

A vertical, light brown rope runs down the center of the frame. The rope is twisted and has frayed, frayed ends at the top and bottom, with loose fibers extending outwards. The background is solid black.

THE BURNOUT SOCIETY

BYUNG-CHUL HAN

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Translated by ERIK BUTLER

stanford briefs

An Imprint of Stanford University Press
Stanford, California

Stanford University Press
Stanford, California

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The Burnout Society was originally published in Germany:

Byung-Chul Han: Müdigkeitsgesellschaft. Berlin 2010 © MSB Matthes
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The translation of this work was supported by a grant from the Goethe-
Institut which is funded by the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs.



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Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free, archival-quality paper

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Han, Byung-Chul, author.

[Müdigkeitsgesellschaft. English]

The burnout society / Byung-Chul Han ; translated by Erik Butler.
pages cm

Translation of: Müdigkeitsgesellschaft.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8047-9509-8 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Mental fatigue—Social aspects. 2. Burn out (Psychology)—Social
aspects. 3. Depression, Mental—Social aspects. I. Butler, Erik, 1971—
translator. II. Title.

BF482.H35513 2015

302'.1—dc23

2015020750

ISBN 978-0-8047-9750-4 (electronic)

Typeset by Classic Typography in 10/13 Adobe Garamond

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THE BURNOUT SOCIETY

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-for-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.

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.

PROFOUND BOREDOM

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

VITA ACTIVA

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 revaluation 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

essential for “spirituality.” Rather, it stands for a lack of drive and for apathy, which seal Bartleby’s doom.

The society that Melville describes is still a disciplinary society. Walls and partitions, the elements of disciplinary architecture, traverse the entire narrative. After all, “Bartleby” tells “A Story of Wall-Street.” “Wall” is one of the most frequently used words. Reference often occurs to the “dead wall”: “The next day I noticed that Bartleby did nothing but stand at his window in his dead wall revery” (28). Bartleby works behind a screen and stares empty-headedly at the “dead brick wall.” The wall is always associated with death.³ Last but not least, disciplinary society is signified by the recurrent motif of the thick-walled prison called the “Tombs.” There, all life is extinguished. Bartleby ultimately lands in the Tombs and dies in complete isolation and solitude. He still represents an obedience-subject. He does not develop symptoms of depression, which is a hallmark of late-modern achievement society. Feelings of inadequacy, inferiority, or fear of failure do not belong to Bartleby’s emotional household. Constant self-reproach and self-aggression are unknown to him. He does not face the imperative to be himself that characterizes late-modern achievement society. Bartleby does not fail in the project of being an “I.” Monotonous copying—the sole activity he has to perform—leaves no free space in which private initiative would prove necessary, or even possible. What makes Bartleby sick is not excessive positivity or possibility. He is not burdened by the late-modern imperative of letting his *self* flourish [*das Ich selbst beginnen zu lassen*]. The activity of copying, in particular, does not admit initiative. Bartleby, who still lives in a society of conventions and institutions, does not know the wearing-out of the ego that leads to depressive *I-tiredness*.

Agamben’s ontotheological interpretation of “Bartleby,” which pays no attention to pathological elements, already founders on the facts of the narrative. It also fails to take note of the change of mental structure [*psychischer Strukturwandel*] in the present day.

Problematically, Agamben elevates Bartleby to a metaphysical position of the highest potency:

This is the philosophical constellation to which Bartleby the scrivener belongs. As a scribe who has stopped writing, Bartleby is the extreme figure of the Nothing from which all creation derives; and at the same time, he constitutes the most implacable vindication of this Nothing as pure, absolute potentiality. The scrivener has become the writing tablet; he is now nothing other than his white sheet.⁴

By this logic, Bartleby embodies the “mind”—a “being of pure potentiality”—as signified by the empty tablet (on which nothing yet stands).⁵

Bartleby exhibits neither self-reference nor reference to anything else. He exists without a world and is absent and apathic. If he counts as a “white sheet” at all, this is because he has been voided of any and all relation to the world or meaning. Bartleby’s “dim eyes” (45) already speak against the purity of divine potentiality he is supposed to embody. It is just as unconvincing when Agamben claims that Bartleby’s stubborn refusal to write announces the potency of *being able* to do so—that his radical renunciation of willing [*das Wollen*] betokens *potentia absoluta*. As Agamben views things, Bartleby’s refusal is *kerygmatic*. He embodies “pure being without any predicate.” Agamben makes Bartleby into an angelic messenger, the Angel of Annunciation, who, for all that, “predicates nothing of nothing.”⁶ Thereby, he disregards the fact that Bartleby refuses every “errand.” He steadfastly refuses to send the mail: “‘Bartleby,’ said I, ‘Ginger Nut is away; just step round to the Post Office, won’t you?’ . . . ‘I would prefer not to’” (19). As is well known, the tale ends with the curious addendum that Bartleby formerly worked as an employee of the Dead Letter Office:

Dead letters! does it not sound like dead men? Conceive a man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness, can any business seem more fitted to heighten it than that of continually handling these dead letters and assorting them for the flames? (46)

Racked by doubt, the attorney-narrator exclaims: "On errands of life, these letters speed to death." Bartleby's *Dasein* is a negative being-unto-death. This negativity contradicts Agamben's onto-theological interpretation, which makes Bartleby the herald of a second Creation—of de-creation [*Ent-Schöpfung*] that undoes the border between what has been and what has not, between Being and Nothingness.

Melville allows for a tiny sprout of life to appear in the Tombs. However, given the utter hopelessness, the massive presence of death, this small, "imprisoned turf" (45) only underscores the negativity of the realm of the dead. The words of comfort the attorney addresses to the incarcerated Bartleby also offer no help: "Nothing reproachful attaches to you by being here. And see, it is not so sad a place as one might think. Look, there is the sky and here is the grass." Unimpressed, Bartleby responds, "I know where I am" (43). Agamben interprets both the sky and the grass as messianic signs. The small patch of lawn—the only sign of life in the midst of the realm of the dead—only augments the hopeless emptiness. "On errands of life, these letters speed to death"; this is the central message of the tale. All efforts to live [*Bemühungen ums Leben*] lead to death.

Kafka's "Hunger Artist" harbors fewer illusions. His death, which no one remarks, provides a great relief to onlookers—"even the most insensitive felt it refreshing."⁷ His death makes room for a young panther, which embodies the joy of living free of desire:

The food he liked was brought him without hesitation by the attendants; he seemed not even to miss his freedom; his noble body, furnished almost to bursting with all that it needed, seemed to carry freedom around with it too; it seemed to lurk somewhere in his jaws; and the joy of living streamed with such ardent passion from his throat that for the onlookers it was not easy to stand the shock of it. But they braced themselves, crowded around the cage, and would not move on.⁸

In contrast, the hunger artist derives a feeling of freedom only from the negativity of refusal; this feeling is just as insubstantial

[*scheinhaft*] as the freedom that the panther guards “in his jaws.” Likewise, Bartleby is joined by “Mr. Cutlets,” who looks like a piece of meat. He extols the establishment and attempts to induce his companion to eat:

Hope you find it pleasant here, sir;—spacious grounds—cool apartments, sir—hope you’ll stay with us some time—try to make it agreeable. May Mrs. Cutlets and I have the pleasure of your company to dinner, sir, in Mrs. Cutlets’ private room? (44)

What the lawyer says in response to Mr. Cutlets after Bartleby’s death sounds almost ironic: “Eh!—He’s asleep, ain’t he?” “With kings and counsellors,” murmured I” (45). The narrative does not open onto messianic hope. When Bartleby dies, the “last column of some ruined temple” falls. He goes under like a “wreck in the mid Atlantic.” Bartleby’s phrase, “I would prefer not to,” defies any Christological-messianic interpretation. This “Story of Wall-Street” is not a tale of de-creation [*Ent-Schöpfung*], but rather a story of exhaustion [*Erschöpfung*]. The exclamation that ends the tale is both a lament and an indictment: “Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!”

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 [*Verwandschaft*]. 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 finds 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

of me" [*Mehr des weniger Ich*], healthy "tiredness that trusts in the world."² I-tiredness, as solitary tiredness, is worldless and world-destroying; it annihilates all reference to the Other in favor of narcissistic self-reference.

The psyche of today's achievement-subject differs from the psyche of the disciplinary subject. The ego, as Freud defines it, is a well-known disciplinary subject. Freud's psychic apparatus is a repressive apparatus with commandments and prohibitions that subjugate and repress. Like disciplinary society, the psychic apparatus sets up walls, thresholds, borders, and guards. For this reason, Freudian psychoanalysis is only possible in repressive societies that found their organization on the negativity of prohibitions and commandments. Contemporary society, however, is a society of achievement; increasingly, it is shedding the negativity of prohibitions and commandments and presenting itself as a society of freedom. The modal verb that determines achievement society is not the Freudian *Should*, but *Can*. This social transformation entails intrapsychic restructuring. The late-modern achievement-subject possesses an *entirely different psyche* than the obedience-subject for whom Freud conceived psychoanalysis. Freud's psychic apparatus is dominated by negation [*Verneinung*], repression, and fear of transgression. The ego is a "seat of anxiety" [*Angststätte*].³ In contrast, the late-modern achievement-subject is poor in negation. It is a subject of affirmation. Were the unconscious necessarily connected to the negativity of negation and repression [*Verdrängung*], then the late-modern achievement-subject would no longer have an unconscious. It would be a post-Freudian ego. The Freudian unconscious is not a formation that exists outside of time. It is a product of the disciplinary society, dominated by the negativity of prohibitions and repression, that we have long since left behind.

The work performed by the Freudian ego involves the fulfillment of duty, above all. On this score, it shares a feature with the Kantian obedience-subject. For Kant, the conscience occupies the

position of the superego. Kant's moral subject is subject to "power" [*Gewalt*], too:

Every man has a conscience and finds himself observed, threatened, and, in general, kept in awe (respect coupled with fear) by an internal judge; and this authority watching over the law in him is not something that he himself (voluntarily) *makes*, but something incorporated into his being.⁴

The Kantian subject, like the Freudian subject, is internally divided. It acts at the behest of *Another*; however, this Other is also part of itself:

Now, this original intellectual and (since it is the thought of duty) moral predisposition called *conscience* is peculiar in that, although its business is a business of man with himself, one constrained by his reason sees himself constrained to carry it on as at the bidding of *another person*.⁵

On the basis of this split, Kant speaks of a "doubled self," or "dual personality."⁶ The moral subject is simultaneously defendant and judge.

The obedience-subject is not a subject of desire or pleasure, but a subject of duty. Thus, the Kantian subject pursues the work of duty and represses its "inclinations." Hereby, God—that "omnipotent moral being"—does not appear only as the instance of punishment and condemnation, but also (and this is a very important fact, which seldom receives due attention) as the instance of *gratification*. As the subject of duty, the moral subject represses all pleasurable inclinations in favor of virtue; God, who epitomizes morality, rewards such painfully performed labors with happiness [*Glückseligkeit*]. Happiness is "distributed in exact proportion to morality [*Sittlichkeit*]."⁷ The moral subject, which accepts pain for morality, may be entirely certain of gratification. There is no threat of a crisis of gratification occurring, for God does not deceive: He is trustworthy.

The late-modern achievement-subject does not pursue works of duty. Its maxims are not obedience, law, and the fulfillment of obligation, but rather freedom, pleasure, and inclination. Above all, it expects the profits of enjoyment from work. It works for pleasure and does not act at the behest of the Other. Instead, it hearkens mainly to *itself*. After all, it must be a self-starting entrepreneur [*Unternehmer seiner selbst*]. In this way, it rids itself of the negativity of the “commanding [*gebietender*] Other.” However, such freedom from the Other is not just emancipating and liberating. The dialectic of freedom means developing new constraints. Freedom from the Other switches into narcissistic self-relation, which occasions many of the psychic disturbances afflicting today’s achievement-subject.

The absence of relation to the Other causes a crisis of gratification. As recognition, gratification presupposes the instance of the Other (or the “Third Party”). It is impossible to reward oneself or to acknowledge oneself. For Kant, God represents the instance of gratification: He rewards and acknowledges moral accomplishment. Because the structure of gratification has been disturbed, the achievement-subject feels compelled to perform more and more. The absence of relation to the Other, then, represents the *transcendental* condition for the crisis of gratification to arise in the first place. However, contemporary relations of production are also responsible. A definitive work [*Werk*], as the result of completed labor [*Arbeit*], is no longer possible today. Contemporary relations of production stand in the way of conclusion. Instead, one works into the open. Conclusive forms [*Abschlußformen*] with a beginning and an end prove wanting.

Richard Sennett has also traced the gratification crisis to a narcissistic disturbance and the absent relation to the Other:

As a character disorder, narcissism is the very opposite of strong self-love. Self-absorption does not produce gratification, it produces injury to the self; erasing the line between self and other means that nothing new, nothing “other,” ever enters the self; it is devoured and trans-

formed until one thinks one can see oneself in the other—and then it becomes meaningless. . . . The narcissist is not hungry for experiences, he is hungry for Experience. Looking always for an expression or reflection of [oneself]. . . . one drowns in the self.⁸

Experience [*Erfahrung*] involves encountering the Other. It *alters*. Experiencing [*Erlebnis*], in contrast, expands the ego into the Other, into the world. It *com-pares*. Love of self is still determined by negativity insofar as it devalues and wards off the Other in favor of the Own. The Own sets itself against the Other. Thereby, the Other acts to preserve distance. Self-love means taking an explicit stand vis-à-vis the Other. Narcissism, in contrast, blurs the border. If one suffers from a narcissistic disorder, one sinks into oneself. When reference to the Other goes missing, no stable self-image can form.

Sennett rightly connects contemporary psychic disturbances to narcissism, but he draws the wrong conclusions:

Continual escalation of expectations so that present behavior is never fulfilling is a lack of “closure.” The sense of having reached a goal is avoided because the experiences would then be objectified; they would have a shape, a form, and so exist independently of oneself. . . . The self is real only if it is continuous; it is continuous only if one practices self-denial. When closure does occur, experience seems detached from the self, and so the person seems threatened with a loss. Thus the quality of a narcissistic impulse is that it must be a continual subjective state.⁹

Sennett maintains that the narcissistic individual *intentionally* avoids achieving goals: closure yields an objectifiable form, which, inasmuch as it possesses independent substance, weakens the self. In fact, precisely the opposite holds. The socially conditioned impossibility of objectively valid, definitive forms of closure drives the subject into narcissistic self-repetition; consequently, it fails to achieve *gestalt*, stable self-image, or character. Thus, it is not a matter of intentionally “avoiding” the achievement of goals in order to heighten the feeling of self. *Instead, the feeling of having*

achieved a goal never occurs. It is not that the narcissistic subject does not want to achieve closure. Rather, it is incapable of getting there. It loses itself and scatters itself into the open. The absence of forms of closure depends, not least of all, on economic factors: openness and inconclusiveness favor growth.

Hysteria is a typical psychic malady of the disciplinary society that witnessed the founding of psychoanalysis. It presumes the negativity of repression, prohibition, and negation, which lead to the formation of the unconscious. Drive-representations [*Triebrepräsentanzen*] that have been pushed off into the unconscious manifest themselves, by means of “conversion,” as bodily symptoms that mark a person unambiguously. Hysterics exhibit a characteristic *morphe*. Therefore, hysteria admits morphology; this fact distinguishes it from depression.

According to Freud, “character” is a phenomenon of negativity, for it does not achieve form without the censorship that occurs in the psychic apparatus. Accordingly, he defines it as “a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes.”¹⁰ When the ego becomes aware of object-cathexes taking place in the id, it either lets them be or fights them off through the process of repression. Character contains the history of repression within itself. It represents a determinate relation of the ego to the id and to the superego. Whereas the hysteric shows a characteristic *morphe*, the depressive is formless; indeed, he is *amorphous*. He is a *man without character*. One might generalize the observation and declare that the late-modern ego has no character. Carl Schmitt says it is a “sign of inner conflict to have more than one real enemy.”¹¹ The same holds for friends. Following Schmitt, having more than one true friend would betoken a lack of character and definition. One’s many friends on Facebook would offer further proof of the late-modern ego’s lack of character and definition. In positive terms, such a human being without character is flexible, able to assume any form, play any role, or perform any function. This shapelessness—or, alternately, flexibility—creates a high degree of economic efficiency.

Psychoanalysis presupposes the negativity of repression and negation. The unconscious and repression, Freud stresses, are “correlative” to the greatest extent. In contrast, the process of repression or negation plays no role in contemporary psychic maladies such as depression, burnout, and ADHD. Instead, they indicate an *excess of positivity*, that is, not negation so much as the *inability to say no*; they do not point to not-being-allowed-to-do-anything [*Nicht-Dürfen*], but to being-able-to-do-everything [*Alles-Können*]. Therefore, psychoanalysis offers no way of approaching these phenomena. Depression is not a consequence of repression that stems from instances of domination such as the superego. Nor does depression permit “transference,” which offers indirect signs of what has been repressed.

With its idea of freedom and deregulation, contemporary achievement society is massively dismantling the barriers and prohibitions that constituted disciplinary society. The dismantling of negativity serves to enhance achievement. Matters reach a general state of dissolution and boundlessness—indeed, a state of *general promiscuity*—from which no energy of repression issues. Where restrictive sexual morality does not prevent the impulses of drives from being discharged, paranoid delusions do not emerge—such as those of Daniel Paul Schreber, which Freud traced back to repressed homosexuality. The “Schreber Case” typifies nineteenth-century disciplinary society, where the strict prohibition of homosexuality—indeed, of pleasure and desire as a whole—predominated.

The unconscious plays no part in depression. It no longer governs the psychic apparatus of the depressive achievement-subject. Ehrenberg, however, still holds to the idea, which throws his argument off course:

The history of depression has helped us . . . understand this social and mental turnaround. Its irresistible rise permeates the two pairs of changes that have affected the individual in the first half of the twentieth century: (1) psychic liberation and identity insecurity and (2) individual initiative and the inability to act. These two pairings display the

anthropological risks at play in the movement from neurotic conflict to depressive inadequacy in the field of psychiatry. The individual emerges from the battle to face messages from this unknown person she cannot control, this irreducible part that Westerners call the unconscious.¹²

According to Ehrenberg, depression symbolizes “what cannot be controlled” and is “irreducible.”¹³ It derives from the “confrontation between the notion of limitless possibilities and the notion of the uncontrolled.”¹⁴ Following this reasoning, depression occurs when the subject striving to display initiative founders on the uncontrollable. However, the uncontrollable, the irreducible, and the unknown—like the unconscious—are figures of negativity; they are no longer constitutive of achievement society, which is dominated by excessive positivity.

Freud understands melancholy as a destructive relationship to the Other that has been made part of the self through narcissistic identification. In this process, the originary conflicts with the Other are internalized and transformed into a conflicted self-relationship that leads to ego-impoverishment and auto-aggression. However, the depressive disorder of the contemporary achievement-subject does not follow upon a conflicted, ambivalent relation to the Other that now has gone missing. No *dimension of alterity* is involved. Depression—which often culminates in burnout—follows from overexcited, overdriven, excessive self-reference that has assumed destructive traits. The exhausted, depressive achievement-subject grinds itself down, so to speak. It is tired, exhausted by itself, and at war with itself. Entirely incapable of stepping outward, of standing outside itself, of relying on the Other, on the world, it locks its jaws on itself; paradoxically, this leads the self to hollow and empty out. It wears out in a rat race it runs against itself.

New media and communications technology are also diluting being-for-otherness [*Sein zum Anderen*]. The virtual world is poor in alterity and the resistance [*Widerständigkeit*] it displays. In virtual spaces, the ego can practically move independent of the

“reality principle,” which would provide a principle of alterity and resistance. In all the imaginary spaces of virtuality, the narcissistic ego encounters itself first and foremost. Increasingly, virtualization and digitalization are making the real disappear, which makes itself known above all through its resistance. The real is a *stay* in the double meaning of the word. It not only offers interruption and resistance, but also affords stopping and support.

The late-modern achievement-subject, with a surplus of options at its disposal, proves incapable of *intensive bonding*. Depression severs all attachments. Mourning differs from depression above all through its strong libidinal attachment to an object. In contrast, depression is objectless and therefore undirected. It is important to distinguish depression from melancholy. Melancholy is preceded by the experience of loss. Therefore it still stands in a relation—namely, *negative relation*—to the absent thing or party. In contrast, depression is cut off from all relation and attachment. It utterly lacks gravity [*Schwerkraft*].

Mourning occurs when an object with a strong libidinal cathexis goes missing. One who mourns is entirely with the beloved Other. The late-modern ego devotes the majority of libidinal energy to itself. The remaining libido is distributed and scattered among continually multiplying contacts and fleeting relationships. It proves quite easy to withdraw the weakened libido from the Other and to use it to cathect new objects. There is no need for drawn-out, pain-filled “dream work.” In social networks, the function of “friends” is primarily to heighten narcissism by granting attention, as consumers, to the *ego exhibited as a commodity*.

Ehrenberg’s point of departure is to distinguish between melancholy and depression in strictly quantitative terms. Melancholy, he observes, has something elitist about it; today it is being popularized as depression: “If melancholia was the domain of the exceptional human being, then depression is the manifestation of the *democratization of the exceptional*.”¹⁵ “Depression . . . is melancholia plus equality, the perfect disorder of the democratic human

being.”¹⁶ Ehrenberg locates depression in the same epoch when the “sovereign man” announced by Nietzsche has become mass reality. According to this view, the depressive is one who is “exhausted by his sovereignty”—that is, no longer has the power to be his own master. The depressive is tired from the constant “need for initiative.”

However, the etiology offered by Ehrenberg suffers from contradiction, for melancholy, which already existed in antiquity, cannot be conceived in terms of the sovereignty distinguishing modern or late-modern individuals. The melancholic of old was anything but a depressive lacking power to be the “master of himself” or “passion for being himself.”¹⁷ Like hysteria or mourning, melancholy is a phenomenon of negativity, whereas depression involves excess positivity. Might connections obtain between depression and democracy? Following Carl Schmitt, depression would characterize democracy insofar as it lacks the *conclusive power of decision*. Incisive, decisionistic force would prevent a drawn-out conflict from arising in the first place. Seen in this light, depression no longer represents the “lost relation to conflict,” but rather the absent relation to an objective instance of decision that would produce conclusive forms and thereby assure an instance of gratification.

Ehrenberg considers depression exclusively in terms of psychology and the pathology of the self. In so doing, he fails to consider economic context. Burnout, which often precedes depression, does not point to a sovereign individual who has come to lack the power to be the “master of himself.” Rather, burnout represents the pathological consequence of *voluntary* self-exploitation. The imperative of expansion, transformation, and self-reinvention—of which depression is the flipside—presumes an array of products tied to identity. The more often one changes one’s identity, the more production is dynamized. Industrial disciplinary society relied on unchanging identity, whereas postindustrial achievement society requires a flexible person to heighten production.

Ehrenberg's main thesis reads: "the success of depression lies in the *decline of conflict as a reference point* upon which the nineteenth-century notion of the self was founded."¹⁸ According to this view, conflict performs a constructive function; both personal identity and social identity are formed from elements that stand "*in relationship because of their conflict*"¹⁹; in political and private life, conflict represents the normative core of democratic culture. Depression, Ehrenberg continues, conceals how relationships emerge from conflict; now conflict no longer founds personal identity.

The conflict model dominates classical psychoanalysis. Healing involves *recognizing*, that is, raising the existence of intrapsychic conflict to the level of consciousness. However, the conflict model presupposes the negativity of repression and negation. Therefore, it cannot apply to depression, which lacks all negativity. Although Ehrenberg recognizes that depression is characterized by an absent relation to conflict, he still holds to the conflict model. Depression, he maintains, has a hidden conflict at its basis, which the use of antidepressants further obscures. Conflict no longer offers a sure "guide":

Deficit filled, apathy stimulated, impulses regulated, compulsion tamed—all of this has made dependency the flipside of depression. With the gospel of personal development on the one hand and the cult of performance on the other, conflict does not disappear; however, it loses its obvious quality and can no longer be counted on to guide us.²⁰

In fact, depression defies the conflict model—that is, depression eludes psychoanalysis. Ehrenberg attempts to rescue psychoanalysis *even though its conditions have disappeared*.

The "deconflictualization"²¹ that Ehrenberg connects with depression must be seen in light of the general positivization of society, which entails its de-ideologization. Sociopolitical events are no longer determined by the clash between ideologies or classes—the very idea has come to sound archaic. But for all that, the positivization of society does not abolish violence. Violence

does not stem from the negativity of clash or conflict alone; it also derives from the positivity of consensus. Now, the totality of capital, which seems to be absorbing everything, represents consensual violence. Struggle no longer occurs between groups, ideologies, or classes, but between individuals; still, this fact is not as important for understanding the crisis of the achievement-subject as Ehrenberg claims.²² What proves problematic is not individual competition per se, but rather its self-referentiality, which escalates into *absolute competition*. That is, the achievement-subject competes with itself; it succumbs to the destructive compulsion to outdo itself over and over, to jump over its own shadow. This self-constraint, which poses as freedom, has deadly results.

In the transition from disciplinary society to achievement society, the superego positivizes itself into the *ego ideal*. The superego is repressive. Above all, it prohibits. It rules over the ego with the "harshness and cruelty" of the "dictatorial 'Thou shalt'" and its "harshly restraining, cruelly prohibiting quality."²³ In contrast to the repressive superego, the ego ideal seduces. The achievement-subject projects itself [*entwirft sich*] onto the ego ideal, whereas the obedience-subject subjects itself [*sich unterwirft*] to the superego. *Subjection* and *projection* are two different modes of existence. Negative compulsion issues from the superego. In contrast, the ego ideal exercises a positive compulsion on the ego. The negativity of the superego restricts the freedom of the ego. Projecting oneself into the ego ideal is interpreted as an act of freedom. But when the ego gets caught in an unattainable ego ideal, it gets crushed altogether. The gap between the real ego and the ego ideal then brings forth auto-aggression.

The late-modern achievement-subject is subject to no one. In fact, it is no longer a subject in the etymological sense (subject to, *sujet à*). It positivizes itself; indeed, it liberates itself into a *project*. However, the change from subject to project does not make power or violence disappear. Auto-compulsion, which presents itself as freedom, takes the place of allo-compulsion. This development is

closely connected to capitalist relations of production. Starting at a certain level of production, auto-exploitation is significantly more efficient and brings much greater returns [*leistungstärker*] than allo-exploitation, because the feeling of freedom attends it. Achievement society is the society of self-exploitation. The achievement-subject exploits itself until it burns out. In the process, it develops auto-aggression that often enough escalates into the violence of self-destruction. The project turns out to be a *projectile* that the achievement-subject is aiming at itself.

In view of the ego ideal, the real ego appears as a loser buried in self-reproach. The ego wages war with itself. The society of positivity, which thinks itself free of all foreign constraints, becomes entangled in destructive self-constraints. Psychic maladies such as burnout and depression, the exemplary maladies of the twenty-first century, all display auto-aggressive traits. Exogenous violence is replaced by self-generated violence, which is more fatal than its counterpart inasmuch as the victim of such violence considers itself free.

Homo sacer originally meant someone excluded from society because of a trespass. One may kill him without suffering punishment. The sovereign disposes of absolute power to suspend the standing legal order. He embodies the legislative power [*rechtsetzende Gewalt*] that stands outside of legal order [*Rechtsordnung*] yet maintains a relation with it. Thus, the sovereign does not need to be right to determine rights [*So braucht der Souverän nicht Recht zu haben, um Recht zu setzen*]. The state of exception, by suspending the legal order, produces a lawless space where it is possible for any and every individual to be seized absolutely [*ein absoluter Zugriff auf jeden einzelnen möglich ist*]. Sovereignty's originary achievement is to have produced the bare life of *homo sacer*. This life is bare because it stands outside the legal order and therefore can be destroyed at any time.

According to Agamben, human life becomes political only when it is incorporated into the power of sovereignty—that is, when it

experiences “unconditional subjection to a power of death.”²⁴ Bare, expendable life and the power of sovereignty generate each other: “Contrary to our modern habit of representing the political realm in terms of citizens’ rights, free will, and social contracts, from the point of view of sovereignty, *only bare life is authentically political.*”²⁵ “Life exposed to death” is the “originary political element.” The “*Urphänomen* of politics” is the injunction [*Bann*] that produces the “bare life of *homo sacer*.”²⁶ Sovereignty and the bare life of *homo sacer* occupy the two endpoints of the same spectrum. For the sovereign, all human beings are potentially *homines sacri*.

Agamben’s theory of *homo sacer* holds to the scheme of negativity. Accordingly, perpetrators and victims, sovereign and *homo sacer*, are clearly distinguished—and topologically, too. Sovereignty and the bare life of *homo sacer*, Agamben writes, stand “at the two extreme limits of the [same] order.”²⁷ Agamben’s state of exception is a state of negativity. In contrast, the *homines sacri* of achievement society inhabit a *totalized state of normality*; this is a state of positivity. Agamben utterly fails to notice the topological change of power that lies at the basis of the society of sovereignty’s transformation into achievement society. From a standpoint at the middle of the society of achievement, Agamben describes the society of sovereignty. Therein lies the anachronism of his thinking. The dynamic that he traces is burdened by his anachronistic focus on negativity based entirely on *exclusion* and *inhibition*. Accordingly, he cannot grasp the violence of positivity, which expresses itself as the *exhaustion* and *inclusion* that characterize the society of achievement. Because Agamben devotes his attention exclusively to secularized forms of negativity that seem more archaic than ever, extreme phenomena of positivity escape him. Today violence issues more readily from the conformism of consensus than from the antagonism of dissent. In this sense—contra Habermas—one might speak of the *violence of consensus*.

The achievement-subject stands free from external instances of domination forcing it to work and exploiting it. It is subject to no

one if not to itself. However, the absence of external domination does not abolish the structure of compulsion. It makes freedom and compulsion coincide. The achievement-subject gives itself over to freestanding compulsion in order to maximize performance. In this way, it exploits itself. Auto-exploitation is more efficient than allo-exploitation because a deceptive feeling of freedom accompanies it. The exploiter is simultaneously the exploited. Exploitation now occurs without domination. That is what makes self-exploitation so efficient. The capitalist system is switching from allo-exploitation to auto-exploitation in order to accelerate. On the basis of the paradoxical freedom it holds, the achievement-subject is simultaneously perpetrator and victim, master and slave. Freedom and violence now coincide. The achievement-subject that understands itself as its own master, as *homo liber*, turns out to be *homo sacer*. The sovereign of achievement society is simultaneously *his own homo sacer*. By this paradoxical logic, sovereign and *homo sacer* still generate each other in achievement society.

Agamben contends that we are all *homines sacri* virtually and potentially; this is because we all stand under a sovereign injunction and are exposed to absolute expendability. However, this diagnosis contradicts all the features that define contemporary society, which is no longer a society of sovereignty. The injunction that makes us all *homines sacri* is not a sovereign injunction, but the injunction to achieve [*Bann der Leistung*]. The achievement-subject that considers itself free and fashions itself as *homo liber*—its own sovereign and self-made [*Unternehmer seiner selbst*—stands under the injunction to achieve; thereby, it makes itself into *homo sacer*. The sovereign of achievement society, then, is the *homo sacer* of his own self.

Likewise, Ehrenberg's theory of depression overlooks the systemic violence inhabiting achievement society. For the most part, his analyses are psychological, not economic or political. Therefore, he does not observe capitalistic relations of self-exploitation in the achievement-subject's psychic maladies. According to Ehrenberg, only the imperative to belong to oneself entails depression;

depression is the pathological expression of late-modern man's failure to become himself. Ehrenberg equates this type with Nietzsche's "sovereign man," but he fails to notice the identity between sovereign and *homo sacer*, master and slave, that actually holds. For Nietzsche, it is not "sovereign man" but the "*last man*" who exploits himself as his own vassal. Counter to what Ehrenberg claims, Nietzsche advanced "sovereign man" in the name of cultural criticism, as a countermodel to the exhausted achievement-subject. That is why "sovereign man" is a man of leisure [*Muße*]. A hyperactive person would have disgusted Nietzsche: the "strong soul" keeps "*calm*," "moves slowly," and "has an aversion to what's too lively."²⁸ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* declares:

All of you who are in love with hectic work and whatever is fast, new, strange—you find it hard to bear yourselves, your diligence is escape and the will to forget yourself.

If you believed more in life, you would hurl yourself less into the moment. But you do not have enough content in yourselves for waiting—not even for laziness!²⁹

The capitalist economy absolutizes survival. It is not concerned with the *good* life.³⁰ It is sustained by the illusion that more capital produces more life, which means a greater capacity for living. The rigid, rigorous separation between life and death casts a spell of ghostly stiffness over life itself. Concern about living the good life yields to the hysteria of surviving. The reduction of life to biological, vital processes makes life itself bare and strips it of all narrativity. It takes *livingness* from life, which is much more complex than simple vitality and health. The mania for health emerges when life has become as flat as a coin and stripped of all narrative content, all value. Given the atomization of society and the erosion of the social, all that remains is the body of the ego, which is to be kept healthy at any cost. The loss of ideal values leaves, other than the exhibition value of the ego, only health value behind. Bare life makes all teleology vanish—every in-order-to [*jedes Umzu*] that

would give reason to remain healthy. Health becomes self-referential and voids itself into purposiveness without purpose.

The life of *homo sacer* in achievement society is holy and bare for another reason entirely. It is bare because, stripped of all transcendent *value*, it has been reduced to the immanency of vital functions and capacities, which are to be maximized by any and all means. The inner logic of achievement society dictates its evolution into a *doping society*. Life reduced to bare, vital functioning is life to be kept healthy unconditionally. Health is the new goddess.³¹ That is why bare life is holy.

The *homines sacri* of achievement society also differ from those of the society of sovereignty on another score. They cannot be killed at all. Their life equals that of the undead. They are too alive to die, and too dead to live.

NOTES

NEURONAL POWER

1. An interesting, reciprocal relationship holds between social and biological discourses. The sciences are not free of nonscientific dispositives. Accordingly, a paradigm shift occurred within medical immunology at the end of the Cold War. In America, Polly Matzinger discarded the immunological model of preceding decades. According to her model, the immune system does not distinguish between “self” and “non-self,” i.e., domestic and foreign, but between “friendly” and “dangerous.” See Polly Matzinger, “Friendly and Dangerous Signals: Is the Tissue in Control?” *Nature Immunology* 8.1 (2007): 11–13. The object of immune defense is no longer foreignness or Otherness as such. Only foreign intruders that act destructively in inner, domestic space are combated. So long as what is foreign does not attract unwelcome attention, immune defenses ignore it. It follows that the biological immune system is more hospitable than previously assumed. That is, it does not harbor xenophobia. As such, it proves more intelligent than human societies. Xenophobia is a pathologically escalated immunoreaction that proves damaging to one’s own development [*die Entwicklung des Eigenen*].

2. Heidegger’s thinking also displays immunological traits. Thus, he decidedly rejects the Identical, to which he opposes the

Same. In contrast to the Identical, the Same possesses interiority, which is the basis for every immunoreaction.

3. Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), 1.

4. Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*, trans. James Benedict (London: Verso, 1993), 65.

5. *Ibid.*, 74.

6. Jean Baudrillard, "From the Universal to the Singular: The Violence of the Global," in *The Future of Values: 21st-Century Talks*, ed. Jérôme Bindé (New York: UNESCO/Berghahn, 2004), 21.

7. Jean Baudrillard, "Jean Baudrillard im Gespräch mit Peter Engelmann," *Der Geist des Terrorismus* (Vienna: Passagen, 2002), 85 (this interview does not appear in the English-language edition, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, trans. Chris Turner [London: Verso, 2003]).

8. *Ibid.*, 86.

9. Baudrillard, *Spirit of Terrorism*, 15.

BEYOND DISCIPLINARY SOCIETY

1. Alain Ehrenberg, *Weariness of the Self: Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age*, trans. Enrico Caouette, Jacob Homel, David Homel, and Don Winkler (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), 4.

2. *Ibid.*, 117.

3. Freedom, in an authentic sense, is tied to negativity. It is always freedom from constraint that the immunologically Other exercises. When negativity yields to excessive positivity, the emphasis on freedom—which springs dialectically from the negation of negation—also vanishes.

PROFOUND BOREDOM

1. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935–1938*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 149.

2. Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 106–7.

3. In this sense, Merleau-Ponty writes, “We forget the viscous, equivocal appearances, and by means of them we go straight to the things they present.” *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, ed. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 77.

4. *Ibid.*, 76–77.

5. Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 133.

VITA ACTIVA

1. Counter to what Arendt claims, the Christian tradition does not attach importance exclusively to *vita contemplativa*. Rather, the aim is to strike a balance between *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*. In this sense, Saint Gregory the Great wrote: “One must know, if a good course of life requires that one pass from the active to the contemplative life, then it is often useful when the soul returns from the contemplative to the active life in such a way that the flame of contemplation lighted in the heart confers its entire perfection on activity. Thus, the active life must lead to contemplation, but contemplation must proceed from what we have observed within and calls us back to activity.” Quoted in Alois M. Haas, “Die Beurteilung der Vita contemplativa und activa in der Dominikanermystik des 14. Jahrhunderts,” in *Arbeit Muße Meditation*, ed. B. Vickers (Zurich: Verlag der Fachvereine, 1985), 109–131; here, 113.

2. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 247.

3. *Ibid.*, 322.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*, 321.

6. *Ibid.*, 322.

7. *Ibid.*, 322–23.

8. *Ibid.*, 325.

THE PEDAGOGY OF SEEING

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 190.
2. Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human*, 132.
3. Both Heidegger's "dread" and Sartre's "nausea" are exemplary immunological reactions. The philosophical discourse of existentialism has a strong immunological imprint. Existential philosophy's emphasis on freedom owes its urgency to Otherness or foreignness. The two principal works of twentieth-century philosophy indicate that it was an immunological age.
4. Baudrillard, *Transparency of Evil*, 61.

THE BARTLEBY CASE

1. Thus Gilles Deleuze writes, "Even in his catatonic or anorexic state, Bartleby is not the patient but the doctor of a sick America, the *Medicine-Man*, the new Christ or the brother to us all." *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (London: Verso, 1998), 90.
2. Herman Melville, *Billy Budd and Other Stories* (New York: Penguin, 1986), 1–46; hereafter cited parenthetically.
3. This aspect goes missing entirely in German translation (*Brandmauer* or *blinde Ziegelmauer*).
4. Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 253.
5. *Ibid.*, 245.
6. *Ibid.*, 257.
7. Franz Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1971), 277.
8. *Ibid.*; translation slightly modified.

THE SOCIETY OF TIREDNESS

1. Peter Handke, *The Jukebox and Other Essays on Storytelling*, trans. Ralph Manheim and Krishna Wilson (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994), 3–46; cited parenthetically.

2. Translation modified.

3. Capitalization added.

4. Translation modified.

5. Translation modified.

6. The ethics of both Kant and Levinas are immunologically structured. Thus, Kant's moral subject practices tolerance, which represents a genuinely immunological category. That is, tolerance concerns Otherness. Kant's ethics is an ethics of negativity, which Hegel leads to completion with his theory of recognition. Levinas, on the other hand, reduces immunological tolerance to absolute zero. Thus, the ego stands "exposed" to the "violence" that comes from the Other and puts it into question radically. The emphasis on the wholly Other lends Levinas's ethics an immunological character.

BURNOUT SOCIETY

1. Kafka, *Complete Stories*, 432.

2. Handke, *Jukebox and Other Essays on Storytelling*.

3. Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, ed. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1990), 59.

4. Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 233.

5. *Ibid.*, 233–34.

6. *Ibid.*, 234n.

7. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 93.

8. Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Norton, 1992), 324–25.

9. *Ibid.*, 335.

10. Freud, *Ego and the Id*, 24.

11. Carl Schmitt, *Theory of the Partisan*, trans. G. L. Ulmen (New York: Telos, 2007), 85.

12. Ehrenberg, *Weariness*, 228.

13. Ibid., 232: "Depression portrays for all of us the style of the uncontrollable in the age of limitless possibilities. We can manipulate our bodily and mental nature, we can push back our limits by all sorts of means, but this manipulation won't save us from anything. Constraints and freedoms change, but 'that irreducible part' is not diminished."

14. Ibid., 230.

15. Ibid., 218.

16. Ibid., 219.

17. Ibid., 166; translation slightly modified.

18. Ibid., 10.

19. Ibid., 215.

20. Ibid., 205–6.

21. Cf. *ibid.*, 214–17.

22. Cf. *ibid.*, 223: "Instead of struggles between social groups, individual competition affects people. . . . We are witnessing a double phenomenon: increasing universality (globalization), which is abstract, and acute personalization, which is felt more concretely. We can fight a boss of an opposing class, but how do you fight 'globalization'?"

23. Freud, *Ego and the Id*, 56.

24. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 90.

25. Ibid., 106.

26. Ibid., 109. *Homo sacer* refers to one who has been expelled from the community for transgressing divine commandments. For example, a man who has moved the border stone faces the vengeance of Jupiter Terminus, the god who defends borders. One may kill him without incurring punishment. That said, *homo sacer* passes through several historical stages. At the time of the Twelve

Tables, *sacer* was whoever injured the sanctity of the people's tribunes. The plebs took up the ancient practice, which was originally religious, in order to secure their position of power. Agamben disregards the historical development of *homo sacer* entirely and restricts *sacratio* to the time of plebeian rule. In this way, he falsely derives *sacratio* from the *potestas sacrosancta* due to the tribunes of the plebs. In this way—by cutting out its religious origin—he (con)fuses *sacratio* with the power of sovereignty. The celebrated legal historian Emil Brunnenmeister writes: “*sacratio* . . . was not worldly; it concerned mindfulness of the gods [*Gottesacht*] exclusively. However, it slowly developed into worldly mindfulness.” *Das Tötungsverbrechen im altrömischen Recht* (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1887), 153. Moreover, in support of his thesis, Agamben posits a contradiction in the figure of *homo sacer* that does not in fact exist. He indicates that *homo sacer* cannot possibly belong to the religious sphere because one is allowed to kill him, whereas it is forbidden to injure holy things (*res sacrae*). The possibility of being killed by human hand does not remove *homo sacer* from the religious realm, for it was assumed that divine vengeance could befall *homo sacer* at any point—which included actions performed by another human being. The murderer counts simply as the tool of vengeance employed by the divinity concerned. In this sense, Brunnenmeister observes:

sacratio has as its basis the widely attested belief that the godhead itself . . . would punish the wicked [*Frevler*] when and how it wanted, and that no one—neither the state nor its officials, priests, or individual citizens—could undertake this punishment first. What path the angered deity would choose for the victim whose life was forfeit, no mortal knew. The deity might drive the guilty to suicide through tortments of every kind, make his life end by accident or slow wasting, or put a deadly weapon in another's hand. Whoever killed a cursed man (*sacer*) counted as blameless as soon as circumstances revealed that he, perhaps without knowing it at all, had been the instrument of divine vengeance. The idea that it was permitted (much less a duty) to assist

the offended god in the business of revenge was utterly foreign to popular piety. The same awe that protected the property of the gods from violation surely prevented frivolous and malicious parties from acting as representatives, in this world, of the prosecution consigned to a supernatural power. (152f)

Finally, Agamben declares that *homo sacer* is excluded not just from the human order, but from the divine order as well, because it is forbidden to sacrifice him. This is also a false conclusion: *homo sacer* may not be sacrificed precisely because he *already* stands in possession of the offended deity. Accordingly, the figure of *homo sacer*, upon which Agamben founds his theory of sovereignty, is a fiction that does not correspond to the historical facts.

27. Agamben, *Homo sacer*, 84.

28. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, ed. Rüdiger Bittner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 132.

29. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 32.

30. Aristotle observes that the simple accumulation of capital merits reproach because it concerns only bare life, and not the good life: "So some people believe that this is the task of household management, and go on thinking that they should maintain their store of money or increase it without limit. The reason they are so disposed, however, is that they are preoccupied with living, not with living well. And since their appetite for life is unlimited, they also want an unlimited amount of what sustains it." Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 17 (1257b).

31. Nietzsche's last man declares Health the new goddess after the death of God: "one honors health. 'We invented happiness,' say the last human beings, and they blink." *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 10.