

The Burnout Society

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The book *The Burnout Society*¹ was written by German-settled, Korean philosopher, Byung-Chul Han. It is composed of seven chapters and two annexes, which deepen themes such as the passage from a society of control to a society of performance and the consequences in everyday life, marked by pathologies linked to excess and positivity. These basis of the epistemological reflections are those of like Plato, Aristotle, Arendt, Agamben, Nietzsche, Kant, and Freud, among others, to debate, to oppose and to deepen their concepts.

In the first chapter, "The Neuronal Violence", the author affirms that we are living the era of neuronal diseases, marked by pathologies such as depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, borderline personality disorder, Burnout Syndrome; diseases caused by excess. In a previous era these pathologies were described as bacterial and viral, marked by the disagreeable removal of foreign things, a concept that goes beyond the immunological field and reaches the social realm. The immunological reaction is characterized by a

reaction to the otherness; alterity, whose prophylaxis is the vaccine and is characterized as the denial of denial that occurs without danger to life, even allowing the use of a form of self-violence to protect itself from even greater violence. However, in the present day, in neuronal pathologies, the difference is that does not provoke any reaction and does not become sick, but becomes naturalized in consumption, giving way to the exotic. The immigrant, for example, is no longer seen as another risk-taker or a foreigner representing a real danger (bacteriological and viral epoch), he is seen, in the neural period, as a weight to be carried. Violence arising from positivity, overproduction, super performance and super-communication causes the depletion, exhaustion and suffocation reflexes of a permissive and pacified society where this type of violence is invisible and inaccessible from a direct perception.

In this society, the subject becomes an entrepreneur, absorbed in the pursuit of performance and production. Han splits two concepts that make up the the disciplinary society and control society (Foucault's concepts) to describe the transition to society from performance, in the second chapter of his book. A characteristic statement of this time is yes, we can, which demonstrates the positivity

of power as opposed to the negativity of duty. No more external coercion is necessary, the depressive man is the working animal that can no longer be power; it is at the same time the victim and his own tormentor in a context of paradoxical freedom. The concept of the working animal is further elaborated in Chapter 4, called "Active Life". The business model of self creates a false sense of freedom. However, the excess of positivity and not being able to say no trigger processes of coercion and violence, in general, that are imperceptible. An effective technique for production and performance is multitasking, the author explains in Chapter 3, that it is not something innovative, but rather a retrogression that brings man closer to the animal that by extinction of survival divides its attention into different activities. Contemplation and deep attention have been shifted to hyper-attention, with low boredom tolerance that is critical to the creative process.

In the chapter "Active Life," the author discusses the concept of Hannah Arendt. For the author, acting has a heroic emphasis linked to birth and is configured as a way to activate new processes. However, modernity has generated a deadly passivity, and that acting and producing relate directly to work, reducing man to a working animal. In postmodernity, transience is something real, which relates not

only to human life, but to the world as it is today. In this scenario, the man-animal worker experiences new constraints, is no longer passive, and all the common activities of daily life generate in him a nervous agitation producing hyperactive and hyper-neurotic subjects, devoid of being. As an alternative, the author says that even without realizing it, Hannah Arendt mentions the language of the contemplative life, and states that the loss of the capacity to contemplate, characteristic of modern active society, is co-responsible for hysteria and nervousness.

In chapter 5, Han problematizes the need to learn to see, allowing a long, slow look without an immediate reaction, then finally the ability to contemplate. Immediate reaction, characteristic of our time, can be seen as a symptom of exhaustion, hyperactivity that paradoxically becomes hyper-passivity and generates the illusion of a freedom, but which actually generates more coercions. Man suffers in a poor world of interruptions, necessitating the negativity of the cut, of stopping inwardly to perceive the whole that is not in an activity. Positivity, however, produces scattered thought, without reflection, and connected to various objects. This growing positivization of society does not give rise to reflection and perception of difference, thus provoking a state

of totalitarian normality that absorbs every state of exception.

In the following chapter the author uses Melville's text on *Bartleby* to describe the characteristics of a disciplinary society. He states that in the disciplinary society there are no symptoms of depression, since the feeling of inadequacy and anguish over failure are not part of the possible feelings in context; the postmodern imperative of continuing to produce requires self-abandonment. The *Bartleby* story, describes the exhaustion lived on Wall Street, where only the negativity of the refusal used by the character, gives him freedom.

Chul Han, follows this with the chapter "Society of Fatigue" addressing how performance society has been used as a form of doping for cognitive enhancement, vitality as a complex phenomenon loses value by reducing its vital function. So we have a society of excess, of performance, an active society that generates exhaustion and a solitary fatigue by positivity. It is also a form of violence that wipes out the community, making possible a society that does not need membership. He ends this chapter by opposing the active society to the "petencostal society," composed of tired people with no specific

meaning, he affirms that if the future were this, we would have a society of fatigue. The book follows with the attachment "Society of Exhaustion" where the author makes an analysis of the concepts of Freud and the changes of the disciplinary society to society of the performance, pointing to a restructuring of the psyche. The psychic apparatus proposed by Freud is dominated by fear and anguish in the face of transgression; however, in the subject of performance one sees the subject of affirmation. This subject no longer submits to compulsory labor and is not waiting for the gratification that suffering could cause him. He seeks pleasure and becomes an entrepreneur of himself, a state of freedom that forces him to produce more without ever reaching a point of gratification. A new form of coercion, disguised, prevents negative feelings from being perceived, and thus, the conflict of this way of life and functioning does not emerge.

The author builds a new way of looking at psychic illness such as depression and burnout, described as the consequences of inability to say no, of not being able to do everything. A form of self-destruction that gains concreteness in nervous breakdown or in syndromes such as burnout, in this way of living, man equates with the undead, who are too alive to die and too dead to live.

In the second appendix, entitled "Celebration time - party in a time without celebration", the author closes his book giving clues to forms of resistance to the society of performance, for this offers the reader the concept of party in counterpoint to the event. The time of the party is a time that does not pass, it is a space where we linger, a situation difficult to identify today, we live the temporality of the event or the spectacle, life is marked by the eventuality. The word party has religious origins, being a moment where we become divine, Han refers Plato's book *Nomos* (Law) that says that man and woman were made by God to cheer and to play, however the manifestations of giving offerings, dancing and singing served to awaken the grace of the Gods. Today, however, we are slaves of work, performance, and production moving away from divinity. For the current crisis, the author suggests that we should create a way of life that recovers stagnation, for this is important to realize the difference between stop and pause. In pause or deceleration to the goal is recovery to return to work, to continue working in opposition we have stagnation characterized by a full time of high vital intensity.

Han concludes his book by citing the three forms of free life, according to Aristotle: one who enjoys beautiful things, one who produces

beautiful acts in the polis and the contemplative life, thus, poets, politicians and philosophers are free. Nevertheless, today, politics is misrepresented, politicians have submitted to the system that results in a dictatorship of capital. Hypercapitalism transforms all relationships into commercials, human dignity is replaced by market value and

society is becoming a large and unique commercial shop, full of objects and goods with diminishing shelf life and validity. Very similar to the asylum, where we have everything, but we lack the essential, the world. The author affirms that it is time to transform this store that has turned the world into a house, a party house, where it is worth living.

Reference

¹HAN, Byung-Chul. Sociedade do cansaço. 2ª Edição Ampliada. Petrópolis, RJ: Vozes; 2017.



The text is being published in Portuguese and English, in this order.