

Burnout Culture and Its Limits

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JONATHAN Malesic's *The End of Burnout: Why Work Drains Us and How to Build Better Lives* is a deeply personal book. He left his job as a tenured academic—the quintessential “good” job—because of burnout, and this book is both a personal and cultural reckoning with America's idealization of work and overwork.

Malesic defines burnout as the divergence between expectations and experience at work: when the reality of work does not fulfill its promise of dignity and purpose, leading to enduring exhaustion, cynicism, and despair. Though the harshest consequences of burnout are experienced by the individual, Malesic argues that burnout is not an individual problem. It is a cultural one. “Burnout culture” persists, Malesic maintains, because “we fear losing the meaning that work promises.”¹ The remedy, he argues, is to de-center work from our lives and detach it from our sense of self-worth. Thus, rather than a “self-help book for individuals,” Malesic describes *The End of Burnout* as a self-help book “for an entire culture.”²

In part I, Malesic examines “burnout culture”: the cultural discourse surrounding it, its historical antecedents, and its causes and consequences. Chapter 1 explores the cultural ambiguity and ambivalence around burnout. As Malesic shows, though lamentations about the prevalence of burnout frequently occupy news headlines, it is also lionized in American culture. This ambivalence is explained, at least in part, by lack of agreement about the meaning of burnout. Malesic finds that even scholarly studies do not deploy a standard definition, which contributes to overly broad proclamations of burnout's prevalence that prohibit meaningful change.

In chapter 2, Malesic gives a brief history of some of burnout's antecedents, including melancholia and neurasthenia. These “nervous illnesses” were only diagnosed in (and, I would add, available to) the elite: “those who nobly pursued the life of the mind,” as Malesic says of melancholia.³ Continuing in this vein, burnout emerged in the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s, as the idealism of the '60s was upended by the “Great U-Turn” of the '70s:⁴ an economic about-face characterized by stagnating wages, decreased job security, increased work hours, and rising economic inequality.

In chapter 3, Malesic draws on the psychological literature to define burnout as encompassing three distinct dimensions—exhaustion, cynicism,

and ineffectiveness—which combine in multiple ways to form different profiles and experiences of burnout. Then, in chapters 4 and 5, Malesic examines the modern causes of burnout. On the one hand, he notes, working conditions have eroded since the 1970s: work has become more insecure as well as more demanding in terms of work hours, workload, and emotional labor. On the other hand, the cultural ideal of work as a primary source of “dignity, character, and purpose” has only increased.⁵ Americans are promised—and often expect—dignity and self-fulfillment in work. “The unceasing demand that you demonstrate your worth through work helps create the total work society, which, combined with the disappointing conditions of postindustrial-era jobs, becomes burnout culture,” Malesic argues.⁶

In order to disrupt burnout culture, Malesic contends, we must take a two-pronged attack: improving working conditions while also lowering our expectations of work. Towards that end, in part 2, Malesic explores cultural spaces in which people’s worth, dignity, and daily lives are not centered on work. In chapter 7, for example, he explores the role of work among Benedictine monks. In this culture, work hours are strictly delimited, the monks’ primary focus is prayer and community (not work), and their dignity is not contingent on work or anything else. “Each has a right to belong, regardless of the work they do,” Malesic writes.⁷ In chapter 8, Malesic examines other groups’ efforts to push back against burnout culture. He focuses on an anti-poverty nonprofit in Dallas, the very type of organization that attracts highly idealistic, dedicated, and hard-working employees, all of which can lead to burnout. Though the organization cannot entirely prevent worker burnout, Malesic finds that it has taken important steps towards limiting it through several key interventions: by routinely acknowledging workers for their labor, by offering numerous counseling sessions, by providing substantial paid time off and encouraging employees to take it, and—when worker performance declines—by providing cross-training and support rather than discipline. Malesic concludes the book by arguing that the Covid-19 pandemic, by disrupting our routines, expectations, and experiences of work, may present a unique opportunity to resist and change burnout culture.

The End of Burnout is an important contribution to a growing body of research that challenges America’s often-harmful love affair with work. It both echoes and bolsters Sarah Jaffe’s sweeping condemnation of the “tyranny of work,”⁸ as well as Kathi Weeks’ powerful call for the rise of an anti-work politics and a postwork society.⁹

At times, however, the book seems to reify the stalwart yet socially-constructed divides—and inequalities—between “work” and nonwork, and between “good” jobs and “bad.”

First, Malesic concedes that this book is about burnout only in paid employment. This is a reasonable parameter, to be sure, given that the research he synthesizes focuses on paid labor. But it is the justification for this parameter that I find potentially problematic. As Malesic goes on to explain, the book “does not cover parental burnout, for instance”:

[T]he scientific research on parental burnout is limited, and the dissimilarities between parenting and paid employment are great. Parents don’t worry about getting fired, and they don’t have a human resources office where they can take their complaints. In fact, a crucial step in breaking down burnout culture must be to recognize that unpaid activities like parenting, school, and relationships have a value altogether different from the value of paid work.¹⁰

The research on parental “burnout” may indeed be limited, but research on the challenges of parenting and on parenting as labor are not. To preemptively distinguish parenting and its challenges from other work (and its burnout) is to accept and reify the longstanding construction of women’s unpaid domestic labor as inherently distinct from—and less valuable than—wage work. Indeed, contrary to Malesic’s assertion that parenting has a “value altogether different from the value of paid work,” the economic value of social reproduction is well established, even if it also has noneconomic value.

Rather than accepting the distinctions between activities that are socially and legally constructed as “work” and those that are not, I would urge Malesic (and other scholars) to question and interrogate those distinctions. In doing so, Malesic might find important points of overlap—as well as divergence—in the experience of burnout between workers in paid employment and those who labor without pay, not only parents but also interns, volunteers, college athletes, and others.

Second, Malesic’s analysis risks reifying the divide between “good” and “bad” jobs. If only workers who are promised dignity and meaning at work experience burnout, then only a relatively elite class would experience it—or, as I think is more likely, only the elite would have access to this diagnosis and its remedies, much like diagnoses of melancholia in the past. To be fair, Malesic states that the promise of self-fulfillment through work is not limited to the elite. Yet much of his evidence suggests otherwise. For instance, he contrasts his happiness in a low-status, low-wage job (as a parking lot attendant) with his misery in a high-status, high-wage job (as a professor) to argue that the cultural expectations of (some) work contribute to burnout. In describing his job as a parking lot attendant, Malesic writes,

The job resisted any effort to make it morally or spiritually meaningful. It did not promise dignity, growth in character, or a sense of purpose. It never held out the possibility of the good life. Because I couldn't find fulfillment through my job, I had to look for it elsewhere.¹¹

Though it may be true that only some jobs produce burnout, I resist the implication that “bad” jobs do not, particularly for the many workers who cobble together multiple low-wage jobs in an effort to get by. Indeed, an equally plausible explanation for Malesic's experience is that his job as a parking lot attendant was temporary—a stopgap between graduate school and a “real” job—which forestalled any enduring sense of exhaustion, cynicism, and ineffectiveness. What's more, even if the false promise of self-fulfillment through work is particularly harmful for only some workers, it is important to keep in mind the many workers who are neither promised nor granted dignity at work.

Regardless, *The End of Burnout* is a must-read for anyone interested in questioning the centrality of work and overwork in American culture. Scholars and students alike will find Malesic's book to be highly readable and provocative, and all workers at risk of burnout will find it to be a rich source of information, affirmation, and guidance.

¹ Jonathan Malesic, *The End of Burnout: Why Work Drains Us and How to Build Better Lives* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2022), 2.

² Ibid., 15.

³ Ibid., 40.

⁴ See Bennett Harrison and Barry Bluestone, *The Great U-Turn: Corporate Restructuring and the Polarizing of America* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

⁵ Malesic, *The End of Burnout*, 115.

⁶ Ibid., 143.

⁷ Ibid., 158.

⁸ See Sarah Jaffe, *Work Won't Love You Back* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2021).

⁹ See Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

¹⁰ Malesic, *The End of Burnout*, 16.

¹¹ Ibid., 142.