

On burnout

by Aidan Cornelius-Bell

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Dear friends,

Today I have been contemplating burnout.

Workers under contemporary *fast* capitalism are, like machines, left on piles of scrap amidst declining or decimated mental health and physical health –their only solace, that they briefly increased the stock price of their company. The intemperate nature of capitalist “reimagining” requires us to constantly reconfigure, redeploy, transmute, terraform, juxtapose, and so on regardless of our “job title”. I mean this in the sense that wave after wave of *fast atmospheric shifts* hit workers, demanding change, conformity, complicity and acceptance of new undermining and destabilising conditions in the system, just for us to subsist. Here is one of the most essential contradictions for workers under capitalism: consent is required for participation in wage-slavery, wage-slavery is required for capitalism, capitalism is indifferent to which wage-slave offers their consent, consent is mandatory.

Time was, before capitalism was violently and brutally globalised, that with access to adequate knowledge, skills, and physical locale, a select group of humans could opt-out of participation in capitalism. Through living in nations under different regimes, through “going into the wild”, or other radical forms of resistance, the alternative to capitalism was, essentially –at least in depictions, “being wild”. Hegemonic constructions of civilisation and civility, then, naturally arose from this false construct – those who lived in relation to land and place were less intelligent, less civil, they were less. Indeed, a large focus of cultural production, particularly in the 1940s, was around colonising, gentrifying, and capturing the imaginary that anyone not engaged in fulsome capitalist participation was utterly undesirable (thereby justifying genocides):

Bingo, bangle, bungle, I ‘m so happy in the jungle, I refuse to go
Don’ t want no jailhouse, shotgun, fish-hooks, golf clubs, I got my spears
So, no matter how they coax him (Yep!)
I’ ll stay right here (Hillard & Sigman, 1947)

But, what does “living in the wild” even mean for burnout, Aidan? Firstly, let’ s be clear, that living in the wild is a capitalist construct. The notion that nothing exists outside of capitalism, capitalist realism, has emerged in recent years as a way of understanding the ontology of labour-servitude that is enforced by our contemporary socio-economy. But notions of “wildness”, “civility” and “barbarism” are equally constructs designed to lead us to this eventuality. Historiography shows us that most of the world did not, in fact, at least in the last 3,000 years, live “in the wild” in the sense of Tarzan. But rather that sophisticated communities of social, economic, and essential care under a wide variety of political and social organisation systems proliferated.

European colonial thinking began placing these systems of organisation on hierarchical ladders at around the same time as the politics of race relations came on to the scene – a repugnant, but “useful”, tool for the morally unencumbered capitalist slave merchant –to profile intelligence, civility, “usefulness” and other outlandish, racist, and unscientific notions which have been discredited time and again. Though, that doesn’ t stop Trump and Vance, Dutton, or Sunak, etc. from deploying variously racist, sexist, and vile divisive rhetorics. By using these tools, and through the continued manufacturing of history, we have arrived hard and fast – like a car fully slamming the break on after a 100mph race, at capitalist realism. Alternatives, in this world, are not only impossible, but they are fiction. As are the versions of “wild” life we see portrayed by capitalist and corporate media. Imbued

with political messaging which demands there is no alternative to capitalism but barbarism, terrorism, violence, and death. In spite of the fact that alternative systems continue to exist and work -today.

So, burnout, what do? Burnout is a direct consequence of the intensified exploitation of workers, felt by knowledge workers and labourers alike, under late capitalism. As demands for productivity and efficiency continually increase, workers are pushed to their mental and physical limits, extracting maximum surplus value until they can no longer function effectively. Like the shipping containers in the desert filled with outmoded robots in *I, Robot* (anyone else remember this vividly?), workers are worked *fast* and *hard* until they retire or cease to function for other reasons (i.e., mental health). Capitalism throughout remains utterly indifferent to the reasons, of course, unless “enough workers” become a “real” problem. Theoretically, this process mirrors Marx’ s concept of the reserve army of labour, but in addition to unemployment/underemployment, it also creates a cycle of burnout/replacement. Our socio-economic model treats workers as disposable resources. Not an investment, not even in the materials sense (qua. raw materials) where outmoded raw materials are still used for other purposes. Instead, humans and their labour become indistinguishable from the tools of production which have been replaced in the race for “bigger” , “more” and “better” .

Literally, capitalism demands using us up and discarding us when we can no longer meet the ever-escalating demands of the market. Even when an entire workforce or industry collapses, the bro on wall street could not care less, and so the system marches on. In the specific realm of knowledge work, this exploitation takes on yet another insidious form, as the boundaries between work and personal life blur, and workers are expected to be constantly available and productive -such that the equation of work for your leisure time has been replaced with work for work -or just die [1].

But hey, this is a cheery topic, why stop here?

The status quo, enacted through the mass weight of hegemony, gives us further insight into how burnout is normalised -even valorised -and perpetuated in society. The dominant capitalist ideology promotes a culture of overwork and self-sacrifice, framing burnout as a personal failure rather than a systemic issue. Indeed, “soft” burnout (or perhaps the CEO’ s pretend burnout) is vastly different from the true psychology of burnout -but nonetheless the colonisation of words by capitalist hegemons rolls on. Work culture as cultural hegemony, naturally, serves to maintain the status quo. Here workers are ever forestalled from realising collective exploitation -with individualist answers offered to systemic issues by capitalists’ EAPs. Of course, we know from Gramsci, this also forestalls creative problem solving, future thinking, creativity broadly, and most importantly organising against this extractive and deadly system -*together*, the only way to collective liberation [2].

Adding to the mix, here, the role of traditional intellectuals offers us an interesting, if equally grim, analytical point. If we presume that traditional intellectuals are, largely, educated, critical thinkers, and somewhat autonomous under the proviso of capitalist loyalty, then we see a double stab of capitalist against prole, or rather against petit-bourgeois. Despite their potential for critical thinking, traditional intellectuals have become complicit even in their own exploitation and expropriation. The promise of social mobility and professional success acts as a form of consent and leads workers to accept and even embrace the conditions that lead to their burnout. The simultaneous acts of valorising work, espousing capital, and accepting the conditions that allow humans to be discarded because of individualist tendencies is a vicious and contradictory cycle -but no longer a contradiction of gloves-off capitalism, but rather one of “faced” human exploitation (as in there are actual perpetrators of sociopathy who think this shit is all fine and dandy, and worse, get off on creating conditions which burn colleagues out).

And what is suggested as the antidote to all this? Well naturally “self-care” . You’ re bourgeois enough to have burnt out, so you must be bourgeois enough to have a spa day –that’ ll fix ten years of expropriation of your labour, yeah? *Yeah*. But this, too, as with all things in our realist capitalist hellscape is commodified. What began, in pockets at least, as a radical act of resistance against systemic oppression has been twisted into a profitable industry that additionally burdens the worker with individualist notions of care, commercialised versions of wellbeing, and responsibility not with the capitalist and sociopathic micromanager creating the conditions of suffering, but again, with the “defective worker” .

This perversion of self-care serves a dual purpose for the capitalist class. First, it creates new markets for products and services aimed at “alleviating” the very stress and burnout that capitalism itself engenders, and has come to value. Second, and more cunningly, but with regular monotony, it diverts attention and energy away from collective action and systemic change. After all, why organise a union when you can buy another subscription to a different mindfulness app?

And while I’ m on a roll, this wouldn’ t be the blog it is without mention of technology’ s role in all this. We have discussed ad nauseam, dear friends, how the potential of technology as a liberating force has been forever rewritten by capitalism into a sophisticated system of control and exploitation. Since there have been “tools of production” there have been techniques, modes, and models of worker exploitation matching the increased technology of the machinery to ensure control, subordination and solidification of class/race/gender hierarchies. The laptop and smartphone, introduced and marketed as tools of “freedom” and “flexibility” have become the digital shackles of the 21st century proletariat (okay, even I roll my eyes a little here, but the sentence sounded cool). With the hegemon perpetually valorising the degradation of boundaries between work and personal life, the 24/7 access to technology has all but obliterated “leisure” , in spite of what the ALP would have you believe after watering down the Greens’ legislation [3].

Stemming from technology use, remote work, here, touted as a remedy for work-life balance, has only intensified the extraction of surplus value from workers –particularly so in the case of precarious knowledge workers, shift workers, and other casualised and insecure workers. The home, in Marx’ s day, a refuge from the demands of wage labour servitude, has been colonised by capital, and does not rest. Indeed, growing subjugation to invasive digital surveillance under the guise of “productivity monitoring” seals the deal.

As I wrote about open source LLMs and AI as a potential panacea to corporate AI-fanatic bullshit, this techno-dystopian reality is not an aberration but the logical conclusion of capitalism’ s relentless drive for “efficiency” and “profit” . The question we need ask ourselves, as always, is “for who?” because I can tell you, my friends, it is not for me –and it is not you.

As we stand amidst the smouldering ruins of the 40-hour workweek, gasping for air in the acrid smoke of burnout, it is ever clear that tinkering around the edges of capitalism is insufficient. Liberal reform as led to liberal increases in work suffocation, choking on our own fumes, so to speak, as the planet burns. We need a radical reimagining of work itself, one that challenges the very foundations of the wage-labour paradigm that has defined capitalism since its inception.

Between growing calls for universal basic income, reduced working hours, and workplace democracy, I see only more ways for capital to incorporate, inculcate, and colonise. What about labour for the common good? What about care as a natural and native part of what we do as humans? What about sharing-economies at small scales, or just living in right relation with the land? These are utterly foreign, despicable, and insufferable qualities to capitalism and its capitalists. But these ideas, and more from smarter people than I, are

amongst our only hopes for a society where burnout is a relic of a bygone era, rather than an individual issue for “someone else” as we compete for means of survival in late capitalism.

What a fucking world, friends.

I had a whole tirade about how AI could have been leveraged, but wasn't, to liberate more of us, but that's really a story for another day. In the meanwhile I hope wherever you are isn't quite so grim, and you're not as surrounded by burnt out people.

Much love and with solidarity,

Aidan

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1. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/article/2024/sep/05/pwc-to-start-tracking-working-locations-of-all-its-uk-employees> <https://arstechnica.com/gadgets/2024/06/nearly-half-of-dells-workforce-refused-to-return-to-the-office/>
 2. Gramsci, A. (with Bordiga, A., & Tasca, A.). (1977). Selections from political writings (1910-1920) (Q. Hoare & J. Mathews, Trans.). Lawrence and Wishart.
 3. <https://www.fairwork.gov.au/about-us/workplace-laws/legislation-changes/closing-loopholes/right-to-disconnect>