

Reviews

Exhausting concepts

Pascal Chabot, *Global Burnout*, trans. Aliza Krefetz (London: Bloomsbury, 2018). 144 pp., £96 hb., £23.99 pb., £25 eb., 978 1 50133 438 2 hb., 978 1 50133 447 4 pb., 9 781 501 33439 9 eb.

Philosophers have often described society as being either physically sick or mentally ill, but the diagnoses differ. Metaphors proliferate and medical paradigms shift but neurological and psychological pathologies seem to predominate. For Jean Baudrillard capitalism was hysterical; for Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari the schizophrenic was the metonym; whereas Julia Kristeva wondered if ‘maladies of the soul’ threatened to disappear from contemporary life altogether. More recently, Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi and Tiziana Terranova have both paid attention to pathologies of attention; Paulo Virno has identified a mirror of society in mirror neurons; Mark Fisher has perceived connections between capitalism and depression; and Catherine Malabou has described affectless ‘new wounded’ subjects produced by brain injuries and PTSD.

Yet in spite of the very different psychic outcomes identified in these accounts, the economic, political and technological realities said to both reflect and produce these conditions tend to have some common features: too fast, too busy, too interconnected, too technological, too relentless, too precarious, too stimulating, too intense, too demanding, too vast, too intricate, too bright, too brutal. We are losing sleep, we can’t keep up and we can’t concentrate on anything any more. What do these shifting psychopathological categories say about the historical moments in which these theories were produced? And what are the differing political implications of the diagnoses?

A recent viral BuzzFeed article by Anne Helen Petersen described millennials (defined as people born between 1981 and 1996) as ‘the burnout generation’, afflicted by an inability to run simple errands like going to the post office or to finish basic administrative tasks like registering to vote. She connects the phenomenon to the

peculiar demands of contemporary working conditions. Though she ascribes it to a specific and implicitly internally homogeneous generation, often the article seems to imply that burnout is actually a universal response to life under capitalism today. Burnout, she claims, is chronic and pervasive: far from a condition linked metaphorically to the contemporary, burnout is the ‘contemporary condition ... Burnout isn’t a place to visit and come back from; it’s our permanent residence.’

Despite its philosophical underpinnings, Pascal Chabot’s recently translated treatise *Global Burnout* broadly overlaps with Petersen’s article: ‘Burnout is a disease of civilization’, he intones. The pressure to work it harder, make it better, do it faster, makes us weaker. The only things that seem to be diminishing in this account of the contemporary world are the earth’s resources and people’s leisure time. ‘Increasing’, ‘accelerating’, ‘ever-mounting’, ‘intensifying’ – Chabot’s adjectives tend to indicate expansion and excess (of speed, of work, of control, of power, of pressure): ‘more things, more money, more interactions, more distraction.’ In Chabot’s account, burnout emerges as a response to a world in which there is too much of everything apart from the time and energy with which to do it.

Although she cites a psychoanalyst who works on ‘burnout’, Petersen’s BuzzFeed piece doesn’t outline the term’s emergence as a diagnostic category. *Global Burnout*, by contrast, begins by tracing burnout’s psychiatric genealogy before excavating its literary pre-history (via a discussion of Graham Greene’s 1961 novel *A Burnt Out Case*). As Chabot explains, Herbert J. Freudenberger introduced the term in the 1970s as a way of describing his own experiences as a psychiatrist working with drug addicts at a clinic where the staff were struggling to cope with the long hours and emotional toll of their work.

Although Chabot discusses the 'Maslach Burnout Inventory' test which is used to assess symptoms of burnout, he does not mention that the term is still not included in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*, indicating that it remains more of an informal diagnosis for a wide range of experiences than an official nosological category.

Despite conceding that burnout is a concept 'suffused with considerable ambiguity', Chabot insists that the forms of fatigue associated with it are different from those associated with physical exertion, insomnia, intellectual exhaustion or working long hours. Burnout is also distinct from tiredness or exhaustion. He identifies acedia, a form of mental torpor originally observed among medieval monks, as burnout's antecedent. Acedia was most prevalent among the more fervently religious monks but ultimately resulted in a loss of faith: 'Like the monk who can no longer bear to pray to a God who no longer comforts him, the worker throws up her hands, often in response to a lack of recognition ... She has lost faith in herself, but above all, she has lost faith in a sys-

tem that seems to treat her with contempt.' Tiredness begets disillusionment and what begins as individual discontentment with a specific work environment in which the afflicted person had tried to excel, extends to become a critique the burnt out person eventually levels at society as a whole.

At some points in the book Chabot suggests burnout might afflict any worker striving to adapt to the ever-mounting and impossible-to-meet demands of the neo-liberal workplace. While he certainly doesn't think that 'pushing people to their limits in order to extract the maximum profit from their efforts' is good, and even explicitly defines burnout as a symptom of capitalism, these observations tend to be relayed in the smooth sanguine tone of neutral empirical description with none of the jagged anger a more politically engaged account might convey. The discussions of workplace flexibility and precarity here are uncontroversial but more platitudinous than polemical, flitting indiscriminately between classes without grounding the discussion in research pertaining to conditions in specific professions.



After criticising the rigid and segmented schedules imposed on workers, Chabot opines that ‘luxuriating in time is one of our greatest occasions of intimacy with ourselves and the world’; but here he seems to imply that people’s inability to do so is as much the fault of technology as it is of capitalism. Indeed, the solutions offered by *Global Burnout* occasionally sound like lines from a self-help book: ‘yoga, sport, or relaxation – can be highly beneficial’, we are advised in a discussion of the Aristotelian notion of ‘intuitive equilibrium’ and the ‘happy medium’. Later he muses phlegmatically that in ‘a complex world where we often feel as anonymous as water droplets in a vast ocean, our quest for concrete signs of recognition is altogether understandable’, almost echoing the kinds of phrases that might be found on the packaging of scented candles. Lighting a scented candle might be more relaxing than not doing so but it’s not going to lead to a transformation in someone’s working conditions. Despite identifying material conditions under which people are unable to work less or take it easy, and explicitly stating that people experiencing burnout often castigate themselves for their personal shortcomings rather than blaming the ‘social conditions of their work environments’, Chabot nonetheless tends to emphasise restoring (individual) balance and harmony rather than changing the (shared) conditions that make people feel burnt out in the first place.

Although he talks about the demands associated with new technologies and sometimes discusses examples of burnout among people in managerial positions in corporate offices, the main victims of burnout in this account are not people who sit all day operating shiny new machines. They are care workers. Burnout may be a new category which Chabot seems to think belongs to the contemporary world, but the kinds of work that he claims produces it are old. Critics of Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams’s *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* were quick to point out that the field of social reproduction is one of the most resistant to automation, but that does not seem to be Chabot’s main concern. Despite the book’s generalising claims about workplace exhaustion, Chabot explains that burnout originated as a term relating to overworked caregivers and still disproportionately affects people in ‘caring professions’, whose symptoms sometimes end up reflecting those of the people for whom they are trying to care:

‘they were over-worked, perhaps overly idealistic, and certainly over-committed’ but eventually became cynical and detached. As in his discussions of other forms of work, Chabot is not very specific about care work. It is unclear, for example, if his analysis includes unwaged work; he gives little consideration of the kinds of people by whom care work is disproportionately performed; he is vague about the relationship between the affective demands of these roles and wage labour; and he does not engage with the large existing feminist literature on these subjects, from social reproduction theory to theories of emotional labour. Instead, Chabot’s discussion of care work leads back to a more general discussion of the ‘exhaustion of humanism’ that emerges from a clash between two distinct but incompatible understandings of progress: ‘useful’ and ‘subtle’, with the former connected to scientific and technological progress and capitalist accumulation, the latter to individual well-being.

After considering the ‘desire for recognition’ at work, Chabot discusses the gendered dimension of burnout (in a separate section from his discussion of care). His main reference here is the psychologist Pascale Molinier’s discussions of how working women navigate femininity. His examples are more Sheryl Sandberg than Selma James: ‘The challenges [women] face range from determining the implications of stem cell research to trying to stay true to themselves while managing an all-male team.’ Chabot is critical of the ‘seriousness of the masculine perspective’ and celebrates women for wearing bright coloured clothes (*sic!*), ascribing to them the humanist qualities of ‘spirit, compassion, imagination’ and ‘nurturing behaviours’ that ‘humankind desperately needs’. In this section he does acknowledge that care work is disproportionately performed by women, but although he is quick to point out that compassion is not some innate ‘feminine’ attribute (almost as if the thought just occurred to him), this does not stop him from waxing lyrical about the ‘biological miracle’ of motherhood that ‘for a woman ... changes everything’.

According to Chabot, the ‘fragile human’ cannot thrive within a profit-driven society so they burn out, but he consistently identifies capitalism with technological development and proposes as a solution to inequality the resurrection of historical concepts whose oppressive premises he ignores:

If this inequality persists and deepens, technological and economic interests will eventually subsume the interests of the human beings who gave rise to them. This is why a new pact is necessary to protect humanity from its own capacity for self-destruction, just as in the eighteenth century, the idea of a social contract served to defend society from endogenous risks of implosion.

He repeats this call for a renewed social contract towards the end of the book. Conceding that ‘the intolerable sensations and perceptions that afflict us constitute a call for changes to our systems of production and consumption’, Chabot turns not to Marx but to Hobbes. Burnout ‘reflects certain unsustainable values within our society’ but rather than burning anything down or considering how burnt out people might struggle to participate in conventional forms of political struggle, Chabot merely advocates ‘opening our eyes to our way of life’.

Reading Chabot’s account of burnout, I was struck by the assumptions it makes about excess and speed under capitalism. He pays more attention to the experiences that burn people out than he does to the experience of feeling burnt out; he is more interested in the stimulating world than the depleted subjects he claims it produces. He describes burnout as a ‘mirror disorder’ but is inertia really the mirror image of excess? As a counterpoint I thought of Lisa Baraitser’s recent book *Enduring Time*

which describes care as ‘the arduous temporal practice of maintaining ongoing relations with others and the world.’ Baraitser perceives that care is not only about expending energy or working too hard or too compassionately for others:

To care is never simply a matter of labour or simply a matter of the wish to repair the world. To care is to deal in an ongoing and durational way with affective states that may include the racialized, gendered and imperially imbued ambivalence that seeps into the ways we maintain the lives of others. Care is an arduous temporal practice that entails the maintenance of relations with ourselves and others through histories of oppression that return in the present again and again.

Sometimes things are not fast. Sometimes nothing much happens. Sometimes the demands made on people by capitalism and each other are quiet and ongoing. Sometimes care also contains a violent aspect. Thinking about the temporal aspects of care thematised by Baraitser seems to provide a more promising way of understanding and ameliorating the effects of something as chronic and pervasive-seeming as ‘burnout’ than Chabot’s proposed return to eighteenth-century notions of social contracts.

Hannah Proctor

Insurgent universality

Asad Haider, *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump* (London and New York: Verso, 2018). 144pp., £10.99 pb., 978 1 78663 376

In an editorial in the *New York Times* written ten days after the 2016 presidential election, Mark Lilla (Professor of Humanities at Columbia University) challenged the so-called ‘Whitelash’ thesis, arguing that the reason for Trump’s victory wasn’t his ability to translate economic insecurity into racism, but rather that the Democratic Party under Hillary Clinton’s leadership was itself too focused on identity questions. Identity politics, Lilla argued, were more ‘expressive’ than ‘persuasive,’ and, as a consequence, never won elections but often lost them. Lilla’s argument, subsequently elaborated in his 2017 book entitled *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics*, is that liberals within the Democratic Party

should spend less time emphasising gender, race, ethnicity or sexual orientation – that is, what *divides* Americans – and more time emphasising the United States’ great liberal-democratic institutions – that is, what Americans share *in common*.

This was apparently oblivious to the way in which Trump had actually won the election himself on the basis of a kind of White identity politics (what has been called ‘identitarianism’). After all, 53% of White women voted not for the White woman but for the White ethno-nationalist candidate. Nonetheless, since Lilla’s op-ed and book, two other notable books have appeared on identity politics in the wake of Trump’s election: *Identity:*