedom as a coercive device in Han's work. Han (2015a) criticises Ehrenberg for wrongly equating the modern subject with what Nietzsche called the *sovereign man*, the sole owner of himself in which nothing stands above him issuing orders. Han argues the modern subject is not this *sovereign man*, but rather what Nietzsche called, the *last man*, an *animal laboran* "who does nothing but work" (Han, 2015a, p.10) and exploits himself voluntarily without external limitations forcing him to work. Depression and burnout are not a failure to become oneself, but rather a failure to live up to the demands of unbounded freedom. Han says, the complaint of a person suffering depression or burnout is that "nothing is possible" which can only occur in a society in which "nothing is impossible" (Han, 2015a, p. 11). This is the point in which the subject becomes overburdened by the demands of unbounded freedom and is "*no-longer-being-able-to-be-able*" (Han, 2015a, p.11). This self-referentiality produces paradoxical freedom that becomes violence that is directed against the self.

CRITIQUE

In this section I will respond to some secondary literature on Han, particularly Alphin and Debrix (2021). These authors have questioned Han's framework, particularly his overstatement of the changes between biopolitics and psychopolitics. They argue that Han's insistence on the psyche as the new locus of power overlooks that the targeting of the mind, as a form of self-government, was already present in Foucault. They also criticise Han for insufficient theorising of the Other which overlooks how otherness is a vital resource for the achievement subject and how violence and pain inflicted on the achievement subject is also inflicted on the Other. They also take issue with Han's interpretation of modern freedom. For these authors, freedom is no different under neoliberalism than it was under liberalism, and they believe Han exaggerates the differences.

According to the authors (Alphin & Debrix, 2021) Foucault had already introduced the concept of self-discipline and the internalisation of power in the production of docile subjects. Foucault therefore anticipated Han's smart power as a modality of power that disciplines subjects to work on themselves. This was primarily conceived as an investment at the level of the [social] body which encouraged subjects to work on their psyche and become self-disciplined, laying the groundwork for the concept of self-optimisation. The authors also criticise Han for wanting to keep the subject's body out of the operations of psychopolitics, as if the modern subject did not have a body. The neoliberal modes of subjectification, they argue, are not a break from biopolitical and disciplinary powers but represent an intensification of previous modes.

This criticism overlooks a critical aspect of Han's psychopolitical framework. According to Riemann and Rossi (2022), biopolitical and disciplinary powers presuppose a collective identity or nation. The targeting of the individual and social body was in the service of producing a normalised form of subjectivity—the *docile subject*. Neoliberal modes of subjectification, on

the other hand, are increasingly in service of individual self-optimisation and this denies any form of collective identity (Riemann & Rossi, 2022; Han, 2017f). According to Han (2017f), atomised society shrinks the space for collective action, hindering a counterforce that could oppose capitalism. It is not nation but solitude that describes the neoliberal social configuration.

Here we see that Han's achievement subject is dialectically opposed to Foucault's obedience subject. It is defined by a positive dialectic in which the master-slave relationship has become internalised. This is not a type of subjectivity with shared experiences of nationhood, but it is one of isolation. Han has commented that today we all carry a labour camp inside (Han 2015a, p. 19). This is not just an expression of how modern subjects own their own skills and techniques of production, but it also expresses the internalisation of relations of power—the digital panopticon. The internalised labour camp is where one is simultaneously guard and prisoner, perpetrator and victim, boss and worker, and importantly, this internalisation implies atomisation. Han makes this explicit when he contrasts the disciplinary society governed by the modal verb *Should* with the achievement society governed by *Can*. He says the move from *you Should* to *you Can* is not a replacement of disciplinary society with the achievement society but rather an evolution in which the former is subsumed into the latter. The modern imperative, *yes, we Can*, contains the implicit commandment, *yes, we Should*. It is simultaneously a mode of freedom and a mode of control.

In response to the claim (Alphin & Debrix, 2021) that Han has not provided a sufficient theorisation of the Other, it is a shame these authors did not reference Han's work *The Expulsion of the Other* (2018a) that is devoted to theorising about the Other in contemporary society. Whist rich in detail, this work describes how Otherness has been disappearing across several dimensions. The neoliberal strategy of authenticity is a process of bending the Other for the purposes maximising efficacy. It makes the Other conform so that it is eventually replaced with what Han terms commodifiable differences. Difference for Han does not elicit the same immune

response, or sting, as Otherness and is increasingly converging on conformity. The violence and pain inflicted on the Other can be seen in Han's work as the removal of boundaries and thresholds. Here again, other cultures and nationalities are dismantled or watered down so that they fit the mould of neoliberal capitalism. Any real meaning found in the singularly (the one who is a radical other), or in other ways of being in the world, are blocked or levelled out because they do not submit to universal exchange (Han, 2018a, p. 11). True radical Otherness, for Han, is not only unsettling, but also impairs the circulation of information and the efficient production and reproduction of capital. This can be interpreted as nothing short of a violence against the Other.

Finally, Alphin and Debrix (2021) argue that freedom is not different under neoliberalism than it was under liberalism and Han overstates this change. What we see, they claim, is an intensification of freedom that includes self-exploitation. They seem to be assuming firstly that freedom is nothing more than the negative liberal concept. Nevertheless, the authors do not pay enough homage to the paradoxical aspect of freedom in Han's achievement subject. For Han, paradoxical freedom is not a claim that freedom itself has changed. Rather, it is a claim that we are witnessing the limits of liberal freedom. Freedom is supposed to be the opposite of control and domination. However, the achievement subject, who stands free from external commands and prohibitions forcing it to work, is now subjecting itself to internal forms of domination. The removal of external domination does not then produce freedom but rather it brings forth new forms of compulsion and constraint, where freedom and constraint coincide. The result is self-exploitation which is more efficient than exploitation by others because it is accompanied by a sense of freedom. Han writes that burnout is a pathological manifestation of paradoxical freedom (Han, 2015a).

It could be argued, there is no paradox if we follow the theory of freedom as described by Hobbes (Honneth, 2014). For Hobbes, internal hindrances do not count as restrictions on

freedom. For Hobbes, this is because psychological factors can only be traced to internal capacities of the individual and therefore do not restrict freedom (Honneth, 2014). This objection clearly overlooks the impoverishment of negative freedom. For instance, it denies the role culture plays in conditioning the psychological makeup of individuals. As Honneth (2014) has argued, negative freedom has a “tendency to grant people the opportunity to be narcissistic” (p. 23).

This critique of liberal freedom can be enriched with perspectives from republican theories of non-domination (Breen, 2021). Republicans claim freedom from interference is not enough. For instance, when people are vulnerable to domination by others, they might modify their behaviour, changing their lives in ways they did not freely choose. Freedom as non-domination is freedom from structures that create arbitrary forms of domination. This is still a negative conception because it does not focus on actualising one’s capacities but the absence of arbitrary influences by others or our dependence on them (Breen, 2021). For Han, freedom for the achievement subject is producing compulsion and constraint. The freedom of *Can* produces more coercion than the disciplinary *Should* (Han, 2017b). This does not indicate the removal of arbitrary forms of domination but rather they have become obscured behind the guise of unbounded freedom of achievement and performance. Recall also that Han distinguished biopolitics, that attempts to make people obedient, from neoliberalism that seduces people with unbounded freedom, making them dependent. The internal master is the new form of domination forcing the internal slave to work. The *dialectic of positivity* can be read as an internal form of arbitrary domination. When I think I am free to determine my own actions, projects, and goals, I can never know if obsessive achievement and performance are not in the service of something else?

This brings to the surface Han’s claim that today we have a poor relationship with negativity. The negativity of the Other is instrumental to resisting internal forms of arbitrary domination. If we return to Ekstedt and Fagerberg’s (2005) research, they demonstrate that in

the experience of the time preceding burnout people often ignore the warning signs from others and even fatigue or cognitive impairment from their own bodies. It is as if the positivity of achievement and performance block out all negativity that would interfere with achievement of the task at hand. Burnout occurs at this threshold when we ignore the negativity of the Other. When colleagues recognise the signs of fatigue or obsessive behaviour that might lead to burnout, or when our bodies send us signs that we need rest, it would be in our best interest to engage with this negativity.

Real freedom, which Han (Han, 2017b) draws from Marx and Hegel, comes from the word friendship, and occurs in a fruitful relationship, it is “*self-realization with others*” (p. 3). And like all relationships, they are a dynamic process of navigating, or engaging with, positive and negative forces. The neoliberal achievement subject, however, has no capacity for relationships that are free of purpose (Han, 2017b) and is governed by a negative liberal conception of freedom, as individual self-interest. This concept of freedom is particularly vulnerable to smart power (2017b; 2019) and can easily be hijacked as a form of control. The crisis of freedom and the rise of burnout can be read as a failure of this modern concept of freedom (Han, 2017b).

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have argued that burnout is the result of freedom that becomes paradoxical when the achievement subject maximises performance without the negativity of the Other. As a foundation for this claim we examined Han’s concept of power to show how freedom can be harnessed for coercive purposes. It produces a form of subjectivity that is hyperactive and orientated to achievement and performance. The theory of psychopolitics captures the idea that burnout is a non-immunological condition created by new conditions of power. Burnout is a condition of the positivity of the achievement subject who relates only to itself. For Han,

biopolitics operates with immunological categories of inside and outside and therefore is not sufficient to describe modern forms of burnout. In the next chapter we will examine how the effects of impoverished negativity has altered our social conditions through transparency and digital technology, and how these have reduced the capacity for communicative action which involves engagement with the Other. Then we will conclude by reflecting on some of Han's solutions which rely on the value of experiences of negativity.

CHAPTER 3. NEGATIVITY

“Positive society, from which the negativity of death has been removed, is a society of mere life, dominated merely by the concern to ‘ensure the survival of discontinuity.’ And that is the life of a slave. This concern for mere life, survival, deprives life of all its vivacity, which represents an extremely complex phenomenon. The merely positive is deprived of life. Negativity is essential to vitality” (Han quoted in *Leite, 2016*, p.292).

Introduction

Burnout is not just a stress-response to badly organised work but arises in social conditions devoid of negativity. It is a pathology of excess positivity, in which agency is affirmed through the unbounded freedom of achievement, and this becomes an obsession.

We have seen that smart power configures social conditions and individuals along the positive dimensions of capitalism. Its friendly appearance seduces and subjugates people, through consumption and communication, into dominating themselves. Obsessive achievement and performance are subjugation in an emancipatory guise and freedom, which is supposed to be opposite of coercion, is turned into submission. The subject positively affirms a sense of agency through the freedom of achievement, but since achievement is indefinite, it has no ends, it becomes a compulsion and produces self-exploitation. It is therefore not the suppression of freedom, but “its exploitation that maximizes productivity and efficiency” (Han 2018a, p. 15). In this social configuration the achievement subject has a hard time engaging in negativity. However, it is the valuing of experiences of negativity that can be constructive as a solution to burnout.

This Chapter offers solutions to burnout through the constructive value of negativity. First, I analyse the concepts of negativity and positivity drawing on Han, Hegel, and Sennett. Next, I examine how impoverished negativity has altered our social conditions through transparency and digital technology. Here the claim is that thinking, freedom, action, and politics are active states that require engagement with the negativity of others. Finally, we will reflect on

Han's solutions that rely on the value of experiences of negativity where we consider contemplation, stopping and listening as antidotes to burnout.

WHAT IS NEGATIVITY?

Han claims, "not all negativity is destructive" and forms of "negativity such as hesitation, pausing, boredom, waiting, or rage prove constructive" (2017f, p. 177). We could add, the negativity of collective action, friendship, love, gratification, and conclusion, all of which contain an element of the Other and relationships of negation. Truth is also a negative force, because it asserts itself when it declares that everything else is false (Han, 2015b, p. 8). Drawing on Hegel then, dialectics is based on negativity and "negativity is precisely what keeps existence [Dasein] alive" (Han, 2015a, p.24). "Spirit" does not turn away from negativity but tarries with it, enduring it, and preserving it within itself (Han, 2015b). Meaningful change therefore requires lingering with the negativity of the Other which is a slow process. Relationships do not form overnight, and slowness itself is a form of negativity. Those who do not linger and pursue only that which is positive, that is, those who race and want things instantly, become mindless (Han, 2015a). Thought itself requires engagement with the Other because it is only the Other that can challenge the Same (Han, 2018a, p. 4). If the Self had no access to the Other, thinking becomes calculation, which amounts to "an endless repetition of the Same" and this "cannot produce any new state" (Han, 2018a, p. 4). The absence of negativity produces a deficiency in social rationality when there is no enrichment by the Other.

The society of positivity seduces subjects into refusing the good life and preferring *bare life*. *Bare life* is the life of animal labouring and subsistence, and this is a positive state for capitalism because labouring and consumption produces profit. The good life, however, is a negative notion because first, it involves the negativity of Others in which different people have

different conceptions of the good life, and second, like truth, by asserting itself as true, a specific view of the good life declares that other ways of life are less suitable.

Rather than not being allowed to do something, which characterises the disciplinary subject, the achievement subject is supposed to be able to do everything. The positive human being is “flexible, able to assume any form, play any role, or perform any function. This shapelessness—or, alternately, flexibility—creates a high degree of economic efficiency” (Han, 2015a p. 40). This produces an excess of positivity that suits the climate of modern capitalism. It also lays the groundwork for self-exploitation because a subject who constantly engages in frantic activity lacks the negativity of pause, hesitation, or slowness—that is to say, lacks the ability to say no. However, in the search to become flexible, or assume any role, the positive human being is without character. According to Freud, Han (2015a) argues, the formation of character takes its shape from the negativity of internal censorship. The agent's history of repression, for instance, is a history of working through conflict within the psyche (2015a). The modern subject lacks character in another sense, according to Richard Sennett (1998). The concept of character is opposed to the positivity of flexible capitalism because it concerns the ‘long-term aspects of our emotional experience,’ delayed gratification, and “personality traits which we value in ourselves and for which we seek to be valued in others” (Sennett, 1998, p. 10). Sennett and Freud demonstrate that the formation of character is a dialectical process that contains as much negativity as it does positivity. Short term goals, flexibility, and the ability to perform any role or function do not admit to a fixed character but do exhibit signs of the positivity of Han’s unstable hyperactive subject.

The system of psychopolitics ensures that individuals are, in a manner of speaking, disconnected from their own minds. Recall, the achievement subject has no need for any relationships that are “*free of purpose*” (Han, 2017b, p.2). Therefore, they have no need for a relationship with an Other. The Other could either be external to the Self or an internal

disposition. Does this mean the achievement subject has no relationship with negative violence? While this view may be extreme, recall also that research on the experience of time preceding burnout uncovered a phenomenon called cutting-off. Here, burnout sufferers reported that at the onset of burnout they were driven by the positivity of workplace goals and block out warning signs from their own bodies. They seemed incapable of a relationship with their own signs of fatigue and cognitive impairment, as if this was a form of Otherness. When the determination to achieve means freedom, and one cannot engage with its own negativity, this results in self-exploitation.

Bartles (2021) says that Han continuously makes the claim that negative violence has disappeared, which also seems odd considering neoliberalism is associated with violence and destruction (Harvey, 2007). However, to read Han at face value would be a mistake. For Han, neoliberal ideology replaces forms of negative violence with positive violence. Because the achievement subject “feels free their obedience to capitalism” and their identity is constructed as project that “seeks self-fulfilment in an increasingly meaningless series of isolated tasks that serve only the interests of capital” (Bartles, 2021, p. 59) violence has also become internalised. With the gamification of work, work has become play, simultaneously increasing efficiency, and destroying the potential of play to set one free (Bartles, 2021; Han, 2017b).

The Society of Transparency

Transparency is a mechanism that insures the positivity of capitalism. In moderation it serves the function of accountability and protects against corruption. Its overuse by the neoliberal achievement society, however, strips all things of negativity for the purposes of maximising efficiency (Han, 2015b).

Transparency dismantles negativity by being presented as the best vehicle for freedom and then by force it transforms everything into information (Han, 2017b). For Han, it amounts to a neoliberal technology of power that takes hold of all social processes to “operationalize and

accelerate them” (2015b, p. 2). Operations, procedures, society, and people become transparent when stripped of all negativities that would oppose the positive reproduction of capital. The demand for transparency, which is much like the demand for freedom, is a process of deep-reaching change that reconfigures society and human beings for this end (Han, 2015a). If we only connect transparency to the freedom of information and corruption, then we have failed to comprehend this scope (2015b). As a power relation, it dismantles social processes and practices, removing the negativity that would impede the flow of capital, and retaining the positive dimensions so that operations and human beings are calculable, steerable, and controllable. They become smoothly integrated into capitalism where they are expressed in price and figures alone. The presence of negativity would interrupt operations, slow them down, tarry with them, and change them. On a Marxian interpretation, however, the system of transparency ensures what Han calls the survival of discontinuity, because it guarantees that its subjects are kept in a state of disunion, they lack any social cohesion, and cannot form a collective group to challenge the system. The demand for transparency atomises individuals and this reduces our capacity to engage with the Other.

Transparency is therefore a strategy with two purposes, productivity, and compliance. First, it increases production by optimising the efficiency of its subjects as if they were part of the machinery, because only machines are fully transparent (Han, 2015b). Han writes, communication, production, and consumption reach their most efficient state only when “like responds to like” (Han, 2015b, p. 2) and this amounts to a calibrated society. Second, transparency produces subjects who are compliant and less likely to resist. This is the violence inherent in transparency that is often overlooked, in which the human being is flattened out to form a functional part of the system (Han, 2015b). It produces a pornographic⁶ society where

⁶ Han defines the term pornography as the ‘unmediated contact between the image and the eye.’ (2015b, pp.1-2)

everything is exposed, and this ensures we mimic each other, reducing the tendency of the radical Other from emerging. This spells the death of politics, which requires secrecy for strategic action to safely voice and debate ideas out of public view. Without the negativity of secrecy or the radical questioning of our political economic system then politics becomes impotent and degrades into theatre (Han, 2015b).

The Digital Order

Digital technology and communication are technologies of positivity that are destroying our relationship to the negativity of the Other (Goulart, 2022; Han, 2017a). Debates around digital technology are often concerned with questions like, how it is used? Or how it should be used? When questions arise about its ethical dimension these are often silenced with claims about its neutrality (Ballesteros, 2020). But any new tool will influence human life or behaviour in some way by its use alone and therefore is never ethically neutral. This idea goes back to Plato where in the *Phaedrus* he discusses how King Thamus was worried about the introduction of writing. Thamus warned that writing, the new technology of the time, would diminish the human capacity for memory regardless of content or how writing is used (Ballesteros, 2020). Han argues that the use of digital technology degrades various human capacities that connect to the experience of negativity, such as the capacity for thought, or social and political engagement.

Today, more and more we are creating tools that rule over our own psyche and modify our behaviour (Ballesteros, 2020). First, digital communication robs us of the full experience of human communication by reducing it to one aspect. Verbal and written communication on digital platforms have become a form of transparent communication. But human communication is a complex phenomenon that involves more than just verbal and written communication. It includes facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, inflection, smell perception, and body language that are always open to the negativity of the Other and are subjected to interpretation (Goulart, 2022; Han, 2017a). Secondly, digital communication atomises and isolates individuals and therefore

passes over those who are unfamiliar. This is because social media and internet communication create an illusion of human relationships when what they really do is produce echo chambers in which one's own opinions are confirmed. This reduces social engagement and our capacity to think or engage in collective action. The constant exposure to the excessive positivity of large amounts of digital information has also caused a reduction in sensitivity and a deterioration of analytical skills (Han, 2017a). We are exposed to so much information that information ceases to be informative. Human interaction in the digital world becomes a form of *communication without community* (Han, 2017a). Han contrasts this with the collective voice of a *community without communication*. His poetic reversal of this phrase gestures towards an important inversion which has surfaced in the age of digital communication.

According to Han (2017a), the age of crowds has been overtaken by the digital swarm. This is in reference to Gustave Le Bon who described modernity as the “age of the crowds” in which he predicted that society would eventually have to come to terms with the power of the masses (p. 9). The divine right of kings would be replaced by the “divine right of the masses” (Han, 2017a, p. 9). This has changed according to Han. The digital swarm does not embody the collective spirit of a crowd because it is composed entirely of atomised individuals whose communication is produced in private spaces and then sent to other private spaces. (Han, 2022b). No rage forms, only what Han (2017b) calls shitstorms. The first word of western narration is rage which can also be translated as *wrath* or *vengeance* from the Ancient Greek word *menin* (Han, 2017b, p. 8). The rage of Achilles, as a metaphor for narration and action, symbolises the capacity to interrupt the current conditions and bring about something new. A shitstorm, on the other hand, is an internet phenomenon expressed in sudden outbursts of anger or outrage. Shitstorms are neither narration nor action because they lack the social unity or cohesion necessary for real collective action and change. Social media shitstorms do not show a genuine concern for the social body. But rather, they are expressions of narcissism that well up in echo chambers and then quickly dissipate (Han, 2017d).

This means the internet and social media are not public spaces according to Han because they are not mediums for communicative action. The crowd is a collective group that speaks with a united voice. Its inversion into the digital swarm results in isolated individuals that do not speak with a united voice. The swarm becomes, according to Han, something like white noise. Without public institutions and social practices that preserve the credibility of information and discourse, democracy is in crisis.

The concept of communicative action can be attributed to Arendt and Habermas (Han, 2022b). For Arendt (Han, 2022b), political thinking is representative because it involves considering the standpoint of those who are absent, and this forms a truly discursive dialogue because it is always mindful of the position of the Other. The Other becomes a form of negativity that one must linger with before coming to a considered position. For Habermas (Han, 2022), actors are also speakers and hearers who either accept or reject validity claims about something in the world. Actors do not refer directly to something objective, subjective, or social, but qualify their opinions based on the possibility that others might negatively impact their discourse by disputing it (Han, 2022b, p. 27).

While there are multiple causes to the contemporary crisis of politics and communicative action, one dimension of this is the positivity of digital communication. When discourse, in the form of digital information, does not pass through the public sphere, and disintegrates into the digital swarm, where each person acts in isolation, pursuing their own interests. Here we also see a dimension of the disappearance of the Other in which the internet has provided a platform to indoctrinate oneself with one's own ideas, like an echo chamber, and the voice of the Other is not heard.

EXPERIENCES OF NEGATIVITY

Today, the positivity of continuous activity and achievement has turned us into labouring animals who work until we burn out. This has robbed us of the capacity to linger and contemplate. It has also deprived us of the experience of the Other which first involves encountering the negativity of the other and then tarrying with it slowly. Slowness does not figure in the positivity of the achievement society which is always rushing. For Han (2015a; 2018a), regaining the capacity for negative practices like contemplation, boredom, stopping, and listening, feature prominently as solutions to overcome the hyperactive tendencies of the Burnout Society. This amounts to embracing negativity as something with intrinsic value because it creates a dialectical balance to frantic activity. Through recognition that deficiencies in negativity give rise to certain social pathology we can be motivated to convert this knowledge into praxis (Honneth, 2004b). While Han is certainly not alone in recognising the value of contemplation and listening, he places great emphasis on negativity as being inherently valuable, if not indispensable, which he draws from both Hegel (Han, 2015a) and Ancient Greek philosophy (Han, 2017e).

For Aristotle, philosophy, thinking, and freedom owe their existence to leisure [*scholē*], as a time without coercion, necessity, or toil (2017e). These have little to do with today's conception of idleness or leisure time. Work, by contrast, is the pursuit of usefulness and necessity for the maintenance and reproduction of life, and because this is subjected to the coercive nature of life, it is not a realm of freedom. Outside of work is the beauty, truth, honour, and virtue, and these are found when "contemplative rest enjoys absolute priority" (Han, 2017e, p. 86). Work as a period of non-rest must therefore be subordinated to leisure as a time of rest. Work is bound up with the necessities of life, it is a means and not an end. So, we learn skills such as drawing and painting so that we can contemplate physical beauty. But the "incapacity for leisure is precisely a sign of inertia" (Han, 2017e, p. 87) or the incapacity to collect oneself.

Contemplation

For Han, contemplation and boredom are necessary antidotes to burnout. Drawing on Nietzsche, Han connects contemplation to the negativity of an “excluding instinct” (Han, 2015a, p.21) in which we take control of our actions. Without this excluding instinct we react to every impulse and our thinking becomes scattered and hyperactive. The symptoms of exhaustion stem from the “inability to set a *no* in opposition” (Han, 2015a, p.21) to an obsession with achievement.

Contemplation for Han is an active state and a resistance against this kind of “intrusive stimuli” (Han, 2015a, p.21) whereas hyperactivity is a passive state. Here we see another inversion of our intuitions. When continuous activity intensifies in the positive affirmation of freedom it becomes hyperactivity and this abruptly switches into form of hyper-passivity. While the subject might seem active from the outside, internally the subject obeys every stimulus or impulse without question (Han, 2015a, p.21). In this sense, hyperactivity resembles inertia, the tendency to remain unchanged. The hyperactive achievement subject is therefore poor in the negativity of interruption, the active capacity to stop. For Han, interruption is when we measure the sphere of contingency, that is, to reflect on our instrumental means we must be able to stand outside and reflect on their ends. To stop and reflect is an active state because it interrupts the passive state of hyperactivity (Han, 2015a, p.24).

Stopping

Josh Cohen (2018) has argued that modern subjects do not seem to have the power to stop in a negative sense. They only stop in the positive sense when they cease one activity and then immediately continue with another one. This is not the kind of stopping that can curb burnout.

Cohen (2018) observes that we can read the phrase *to stop* as either a transitive verb or an intransitive verb. In a culture obsessed with activity, the transitive use of stopping refers to stopping something to do something else. To stop one activity and begin another immediately turns not doing something into something that has to be done. It adds more items to the to-do list and perpetuates our hyperactive society of constant self-improvement. The intransitive use of stopping has no object attached to it and stopping becomes an autonomous choice, or an “act of resistance against the tyranny of action” (Cohen, 2018, p. 218). Here, Cohen points to the idea that action when devoid of negativity can become a form of tyranny.

On this view, burnout is the result of subjects that cannot stop in the intransitive sense. It also results in extreme passivity that does not allow free action to occur. According to Han (2015a) there are two forms of potency, negative potency, and positive potency. Positive and negative potency are two forms of active power: the power to do something, and the power not to do something. They are intrinsically different from impotence. Impotence is lack of power, which might well manifest itself in activity, or even hyper-activity, if this activity is not driven by the agent’s power. So, when work becomes an obsession, and heads in the direction of burnout, the action required would be to rest. But impotence is precisely the incapacity to stop at this point, resulting in overwork. Negative potency, on the other hand, is the capacity to say no, to stop work at the appropriate time. Han says, “if one only possessed the positive ability to perceive something and not the negative ability not to perceive something, one’s senses would stand utterly at the mercy of rushing, intrusive stimuli and impulses” (Han, 2015a, p. 24). In this sense, burnout is a form of impotence, the inability to stop and rest, or to switch off from obsessive achievement, when the body requires a period of rest.

Han connects negative potency with contemplation and spiritual practices. In meditation one attempts to free oneself from intrusive stimuli by actively suppressing thoughts and emotions. As an antidote to burnout stopping is not just a form of rest. It is also the freeing of the mind

from the shackles of thought and emotions, or the constant internal demand of achievement and performance. While sleep might be a natural remedy for physical exhaustion only in boredom or contemplation does the mind detach from these demands.

The path to overcome burn out is therefore to live a balanced life that recognises and engages with negativity. There is nothing wrong with achievement and performance in themselves, but when these activities become positive, that is, devoid of all negativities, they cease to be constructive and becomes destructive. According to Han, we must be willing to say “no” to the world and we must develop the power, or the courage, to reject the command to always be positive. Han argues that negativity not only nourishes the “life of the mind” (2015b, p.5) but also opposes the self-destructive traits of the achievement subject (Han, 2018a).

Listening

Listening is an experience of negativity that is constructive. According to Han (2018a) we need a temporal revolution, a new time because our time he defines as the *time of the Self* where the narcissistic achievement subject is deaf to the pain and suffering of Others. The domination of smart power has privatised pain and suffering, and the echo chambers of digital technology conceals a deterioration of the social and political dimensions. Han suggests the *time of the Other*, would be a new epoch in which we re-connect with the experiences of the Other. For this he suggests we need to restore the art of listening (Han, 2018a).

For Han (2018a), listening is far from a passive act, but is an active process where the listener tries to understand the Other. The listener does not just allow the Other to speak, but the listener is already listening before the Other begins to speak. This way the Other is freed to be at home in their otherness because we suspend our own egos and judgements. This requires both the negative capacity not to interrupt, pass judgement or dismiss the views of the Other, and the positive capacity of interpretation and understanding. Judgement, which presupposes a position before the speaker speaks, would be a betrayal of the Other.

Communication also presumes the presence of a concrete addressee or counterpart. The culture of the “like” that is typical of the society of achievement, and is dominant on social media, has no need for a counterpart. Here, communication takes the form of an advertisement or exhibition space for the Self which does not necessarily foster good listening or communicative action. Rather than listening, communication becomes a mere exchange of information in which no relationships or community form. In this environment we are blind to the pain and suffering of the Other.

Listening is therefore a political act. The active engagement of listening to the Other and their experiences of suffering is what connects people and makes consideration possible. Today, however, we have lost this capacity because, for Han (2018a), suffering has been privatised and individualised. Rather than shared experiences that produce meaning and understanding, suffering has become a positive object of therapy in which the Self is tampered with and redirected. Burnout becomes an object for correction in which the sufferer feels ashamed and conforms to an ideological standard. To overcome this deficiency, we need this temporal revolution, a time in which we suspend our ego and make space for the voice of others (Han, 2018a).

The Praxis of Idiotism

At the end of *Psychopolitics* (2017b), Han considers the radical idea of idiotism as a practice of freedom and emancipation from ‘psychological programming and steering’ (Han, 2017b). In following Nietzsche, he argues what society needs is an “event” that brings into play something from the outside that defies all calculation. This would amount to a real praxis of freedom. But how would one enact this practice of freedom? According to Han we need to neutralise or cleanse our psychology of the tendency to be governed by unbounded freedom through the “art of living”. Following Foucault, “the art of living is the art of killing psychology, of creating with oneself and with others unnamed individuals, beings, relations, qualities” (Han

quoting Foucault, 2017b, p.78). The de-psychologised subject can then unlock new existential modes of existence that are currently unnamed, “an unwritten future” (Han,2017b, p.79). For this he turns to the idea of idiotism (Oliver, 2020).

This view argues that to be truly free, we must liberate ourselves from our own self-empowerment, because self-empowerment itself has become corrupted by psychopolitics. The real practice of freedom is not found in the unbounded freedom of the achievement subject but in the one who stands outside and chooses not to be constrained by the system. This is the wholly Other, or the idiot. Han uses the word idiot to mean the one who brings about a new idiom. The history of philosophy is full of such examples. The only thing Socrates knew was that he knew nothing, and his thinking created a new idiom. Deleuze is quoted as saying, “an old idiot wanted truth, but the new idiot wants to turn the absurd into the highest power of thought” (Han quoting Deleuze, 2017b, p.82). These examples allude to well-known philosophers who broke with current modes of thinking to create a genuinely new discourse.

For Han, the idiot is the wholly Other who stands outside the status quo and brings forth a new way of life. He is the modern-day heretic, where heretic etymologically means choice, who opposes the violence of consensus. Only the idiot has access, or can alert others, to a wholly different way of being, and in doing so he can invent a new discourse and create new possibilities that amount to a new future beyond neoliberalism (Oliver, 2020).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Byung-Chul Han's theory of the burnout society explores social pathology as a condition of excessive positivity. It shows how social rationality becomes deficient when we do not engage with or appreciate the value of experiences of negativity. The burnout condition is a positive form of violence that stems from the compulsive freedom of the achievement subject, a new form of subjectivity that is based on new power relations in which achievement is a positive affirmation of agency and power. But because achievement is unlimited it becomes compulsive and produces self-exploitation.

To support this argument, this thesis explains Han's concept of power and psychopolitics as hidden causes of this self-exploitation. Power is a continuation of the Self in the Other that should be conceptualised as a *form*, where *mediation* between the *source of power* and the *subject of power* is what changes according to the social configuration. This allows us to see how freedom can be coercive. In the theory of psychopolitics burnout is understood as a non-immunological condition created by these new power relations because an excess of positivity. Psychopolitics captures new technologies of power that shape the achievement subject. This mode of subjectivity expresses the positivity of unbounded freedom, and this leads to self-exploitation. For Han, biopolitics is no longer able to capture this dimension of subjectivity because it operates with immunological categories of inside and outside and therefore cannot describes modern forms of burnout.

In the discourse on negativity, we saw how surplus positivity alters our social conditions, as seen in transparency and digital technology, and this has impacted on the capacity to contemplate, engage in communicative action, and recognise the Other. Burnout becomes a form of impotence and the consequences of a reduction in the capacity for thought and action. Frantic activity, which it is argued is a form of passivity, is where one's actions are determined by

obsessive achievement and self-optimisation. Burnout represents an incapacity to act when action is required, or to set a “no” in opposition to obsessive achievement.

This thesis is concluded with reflections on the value of experiences of negativity that can be found in contemplation, stopping, and listening and these are proposed as solutions to burnout. It concludes with the idea that real freedom can only be obtained when we emancipate ourselves from our own self-empowerment, because self-empowerment itself has become inverted and corrupted by psychopolitics as a means of coercion and for increasing productivity.

This thesis adds the growing work on Byung-Chul Han within English-speaking countries. It also adds to the philosophical literature on burnout as a critique of neoliberal society.

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