

THE BURNOUT SOCIETY

BYUNG-CHUL HAN

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NEURONAL POWER

Every age has its signature afflictions. Thus, a bacterial age existed; at the latest, it ended with the discovery of antibiotics. Despite widespread fear of an influenza epidemic, we are not living in a viral age. Thanks to immunological technology, we have already left it behind. From a pathological standpoint, the incipient twenty-first century is determined neither by bacteria nor by viruses, but by neurons. Neurological illnesses such as depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), borderline personality disorder (BPD), and burnout syndrome mark the landscape of pathology at the beginning of the twenty-first century. They are not infections, but infarctions; they do not follow from the *negativity* of what is immunologically foreign, but from an excess of *positivity*. Therefore, they elude all technologies and techniques that seek to combat what is alien.

The past century was an immunological age. The epoch sought to distinguish clearly between inside and outside, friend and foe, self and other. The Cold War also followed an immunological pattern. Indeed, the immunological paradigm of the last century was commanded by the vocabulary of the Cold War, an altogether military dispositive. Attack and defense determine immunological action. The immunological dispositive, which extends beyond the

strictly social and onto the whole of communal life, harbors a blind spot: everything foreign is simply combated and warded off. The object of immune defense is the foreign as such. Even if it has no hostile intentions, even if it poses no danger, it is eliminated on the basis of its *Otherness*.

Recent times have witnessed the proliferation of discourses about society that explicitly employ immunological models of explanation. However, the currency of immunological discourse should not be interpreted as a sign that society is now, more than ever, organized along immunological lines. When a paradigm has come to provide an object of reflection, it often means that its demise is at hand. Theorists have failed to remark that, for some time now, a paradigm shift has been underway. The Cold War ended precisely as this paradigm shift was taking place.¹ More and more, contemporary society is emerging as a constellation that escapes the immunological scheme of organization and defense altogether. It is marked by the disappearance of *otherness and foreignness*. Otherness represents the fundamental category of immunology. Every immunoreaction is a reaction to Otherness. Now, however, Otherness is being replaced with *difference*, which does not entail immunoreaction. Postimmunological—indeed, postmodern—difference does not make anyone sick. In terms of immunology, it represents the *Same*.² Such difference lacks the sting of foreignness, as it were, which would provoke a strong immunoreaction. Foreignness itself is being deactivated into a formula of consumption. The alien is giving way to the exotic. The tourist travels through it. The tourist—that is, the consumer—is no longer an *immunological subject*.

Consequently, Roberto Esposito makes a false assumption the basis of his theory of *immunitas* when he declares:

The news headlines on any given day in recent years, perhaps even on the same page, are likely to report a series of apparently unrelated events. What do phenomena such as the battle against a new resurgence of an epidemic, opposition to an extradition request for a foreign head of state accused of violating human rights, the strengthening of barriers

in the fight against illegal immigration, and strategies for neutralizing the latest computer virus have in common? Nothing, as long as they are interpreted within their separate domains of medicine, law, social politics, and information technology. Things change, though, when news stories of this kind are read using the same interpretive category, one that is distinguished specifically by its capacity to cut across these distinct discourses, ushering them onto the same horizon of meaning. This category . . . is immunization. . . . [I]n spite of their lexical diversity, all these events call on a protective response in the face of a risk.³

None of the events mentioned by Esposito indicates that we are now living in an immunological age. Today, even the so-called immigrant is not an immunological *Other*, not a *foreigner* in the strong sense, who poses a real danger or of whom one is afraid. Immigrants and refugees are more likely to be perceived as burdens than as threats. Even the problem of computer viruses no longer displays virulence on a large social scale. Thus, it is no accident that Esposito's immunological analysis does not address contemporary problems, but only objects from the past.

The immunological paradigm proves incompatible with the process of globalization. Otherness provoking an immune reaction would work against the dissolution of boundaries. The immunologically organized world possesses a particular topology. It is marked by borders, transitions, thresholds, fences, ditches, and walls that prevent universal change and exchange. The general promiscuity that has gripped all spheres of life and the absence of immunologically effective Otherness define [*bedingen*] each other. Hybridization—which dominates not just current culture-theoretical discourse, but also the feeling of life in general—stands diametrically opposed to immunization. Immunological hyperaesthesia would not allow hybridization to occur in the first place.

The dialectic of negativity is the fundamental trait of immunity. The immunologically Other is the negative that intrudes into the Own [*das Eigene*] and seeks to negate it. The Own founders on the negativity of the Other when it proves incapable of negation

in turn. That is, the immunological self-assertion of the Own proceeds as the negation of negation. The Own asserts itself in—and against—the Other by negating its negativity. Immunological prophylaxis, that is, inoculation, follows the dialectic of negativity. Fragments of the Other are introduced into the Own in order to provoke an immunoreaction. Thereby, negation of negation occurs without the danger of death, because the immune system does not confront the Other itself. A small amount of self-inflicted harm [*Gewalt*] protects one from a much larger danger, which would prove deadly. Because Otherness is disappearing, we live in a time that is poor in negativity. And so, the neuronal illnesses of the twenty-first century follow a dialectic: not the dialectic of negativity, but that of positivity. They are pathological conditions deriving from an *excess of positivity*.

Harm does not come from negativity alone, but also from positivity—not just from the Other or the foreign, but also from the Same. Such violence of positivity is clearly what Baudrillard has in mind when he writes, “He who lives by the Same shall die by the Same.”⁴ Likewise, Baudrillard speaks of the “obesity of all current systems” of information, communication, and production. Fat does not provoke an immune reaction. However—and herein lies the weakness of his theory—Baudrillard pictures the totalitarianism of the Same from an immunological standpoint:

All the talk of immunity, antibodies, grafting and rejection should not surprise anyone. In periods of scarcity, absorption and assimilation are the order of the day. In periods of abundance, rejection and expulsion are the chief concerns. Today, generalized communication and surplus information threaten to overwhelm all human defenses.⁵

In a system where the Same predominates, one can only speak of immune defense in a figural sense. Immunological defense always takes aim at the Other or the foreign in the strong sense. The Same does not lead to the formation of antibodies. In a system dominated by the Same, it is meaningless to strengthen defense

mechanisms. We must distinguish between immunological and nonimmunological rejection. The latter concerns the *too-much-of-the-Same*, surplus positivity. Here negativity plays no role. Nor does such exclusion presume interior space. In contrast, immunological rejection occurs independent of the *quantum*, for it reacts to the negativity of the Other. The immunological subject, which possesses interiority, fights off the Other and excludes it, even when it is present in only the tiniest amount.

The violence [*Gewalt*] of positivity that derives from overproduction, overachievement, and overcommunication is no longer “viral.” Immunology offers no way of approaching the phenomenon. Rejection occurring in response to excess positivity does not amount to immunological defense, but to digestive-neuronal abreaction and refusal. Likewise, exhaustion, fatigue, and suffocation—when too much exists—do not constitute immunological reactions. These phenomena concern *neuronal* power, which is not viral because it does not derive from immunological negativity. Baudrillard’s theory of power [*Gewalt*] is riddled with leaps of argument and vague definitions because it attempts to describe the violence of positivity—or, in other words, the violence of the Same when no Otherness is involved—in immunological terms. Thus he writes:

The violence of networks and the virtual is viral: it is the violence of benign extermination, operating at the genetic and communicational level; a violence of consensus. . . . A viral violence in the sense that it does not operate head-on, but by contiguity, contagion, and chain reaction, its aim being the loss of all our immunities. And also in the sense that, contrary to the historical violence of negation, this virus operates hyperpositively, like cancerous cells, through endless proliferation, excrescence, and metastases. Between virtuality and virality, there is a kind of complicity.⁶

According to the genealogy of hostility [*Feindschaft*] that Baudrillard outlines, the enemy first takes the stage as a wolf. He is an

“external enemy who attacks and against whom one defends oneself by building fortifications and walls.”⁷ In the next stage, the enemy assumes the form of a rat. He is a foe who operates in the underground, whom one combats by means of hygiene. After a further stage, that of the insect, the enemy finally assumes a viral form: “viruses effectively move in the fourth dimension. It is much more difficult to defend oneself against viruses, because they exist at the heart of the system.”⁸ Now “a ghostly enemy” appears, “infiltrating itself throughout the whole planet, slipping in everywhere like a virus, welling up from all the interstices of power.”⁹ Viral violence proceeds from singularities that install themselves in the system as terrorist sleeper cells and undermine it from within. Baudrillard affirms that terrorism, as the main figure of viral violence, represents a revolt of the singular against the global.

Even in viral form, hostility obeys the immunological scheme: the enemy virus intrudes into a system, which functions immunologically and fights off the invader. *For all that, the genealogy of hostility does not coincide with the genealogy of violence.* The violence of positivity does not presume or require hostility. It unfolds specifically in a permissive and pacified society. Consequently, it proves more invisible than viral violence. It inhabits the negativity-free space of the Same, where no polarization between inside and outside, or proper and foreign, takes place.

The positivation of the world allows new forms of violence to emerge. They do not stem from the immunologically Other. Rather, they are immanent in the system itself. Because of this immanence, they do not involve immune defense. Neuronal violence leading to psychic infarctions is a terror of immanence. It differs radically from horror that emanates from the foreign in the immunological sense. Medusa is surely the immunological Other in its extreme form. She stands for radical alterity that one cannot behold without perishing in the process. Neuronal violence, on the other hand, escapes all immunological optics, for it possesses

no negativity. The violence of positivity does not deprive, it saturates; it does not exclude, it exhausts. That is why it proves inaccessible to unmediated perception.

Viral violence cannot account for neuronal illnesses such as depression, ADHD, or burnout syndrome, for it follows the immunological scheme of inside and outside, Own and Other; it presumes the existence of singularity or alterity which is hostile to the system. Neuronal violence does not proceed from system-foreign negativity. Instead, it is *systemic*—that is, system-immanent—violence. Depression, ADHD, and burnout syndrome point to excess positivity. Burnout syndrome occurs when the ego overheats, which follows from too much of the Same. The *hyper* in hyperactivity is not an immunological category. It represents the massification of the positive.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt seeks to rehabilitate the *vita activa* against the primacy a long tradition has granted the *vita contemplativa*, and to articulate its inner richness in a new way. In her estimation, the traditional view has wrongly reduced *vita activa* to mere restlessness: *nec-otium* or *a-scholia*.¹ Arendt connects her reevaluation of *vita activa* to the priority of action [*Handeln*]. This makes her commit to heroic actionism, like her teacher Heidegger. That said, for the early Heidegger death provides the point of orientation: the possibility of dying imposes limits on action and makes freedom finite. In contrast, Arendt orients possible action on birth, which lends it more heroic emphasis. The miracle, she argues, lies in human natality itself: the new beginning that human beings are to realize on the basis of being born. Wonder-working belief is replaced by heroic action, the native obligation of mankind. This amounts to conferring a quasi-religious dimension on action:

The miracle . . . is the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born. . . . It is this faith in and hope for the world that found perhaps its most glorious and most succinct expression in the few words with which the Gospels announced their "glad tidings": "A child has been born to us."²

According to Arendt, modern society—as a society of “laboring” [*Arbeitsgesellschaft*]—nullifies any possibility for action when it degrades the human being into an *animal laborans*, a beast of burden. Action, she maintains, occasions new possibilities, yet modern humanity passively stands at the mercy of the anonymous process of living. Thereby, thinking degrades into calculation, mere cerebral functioning (“reckoning with consequences”³). All forms of *vita activa*, both the matter of producing and that of acting, sink to the level of simple laboring. As Arendt sees it, modernity began with an unprecedented, heroic activation of human capacity, yet it ends in mortal passivity.

Arendt’s explanation for the ubiquity of *animal laborans* does not hold up to recent social developments. She maintains that the life of the modern individual is “submerged in the over-all life process of the species”; under these circumstances, “the only active decision” would be “to let go, so to speak, to abandon . . . individuality” and “acquiesce” to a “functional type of behavior.”⁴ The absolutization of laboring follows from the fact that, “in the rise of society[,] it was ultimately the rise of the species which asserted itself.”⁵ Arendt even believes to have identified danger signals “that man may be . . . on the point of developing into that animal species from which, since Darwin, he imagines he has come.”⁶ She assumes that all human activities, if viewed from a sufficiently remote point in the universe, would no longer appear as deeds but as biological processes. Accordingly, for an observer in outer space, motorization would resemble a biological mutation: the human body surrounds itself with a metal housing in the manner of a snail—like bacteria reacting to antibiotics by mutating into resistant strains.⁷

Arendt’s descriptions of the modern *animal laborans* do not correspond to what we can observe in today’s achievement society. The late-modern *animal laborans* does not give up its individuality or ego in order to merge, through the work it performs, with the anonymous life process of the species. Rather, contemporary labor society, as a society of achievement and business, fosters individuality

[*Die Arbeitsgesellschaft hat sich individualisiert zur Leistungs- und Aktivgesellschaft*]. The late-modern *animal laborans* is equipped with an ego just short of bursting. And it is anything but passive. If one abandoned one's individuality and dissolved into the life process of the species entirely, one would at least have the serenity [*Gelassenheit*] of an animal. But the late-modern *animal laborans* is anything but animalian. It is hyperactive and hyperneurotic. There must be another answer to why all human activities in late modernity are sinking to the level of mere laboring—and, more still, why such hectic nervousness prevails.

The modern loss of faith does not concern just God or the hereafter. It involves reality itself and makes human life radically fleeting. Life has never been as fleeting as it is today. Not just human life, but the world in general is becoming radically fleeting. Nothing promises duration or substance [*Bestand*]. Given this lack of Being, nervousness and unease arise. Belonging to a species might benefit an animal that works for the sake of its kind to achieve brute *Gelassenheit*. However, the late-modern ego [*Ich*] stands utterly alone. Even religions, as thanatotechnics that would remove the fear of death and produce a feeling of duration, have run their course. The general denarrativization of the world is reinforcing the feeling of fleetingness. It makes life bare. Work itself is a bare activity. The activity of bare laboring corresponds entirely to bare life. Merely working and merely living define and condition each other. Because a narrative thanatotechnics proves lacking, the unconditional compulsion arises to keep bare life healthy. Nietzsche already observed that; after the death of God, health rose to divine status. If a horizon of meaning extended beyond bare life, the cult of health would not be able to achieve this degree of absoluteness.

Life today is even barer than the life of *homo sacer*. Originally, *homo sacer* refers to someone excluded from society because of a trespass: one may kill him without incurring punishment. According to Giorgio Agamben, *homo sacer* stands for absolutely expendable life. Examples he provides include Jews in concentration camps, prison-

ers at Guantanamo, people without papers or asylum-seekers awaiting deportation in a lawless space, and patients attached to tubes and rotting away in intensive care. If late-modern achievement society has reduced us *all* to bare life, then it is not just people at the margins or in a state of exception—that is, the excluded—but all of us, without exception, who are *homines sacri*. That said, this bare life has the particularity of not being absolutely expendable [*tötbar*]; rather, it cannot be killed absolutely [*absolut untötbar (ist)*]. It is *undead*, so to speak. Here the word *sacer* does not mean “accursed” but “holy.” Now bare, sheer life itself is holy, and so it must be preserved at any cost.

The reaction to a life that has become bare and radically fleeting occurs as hyperactivity, hysterical work, and production. The acceleration of contemporary life also plays a role in this lack of being. The society of laboring and achievement is not a free society. It generates new constraints. Ultimately, the dialectic of master and slave does not yield a society where everyone is free and capable of leisure, too. Rather, it leads to a society of work in which the master himself has become a laboring slave. In this society of compulsion, everyone carries a work camp inside. This labor camp is defined by the fact that one is simultaneously prisoner and guard, victim and perpetrator. One exploits oneself. It means that exploitation is possible even without domination. People who suffer from depression, bipolar disorder, or burnout syndrome develop the symptoms displayed by the *Muselmänner* in concentration camps. *Muselmänner* are emaciated prisoners lacking all vigor who, like people with acute depression, have become entirely apathetic and can no longer even recognize physical cold or the orders given by guards. One cannot help but suspect that the late-modern *animal laborans* with neuronal disturbances would have been a *Muselmann*, too—albeit well fed and probably obese.

The last chapter of Arendt's *Human Condition* addresses the triumph of *animal laborans*. The author offers no viable alternative to this social development. With resignation, she concludes that

the ability to act is restricted to only a few. Then, on the final pages of the book, she invokes thinking directly [*beschwört . . . unmittelbar das Denken*]. Thinking, she contends, has suffered the least from the negative development in question. Although Arendt concedes that the world's future depends on the power of human beings to act, and not on their power to think, thinking still bears on the future of humanity because it surpasses all other activities [*Tätigkeiten*] of the *vita activa* in its sheer capacity for action [*Tätigsein*]. Accordingly, the book closes with the following words:

Whoever has any experience in this matter will know how right Cato was when he said: . . . "Never is he more active than when he does nothing, never is he less alone than when he is by himself."

These final lines seem like a stopgap. What could thinking accomplish, such that this "experience of being active . . . would surpass [all other activities]"?⁸ After all, the emphasis on being active has a great deal in common with the hyperactivity and hysteria displayed by the late-modern achievement-subject. Cato's dictum also seems a little out of place in light of the fact that Cicero originally included it in his treatise *De re publica*. Quoting the same passage as Arendt, Cicero exhorts his readers to withdraw from the "forum" and the "rush of the crowd" in order to find the isolation of the contemplative life. That is, immediately after quoting Cato, Cicero goes on to praise the *vita contemplativa*. Not the active life but the contemplative life makes man into what he should be. Arendt changes the same words into praise for the *vita activa*. What is more, the solitary contemplation Cato speaks of proves incompatible with the "power of acting human beings," which Arendt invokes time and again. Toward the end of her discussion of *vita activa*, then, Arendt inadvertently endorses *vita contemplativa*. It escapes her notice that the loss of the ability to contemplate—which, among other things, leads to the absolutization of *vita activa*—is also responsible for the hysteria and nervousness of modern society.

THE PEDAGOGY OF SEEING

The *vita contemplativa* presupposes instruction in a particular way of seeing. In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche formulates three tasks for which pedagogues are necessary. One needs to learn to see, to think, and to speak and write. The goal of education, according to Nietzsche, is "noble culture." Learning to see means "getting your eyes used to calm, to patience, to letting things come to you"—that is, making yourself capable of deep and contemplative attention, casting a long and slow gaze. Such learning-to-see represents the "first preliminary schooling for spirituality [*Geistigkeit*]." One must learn "not to react immediately to a stimulus, but instead to take control of the inhibiting, excluding instincts." By the same token, "every characteristic absence of spirituality [*Ungeistigkeit*], every piece of common vulgarity, is due to an inability to resist a stimulus"¹—the inability to set a *no* in opposition. Reacting immediately, yielding to every impulse, already amounts to illness and represents a symptom of exhaustion. Here Nietzsche is simply speaking of the need to revitalize the *vita contemplativa*. The *vita contemplativa* is not a matter of passive affirmation and being open to whatever happens. Instead, it offers resistance to crowding, intrusive stimuli. Instead of surrendering the gaze to external impulses, it steers them in sovereign fashion. As a mode of saying

no, sovereign action [*Tun*] proves more active than any and all hyperactivity, which represents a symptom of mental exhaustion. What eludes Arendt in the dialectic of being-active [*Aktivsein*] is that hyperactive intensification leads to an abrupt switch into hyperpassivity; now one obeys every impulse or stimulus without resistance. Instead of freedom, it produces new constraints. It is an illusion to believe that being more active means being freer.

Without the "excluding instincts" Nietzsche praises, action scatters into restless, hyperactive reaction and abreaction. In a pure state, activity only prolongs what is already available. In contrast, a real turn to the Other presupposes the negativity of an interruption. Only by the negative means of making-pause [*Innehalten*] can the subject of action thoroughly measure the sphere of contingency (which is unavailable when one is simply active). Although delaying does not represent a positive deed [*Tathandlung*], it proves necessary if action is not to sink to the level of laboring. Today we live in a world that is very poor in interruption; "betweens" and "between-times" are lacking. Acceleration is abolishing all intervals [*jede Zwischen-Zeit*]. In the aphorism, "Principal deficiency of active men," Nietzsche writes: "Active men are generally wanting in the higher activity . . . in this regard they are lazy. . . . The active roll as the stone rolls, in obedience to the stupidity of the laws of mechanics."² Different kinds of action and activity exist. Activity that follows an unthinking, mechanical course is poor in interruption. Machines cannot pause. Despite its enormous capacity for calculation, the computer is stupid insofar as it lacks the ability to delay.

In the course of general acceleration and hyperactivity we are also losing the capacity for rage [*verlernen wir auch die Wut*]. Rage has a characteristic temporality incompatible with generalized acceleration and hyperactivity, which admit no breadth of time. The future shortens into a protracted present [*Gegenwart*]. It lacks all negativity, which would permit one to look at the Other [*das Andere*]. In contrast, rage puts the present as a whole into question. It presupposes an interrupting pause in the present. This is

what distinguishes it from anger [*Ärger*]. The general distraction afflicting contemporary society does not allow the emphasis and energy of rage to arise. Rage is the capacity to interrupt a given state and *make a new state begin*. Today it is yielding more and more to offense or annoyance [*Ärgernis*], "having a beef," which proves incapable of effecting decisive change. In consequence, one is annoyed even by the inevitable. Annoyance relates to rage as fear relates to dread [*Angst*]. In contrast to fear, which concerns a determinate object, dread applies to Being-as-such. It grips and shakes the whole of existence. Nor does rage concern a discrete state of affairs. It negates the whole. Therein lies its negative energy. It represents a state of exception. Increasing positivization makes the world poor in states of exception. Agamben overlooks this growing positivity. Counter to his diagnosis—that the state of exception is undergoing expansion and turning into the state of normality—general social positivization now is absorbing every state of exception. That is, conditions of normality are being totalized. Because the world is being increasingly positivized, more attention is paid to concepts such as "the state of exception" or "immunitas." However, such attention offers no proof for their actuality; rather, it shows that they are vanishing.

Mounting positivization of society also weakens feelings such as dread and mourning [*Trauer*], which are based on a kind of negativity; they are negative feelings.³ If thinking [*das Denken*] itself were a "network of antibodies and natural immune defenses,"⁴ then the absence of negativity would transform it into calculation. The computer calculates more quickly than the human brain and takes on inordinate quantities of data without difficulty because it is free of all Otherness. It is a machine of positivity [*Positivmaschine*]. Because of autistic self-referentiality, because negativity is absent, an idiot savant can perform what otherwise only a calculator can do. The general positivization of the world means that both human beings and society are transforming into autistic performance-machines. One might also say that overexcited [*überspannt*] efforts to maximize performance are abolishing negativity because

it slows down the process of acceleration. If man were a being of negativity [*Negativitätswesen*], the total positivization of the world would prove more than a little dangerous. According to Hegel, negativity is precisely what keeps existence [*Dasein*] alive.

There are two forms of potency. Positive potency is the power to do something. Negative potency, in contrast, is the power not to do—to adopt Nietzsche's phrasing, the power to say no. However, this negative potency differs from simple impotence, the inability to act. Impotence is merely the opposite of positive potency. It is positive itself insofar as it connects with something, which it cannot do. Negative potency reaches beyond such positivity, which is tied to something else. 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. In such a case, no "spirituality" would be possible. If one had only the power to do (something) and no power not to do, it would lead to fatal hyperactivity. If one had only the power to think (something), thinking would scatter among endless series of objects. It would be impossible to think back and reflect [*Nachdenken*], for positive potency, the preponderance of positivity, only permits anticipation and thinking ahead.

The negativity of *not-to* also provides an essential trait of contemplation. In Zen meditation, for example, one attempts to achieve the pure negativity of not-to—that is, the void—by freeing oneself from rushing, intrusive Something. Such meditation is an extremely active process; that is, it represents anything but passivity. The exercise seeks to attain a point of sovereignty within oneself, to be the middle. If one worked with positive potency, one would stand at the mercy of the object and be completely passive. Paradoxically, hyperactivity represents an extremely passive form of doing, which bars the possibility of free action. It is based on positive potency that has been made absolute to the exclusion of all else.

THE BARTLEBY CASE

Melville's "Bartleby," which has often been the object of metaphysical and theological interpretations,¹ also admits a pathological reading. This "Story of Wall-Street"² describes an inhumane working world whose inhabitants have all degraded to the state of *animal laborans*. The sinister atmosphere of the office, choked by skyscrapers on every side, is hostile to life and portrayed in detail. Less than three meters from the window there surges a "lofty brick wall, black by age and everlasting shade" (5). The workspace, which seems like "a huge square cistern," proves "deficient in what landscape painters call 'life'" (5). Melancholy and gloominess are often mentioned, and they set the basic mood for the narrative. The attorney's assistants all suffer from neurotic disorders. "Turkey," for example, runs around in "a strange, inflamed, flurried, flighty recklessness of activity" (6). Psychosomatic digestive troubles plague the overly ambitious assistant "Nippers," who grinds his teeth perpetually and hisses curses through them. In their neurotic hyperactivity, these figures represent the opposite pole of Bartleby, who falls into silent immobility. Bartleby develops the symptoms characteristic of neurasthenia. In this light, his signature phrase, "I would prefer not to," expresses neither the negative potency of *not-to* nor the instinct for delay and deferral that is

THE SOCIETY OF TIREDNESS

Tiredness has a broad heart.

—Maurice Blanchot

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

BURNOUT SOCIETY

In a very cryptic tale—"Prometheus"—Kafka undertakes a few modifications of the Greek legend. His reworking reads, "The gods grew weary, the eagles grew weary, the wound closed wearily."¹ I would subject Kafka's version to further revision and turn it into an intrapsychic scene: the contemporary achievement-subject inflicting violence on, and waging war with, itself. As everyone knows, Prometheus also brought work to mankind when he gave mortals the gift of fire. Today's achievement-subject deems itself free when in fact it is bound like Prometheus. The eagle that consumes an ever-regrowing liver can be interpreted as the subject's *alter ego*. Viewed in this way, the relation between Prometheus and the eagle represents a relation of self-exploitation. Pain of the liver, an organ that cannot actually experience pain, is said to be tiredness. Prometheus, the subject of self-exploitation, has been seized by overwhelming fatigue.

For all that, Kafka envisions a healing tiredness: the wound closes wearily. It stands opposed to "I-tiredness," whereby the ego grows exhausted and wears itself down; such tiredness stems from the redundancy and recurrence of the ego. But another kind of tiredness exists, too; here, the ego abandons *itself* into the world [*das Ich verläßt sich auf die Welt hin*]; it is tiredness as "more of less