We Have Become Exhausted Slaves in a Culture of Positivity

Jalees Rehman

Correspondence to:
Jalees Rehman, M.D.
University of Illinois at Chicago, College of Medicine
Departments of Medicine and Pharmacology
835 South Wolcott Ave, Room E403, Chicago, IL 60612, USA

Email: jalees.rehman[at]gmail[dot]com

Twitter: @jalees_rehman

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We live in an era of exhaustion and fatigue caused by an incessant compulsion to perform. This is one of the central tenets of the book *Müdigkeitsgesellschaft* (translatable as *The Fatigue Society* or *The Tiredness Society*) (1) by the German philosopher Byung-Chul Han. Han is a professor at the Berlin Universität der Künste (University of the Arts) and one of the most widely read contemporary philosophers in Germany. He was born in Seoul, where he studied metallurgy before he moved to Germany in the 1980s to pursue a career in philosophy. His doctoral thesis and some of his initial work in the 1990s focused on Heidegger, but during the past decade, Han has written about broad range of topics regarding contemporary culture and society. *Müdigkeitsgesellschaft* was first published in 2010 and helped him attain a bit of a rock-star status in Germany despite his desire to avoid too much public attention – unlike some of his celebrity philosopher colleagues. (2)

The book starts out with two biomedical metaphors to describe the 20th century and the emerging 21st century. For Han, the 20th century was an “immunological” era. He uses this expression because infections with viruses and bacteria that provoked immune responses were among the leading causes of disease and death and because the emergence of vaccinations and antibiotics helped conquer these threats. He then extends the “immunological” metaphor to political and societal events. Just like the immune system recognizes bacteria and viruses as “foreign” objects that need to be eliminated to protect the “self,” the World Wars and the Cold War were also characterized by a clear delineation of “us” versus “them.” The 21st century, on the other hand, is a “neuronal” era characterized by neuropsychiatric diseases such as depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), burnout syndrome, and borderline personality disorder. Unlike the diseases in the immunological era, where there was a clear distinction between the foreign enemy microbes that needed to be eliminated and the self, these “neuronal” diseases make it difficult to assign an enemy status. Who are the “enemies” in burnout syndrome or depression? Our environment? Our employers? Our own life decisions and choices? Are we at war with ourselves in these “neuronal” conditions? According to Han, this biomedical shift in diseases is mirrored by a political shift in a globalized world where it becomes increasingly difficult to define the “self” and the “foreign.” We may try to assign a “good guy” and “bad
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guy” status to navigate our 21st century, but we also realize that we are so interconnected that these 20th century approaches are no longer applicable.

The cell biologist in me cringed when I read Han’s immunologic and neuronal metaphors. Yes, it is true that successfully combatting infectious diseases constituted major biomedical victories in the 20th century, but these battles are far from over. The recent Ebola virus scare, the persistence of malaria resistance, the under-treatment of HIV, and the emergence of multi-drug resistant bacteria all indicate that immunology and infectious disease will play central roles in the biomedical enterprise of the 21st century. The view that the immune system clearly distinguishes between “self” and “foreign” is also overly simplistic because it ignores that autoimmune diseases, many of which are on the rise and for which we still have very limited treatment options, are immunological examples of where the “self” destroys itself. Even though I agree that neuroscience will likely be the focus of biomedical research, it seems like an odd choice to select a handful of psychiatric illnesses as representing the 21st century while ignoring major neuronal disorders such as Alzheimer’s, dementia, stroke, or Parkinson’s disease. Han also conflates specific psychiatric illnesses with the generalized increase in perceived fatigue and exhaustion.

Once we move past these ill-chosen biomedical examples, Han’s ideas become quite fascinating. He suggests that the reason why we so often feel exhausted and fatigued is because we are surrounded by a culture of positivity. While working, watching TV at home, or surfing the web, we are inundated by not-so-subtle messages of what we can do. Han quotes the example of the “Yes We Can” slogan from the Obama campaign. “Yes We Can” exudes positivity by suggesting that all we need to do is try harder and that there may be no limits to what we could achieve. The same applies to the Nike “Just Do It” slogan and the thousands of self-help books published each year that reinforce the imperative of positive thinking and positive actions.

Here is the crux of Han’s thesis. “Yes We Can” sounds like an empowering slogan, indicating our freedom and limitless potential. But according to Han, this is an illusory freedom because the message enclosed within “Yes We Can” is “Yes We Should.” Instead of living in a Disziplinargesellschaft (disciplinary society) of the past where our behavior was clearly regulated by societal prohibitions and commandments, we now live in a Leistungsgesellschaft (achievement society) in which we voluntarily succumb to the pressure of achieving. The Leistungsgesellschaft is no less restrictive than the Disziplinargesellschaft. We are no longer subject to exogenous prohibitions, but we have internalized the mandates of achievement, always striving to do more. We have become slaves to the culture of positivity, subjugated by the imperative “Yes We Should.” Instead of carefully contemplating whether or not to pursue a goal, the mere knowledge that we could achieve it forces us to strive towards that goal. Buying into the “Yes We Can” culture chains us to a life of self-exploitation, and we are blinded by passion and determination until we collapse. Han uses the sad German alliteration “Erschöpfung, Ermüdung, und Erstickung” (“exhaustion, fatigue, and suffocation”) to describe the impact that an excess of positivity has once we forgo our ability to say “No!” to the demands of the achievement society. We keep on going until our minds and bodies shut down, and this is why we live in a continuous state of exhaustion and fatigue. Han does not view multitasking as a sign of civilizational
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progress. Multitasking is an indicator of regression because it results in a broad but rather superficial state of attention and thus prevents true contemplation.

It is quite easy for us to relate to Han’s ideas at our workplace. Employees with a “can-do” attitude are praised, but you will rarely see a plaque awarded to commemorate an employee’s “can-contemplate” attitude. In an achievement society, employers no longer have to exploit us because we willingly take on more and more tasks to prove our own self-worth.

While reading Han’s book, I was reminded of a passage in Bertrand Russell’s essay “In Praise of Idleness” (3), in which he extols the virtues of reducing our workload to just four hours a day:

In a world where no one is compelled to work more than four hours a day, every person possessed of scientific curiosity will be able to indulge it, and every painter will be able to paint without starving, however excellent his pictures may be. Young writers will not be obliged to draw attention to themselves by sensational pot-boilers, with a view to acquiring the economic independence needed for monumental works, for which, when the time at last comes, they will have lost the taste and capacity. Men who, in their professional work, have become interested in some phase of economics or government, will be able to develop their ideas without the academic detachment that makes the work of university economists often seem lacking in reality. Medical men will have the time to learn about the progress of medicine, teachers will not be exasperatedly struggling to teach by routine methods things which they learnt in their youth, which may, in the interval, have been proved to be untrue.

Above all, there will be happiness and joy of life, instead of frayed nerves, weariness, and dyspepsia. The work exacted will be enough to make leisure delightful, but not enough to produce exhaustion. Since men will not be tired in their spare time, they will not demand only such amusements as are passive and vapid. At least one per cent will probably devote the time not spent in professional work to pursuits of some public importance, and, since they will not depend upon these pursuits for their livelihood, their originality will be unhampered, and there will be no need to conform to the standards set by elderly pundits. But it is not only in these exceptional cases that the advantages of leisure will appear. Ordinary men and women, having the opportunity of a happy life, will become more kindly and less persecuting and less inclined to view others with suspicion.

While Russell’s essay proposes reduction of work hours as a solution, Han’s critique of the achievement society and its impact on generalized fatigue and malaise is not limited to our workplace. By accepting the mandate of continuous achievement and hyperactivity, we apply this approach even to our leisure time. Whether it is counting the steps we walk with our fitness activity trackers or competitively racking up museum visits as a tourist, our
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obsession with achievement permeates all aspects of our lives. Is there a way out of this vicious cycle of excess positivity and persistent exhaustion? We need to be mindful of our right to refuse. Instead of piling on tasks for ourselves during work and leisure, we need to recognize the value and strength of saying “No.” Han introduces the concept of “heilende Müdigkeit” (healing tiredness), suggesting that there is a form of tiredness that we should welcome because it is an opportunity for rest and regeneration. Weekend days are often viewed as days reserved for chores and leisure tasks that we are unable to pursue during regular workdays. By resurrecting the weekend as the time for actual rest, idleness, and contemplation, we can escape from the cycle of exhaustion. We have to learn not-doing in a world obsessed with doing.

Note: Müdigkeitsgesellschaft was translated into English in 2015 and is available as The Burnout Society by Stanford University Press.

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References

