



Burnout: the Emotional Experience of Political Defeat

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BOOK REVIEW

Burnout: the Emotional Experience of Political Defeat, Hannah Proctor, London: Verso, 2024, 217 pp., £14.99 (paper), £10 (ebook), ISBN: 9781839766053 (paper), ISBN: 9781839766060 (ebook)

In the early hours of 13 December 2019, Hannah Proctor – author of *Burnout: The Emotional Experience of Political Defeat* – walked home from a friend’s house in tears following the decisive defeat of Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour Party at the ballot box. That morning, I too awoke bleary-eyed and dazed from the news, facing a five-hour drive back to London after a week of canvassing in the rain and frost in Cornwall. I write now in Bologna, a stone’s throw from *Via Mascarella*: the epicentre of Italy’s *autonomia* at the close of the 1970s – a movement of tens of thousands of students and young workers against work, precarity, austerity and the Communist Party’s electoral pact with the Christian Democrats – which ended in the police-killing of young militant Francesco Lorusso and the persecution of thousands (Figure 1).

From the exile of communards following the Paris Commune of 1871 to the demoralisation of Bolsheviks following the October Revolution, revolutionary movements are no stranger to defeat and disillusionment: a grief for ‘the loss of something that was never fully realised’ (Proctor 2024, 35). Hannah Proctor’s *Burnout* combines both political theory and historical inquiry to examine the psychological toll of this political struggle and loss. The book is structured by eight chapters,



Figure 1. The site of Francesco Lorusso’s death. Via Mascarella, Bologna. Photo author’s own, May 2025.

each exploring a different emotional affect: melancholia, nostalgia, depression, burnout, exhaustion, bitterness, trauma and mourning. Throughout, Proctor makes the case that the emotional damage of collective struggle and its defeat ought to be taken seriously: not as a footnote to any given political project, but as constitutive of it.

In their essay 'We, The Heartbroken', Gargi Bhattacharyya identifies that 'heartbreak is at the heart of all revolutionary consciousness. How can it not be? Who can imagine another world unless they already have been broken apart by the world we are in?' (Bhattacharyya 2020). Their words build on the broadly accepted notion that capitalism leads to all kinds of unhappinesses which are unevenly distributed. Proctor takes the premise further: the state of our mental (un)wellbeing may well stem from the harms of capitalism, but history surely shows us that the very act of fighting against the order of things is constitutive of a plethora of difficult emotional affects. Reading the two theorists together, revolutionary consciousnesses are both heartbroken by the world as it currently exists, and heartbroken further by the toil of political struggle and defeat. Understanding the revolutionary subject as such is critical for Proctor, who rejects the dominant tendency to individualise distress and commercialise 'self-care'; instead advocating for 'anti-adaptive healing': communal forms of recovery that encourage mutual care, solidarity and resilience without denying pain or emotional damage. Resisting neat conclusions, Proctor's work embraces the messiness of emotion. She encourages readers to dwell in the rich and complex history of political defeat and, perhaps, find some solace or companionship in it. For a contemporary activist audience faced with the existential dread of the climate catastrophe, the ongoing genocide in Palestine and a second term of Donald Trump's presidency – and, indeed, a populist rightward shift globally – the book is a timely and thorough investigation for the radical left, reminding audiences today that their efforts sit within centuries of political struggle, dashed hopes and defeats. This review focuses primarily on Proctor's chapters on burnout and exhaustion, in recognition that the book presents a broad and varied selection of emotional affects, each holding within them diverse histories and provocations for contemporary activist movements. To cover them all in depth would be impossible in just one review: rather, the book calls for a series of responses and reflections on the multifarious histories and emotions contained within its pages. By focusing on burnout and exhaustion specifically, this review hopes to heed Proctor's call to take seriously the psychological toll of political struggle, whilst also acknowledging the risks of these emotional affects becoming signifiers of dedication and effort in activist milieus, particularly in the context of burgeoning cultural feelings of impotence in the absence of a clear political project.

In an attempt to reclaim the term 'burnout' from the increasingly commodified 'self-care' industry connected to the need to work too hard in a cutthroat capitalist world, Proctor traces the emergence of the term to the psychoanalyst Herbert J. Freudenberger in the 1970s. Drawing upon his experience in New York free clinics, the term was coined to explain the 'phenomenon of fatigue and encroaching cynicism among people who devote their spare time to projects that seek to transform society', and thus cannot be attributed to overwork itself, but rather 'emerges from emotional investment in a cause and from the disappointments that arise when flaws in a political project become apparent' (Proctor 2024, 92). By reframing burnout as an exhaustion caused by an orientation outside of oneself and towards others – as opposed to a more general tiredness that life under advanced-capitalism produces – Proctor draws our attention to how initiatives designed to alleviate hardship for society's most downtrodden in turn cause guilt, emotional hardship and exhaustion for those dedicated to them. Indeed, as welfare states continue to be hollowed out globally, such demands on those committed to social justice are only increasing. A mile down the road from me sits *Làbas*, a social centre in Bologna which provides a bike shop and repair space, free childcare, a shelter for homeless people and migrants, a doctor for those without papers and cheap food and drink for the local community. As state provision of basic services continues to diminish and the cost of living grows, spaces like this become a critical resource for basic community care. How those volunteers responsible for running them will cope with increased demand and waning resources is a pivotal question, clarified by Proctor's explanation of burnout as a specific affect of

a drive to care for others. For Proctor, reorienting the term away from individualistic notions of overwork and self-care and back towards collectivity and community calls for militants to take seriously their own and each other's wellbeing. Here, Proctor calls for the development of 'webs of care' in revolutionary milieus that 'recognise the support and respite needed by those who dedicate time and energy to helping others' (Proctor 2024, 102) (Figure 2).

Standing in contrast to such an approach, however, is Proctor's analysis of exhaustion. Like burnout, it is often framed as a symptom of capitalist modernity: increasingly precarious work; dwindling leisure time; split attention spans and looming deadlines all contribute to exhaustion, which is in turn tied to notions of success and entrepreneurship. But there are also distinct kinds of political exhaustion. Drawing upon Asad Heider's article 'Exhaustion and Emancipation' (2021), Proctor suggests that these are threefold: first, the 'physical and mental exhaustion experienced by individual militants'; second, 'the exhaustion of particular historical sequences of struggle when a lull occurs'; and finally, 'an epochal sense of exhaustion that results from confronting the seeming impossibility of matching the "scale and depth" of earlier revolutionary moments' (Proctor 2024, 104). Unlike burnout, however, for Proctor there remains dissensus as to whether political exhaustion is a result of fighting for revolution, or is a more existential affect of the 'depleting experience of living in inadequately transformed conditions' (Proctor 2024, 109–110). It is this dissonance which lends militants a complex relationship to exhaustion. Here, Proctor draws upon 'The Apprentice', a short story by Toni Cade Bambara – a writer, activist and scholar involved in the Black Arts Movement – in which veteran organiser Naomi guides a young protégé through the ins and outs of political struggle. This apprentice is tired after a long day of organising work, but 'knows better than to complain to Naomi, who she predicted would retort: "we haven't earned the right to feel tired"' (Proctor 2024, 118). Here, tiredness is presented as a competition: one



Figure 2. Lábás Social Centre, Bologna. Photo author's own, January 2023.

ought not to complain of exhaustion, because there are always those that are more tired, that struggle and suffer more and harder for revolutionary ends. Such a dynamic speaks to a longstanding question that has afflicted revolutionary groups: how much should individual wellbeing and feeling be sacrificed for collective good?

The framing of exhaustion as rivalrous – indicative of dedication to revolution – opens important questions for activists today, particularly in the context of the defeat of left-wing electoral projects in America, Britain and Western Europe; the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on possibilities for collective organising; and the more existential spectres of climate breakdown and the collapse of the neoliberal consensus. Indeed, such a set of circumstances amounts to what the philosopher and media theorist Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi calls a cultural feeling of impotence (Berardi 2024). The context of global advanced capitalism leads to a generalised chaos, which in turn leads to a powerlessness to change our own daily lives, let alone the world as it is currently ordered. It is in these circumstances that what it means to be a left-wing militant is called into question: where the terrain is foggy and no clear political project emerges, what is there left to be done? In the context of this lull – perhaps an epochal sense of exhaustion – the dissensus between exhaustion as an outcome of prolonged political activity and a more existential affectation of life under capitalism becomes increasingly problematic. Indeed, Proctor notes that nervous exhaustion, ‘the sapping of an individual’s finite energetic resources’, was considered a ‘fashionable’ diagnosis in nineteenth- to twentieth-century America and Western Europe (Proctor 2024, 107). Just as melancholia had been considered a fashionable disease in the age of Romanticism, Anna Katherina Schaffner argues that nervous exhaustion had, in this period, transcended from a medical diagnosis into popular literary debates, with authors including Oscar Wilde, Franz Kafka, Marcel Proust, Henry James and Virginia Woolf having been diagnosed with the malaise (Schaffner 2016, 96). Proctor’s inclusion of Bambara’s short story – in which exhaustion is framed as something that ought to be earned – suggests that the affect may also be considered desirable within revolutionary circles too.

The context of impotence and a prolonged lull in revolutionary horizons may well exacerbate such a trend: where exhaustion is framed as a virtue – both within revolutionary movements and within capitalist societies more generally – could it become a performative way to signal ongoing commitment and devotion to revolutionary ends, even in their apparent absence? Though Proctor outlines well the risks and hardships of revolutionary struggle, in the context of a growing individualist and commercialised ‘self-care’ industry, revolutionary movements must resist the urge to replace collective care with a virtuous individualism. Otherwise, exhaustion and burnout risk becoming performative affects to signify oneself as the most dedicated, hardworking or devoted revolutionary in desperately unrevolutionary times. As Martin Holbraad and Myriam Lamrani suggest, revolutionary circles have a tendency to be inward looking: preoccupied with their own organisational forms, political efficacies and interpersonal relationships, groups risk becoming closed off and divorced from their mass revolutionary ideals. Such a dynamic is exacerbated when broader revolutionary aims become uncertain or deferred (Holbraad and Lamrani 2021). How revolutionary circles can take seriously the harms that struggles might cause on their members without becoming inward looking and isolated remains a complex and critical question, particularly in the context of a protracted malaise.

Though Proctor proposes anti-adaptive healing as a route towards solving these problems, her approach remains non-prescriptive, using a series of historic examples to suggest what such an approach to care might look like rather than proposing a set programme. Further, Proctor resists the imposition of value judgement on the broad range of examples given within the book, instead offering them as approaches to be considered, critiqued or adapted by contemporary activist milieus. These range from ‘Red Therapy’, the collective spaces of care and consciousness-raising spaces fostered by British libertarian socialist group Big Flame in the 1970s, to the legacies of Maoist ‘self criticism’ practices. In the book’s Afterword, Proctor reflects on the process of its writing:

I wondered why I had thought there might be value in excavating experiences of defeat, in collaging loss, in cataloguing despair [...] I wanted to get to the end and have some kind of answer [...] I wanted to present some neat little theories that might help make sense of painful emotions as they arise [...] But something about my subject – not just political defeat, but psychic life – resisted such treatment. I didn't want to ignore emotional difficulties, which meant I couldn't reach any pat conclusions. (Proctor 2024, 203–106)

By the author's own admission, then, the book is not intended to be a self-care manual for social movement groups to adopt. What it does, instead, is invite activists to consider what collective forms of healing might look like, and how they might be achieved alongside the urgency that their desires to radically transform the world so often demand. In this sense, then, *Burnout* does not provide answers to the emotional toil of political defeat, but instead provides a series of questions and provocations that might encourage its readers to consider themselves, within their own struggles, campaigns and groups: it is an invitation to start a conversation, rather than a proposed conclusion to one.

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