



Labor and the Neoliberal Manufacture of Welfare

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Abstract

What if suffering were not a failure of the system, but its most sophisticated product? In the contemporary regime of labor, distress is no longer an anomaly to be corrected, nor merely a collateral consequence of exploitation. It has become something else – something altogether more insidious. Amid the exaltation of performance and the rhetoric of well-being, a paradox takes shape: the very structures that promise fulfillment may, in fact, rely on exhaustion. At the same time, alienation has ceased to appear as an external condition; it is now internalized, embedded in the worker's very mode of subjectivity. What remains of the political significance of suffering when it is reframed as a private burden, a test of merit, or even a marker of success? This article does not presume to offer solutions but rather seeks to delineate the contours of a condition yet to be named – a pathology that is neither strictly economic nor merely psychological, but one embedded in the political fabric of contemporary labor and its discontents.

Keywords: Labor; Neoliberalism; Corporate Welfare, Alienation.

Summary: A Promise: The Painless of Labor; I. Self-Medicalization as Macrophysics of Labor; II. Beyond Alienation: Outdated by Design; The Exhaustion of Critique; References.

"[...] the pharmakon is neither remedy nor poison, neither good nor evil, neither the inside nor the outside, neither speech nor writing [...]"

(Derrida 1981, 43)

A Promise: The Painless of Labor

The expansion of remote labor, the promise of flexible hours, corporate benefits and even employer-sponsored psychological support – these developments are often framed as signs of progress, marking a departure from the rigidity of traditional labor structures. They appear to signal a shift towards a model of labor that prioritizes well-being, autonomy and personal fulfillment. But can a system fundamentally built on extraction and exhaustion truly foster care? When the very institutions that generate stress also offer their remedies, are we witnessing the emancipation of labor or rather its refinement as a mechanism of control? What if these so-called benefits are not victories at all, but strategies that further entrench us within its logic? These questions must be framed within the broader symbolic-political order of neoliberalism. As a hegemonic rationality that transcends mere economic doctrine, neoliberalism operates as a pervasive system of norms and governance that reconfigures social relations in accordance with market logic. Emerging as the dominant paradigm in the late 20th century, it champions free markets, deregulation, and privatization while systematically diminishing the role of the state in welfare and economic management. Crucially, neoliberalism is not confined to economic structures; rather, it extends into cultural, political, and social domains, instilling a regime of individual responsibility, competition, and self-entrepreneurialism (Dardot and Laval 2013). In doing so, it fundamentally redefines labor and subjectivity, aligning them with the imperatives of capital accumulation and market efficiency.

Therefore, this paper contends that the neoliberal reaction to organizational malaise involves a subtle form of management that transforms suffering into a matter of self-regulation. Apparent forms of care often mask governance strategies that integrate distress into performance metrics, thereby converting therapy and resilience into instruments of adaptation. To substantiate this argument, the analysis employs a critical–diagnostic methodology, interpreting symptomatic manifestations of malaise as pathological socio-political dimensions that reveal the underlying rationalities of contemporary labor regimes. Proceeding retrospectively from these symptoms, the investigation intertwines genealogical and conceptual analysis with a diagnostic reading of current conditions, drawing primarily on critical social philosophy and post-structural theories concerning the governance of subjectivity. Although the approach is mainly theoretical, it incorporates insights from psychological-clinical and sociological literature, using these perspectives to elucidate how affective distress is rendered intelligible and productive within neoliberal contexts. The integration of multiple per-

spectives is essential, given the complexity of labor studies and their frequent compartmentalization into specialized fields.

Against this backdrop, mounting discontent with exploitative labor structures has led to significant socio-political consequences in recent years. This growing dissatisfaction is deeply embedded in the widening inequalities perpetuated by global capitalism, where workers are increasingly subjected to precarious, undervalued, and often degrading conditions. On the one hand, the emergence of the “precariat” – a social class defined by chronic insecurity and the absence of stable employment – reflects the widespread prevalence of exploitative labor practices, often characterized by short-term contracts, minimal job security, and the erosion of workers’ rights (Standing 2011). On the other, the new pathologies of labor are symptoms of a profound malaise within contemporary labor systems (Jaeggi 2017). These pathologies cannot be simply framed as individual but seem to reflect systemic failures within capitalist structures that reduce labor to mere mechanistic tasks, stripping workers of autonomy and purpose. One of the paradoxes of the contemporary labor market lies in the fact that while millions of individuals find themselves trapped in underpaid yet socially indispensable roles, numerous well-compensated professionals experience their jobs as profoundly devoid of meaning.

Anthropologist David Graeber, in his seminal work, contended that the proliferation of so-called “bullshit jobs” is not a mere accident but a structural by-product of managerial capitalism – a system in which the preservation of hierarchical structures and the illusion of productivity take precedence over any substantive engagement with political or social necessity (Graeber 2018). This insight leads us to the conclusion that the contemporary organizational malaise is not confined to individual workers but is instead a structural condition deeply embedded within the economic order itself. The dissonance between labor’s ostensible purpose and its lived experience played a decisive role in the wave of mass resignations that followed the recent pandemic. Employees increasingly rejected exploitative and unfulfilling conditions, illustrating that worker dissatisfaction is not an incidental crisis but a fundamental flaw in the logic of modern capitalism. However, the rejection of exploitative conditions does not necessarily equate to an escape from neoliberal logic. Even the act of resignation – ostensibly a refusal of alienating labor – risks being reabsorbed as a form of personal rebranding, a step in a continuous process of self-reinvention dictated by market imperatives. The imperative to quit and pursue one’s passion reflects the same ethos of self-optimization that sustains the system: it transforms structural dissatisfaction into an individualized quest for fulfillment, diverting atten-

tion away from collective solutions towards an endless pursuit of personal alignment with economic demands (Graeber 2018).

Neoliberalism's response to this crisis has been neither transformative nor emancipatory. Instead, its approach reinforces what Han (2015) identifies as palliative politics, emphasizing temporary relief over systemic solutions in a society increasingly affected by burnout and hyper-productivity. Furthermore, this response often takes shape through strategies that depoliticize and individualize dissatisfaction, reframing structural tensions as matters of personal well-being and self-management (Cederström and Spicer 2015). One such strategy can be identified in the expansion of corporate welfare, a shift from state-driven social protection to employer-administered well-being initiatives. This development represents a silent appropriation of social policy, in which the state recedes, and the corporation assumes an ostensibly benevolent but ultimately strategic role. Yet corporate welfare, far from constituting a genuine improvement in working conditions, risks functioning as a sophisticated instrument of neoliberal governance – a Trojan horse that allows the microphysics of power to extend ever deeper into the individual subject. It is not designed to liberate the worker from distress but to internalize the responsibility for that distress. Consequently, corporate welfare subtly risks reinforcing the neoliberal ideals of self-management, personal responsibility, and perpetual self-optimization.

Parallel to this development is the infiltration of emotional capitalism into the workplace. Companies increasingly commodify emotions and well-being, repurposing them as tools for productivity (Illouz 2007). Workplace happiness initiatives, mental health programs and corporate wellness schemes end up becoming mechanisms not for ameliorating systemic inequalities but for managing the psychological and emotional lives of workers, subtly diverting attention from the structural conditions that produce burnout and alienation in the first place. “Emotions, once seen as personal and private, have been increasingly turned into instruments for profit and control” (Illouz 2007, 113). Corporate welfare does not simply manage the workforce; it actively reconstructs the very notion of well-being, aligning it with the imperatives of capital. This reconfiguration of well-being also raises a deeper ontological question: if the neoliberal subject is constituted within the parameters of optimization, is there any space left for an experience of well-being that is not already subsumed under the logic of productivity? The imperative of self-care, far from representing a break with exploitation, functions as its latest articulation – one that displaces the burden of structural violence onto the individual, who must now internalize the responsibility for their own survival within an increasingly precarious landscape. In this sense, corporate welfare does not just use well-being as a tool: it takes over

the very concept of care, moving it from a practice of mutual support to a mechanism of self-regulation.

The contemporary culture of positivity and well-being must thus be understood as more than a benign encouragement of personal happiness. Rather, it can represent a mechanism of ideological obfuscation – one that conceals the deeper structural antagonisms that underpin social and economic life. The demand for perpetual positivity, self-improvement, and fulfillment functions as a form of self-exploitation, wherein individuals internalize the burden of their own malaise. Instead of confronting the realities of social disintegration, burn-out, and precarity, neoliberal palliative politics redirects individuals towards discourses of self-care and resilience. In this way, well-being itself is reified and transformed into an asset that workers must cultivate to remain viable within the labor market. The systemic contradictions of neoliberal capitalism remain unaddressed, as the responsibility for managing suffering is transferred from the collective sphere to the individual one. This dynamic also entails a process of emotional expropriation, wherein emotions are not only commodified but also restructured to conform to the neoliberal paradigm of happiness as an obligation. Pain, disillusionment, and exhaustion – far from being understood as symptoms of an ailing socio-economic order – are medicalized and neutralized, rendered problems to be managed rather than conditions to be critically interrogated. The performative society demands that individuals continuously strive for self-optimization, obscuring the political dimensions of their suffering in favor of an endless pursuit of productivity. Thus, corporate welfare and the broader culture of well-being do not represent a rupture with neoliberal ideology but rather a refinement of it. Within this framework, well-being policies – whether in the form of flexible work arrangements, mental health days, or gym memberships – do not challenge the fundamental structures of labor exploitation but instead function as renewed technologies of governance, disciplining workers while absolving corporations of any responsibility for the systemic pressures that produce burnout. This is not a retreat from neoliberalism but a deepening of its logic, wherein even the emotional and physical states of workers are managed in service of capital accumulation.

As Han (2015) has argued, the relentless emphasis on performance, resilience, and self-care serves to intensify alienation rather than alleviate it. By recasting well-being as a matter of personal responsibility rather than collective struggle, the neoliberal order displaces the grounds for systemic critique, rendering resistance increasingly unintelligible. The culture of well-being thus emerges not as a remedy to the crisis of labor, but as its ideological veneer – enabling the persistence of asymmetrical labor relations while concealing the

structural contradictions that sustain them. This is again the paradox of contemporary labor: a system which produces suffering while simultaneously demanding that individuals find fulfillment within it, all the while foreclosing the possibility of an alternative beyond it. The betrayal of these paradigms is clearest in their promise of labor stripped of suffering – where the absence of pain conceals the loss of resistance. If labor can, at least in theory, be made painless, then we must reconsider what we mean by labor at all – across both modern and pre-modern imaginaries. For much of its history, labor has been bound up with effort, struggle, and necessity; to strip it of these traits is not to redefine it, but to risk making the very idea obsolete. Since the neoliberal answer to labor’s malaise lies in expectations of comfort and well-being, we should question not only how these responses function, but also what made them seem necessary in the first place.

The path towards understanding the contemporary manufacture of welfare, therefore, does not begin with the symptoms or even the proposed cures – it must begin by critically examining the very analgesic pharmakon that is prescribed, revealing in its palliative intent the deeper structural maladies it seeks to obscure. The fantasy of labor without suffering does not abolish hardship: it privatizes it, transforming collective malaise into isolated struggles for resilience. Instead of addressing the source of exhaustion, these interventions reframe it as a test of adaptability. What presents itself as care often functions as containment, softening the edges of discontent without altering its cause. To grasp the depth of the issue, we must change perspective: instead of asking whether these policies succeed, we should ask what kind of subject they presuppose –and what kind of world they help sustain. In this light, welfare measures appear less as remedies than as techniques for managing endurance within a system left untouched.

I. Self-Medicalization as Macrophysics of Labor

“Individuals resort less to disciplinary obedience than to personal decision and initiative. Instead of being acted upon by an external force, persons base their actions on an internal drive or mental capacities.”

(Ehrenberg 2009, 8)

Against a background in which corporate welfare operates as a palliative response to the systemic malaise of contemporary organizational premises, its

implications extend beyond workplace policy to a broader apparatus of control. The management of worker well-being has evolved from a microphysics of power – where individual behaviors and emotions were subtly controlled within the confines of the workplace – to a macrophysical logic that governs the entire system. At the core of this transformation is the medicalization of well-being, which now functions as an essential instrument of governance. Within this scenario, psychological distress cannot be considered an anomaly to be addressed but rather as an inherent aspect of economic rationality, managed through psychiatric and pharmacological interventions. This process transforms suffering into a private burden, sidelining its structural roots and encouraging a tendency towards self-medicalization, which involves the internalization of the practices of medicalizing suffering.

The evolving ways in which contemporary biopolitical analysis is understood offer a crucial perspective for grasping this transformation. Power operates not just through external coercion, but increasingly through the internalization of norms that shape how individuals perceive their bodies, emotions, and psychological states (Rose 2006). The medicalization of well-being exemplifies this turn, as the management of mental health becomes an economic imperative rather than a matter of individual flourishing. The contemporary worker is not only required to be productive but to cultivate a state of psychological resilience, transforming well-being from a subjective condition into an obligatory feature of employability. Strategies aimed at fostering emotional balance and personal resilience – though often promoted as means of individual empowerment – may, in certain contexts, end up functioning less as instruments of liberation than as adaptive responses. They risk reinforcing the very frameworks within which that distress is produced, subtly encouraging alignment with the emotional and psychological expectations of capital. In this light, interventions presented as forms of psychological support may come to function less as acts of care than as techniques of accommodation. By channeling discomfort into individualized narratives of adaptation, they contribute to a climate in which workers are expected to remain affectively engaged and psychologically attuned, even as the deeper causes of their distress remain unaddressed and structurally intact. Consequently, the growing relevance of labor psychiatry and the critical exploration of work-related pathologies appear as symptomatic of a deeper need to grapple with the psychological toll of contemporary labor conditions.

Ehrenberg (2009) has shown how the emergence of psychological suffering must be read alongside the evolution of labor's normative patterns, particularly the transition from external discipline to a regime of internalized self-regula-

tion. In the neoliberal landscape, individuals are not governed by direct commands but by the expectation to act autonomously, to display initiative, adaptability, and emotional competence. Within this model, states of psychic exhaustion – whether diagnosed as depression, anxiety, or burnout – are less disruptions than symptomatic expressions of a normative demand: to continuously produce oneself as a capable and efficient subject. The medical framing of such suffering does not simply absorb or contain it; it assigns it a new function, making it legible and manageable within the logics of productivity. Exhaustion ceases to be interpreted as a breakdown in the socio-economic order and becomes instead a failure to self-regulate properly. What might once have constituted a basis for questioning the structure of labor is thus reframed as an individual malfunction, inviting not critique but correction. In this reversal, the language of care becomes a vehicle for normalization, and the experience of psychic strain is transformed from a political indicator into a therapeutic task. Hence, the language surrounding mental health in professional contexts often serves to naturalize the demand for emotional adaptability, embedding it more deeply within the everyday grammar of labor: terms like *coping strategies* and *stress management* assume that the burden of adaptation rests on the individual rather than on the conditions that generate malaise in the first place. This transition is further reinforced by the psychiatric and pharmaceutical industries, which sustain contemporary labor structures by transforming distress into an object of medical intervention. Antidepressants are not limited to relieving suffering because they also enhance individuals' capacity for action, reduce inhibition, and support ongoing adjustment to the pressures of the market. The competitive ethos does not tolerate passivity; it requires constant engagement, self-promotion, and performance. The medicalization of distress, therefore, serves to maintain the illusion of autonomy while ensuring that individuals remain operational within a system that systematically produces their depletion.

Psychiatrist Christophe Dejours radicalizes this critique, revealing that suffering at work isn't just an unfortunate byproduct but a built-in feature of contemporary labor management (Dejours 1980; 1998; Dejours and Gernet 2012). If suffering were an incidental flaw, its ubiquity across vastly different labor sectors and even among the unemployed would defy explanation:

The subjective relation to work plays a key role in the processes involved both in the construction of health as well as in psychiatric and psychosomatic decompensation. Work cannot be held solely to account for a socially generated discontent, one that lies at the root of all somatic afflictions (medical toxicology) and the most vicious mental afflictions (alienation). The mental damage inflicted by unemploy-

ment is there to suggest otherwise. But it would be a mistake to simply make use of this new psychopathology to justify a blissful apologia for labour according to which good health would come only “through toil” (Dejours 2015, 2).

Instead, *malaise* must be understood as the fundamental mechanism through which the worker’s subjectivity is molded, broken down, and reconstructed in compliance with the imperatives of production. The ethical dissonance that many workers experience is not an accidental byproduct of managerial structures; it is a calculated effect of a system that demands engagement in morally or personally alienating tasks while simultaneously neutralizing the possibility of resistance. This condition produces what Dejours terms *souffrance éthique* (Dejours 2022), the ethical suffering that emerges when workers are forced to participate in procedures they recognize as unjust, inefficient, or dehumanizing. Rather than acknowledging the structural origin of this suffering, neoliberal ideology pathologizes it, converting ethical distress into a psychological disorder requiring therapeutic intervention. What should be a moment of political awakening – the realization that one’s labor is structurally meaningless or ethically untenable – is instead reinterpreted as a personal failure, a weakness to be corrected through resilience training, coaching, or pharmacological treatments. The French psychiatrist further interrogates the perverse mechanisms through which workers become complicit in their own subjugation. If suffering is no longer a rupture but a condition to be optimized, then the neoliberal economy has achieved something unprecedented: it has converted alienation into a productive resource. The experience of distress, once central to critiques of industrial capitalism, has ceased to be viewed as a structural consequence of exploitation but as a challenge to be overcome through self-improvement. This is a fundamental change in the genealogy of labor relations, one that renders traditional notions of class consciousness increasingly difficult to sustain. When suffering becomes an individual metric of performance, does it still retain its critical potential, or has it been fully integrated into the machinery of capital? The psychological cost of labor is not merely an external imposition but something that, over time, is internalized as a self-disciplinary function.

The new macrophysics of labor, therefore, does not seek to eliminate suffering but to regulate and exploit it, ensuring that the individual remains perpetually available for labor, regardless of the personal cost. The individual ceases to interpret their discontent as symptomatic of systemic oppression, seeing it instead as a personal failure to adjust. According to Dejours, this transformation produces a deeper psychic estrangement, in which suffering is not simply endured but repurposed as a measure of professional worth. Workers do not merely

tolerate distress; they must display their resilience as a condition of employability. This demand for self-discipline effectively transforms suffering into an asset: the ability to withstand exhaustion, to push through ethical discomfort, and to regulate one's emotions becomes a new form of professional currency. The result is an alienation more insidious than classical Marxist estrangement, as it does not merely sever the worker from the product of their labor but from their very capacity to experience suffering as a signal of systemic injustice. The privatization of suffering also fragments solidarity. In previous labor regimes, shared distress could foster collective resistance; today, it is managed as an individual pathology. Corporate wellness programs, performance coaching, and self-care initiatives replace collective bargaining with personal responsibility, ensuring that workers internalize their struggles rather than recognizing them as part of a broader system of exploitation. This represents a fundamental shift in the comprehension of alienation: the worker is estranged both from their labor and from their own discontent, which ceases to be a collective experience and becomes an individual burden to be fixed or optimized.

When the experience of labor is reshaped so thoroughly by contemporary forms of control, the concept of alienation demands a more careful reconsideration. In a context shaped by self-optimization, therapeutic narratives, and corporate care, alienation has ceased to appear as a rupture with labor, becoming instead a seamless integration into its operational logic. Suffering, once a possible ground for critical awareness and collective resistance, is increasingly re-framed as a matter of individual adjustment. In this movement, the conditions for emancipation are not merely obstructed – they risk becoming unthinkable. While classical theories of alienation presuppose a moment of estrangement – a rupture between the subject and their labor – then contemporary capitalism operates by foreclosing even the possibility of such detachment. The worker is not simply alienated from their labor; they are seamlessly integrated into its demands, calibrated to function within a system that continuously phagocytes and repurposes their discontent. This raises a troubling question: is resistance even conceivable in a context where subjectivity itself is formatted by the imperatives of capital? Critique has traditionally relied on the friction between what is and what could be, and the erosion of this tension risks rendering opposition internally obsolete.

II. Beyond Alienation: Outdated by Design

Alienation, long a central concept in social critique, may today appear somewhat anachronistic. To a certain extent, the very manufacture of contemporary welfare renders alienation anachronistic through practices that, by staying on the surface of the problem, push for self-medication. While once it provided a compelling framework for diagnosing estrangement from self, labor, and world, its conceptual scope must now be questioned. If the classical critiques of alienation – Marx’s economic alienation, Heidegger’s ontological estrangement, and existentialist dislocations – spoke to conditions of forced detachment, our contemporary moment presents a paradox: rather than being estranged from the world, we are absorbed into it – integrated to such a degree that the very notion of alienation fails to fully account for our condition. This is reflected in the transformation of workers’ demands: whereas workers were once expected to demonstrate commitment, a deep existential attachment to their role, dedication to their trade or profession, today what is required is engagement. Unlike commitment, which presupposes an internal identification with labor, engagement is a surface-level affect, an intensity of participation that does not necessarily entail belief or conviction. It is a state of constant activation, of being attuned to the rhythms of production, responsive, optimized, and self-managing. Engagement is not about meaning, but about energy; not about identification, but about performance. The engaged worker does not need to believe in their labor – only to remain immersed in its demands, seamlessly adapting to its imperatives.

And yet, this departure from the classical model of alienation can only be grasped in its full significance when placed against Marx’s original formulation, which continues to offer not merely a historical account of exploitation, but a profoundly human critique of how labor shapes the very conditions of being. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* of 1844, Marx identifies the core of alienation in the worker’s detachment from the product of their labor, the activity of production itself, their human essence (*Gattungswesen*), and ultimately from other human beings (Marx 1975). Alienation, in Marx’s formulation, is not simply an economic imbalance but a spiritual and existential rupture – a situation in which labor ceases to be the self-realizing activity that defines our humanity and becomes instead a process of self-denial. As Marx writes: “Finally, the external character of labour for the worker is demonstrated by the fact that it belongs not to him but to another, and that in it he belongs not to himself but to another” (Marx 1975, 326). Labor, far from being a fulfillment of one’s powers, becomes a site of estrangement in which the subject is no

longer at home in the world. Stefano Petrucciani underscores the anthropological depth of this critique, observing that Marx – particularly in his early writings – conceives of labor as more than a means of survival: it is the very activity through which humans make history, transform nature, and come to recognize themselves and one another (Petrucciani 2024). The alienation of the modern worker, then, is not merely a sociological event – it is the foreclosure of labor’s emancipatory potential. As Petrucciani observes, Marx is able to denounce alienated labor precisely because he envisions an alternative: a form of productive activity that is not degrading but expressive, not imposed but shared. Labor, in this view, is not reducible to toil or sacrifice, but can be the site where individuals objectify their powers, connect with others, and participate in the historical becoming of the world. What is betrayed in alienation is not only the product or the process but the possibility that labor might serve as a medium of self-realization and mutual recognition. The pathos of Marx’s critique lies in this unrealized promise: that we could have worked otherwise and lived otherwise.

In dialogue with this line of thought, Jaeggi seeks to reconstruct the concept of alienation by removing essentialist assumptions and reintroducing it as a flexible tool for critique (Jaeggi 2014). According to Jaeggi, alienation appears as a defective relationship primarily marked by failure of appropriation, distinct from any notion of a fall from an original condition. Alienation arises when individuals cannot appropriate the world, and when practices and institutions remain external or imposed. This view assumes that such failures are experienced as lack, manifesting as a rupture or gap that can be recognized and potentially resisted. Nevertheless, under the capitalist rationality, this rupture is often concealed. Appropriation fails without becoming overtly apparent, as engagement produces a sense of immersion in which the world appears appropriated, yet something essential is absent. Individuals may not consciously experience estrangement and may remain unable to perceive reality as genuinely their own. Such an approach retains its usefulness insofar as it investigates how estrangement can persist beneath conscious awareness and how alienation may be obscured.

Anders (1956; 1980) anticipates these developments by extending the critique into the landscape of technological modernity. The German philosopher contends that the human being has become obsolete, suggesting that traditional frameworks for understanding alienation are inadequate for contemporary experience. In technological modernity, estrangement is reconfigured as obsolescence: individuals are not only excluded from the products of their labor but also rendered redundant by mechanical and calculative systems that surpass and subordinate human abilities. Anders (1956) introduces the concept of “Prome-

thean shame,” the sense of humiliation experienced in relation to the products of human creation, which reflects a profound tendency toward imitation of technology. Modern employees experience continual pressure to match the efficiency and precision of machines. While Marx described alienation, Anders focuses on synchronization, where individuals are compelled to adapt and internalize machinic imperatives until estrangement becomes unrecognizable. Anders’ analysis constitutes a profound reconsideration of the human-technology relationship. In this sense, obsolescence does not mean the end of alienation. Rather, it is the capacity to perceive and articulate alienation that has become outdated. The possibility to recognize alienation diminishes as adaptation and conformity replace previous forms of routine, and the conceptual tools for articulating distance and responsibility become inadequate for technological modernity. The clinical aspects surrounding laboring subjectivity, as examined by labor psychiatry, here acquire existential and political significance when viewed against the broader backdrop of technological transformation.¹

From this, a more nuanced understanding emerges. The metamorphosis of alienation characterizes the very structures of labor and subjectivity, which are increasingly reformulated, constrained, and pathologized. Alienation does not disappear, it shifts its form, manifesting less as a tangible condition than as a mode of perception through which power and subjectivity intertwine. What once appeared as distance now takes the form of over-involvement, and engagement becomes a new mode of dispossession. Within this horizon, Jaeggi’s conception of alienation as a failed relation to the world remains illuminating, yet it must be extended to account for forms of engagement that conceal rather than reveal estrangement. The neoliberal subject appears deeply invested in the world, even though this very engagement obscures the fact that what is lived as participation is often mere adaptation. Apparent proximity replaces genuine appropriation. Classical critique retains its relevance, provided it evolves to decipher how alienation persists under conditions where it has been internalized as a form of self-alienation. If alienation marked the pathologies of industrial modernity, obsolescence now emerges alongside it as a defining condition of the

¹ In this regard, Anders’s notion of *schizophrene Arbeitskrankheit* (Anders 1980, 177) – that can be literally translated as “schizophrenic occupational disease” – is particularly revealing, as it shows that certain forms of psychic distress can only be understood in relation to the individualistic and fragmented organization of labor itself. As Anders argues, labor generates its own pathology: it encourages voluntary desocialization and isolates each task, fragmenting not only collective relations but also the worker’s very sense of activity. What takes shape is a condition in which suffering at work becomes the habitual state of the contemporary laboring subject – a quiet, continuous discomfort woven into the fabric of everyday production.

techno-neoliberal era – one in which the self no longer feels merely estranged, but increasingly superfluous.

The Exhaustion of Critique

Considering the previous reflections, the neoliberal organizational method appears not only to have succeeded in transforming distress into a metric of compliance, but also to have ensured that suffering itself becomes an integral function of the system. While traditional critiques of alienation assumed the possibility of rupture – of an exterior standpoint from which the subject could perceive and resist their estrangement – neoliberal governance forecloses even this possibility. The seamless integration of well-being into the logic of capital does not eliminate suffering; it instrumentalizes it, ensuring that even exhaustion becomes an occasion for self-optimization. The modern worker is neither alienated in the classical sense nor simply complicit; rather, they are enmeshed in a system where engagement is indistinguishable from control.

As previously discussed, Anders's notion of obsolescence offers a compelling alternative to traditional critiques of alienation – an analytical shift from estrangement to redundancy, from forced detachment to seamless absorption. In a world governed by the imperatives of efficiency, performance, and perpetual engagement, the subject is not separated from their labor but indistinguishable from it. The neoliberal self is not simply alienated from the structures that exploit it; it is formatted by them, calibrated to align with their demands. This does not mean that suffering has disappeared; rather, it has been emptied of its disruptive potential, rendered a mere variable in the equation of productivity. The subject does not experience alienation as distance but as the inability to step outside the logic of engagement. Even discontent itself is pre-emptively absorbed into the market's machinery.

Be that as it may, the biopolitics of labor turns suffering into an object of rationalization. Coercion gives way to self-discipline as the imperatives of productivity are internalized and psychic strain is reframed as evidence of vocational adequacy. What was once recognized as alienation is now rebranded as an individual obstacle to be overcome, shifting the responsibility for systemic dysfunction onto the worker. Neoliberal governance not only tolerates distress but thrives on its management, reinforcing the illusion that fulfillment lies not in structural change but in greater adaptability. This process depoliticizes exhaustion, reducing it to a psychological deficit rather than an index of economic subjugation.

Brown (2015) expands on this dynamic, arguing that neoliberalism's stealth revolution has gone beyond restructuring labor and has profoundly transformed the very foundations of democratic life. Neoliberalism, as Brown demonstrates, deregulates not only markets but also subjectivity and the boundary between economics and politics. The space once reserved for debate is now dominated by rivalry and self-management. The traditional citizen is replaced by the self-investing subject, whose value as a political agent is measured by performance rather than participation. In this revised moral economy, success and failure are interpreted as moral outcomes, and the language of justice is supplanted by that of efficiency. The democratic collective, or *demos*, is eroded internally, not through overt repression but by the normalization of entrepreneurial behavior as the universal mode of existence. This transformation affects the emotional foundations of democracy. When vulnerability is equated with weakness and dependence with failure, the potential for solidarity is undermined both emotionally and cognitively. The result is a form of civic isolation, characterized by mutual surveillance, where recognition becomes mere visibility and dissent is reduced to disruption. This observation is critical for understanding how neoliberal power operates by reprogramming collective life rather than prohibiting it. The same processes that recast exhaustion as resilience and dissent as creativity ensure that opposition remains within the logic of management. Crisis, burnout, and exploitation are no longer seen as ruptures but as mechanisms for system recalibration, demonstrating its persistence through its own breakdowns. In this sense, the pathologies of labor reflect the political condition of the neoliberal subject. The laboring self and the democratic self are two faces of the same anthropology – both governed by the imperative of constant enhancement, both haunted by the impossibility of rest. The ideal of autonomy, once central to modern freedom, is now reconfigured as ongoing self-surveillance.

Nevertheless, as alienation undergoes a silent metamorphosis, the possibility of resistance is reconfigured rather than erased. The concept of alienation may appear outmoded in the face of contemporary forms of hyper-integration and affective capture, and yet, paradoxically, it remains indispensable. Its enduring value lies not in its descriptive adequacy but in its critical negativity – in its ability to name what has been lost, even when such loss is no longer consciously experienced. The analytical lens offered by Marx and his intellectual descendants continues to provide a framework for understanding how subjectivity is shaped by and within systems of production, even if the modalities of that shaping have mutated. Invoking Marxian categories is therefore not a nostalgic gesture but a strategic one: not because we inhabit the same historical configuration, but because no new grammar has yet supplanted their critical force. Clas-

sical formulations may fail to capture the lived experience of the neoliberal subject, even though the quiet disappearance of the concept – or its seamless absorption – exposes how deeply systemic imperatives have been internalized. Before dismissing such concepts as obsolete, we should ask what renders them so, and whether this obsolescence reflects historical change or our diminished capacity to interpret it. New forms of opposition will not arise from reclaiming estrangement but from refusing optimization itself. As the neoliberal paradigm converts suffering into an economic resource, resistance demands a radical rejection of its grammar: a refusal to translate exhaustion into resilience, to recast distress as an opportunity for self-betterment, or to accept well-being as an asset under managerial control. Such gestures will not restore the figure of the alienated worker, yet they may reopen a space for critique – one that starts by denying the normalization, commodification, and political neutralization of pain.

However, beyond critique lies a more demanding question: whether organizational well-being can be conceived outside the normative horizon of capitalist rationality. This requires reimagining care, community, and collective agency beyond market imperatives. Within a labor regime that thrives on the management of discomfort, what becomes essential is to expose its contradictions and affirm forms of existence that resist its logic. Whether such a space can be reclaimed remains uncertain, but one thing is clear: as long as suffering remains an asset to be managed rather than a condition to be transformed, the true emancipation of labor remains an unrealized – though not unimaginable – possibility. What lingers of resistance does not erupt in open defiance but settles in the quiet margins: a refusal without direction, a faltering gesture that negates only by pausing. Not a strategy, but a stutter in the machinery of adaptation. The challenge is not to escape optimization but to recognize those moments when its logic strains and begins to falter – when suffering resists conversion, even momentarily. In such moments, critique still flickers – not as a force of rupture, but as the faint memory of a distance we can no longer inhabit.

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