

THE BURNOUT SOCIETY

BYUNG-CHUL HAN

Translated by ERIK BUTLER

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BEYOND DISCIPLINARY SOCIETY

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 It has long been replaced by another regime, namely a society of fitness studios, office towers, banks, airports, shopping malls, and genetic laboratories.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.