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The Tiredness Virus

Covid-19 has driven us into a collective fatigue.

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Covid-19 is a mirror that reflects back to us the crises in our society. It renders more visible the pathological symptoms that already existed before the pandemic. One of these symptoms is tiredness. We all somehow feel very tired. This is a fundamental tiredness that accompanies us everywhere and all the time, like our own shadows. During the pandemic we have felt even more tired. The idleness imposed on us during lockdown has made us tired. Some people claim that we might rediscover the beauty of leisure, that life might decelerate. In fact, time during the pandemic is ruled not by leisure and deceleration but by tiredness and depression.

Why do we feel so tired? Today, tiredness seems to be a global phenomenon. Ten years ago, I published a book, *The Burnout Society*, in which I described tiredness as an illness afflicting the neoliberal achievement society. The tiredness experienced during the pandemic has forced me to think about the subject again. Work, no matter how hard it might be, does not bring about fundamental tiredness. We may be exhausted after work, but this exhaustion is not the same as fundamental tiredness. Work ends at some point. The compulsion to achieve to which we subject ourselves extends beyond that point. It accompanies us during leisure time, torments us even in our sleep, and often leads to sleepless nights. It is not possible to recover from the compulsion to achieve. It is this internal pressure, specifically, that makes us tired. There is thus a difference between tiredness and exhaustion. The right kind of exhaustion could even free us from tiredness.

Psychological disorders such as depression or burnout are symptoms of a deep crisis of freedom. They are a pathological signal, indicating that freedom today often turns into compulsion. We think we are free. But we actually exploit ourselves passionately until we collapse. We realize ourselves, optimize ourselves unto death. The insidious logic of achievement permanently forces us to get ahead of ourselves. Once we have achieved something, we want to achieve more, that is, we want to get ahead of ourselves yet again. But, of course, it is impossible to get ahead of oneself. This absurd logic ultimately leads to a breakdown. The achievement subject believes that it is free but it is actually a slave. It is an absolute slave insofar as it voluntarily exploits itself, even without a master being present.

The neoliberal achievement society makes exploitation possible even without domination. The disciplinary society with its commandments and prohibitions, as analyzed by Michel Foucault in his *Discipline and Punish*, does not describe today's achievement society. The achievement society exploits freedom itself. Self-exploitation is more efficient than exploitation by others because it goes hand in hand with a feeling of freedom. Kafka expressed with great clarity the paradox of the freedom of the slave who thinks he is the master. In one of his aphorisms he writes: "The animal wrests the whip from its master and whips itself in order to become master, not knowing that this is only a fantasy produced by a new knot in the master's whiplash." This permanent self-flagellation makes us tired and, ultimately, depressed. In a certain respect, neoliberalism is based on self-flagellation.

What is uncanny about Covid-19 is that those who catch it suffer from extreme tiredness and fatigue. The illness seems to simulate fundamental tiredness. And there are more and more reports of patients who have recovered but are continuing to suffer severe long-term symptoms, one of which is "chronic fatigue syndrome." The expression "the batteries no longer charge" describes it very well. Those affected are no longer able to work and perform. They have to exert themselves just to pour a glass of water. When walking, they have to make frequent stops to catch their breath. They feel like the living dead. One patient reports: "It actually feels as if the mobile were only 4 percent charged, and you really only have 4 percent for the whole day, and it cannot be recharged."

But the virus doesn't only make Covid sufferers tired. It is now making even healthy people tired. In his book *Pandemic! Covid-19 Shakes the World*, Slavoj Žižek dedicates a whole chapter to the question "Why are we tired all the time?" Žižek clearly also senses that the pandemic has made us tired. In this chapter, Žižek takes issue with my book *The Burnout Society*, arguing that exploitation by others has not been replaced by self-exploitation but has only been relocated to Third World countries. I agree with Žižek that this relocation has taken place. *The Burnout Society* mainly concerns Western neoliberal societies and not the situation of the Chinese factory worker. But through social media the neoliberal form of life is also expanding across the Third World. The rise of egotism, atomization, and narcissism in society is a global phenomenon. Social media turns all of us into producers, entrepreneurs whose selves are the businesses. It globalizes the ego culture that erodes community, erodes anything social. We produce ourselves and put ourselves on permanent display. This self-production, this ongoing "being-on-display" of the ego, makes us tired and depressed. Žižek does not address this fundamental tiredness, which is characteristic of our present times and has been aggravated by the pandemic.

Žižek appears in one passage of his pandemic book to warm to the thesis of self-exploitation, writing, "They [people working from home] may gain even more time to 'exploit ourselves' [sic]." During the pandemic, the neoliberal labor camp has acquired a new name: the home office. Work at the home office

is more tiring than work at the office. However, this cannot be explained in terms of increased self-exploitation. What is tiring is the solitude involved, the endless sitting in one's pajamas in front of the screen. We are confronted with our selves, compelled constantly to brood over and speculate about ourselves. Fundamental tiredness is ultimately a kind of ego tiredness. The home office intensifies it by entangling us even deeper in our selves. Other people, who could distract us from our ego, are missing. We tire because of the lack of social contact, of hugs, of bodily touch. Under quarantine conditions we begin to realize that perhaps other people are not "hell," as Sartre wrote in *No Exit*, but healing. The virus also accelerates the disappearance of the other that I have described in *The Expulsion of the Other*.

An absence of ritual is another reason for the tiredness induced by the home office. In the name of flexibility, we are losing the fixed temporal structures and architectures that stabilize and invigorate life. The absence of rhythm, in particular, intensifies depression. Ritual creates community without communication, whereas today what prevails is communication without community. Even those rituals that we still had, such as football matches, concerts, and going out to the restaurant, theater, or cinema, have been canceled. Without greeting rituals, we are thrown back upon ourselves. Being able to greet someone cordially makes one's self less of a burden. Social distancing dismantles social life. It makes us tired. Other people are reduced to potential carriers of the virus from whom physical distance must be maintained. The virus amplifies our present crises. It is destroying community, which was already in crisis. It alienates us from each other. It makes us even lonelier than we already were in this age of social media that reduce the social and isolate us.

Culture was the first thing to be abandoned during lockdown. What is culture? It engenders community! Without it, we come to resemble animals that want merely to survive. It is not the economy but most of all culture, namely communal life, that needs to recover from this crisis as soon as possible.

Constant Zoom meetings also make us tired. They turn us into Zoom zombies. They force us permanently to look into the mirror. Looking at your own face on the screen is tiring. We are continuously confronted with our own faces. Ironically, the virus appeared precisely at the time of the selfie, a fashion that can be explained as resulting from the narcissism of our society. The virus intensifies this narcissism. During the pandemic, we are all constantly confronted by our own faces; we produce a kind of never-ending selfie in front of our screens. That makes us tired.

Zoom narcissism produces peculiar side effects. It has led to a boom in cosmetic surgery. Distorted or blurred images on the screen lead people to despair over their appearance, while if the screen's resolution happens to be good, we suddenly detect wrinkles, baldness, liver spots, bags under our eyes, or other unattractive skin imperfections. Since the beginning of the pandemic Google searches for

cosmetic surgery have soared. During lockdown, cosmetic surgeons have been swamped with enquiries from customers seeking to improve their tired appearance. There is even talk of a “Zoom dysmorphia.” The digital mirror encourages this dysmorphia (an exaggerated concern with supposed flaws in one’s physical appearance). The virus pushes the frenzy of optimization, which already had us in its grip prior to the pandemic, to the limit. Here, too, the virus holds up a mirror to our society. And in the case of Zoom dysmorphia, the mirror is a real one! Pure despair over our own looks rises up in us. Zoom dysmorphia, this pathological concern with our egos, also makes us tired.

The pandemic has also revealed the negative side effects of digitalization. Digital communication is a very one-sided, attenuated affair: There is no gaze, no body. It lacks the physical presence of the other. The pandemic is ensuring that this essentially inhuman form of communication will become the norm. Digital communication makes us very, very tired. It is a communication without resonance, a communication devoid of happiness. At a Zoom meeting we cannot, for technical reasons, look each other in the eyes. All we do is stare at the screen. The absence of the other’s gaze makes us tired. The pandemic will hopefully make us realize that the physical presence of another person is something that brings happiness, that language implies physical experience, that a successful dialogue presupposes bodies, that we are physical creatures. The rituals we have been missing out on during the pandemic also imply physical experience. They represent forms of physical communication that create community and therefore bring happiness. Most of all, they lead us away from our egos. In the present situation, ritual would be an antidote for fundamental tiredness. A physical aspect is also inherent in community as such. Digitalization weakens community cohesion insofar as it has a disembodied effect. The virus alienates us from the body.

The mania for health was already rampant before the pandemic. Now, we are mainly concerned with survival, as if we were in a permanent state of war. In the battle for survival, the question of the good life does not arise. We call upon all of life’s forces only in order to prolong life at all costs. With the pandemic, this fierce battle for survival undergoes a viral escalation. The virus transforms the world into a quarantine ward on which all of life freezes into survival.

Today, health becomes the highest goal of humanity. The society of survival loses a sense of the good life. Even pleasure is sacrificed at the altar of health, which becomes an end in itself. Nietzsche already called it the new goddess. The strict ban on smoking also expresses the mania for survival. Pleasure has to give way to survival. The prolongation of life becomes the highest value. In the interests of survival, we willingly sacrifice everything that makes life worth living.

Reason demands that even in a pandemic we do not sacrifice all aspects of life. It is the task of politics to make sure that life is not reduced to bare life, to mere survival. I am a Catholic. I like to be in churches, especially in these strange times. Last year at Christmas, I attended a midnight mass that took place despite the pandemic. It made me glad. Unfortunately, there was no incense, which I love so much. I asked myself: Is there also a strict ban on incense during the pandemic? Why? When leaving the church, I habitually stretched out my hand into the stoup and startled: The stoup was empty. A bottle of disinfectant was placed next to it.

The “corona blues” is the name the Koreans have given to the depression that is spreading during the pandemic. Under quarantine conditions, without social interaction, depression deepens. Depression is the real pandemic. *The Burnout Society* set out from the following diagnosis:

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.

Soon we shall have sufficient vaccine to beat the virus. But there will be no vaccines against the pandemic of depression.

Depression is also a symptom of the burnout society. The achievement subject suffers burnout at the moment it is no longer able “to be able.” It fails to meet its self-imposed demand to achieve. No longer being able “to be able” leads to destructive self-recrimination and auto-aggression. The achievement subject wages a war against itself and perishes in it. Victory in this war against oneself is called burnout.

Several thousand people commit suicide every year in South Korea. The main cause is depression. In 2018, about 700 school children attempted suicide. The media even talk of a “silent massacre.” By contrast, so far only 1,700 people have died of Covid-19 in South Korea. The very high suicide rate is simply accepted as collateral damage of the achievement society. No significant measures have been taken to reduce the rate. The pandemic has intensified the problem of suicide—the suicide rate in South Korea has risen rapidly since it broke out. The virus apparently also aggravates depression. But around the globe not enough attention is being paid to the psychological consequences of the pandemic. People

have been reduced to biological existence. Everyone listens just to the virologists, who have assumed absolute authority when it comes to interpreting the situation. The real crisis caused by the pandemic is the fact that bare life has been transformed into an absolute value.

The Covid-19 virus wears out our burnout society by deepening pathological social fault lines. It drives us into a collective fatigue. The coronavirus could thus also be called the tiredness virus. But the virus is also a crisis in the Greek sense of *krisis*, meaning a turning point. For it may also allow us to reverse our fate and turn away from our distress. It appeals to us, urgently: you must change your life! But we can only do so if we radically revise our society, if we succeed in finding a new form of life that is immune to the tiredness virus.

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