

Introduction: Aspiration Burnout

PAMELA M. LEE

In May 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) issued a statement on “burn-out syndrome.” For anyone paying attention, its publication was not only belated but redundant. By then, “burnout” had become a long-standing workplace and pop-culture trope, the stuff of psychologizing briefs, internet memes, and dubious therapies hawked by the wellness industry. Included in its *11th Revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11)*, burnout was defined as “resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed” and characterized by three dimensions: “1) feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; 2) increased mental distance from one’s job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one’s job; and 3) a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment.” The report decisively noted that the syndrome was an occupational phenomenon rather than “a medical condition” and should not “describe experiences in other areas of life.” This last recommendation amounted to correcting what the authors of the statement regarded as a category error. No matter the clinical and affective symptoms associated with burnout—depression, anxiety, chronic fatigue, and social alienation—WHO’s ersatz diagnosis restricted its impacts to the workplace, as if the fallout of working life could be cordoned off and contained.

To the exhausted multitudes, the logic of the WHO’s pronouncement could only read as circular. The collective failure of workers to “manage” their stress, let alone satisfy the criteria of professional “efficacy,” is, to be sure, a function of the very language defining the syndrome in the first place: management and efficiency. Perhaps not surprisingly, both terms are boilerplate to neoliberal governance, in which *self*-management is continuous with the demands of endless productivity, bound in turn to perpetual cycles of consumption, disruption, and extraction. On the other hand, the lessons of both biopolitics and necropolitics implicitly tell us that the categorical distinction the WHO draws between the “occupational” and “other areas of life” is far from hard and fast: that, to follow Foucault, the “administration of bodies and the calculated management of life” across the spectrum of culture and society is integral to maximizing the output of the population in both the

domestic sphere and the market.¹ Self-regulation is essential, in other words, to the horizontal mechanisms of power and its distribution across the *oikos*, understood etymologically as both economy and home.

In spite or because of this Foucauldian verdict, the 2019 report remains instructive on historiographic grounds. It precedes, by less than a year, the devastating knot of global crises and revolutionary insurgencies around which burnout syndrome now assumes an alternately structural and parasitic role. Ten months after the report's appearance, the WHO would confront far more urgent issues than the classification of a workplace hazard: On March 11, 2020, it declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. Not long after, the names George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Tony McDade, Elijah McClain, and countless others were added to the brutalizing roll call of white supremacy; underway years earlier, the uprisings in support of Black Lives Matter reignited in kind. On both counts, world-historical in their impact and exponentially traumatizing in their convergence, burnout may seem epiphenomenal or incidental, at least if one were to subscribe to the definition furnished by the WHO. Meanwhile, an ambience of mass fatigue—an atmosphere of collective depletion—has descended everywhere. Who needs reports by global agencies like the World Health Organization, after all, when you live the syndrome, feel it at the cellular level as your daily habitus: the grim phenomenology of the present tense? Who has time to read such reports, in any case? Workplace mantras encouraging “productivity” and “innovation” drone on. And internet memes, it turns out, may well be more to the point of the exercise. Their incisiveness offers a time-saving, because hyper-mediated, shorthand for what so many of us already know. *I'm so tired of being so tired*, runs one such refrain. *Stop grinding*, goes another.²

This thematic cluster offers historical insight on, and qualified notions of resistance to, the pernicious welter of influences at the crux of burnout syndrome. The texts collected here chart burnout's expanded field, going well beyond the circumscribed workplace and crystallizing the wider interests of economics and power that the experience of burnout throws into relief. Interlinked tropes of sleep, race, attention, media, and sickness ground the investigations by Josie Roland Hodson, Jonathan Crary, *The Friends of Attention*, and Jean Ma historically.

Indeed, a genealogical gloss on the topic of burnout opens onto both psychiatric and philosophical literature trailing the confluence of work and pathology:

1. Michel Foucault, “Right of Death and Power Over Life,” in *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 2, reprinted in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), p. 262. Foundational critiques of biopolitics with respect to racialization, gender, power, and death are Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019) and Alexander Wehilye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

2. The meme “I'm so tired of being so tired” may have roots in the phrase of Black civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer (1917–1977), whose headstone reads, “I am sick and tired of being sick and tired.” “Grind culture,” or “hustle culture,” is typically associated with millennial workers (many in the tech industry) and the social-media phenomenon of “performative workaholism,” as described in Erin Griffith, “Why Are Young People Pretending to Love Work?,” *New York Times*, Jan 26, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/26/business/against-hustle-culture-rise-and-grind-tgm.html> accessed January 4, 2021.

Burnout may claim some epidemiological kinship with neurasthenia, one of modernity's most pervasive and ambiguous diagnoses.³ In *A Practical Treatise on Nervous Exhaustion (Neurasthenia)*, published in 1880, the neurologist George M. Beard popularized a term well in use since the early nineteenth century, listing symptoms of exhaustion, nerves, anxiety, and headache as stemming from the conditions of modern life and urbanization. That some in this period would refer to neurasthenia as “Americanitis” requires seemingly little explanation.

It was in 1974, however, that burnout received its first nominal airing in “Staff Burn-out,” an essay by Herbert J. Freudenberger.⁴ Freudenberger's 1980s stand-alone volume on the subject—a period piece of the self-help genre—opened with an alarming, boldfaced frontispiece: “*ARE YOU, OR SOMEONE YOU LOVE, BURNING OUT? HERE IS THE BOOK TO HELP YOU SURVIVE.*” Burnout, by his lights, was the “high cost of high achievement,” in which chronic stress stemmed from self-sacrificing ideals. Foundationally, it was a syndrome of *aspiration*. With respect to the current situation of work under COVID-19, Freudenberger anticipated one demographic as especially vulnerable to burnout's influence: the “helping” profession of doctors, nurses, and health-care workers. But not only them: Family caregivers and homemakers (in other words, those outside normative spheres of remunerative labor), as well as the spectrum of white- and blue-collar workers, were likewise susceptible. Burnout would be generalized across the population.

Freudenberger describes “high achievement” and “aspiration” as signature features of burnout. In this regard, the syndrome departs from early-modern accounts of worker pathology by tacitly shifting its cause from the environment (“modern urbanism”) to the those who suffer from it. Here, the high-performing individual—whether sacrificing in the service of the common good or compounding the acquisitive interests of the self—internalizes burnout's root causes and is effectively charged with mitigating the syndrome's manifestations by extension. In *The Burnout Society* (2010), the philosopher Byung-Chul Han inveighs precisely against how “the society of achievement and activeness is generating excessive tiredness and exhaustion.”⁵ “These psychic conditions,” he writes, “characterize a world that is poor in negativity and in turn dominated by excess positivity. . . . The excessiveness of performance enhancement leads to psychic infarctions.”⁶ Ever striving and aspirational—ever affirmative of the can-do ethos of personal growth and individual responsibility—today's worker reproduces and contributes to what Han calls the “massification of positivity.” It's an attitude underwriting the hyperbolic perpetuation of meritocracy, updating Hannah Arendt's *animal laborans* for contemporary life as “an ego just short of bursting.”⁷

3. On the history of neurasthenia, see F. G. Gosling, *Before Freud: Neurasthenia and the American Medical Community, 1870–1910* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

4. Herbert J. Freudenberger, “Staff Burn-out,” *Journal of Social Issues* (Winter 1974).

5. Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), p. 31.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

Han's text, already a decade old, might be updated to address current realities. Noting that "every age has its signature affliction," he periodizes burnout relative to the epidemiological era that came before. "Despite widespread fear of an influenza epidemic," he insists in the very first paragraph,

we are not living in a viral age. . . . From a pathological standpoint, the incipient twenty-first century is determined neither by bacteria nor by viruses, but by neurons. . . . The past century was an immunological age.⁸

Han could hardly have predicted the scale of COVID-19, and there's little to be gained in faulting his prognostications. His claims, ultimately, are philosophical: that the "immunological age" was premised on a dialectic of *negativity*—the inoculation of a system from foreign bodies, from Otherness. By contrast, the philosopher's elaboration of "neuronal power" following the viral age speaks to both the pressures of mass positivity and the *immanence* of mental-health disorders associated with burnout. The syndrome "occurs when the ego overheats, which follows from too much of the Same."⁹

In the age of COVID-19, when the "viral" has acquired a terrifying new global valence, with frontline and BIPOC workers especially vulnerable to both burnout *and* pandemic, perhaps we need to consider the resurgence of the immunological as an *entropic* return, a system at the point of breaking.¹⁰ And what better shorthand of entropy—heat death—could there be than *burnout*: energy drain, the extinction of power, the collapse of communication under the weight of too much information; and the compounding of trauma from one generation to the next? Han's reading is critical in diagnosing the burnout society in its recourse to infarction, intellect, ego, and sameness. Lately, though, the morbid confluence of burnout and pandemic complicates this reading, recruiting "Otherness" as central to its catastrophic fallout.¹¹ Indeed, while the syndrome's causes may be generalized across work, culture, and society, it is through burnout's uneven impacts that we confront its most regressive pathology.

8. Ibid., p. 1.

9. Ibid. p. 7.

10. On the recent confluence of the "viral" as both biological and mediated co-agents, see David Joselit, "Virus as Metaphor," *October* 172 (Spring 2020), pp. 159–62.

11. Mainstream accounts of burnout address the syndrome's impacts on the "helping" professions but have barely addressed questions of race, ethnicity, and gender within these and other occupations. Freudenberg's book devotes a scant three pages to the topic of "minorities" and burnout and neglects to mention gender at all. The interests of invisible and emotional labor in both the domestic and public sphere, as well as what Amado Padillo has identified as "cultural taxation" within academia, underscore the uncompensated work of women and BIPOC subjects in particular relative to burnout. On the topic of sleep and racialization (and its implicit relation to burnout), see Janine Francois's text on the collective Black Power Naps, "Reparations for Black People Should Include Rest," *Vice.com*, January 18, 2019, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/d3bbay/sleep-gap-black-slavery-reparations-black-power-naps>. My thanks to Francois for her work on the topic.