Book Review: *The Burnout Society* by Byung-Chul Han. Stanford University Press, 2015. US$ 7.00 (eBook). ISBN 978-0-8047-9750-4.

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In today's world, where burnout, exhaustion, and the loss of hope have become almost commonplace, the dominant explanations often reduce these conditions to a personal problem—an individual's failure to adapt or to maintain a positive mindset. Han, a philosopher and cultural theorist, challenges this narrative. He suggests that burnout should be understood at the level of *psychopolitics*, as a symptom of contemporary capitalism that subtly transforms individuals into their own oppressors.

In *The Burnout Society*, Han argues that contemporary society is no longer governed by what he calls "negative" power—defined by prohibition and the production of "obedience-subjects," as Michel Foucault analyzed in his notion of the "disciplinary society" (pp. 8–9). Instead, power today operates in a "positive" mode: it motivates, stimulates, and drives individuals to see themselves as "achievement-subjects," compelled to constantly improve, perform, and succeed. Han describes this as the "achievement society," in which power no longer imposes itself externally but operates internally, as individuals voluntarily discipline and exploit themselves under the guise of freedom—ultimately becoming their own oppressors.

One of the book's central contributions lies in offering a theoretical lens through which we can discern the "new forms of violence" embedded in contemporary capitalism. Such violence manifests not through external coercion but through the subtle mechanism of "self-exploitation," disguised as the freedom to pursue success. I believe this theoretical lens can also be applied in the field of comparative education, particularly in understanding the pressures faced by students and young people across different societies. They must navigate the weight of educational success and the uncertainty of their futures, having grown up in a period deeply shaped by neoliberalism. For instance, Cho (2015) argues that South Korean youth who came of age in the late 2000s, following the Asian financial crisis, increasingly embody the characteristics of neoliberal subjects. They willingly dedicate themselves to hard work in education, viewing it as both an investment and a marathon requiring endurance, while simultaneously being haunted by anxiety about life's uncertainties and the fear of failure. In other words, are these young people already living in what Han calls the "achievement society," where education becomes a stage of self-exploitation? I hope this review of Han's book will serve as a guide for educators interested in such issues, providing a basic for critical dialogue after engaging with the text.

For me, the first two chapters serve as crucial entry points that readers must not overlook. These chapters mark the theoretical foundation on which Han builds his arguments concerning power and violence in contemporary society. In Chapter 1, *Neuronal Power*, Han points out that the past century was defined by what he calls an *immunological age*—a regime of power premised on protection and elimination, structured through a binary division between the Own and the Other, inside and outside, friend and enemy. These "others" were imagined like viruses—foreign threats whose negative violence might contaminate the self. Physical manifestations of this regime included walls, fences, and borders, all designed to ward off what was deemed foreign or dangerous.

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However, in the post-Cold War era, Han observes a shift. Foreignness is no longer excluded but instead absorbed into the circuits of global capitalism and consumer culture. The violence based on difference and separation has been displaced by a regime of sameness in which alterity no longer appears threatening. But this does not mean violence disappears. Rather, it takes on a new, more insidious form: the violence of positivity, embedded within systems of affirmation and internalization. Han refers to this as *positivization*, a process that ultimately exhausts and burns us out. This theoretical perspective is elaborated further in the second chapter, *Beyond Disciplinary Society*, a key chapter in which Han engages critically with Foucault's influential theory of power. While Foucault analyzed modern society as a *disciplinary society*—governed by institutions such as schools, hospitals, and military barracks that enforced obedience—Han argues that we now live in an *achievement society*, where power no longer imposes limits from the outside but operates internally, urging individuals to become entrepreneurs of themselves. Traditional institutions of discipline have been replaced by sites of self-optimization: fitness studios, banks, shopping malls. In this regime, power takes on a "positive" form, constantly encouraging and motivating individuals through the belief that "you can do it." This is difference from the negative power of discipline, which functioned through prohibition and constraint.

To put it clearly, excess positivity becomes a new form of violence—it compels us to become masters over ourselves. We make war on ourselves in pursuit of endless self-improvement. Freedom, in this context, becomes the freedom to exploit oneself. As external oppression fades from view, self-exploitation takes its place. We turn inward, blaming and exhausting ourselves, until we fall into states of burnout and depression. As Han writes:

> 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. (p. 11)

At this point, it leads me to reflect on the condition of today's students. They grow up in a society saturated with relentless competition, expected to "succeed," to outperform others, to achieve high grades, and to avoid being left behind. The fear of failure pushes them to constantly develop themselves, working hard both in school and in life in the hope of reaching the top. Yet the more they strive, the more they end up waging war against themselves. They repeatedly ask, "Am I good enough yet?" only to feel disappointment and turn their frustration inward, blaming themselves when they fall short of expectations. The result is a cycle of despair, hopelessness, and, in many cases, depression. In this sense, we might say that this is a new form of violence shaped by neoliberal society—one to which we all consent, often without realizing it.

One of the side effects of this new form of violence is that it pushes individuals to do many things simultaneously—what is commonly known as *multitasking.* In Chapter 3, *Profound Boredom* Han points out that this mode of existence is not different from that of hunter-gatherer humans. In such a state, individuals focus only on themselves, lacking the concentration necessary for deep reflection or thoughtful consideration of what lies before them. This condition renders genuine social progress nearly impossible. Then, in Chapter 4, *Vita Activa*, Han reinforces this argument by critically highlighting that in a society where individuals are constantly compelled to act, the self turns into a new kind of labor camp—one in which we are at once both prisoner and guard. Believing this to be freedom, we willingly consent to our own exploitation.

If one asks what the way out might be, in Chapter 5, *The Pedagogy of Seeing*, Han proposes a pedagogical approach centered on permitting learning to take place through calm, attentive observation—not the rushed, immediate responses demanded by contemporary life that continually incite agitation. Han sees this state as opening up the possibility of negative potentiality—the capacity to withhold immediate action, to pause, reflect, and ponder. This pause enables us to envision alternative possibilities beyond the status quo. Meanwhile, In Chapter 6, *The Bartleby Case***,** Han

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returns to the classic literary figure Bartleby, the scrivener who copies documents—a character whose interpretation within late capitalism remains debated. Han invites us to consider Bartleby as a symbol of social deconstruction or perhaps as a reflection of burnout itself.

Chapter 7, *The Society of Tiredness*, Han warns that the achievement society, saturated with endless positive stimulation, is leading people toward a new form of exhaustion—not physical fatigue, but a spiritual weariness characterized by loneliness, weakness, and hopelessness. He emphasizes that to stop—to pause from doing—is not merely inactivity but represents a form of *negative potentiality* essential for human existence. Allowing oneself the space to stop opens up room for imagination, enabling the envisioning of alternative futures.

In the final chapter of *The Burnout Society*, Han argues that individuals in the achievement society live under the illusion of absolute freedom, as though they were entrepreneurs of themselves. This stands in contrast to the disciplinary society, which was structured around obedience to external authority. We turn inward and repeatedly exploit ourselves, a cycle that ultimately culminates in depression. On another level, this condition reflects the logic of survival capitalism, in which we are led to believe that a good life depends on investing in our own potential—primarily through self-exploitation—until we reach a state of total exhaustion and a kind of living death. In this way, freedom and violence become inextricably linked—or perhaps this marks the very end of freedom itself.

In summary, as I noted at the outset, this book critiques a "new form of violence" so subtle that it appears in the guise of "freedom"—that is, as self- exploitation. This form of violence reflects the internalized mechanisms of governance within contemporary capitalism, a point that educators need to connect to understand its relevance to education. However, the book does not provide clear alternative solutions for escaping this condition. While Han introduces the concept of a *pedagogy of seeing*—pausing to observe, slowing down, and noticing what is otherwise hidden—it remains an open question whether this constitutes a genuine solution or merely a temporary relief that tacitly encourages acceptance of the status quo, as described by Fisher (2009) in his notion of *capitalist realism*, in which we feel that no alternative exists beyond capitalism and simply carry on with life as usual. Even so, as an educator, I believe that, at the very least, we must dare to imagine what possible alternatives to the "achievement society" might look like, and how we might challenge this form of violence, especially within educational settings.

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