

Book Review

THE END OF BURNOUT: Why Work Drains Us and How to Build Better Lives. By Jonathan Malesic. Oakland: University of California Press. 2022.

Jonathan Malesic's *The End of Burnout* adds to the recent flood of books on burnout, overwhelm, and the problems with work. A former theology professor who left a tenured position after his own experience with burnout, Malesic incorporates his story into this overview of the history and psychology of burnout.

In Part I, "Burnout Culture," Malesic contends that although we've "been having the same conversation about burnout for 50 years" (61), we still don't know exactly what burnout is and who is experiencing it because there's no consensus on how to define or diagnose it. He connects burnout to other "cultural diseases" such as acedia, melancholia, and neurasthenia, explaining that while the feeling of burnout is not new, our framework for understanding it varies across time and place. Although informative, Malesic's tendency to leap across centuries and subjects—from medieval theologians to 19th century physicians to 1970s psychologists in less than ten pages—makes for an at times disjointed read.

Malesic defines burnout as the "experience of being pulled between expectation and reality at work" (2). Citing Americans' long-standing tendency to transform labor into a spiritual enterprise, or calling, Malesic argues that "In the wrong conditions ... this culturally-enforced enthusiasm for work causes burnout" (122). This definition fits Malesic's own disenchantment with the gap between the life of a professor as he imagined it and the reality of the labor involved. It is less helpful in explaining the sort of low-paid, insecure, unrewarding work that burns people out regardless of the expectations they bring to the job. This is less a critique of Malesic's ideas than the perhaps inevitable outcome of trying to generalize across the dramatically different jobs, lives, and experiences of over a hundred million US workers.

Malesic makes a compelling case for why so many jobs have gotten so much worse over the last half century, pointing to the combined effects of a “shift of risk from capital to labor” and the move “from an economy dominated by manufacturing to one dominated by services” (93). Workers across a range of fields are now expected to perform emotionally demanding work in increasingly poor conditions. For women and workers of color, experiences of burnout are exacerbated by gender and racial discrimination. Malesic thus characterizes burnout as a cultural problem, not an individual one, whose solutions lie not in workers making different choices but in dismantling “the inhumane ethical and economic system that causes burnout in the first place” (11). A necessary step in that direction, he states, is for Americans to realize that work is not, nor should it be, what gives our lives purpose and to “devote less of ourselves to our jobs, improve our labor conditions, and value those of us who do not work for pay” (2).

Part II features people whose lives involve work but do not center on it, including Benedictine monks, sports enthusiasts, poets and artists, and people living with chronic health conditions. This section includes an ode to Malesic’s long-ago job as a parking lot attendant and the engaging tale of a group of New Mexico monks who started a successful web design business then abandoned it when the work got in the way of praying, studying, and taking meals together. Overviews of Pope Leo XIII’s 1891 thoughts on labor and capital and the well-trodden story of Thoreau’s time in Walden Woods felt less relevant to contemporary conversations around burnout. I certainly concur with Malesic’s contention that dignity should not center on work, although his claim that “we assess people’s value by their jobs and demean anyone who doesn’t work” (168) feels overstated, especially in the post-pandemic era.

Malesic rightly argues that humans need and deserve community, connection, and recognition and that jobs should offer higher pay, better schedules, and more support. He is less clear on how to get there from here. He calls for “new policies that enable jobs to meet the dignity of those who perform them” (223) but mentions only a more reliable health care system (to help burnout-prone medical workers) and more generous unemployment benefits (as a step in the direction of a universal basic income). Malesic’s call for solidarity, which he defines as “compassion on the societal scale” (226), is a noble one. But having mostly ignored the deep divides between different types of work and groups of workers, he also sidesteps the many entrenched barriers to collective efforts. These qualms aside, I share Malesic’s optimism that work can and must be re-made, because we all have better things to do than work.

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