



Szymon
WOZNICA

A f f e c t T h e o r y
BURNED OUT.

How the Economy of Exhaustion Profits from Your Fatigue
Series: Affective Feudalism · Vol. III

BOUNDARY LEVERAGING

· VOLUME III ·

BURNED OUT

How the Economy of Exhaustion

Profits from Your Fatigue

SZYMON WOŹNICA

An Anthology of Burnout and the Economy of Exhaustion

Series: Affective Feudalism · 2026

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How to Read This Book

This is not a self-help book. You will not find breathing exercises here, nor a meditation app, nor a list of ten habits that will transform your Monday. If you are looking for something to help you better endure what is wearing you down, put this book aside—it was written against such solutions. I wrote it out of a suspicion that gave me no peace for years: that the fatigue we carry inside us like a private flaw is neither private nor a flaw. That it is fuel. And that someone is profiting from it.

The book you are holding is the third volume of a series, but it can be read on its own. It grew out of the fusion of two earlier works—one on the mechanics of shifting boundaries in the economy, which I called the economy of exhaustion, and another on affect as the raw material this economy extracts and burns. I did not simply glue them together. I wrote something new, because only when set side by side do they reveal the full picture: not two separate problems, but a single mechanism seen from two sides. On one side you can see the lever that shifts what we regard as normal. On the other—the substance that lever moves. That substance is you: your attention, your anxiety, your loyalty, your exhaustion.

I write in a journalistic register because I want this book to reach not only sociologists. I want it to be read by the person who, on a Sunday evening, feels that familiar weight

in the stomach before Monday. By the HR specialist who is rolling out yet another wellbeing program and quietly senses that something in it does not add up. By the manager who leads a team and no longer knows where motivating ends and squeezing begins. By the journalist searching for words for a phenomenon everyone feels but few can name. That is why I avoid jargon where I can, and where I use it, I explain it. At the end you will find a glossary of key concepts—you can consult it like a map.

I give references to authors in the text, in shorthand, in parentheses: name and year. Full descriptions are in the bibliography at the end. I do this deliberately—I do not want you to have to take me at my word. This book is a thesis, not a confession, and a thesis should be verifiable. After the main part you will find empirical appendices: data, case studies, simulation results, and reconstructions of the mechanisms I describe. This is not ornament. It is the place where I show on what basis I claim what I claim, and where the limits of what I can prove come to an end.

Three warnings before you begin. First: this book will not lift responsibility from you, but it will take away your guilt. These are two different things, and I will keep distinguishing them to the very end. Second: it will be uncomfortable at times, because I will show that some of the things we do to survive are at the same time what keeps the system alive. Third: this is not a book without hope. It

ends with a proposal, not a lament. But before we reach the exit, we must examine closely the room we find ourselves in. We begin by turning on the light.

INTRODUCTION

The Fatigue That Pays

Imagine that fatigue has a balance sheet. That somewhere, in some invisible bookkeeping, someone records your sleepless nights, your Sunday dreads, your “I can handle it” repeated like an incantation—and that on the other side of that ledger those same entries turn into someone’s revenue. It sounds like a metaphor. But the longer I looked at how modern work operates, the more strongly I felt that it is not a metaphor but a description. Your exhaustion is someone’s asset. And that is the thesis of this book.

For most of the twentieth century we knew how to talk about exploitation in simple words. There was the worker, there was the factory, there was working time that could be measured by a clock, and there was a wage that could be fought over. Capital took value from labor, and the conflict between the one who works and the one who profits was visible, named, written into politics. You could opt out of it, you could strike, you could count. That story has ended—not because exploitation disappeared, but because it moved to a place the clock does not measure. Today we no longer sell only hours. We sell engagement, enthusiasm, “delivery,” availability, good energy in a meeting, and the readiness to reply to a message at ten at night. We sell affect. And affect has no attendance sheet.

This shift—from work measured by time to work measured by emotional state—is, as I will argue, a change of regime, not of mood (Han 2015; Fisher 2009). It is not that people today are more coddled or less resilient than in the past. It is that what is being extracted has changed. When the currency was physical labor, exhaustion was a side effect of production. When affect becomes the currency, exhaustion ceases to be a side effect and becomes the production process itself. The system does not tire you incidentally. The system tires you because it lives off your fatigue.

I call this order the economy of exhaustion. It is not a conspiracy. There is no headquarters that designed your Sunday dread. It is worse—there is a logic that needs no conspirators, because it works on its own, through the sum of rational decisions made at every level. The company that introduces yet another metric does not want to harm you; it wants control. The manager who messages you in the evening is not an evil person; he too received a message from his boss. The platform that ramps up your emotions does not hate you; it simply profits from it. Each of these moves, taken separately, looks innocent. Only together do they form a machine that devours the resource we all live on—human energy—and does so slowly enough that we call it normality.

In this book I want to show four things that until now have been described separately but are four movements of a

single mechanism. The first movement is extraction: the system learns to squeeze affect out of you, not just labor. The second is boundary leveraging: the system shifts what you consider normal in steps so small that exploitation starts to look like culture, and excessive demands like your own ambition. The third is the privatization of the cost: when the bill arrives—in the form of burnout, anxiety, breakdown—the system holds up a mirror and tells you it is your problem, your psyche, your resilience. The fourth is the monetization of relief: the same system that exhausted you then sells you remedies for exhaustion—apps, workshops, “mental health days”—and profits a second time, on repairing what it broke itself.

These four movements close into a loop. And this loop has one more feature, which I consider the most important and the hardest to see: such a system does not collapse. We are used to thinking that injustice, as it grows, leads to an explosion—to revolt, revolution, some great rupture after which something changes. The economy of exhaustion does not explode. It implodes. Instead of an explosion outward, we get a caving-in: not a collective protest, but a million private breakdowns, each of which looks like a personal matter. Burnout is precisely such an implosion translated into a single life. And because the implosion is quiet, private, and spread out over time, the system that produces it is astonishingly stable. It does not crack. There are simply more and more people going out inside it.

I want this book to contribute something new, so let me say at once what is not in it. There is no praise of the old days—physical labor was not kinder, and nostalgia is a poor compass. Nor is there a diagnosis that ends with the word “capitalism” set down like a full stop after which nothing more need be explained. That is too easy and too unspecific. Instead I offer a tool: the concept of boundary leveraging, which lets us break the mechanism into parts and see exactly where the shift occurs—in which sentence at a meeting, in which email, in which name of a benefit. For only when you see the lever can you block it.

And one more thing that sets this book apart from most of what is read about burnout today. The literature on burnout is enormous, but for the most part it describes burnout as a state of the individual—a set of symptoms that can be measured with a questionnaire and treated individually (Maslach and Leiter 2016). That is true, but incomplete, and this incompleteness is politically useful. If burnout is your state, then its solution is also yours—you are to rest, sort out your priorities, learn to say “no.” If, however, burnout is a function of the system—if it is what the system produces in order to operate—then no amount of individual rest will close it, because the cost is built into the construction, not into character. This book shifts the center of gravity: from the question “what is wrong with me?” to the question “what machine am I a part of?” That is not a question that

removes responsibility. It is a question that addresses it correctly.

We will proceed as follows. First I will set out the diagnosis: I will show what the economy of exhaustion is, why it devours three resources at once—body, relationships, and meaning—and why affect has become its main raw material. Then I will break down the mechanism of boundary leveraging itself: the eight levers by which normality is shifted, and the language that masks that shift as care. Next I will trace how this exhaustion is monetized—through metrics, through wellbeing, through the relief market—and I will present perhaps the hardest thesis of this book: that burnout is sometimes a strategy, not a malfunction. Later we will see how the exhausted person becomes political material: why fatigue feeds polarization and status. We will pass through three renderings of the same mechanism—the American, the European, and the Polish. We will descend to the bottom, to the implosion, in order to understand why this system does not crack. And at the end—because I promised this would not be a lament—I will try to show the way out: counter-levers, collective resilience, and the transition to something I call the personal economy, in which the human being ceases to be fuel.

Before we set off, one more word on method, because this book joins two perspectives that usually travel apart. On one side I look at the mechanism from the side of the lever—

at how boundaries are shifted, how pressure works, how the machine is built. This is the structural perspective, cool, almost engineering-like. On the other I look from the side of affect—at what this mechanism does to human feeling, how it turns anxiety into fuel and shame into a tool. This is the warmer perspective, closer to experience. For years I wrote about these two sides separately, and only when set side by side did they show me they are one thing seen from two sides. Lever and affect are not two subjects—they are the mechanism and the substance that mechanism moves. This book is their synthesis, and that is where its novelty comes from: not from the discovery of a new phenomenon, but from joining two views that until now had not seen each other.

Let us begin with the sentence I hear most often and that unsettles me most. “I’m just tired.” Behind that “just” hides an entire machine. This book is an attempt to take it apart.

PART I — DIAGNOSIS: THE ECONOMY THAT FEEDS ON YOU

Chapter 1. Fatigue Has Existed Before. Why This Is New

Someone might say: after all, people have always been tired. The serf toiled from dawn, the manufactory worker labored fourteen hours, the miner went underground and came back older than he was that morning. That is true. Fatigue is not an invention of our times, and it would be dishonest to pretend that our office weariness is heavier than the physical toil that broke spines. And yet something has changed—not in the quantity of effort, but in its nature, in where it accumulates and how it is talked about. This difference is the heart of this book, and it is worth stating clearly at the outset to avoid misunderstanding. I am not claiming that we suffer more. I am claiming that we suffer differently, and that this difference has a name, a structure, and beneficiaries.

1.1. The End of a Certain Diagnosis

For a century and a half we had a good theory of exploitation, and it was a surprisingly practical invention. Practical, because it could be translated into action. If value arises from labor, and labor can be measured by time, then the dispute over justice is a dispute over numbers: how

many hours, at what rate, under what conditions. The labor movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was essentially a great operation of measurement—a fight for the eight-hour day, for free Sundays, for the boundary beyond which purchased time ends and one’s own time begins. That boundary was visible. It could be drawn on the face of a clock.

Today that clock face is useless. Not because we have stopped working, but because work has spilled beyond time that can be measured. When you are a programmer, a designer, an analyst, or a teacher, your productivity is not a function of the hours spent at your desk. It is a function of the state in which you sit down at that desk. A rested, focused, “engaged” worker is worth many times more than the same person exhausted—and the employer knows this perfectly well. That is why concern for your inner state has become an object of management. Your time is no longer being bought. Your disposition is being bought.

The trouble is that disposition cannot be limited by a clock. An hour is finite; enthusiasm is not. Engagement has no upper limit, which means there is no natural point at which one can say “this much and not a minute more.” It is precisely this absence of a boundary that is the key. The old diagnosis worked because there existed a measure around which a dispute could be waged. The new order works because that measure is gone—and where there is no

measure, there is also no clear moment at which one can say “this is now exploitation.” Exploitation has dissolved into culture, into the language of passion, into the myth of work that “isn’t work if you’re doing what you love.” David Graeber (2018) showed how many contemporary occupations are inwardly empty—“bullshit,” as he called them—and yet draining, because one has to fake meaning in them. This is the fatigue the clock does not measure: not the weariness of muscles, but the exhaustion of the soul put to work (Berardi 2009).

I name the end of the old diagnosis not in order to reject it, but to say that it is no longer sufficient on its own. The categories of class, working time, surplus value—all of this still describes part of reality, especially where physical labor has not vanished but has merely been hidden in logistics warehouses and beneath food-delivery apps. But alongside that old factory a new, invisible one has grown, in which the raw material is no longer the strength of muscles but the capacity to feel, to react, to care. And for this new factory we need a new language.

It is worth seeing how radical this change is through a single image. Imagine a time card—that rectangular piece of cardboard the worker slid into the clock on entering and leaving the factory. On that card the whole truth of the transaction was recorded: you gave this many hours, this much is owed to you. The time card was material proof of

the boundary between sold time and one's own time, and it was accessible to anyone—you did not have to be an economist to read it. Today's knowledge worker has no time card, and if he does, it is a fiction, because the real work happens outside it: in thoughts under the shower, in the anxiety before falling asleep, in the phone checked in the checkout line. The disappearance of the time card was not liberation, though it was sold as such. It was the erasure of a boundary that protected us.

This does not mean that physical labor and its hard exploitation have disappeared—on the contrary, they have been hidden. Logistics warehouses where people walk more than a dozen kilometers a day at the dictate of a scanner counting off seconds; drivers delivering food, settled up by an app that knows no fatigue; sorting-center workers whose pace is set by an algorithm—all of this is living, brutal physical labor, only hidden from the eyes of the middle class that orders a package and a meal with a single click. These people are measured by the clock more than ever—except the clock is now in the cloud, and its hands count not hours but the seconds between one movement and the next. The old factory did not die. It split in two: one invisible, in which affect is measured, and one hidden, in which every step is measured. Both belong to the same economy of exhaustion.

1.2. From Labor to Affect: What Is Being Squeezed Today

Let us try to name precisely what has changed. In the classic model the employer bought your time and your strength, and in return you received a wage and—at least in theory—kept the rest of yourself. What you felt, whom you loved, what you believed in was outside the transaction. The factory wanted your hands, not your heart. Today's organization wants precisely the heart. It wants you to “identify with the mission,” to “live the company's values,” to “be a brand ambassador.” It wants your enthusiasm, because enthusiasm produces more than compulsion and is cheaper to maintain—it needs no guarding, because it guards itself.

What Arlie Hochschild (1983) called emotional labor—managing one's own feelings so that they fit the demands of a role—has gone from the exception to the rule. The flight attendant Hochschild studied had to smile, because the smile was part of the product. Today the smile, the readiness, the “good energy” are part of almost every product, because almost every job has a relational, communicative, affective dimension. You answer emails in a tone meant to build an “experience.” You run meetings at which one must display engagement. You are evaluated not only on what you did but on “how” you did it—whether you were “proactive,” “positively disposed,” whether you were

“easy to work with.” These are all affective categories. The company rents your mood.

And here we come to what I consider decisive. Affect is a renewable resource, but it renews more slowly than we spend it—and that is the whole secret of exhaustion. A muscle regenerates within hours or days after exertion. The capacity to care, to be concerned, to be “present” regenerates through sleep, through relationships, through time without tasks, through boredom even. If you extract affect faster than it replenishes, you build up a debt. And the economy of exhaustion is essentially a machine for taking on that debt in someone else’s name—yours. It takes an advance on your future capacity to feel and spends it now, on this quarter, on this project, on this “important period that will soon pass.” Except that it does not pass.

It is worth seeing how elegantly this works. In the industrial model the boundary of exploitation was physical—the body simply refused, the person collapsed, the machine jammed. In the affective model the boundary is psychic and shiftable, because the psyche has an astonishing capacity for adaptation. One can get used to almost anything—to constant tension, to working weekends, to anxiety as the background of everyday life. This capacity for adaptation, which saved our species for millennia, in the economy of exhaustion turns against us: it becomes the mechanism by which the boundary can be shifted without resistance. The

body would scream. The psyche quietly adapts—until the moment it breaks inward.

There is one more dimension of this change that must be named, because it touches the very core of who we become at work. When one sold time and strength, one could keep a distance from one's own role—the worker did not have to love the assembly line he stood at, he could hate it and still do his eight hours well. Distance was possible, because the transaction concerned what you do, not who you are. The affective economy abolishes that distance. It is not enough that you perform the task—you are to identify with it, believe in it, bring “yourself” to it. Cynical distance, which was once the worker's shield, is today a flaw that engagement surveys catch. The system wants not your hands but your faith—and faith, unlike the work of the hands, cannot be switched off at the end of a shift.

And here reveals itself a cruelty the old factory did not know. The physically exploited worker could at least know that he was being exploited—the enemy was clear, the boundary visible, the anger had an address. The affectively exploited worker often does not know, because he has been taught that his work is his passion, his growth, his choice. How does one rebel against something presented as fulfillment? Exploitation disguised as self-realization is harder to endure precisely because it takes away not only energy but also the right to anger—for after all “you're doing

what you love,” so if you suffer, something must be wrong with you, not with the arrangement. The transition from labor to affect is therefore not only a change in what is extracted, but a change in the very possibility of resistance. We are deprived not only of our strength but of the words with which we might name its loss.

1.3. A Regime, Not a Mood

I now want to draw a distinction that will recur throughout the book, because on it depends whether it is worth writing at all. One can say that contemporary work is tiring, that the pace is too fast, that we are all overstimulated—and treat this as a description of the mood of the era. A mood can be improved: more vacation, better work-life balance, a meditation app on the company’s dime. If, however, what I am describing is a regime—that is, the way the production of value is organized—then no correction of mood will budge it, because the problem lies not in how we feel but in what the system lives on.

I claim that we are dealing with a regime. Three arguments. First, the exhaustion here is systematic, not accidental—it does not happen “despite” good work organization but follows from its logic: from the demand for constant availability, from the culture of accessibility, from metrics that know no saturation. Second, the exhaustion is functional—it is not a defect the system wants to eliminate, but a state that serves it, because a tired person is more

compliant, less inclined to object, easier to steer. Third, the exhaustion is monetizable—there are entire industries that live off alleviating it, which means its disappearance would be a loss for them. When something is at once systematic, functional, and profitable, it ceases to be a mood. It becomes an institution.

Mark Fisher (2009) called the atmosphere surrounding us “capitalist realism”—the sense that there is no alternative, that this is simply how things are and cannot be otherwise. This sense is itself a tool of the regime, because it strips exhaustion of its political dimension and turns it into a condition of the weather. We do not say “the system exhausts me,” we say “I’m worn out,” the way one says “it’s raining”—without an agent, without an addressee, without the possibility of dispute. This whole book is an attempt to restore the agent. Not in order to point to a culprit to be punished—for, as I said, there is no conspiracy here—but in order to restore structure to exhaustion, and a structure can be opposed. A mood cannot. A regime can.

This distinction has a very practical consequence. If your exhaustion is a mood, then you are alone with it and your only move is to cope better. If it is a regime, then you are one of millions of people joined by the same mechanism, and then something opens up that a mood does not offer: the possibility of acting together. That is why it matters so much to me to call it a regime. Not out of a fondness for

grand words, but because on this name depends whether you are left alone with your fatigue or find yourself in company. In the following chapters I will show how this regime works—I will begin with its deepest mechanics, with how it devours its own resources.

Before I go further, I want to preempt an objection I hear every time I say we are dealing with a regime and not a mood. The objection runs: aren't you exaggerating? Aren't you turning simple fatigue into a great conspiracy theory in which everything is someone's plan? It is an important objection and I want to answer it directly, because the credibility of the whole book depends on this answer. Well, I am not speaking of a plan or a conspiracy—I will repeat this to the point of tedium, because it is the most common misunderstanding. A regime is not a plan. A regime is the way incentives, rules, and dependencies are arranged, such that certain outcomes follow from them on their own, without anyone's direction. The market is not a conspiracy, yet it produces regular, predictable effects. The economy of exhaustion is precisely such an order: not planned but resultant—the sum of millions of rational decisions that together yield an irrational whole.

The distinction between regime and mood has one more, practical weight worth stating as we enter this part. If your exhaustion is a mood, then its history is your private history—it began when you started sleeping worse, and it

will end when you take a vacation. If it is a regime, then it has a history longer than you: it began long before you, in decisions that shaped how we work today, and it will continue after you if no one interrupts it. This difference in the scale of time is a difference in where to look for the solution. A mood is cured in a week. A regime changes over generations—and that is precisely why it is so easy to take it for nature, because it lasts longer than our memory. The rest of this book is an attempt to recall that what seems like nature has a start date—and what has a start date can also have an end date.