



# The Sociology of Manufactured Exhaustion: Late Capitalism and the Institutional Production of Psychological Fatigue

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## Abstract

Contemporary societies are increasingly characterized by chronic psychological exhaustion manifested through burnout, cognitive overload, emotional depletion, and declining capacities for sustained social and political engagement. Although sociological scholarship has extensively examined rationalization, neoliberalism, acceleration, emotional labour, and self-governance, exhaustion itself has often remained theoretically fragmented and analytically secondary. Existing approaches typically interpret fatigue either as an individualized psychological condition or as an unintended by-product of contemporary capitalism. This article argues instead that exhaustion should be understood as a structurally productive condition embedded within late-modern institutional power. The objective of the study is to develop a new sociological framework for understanding how contemporary institutions increasingly govern through the continuous production and management of exhausted subjectivity. The article introduces the concept of exhaustive governance, defined as a mode of institutional power in which cognitive overload, emotional self-management, temporal fragmentation, and compulsory self-optimization become central mechanisms of social regulation and institutional stabilization. Methodologically, the article adopts a purely theoretical and conceptual approach grounded in reconstructive social theory. Through conceptual analysis and theoretical synthesis, the study integrates key insights from Max Weber's theory of rationalization, Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality, Hartmut Rosa's theory of social acceleration, and Byung-Chul Han's analysis of psychopolitics and self-exploitation. Additional contributions from critical sociology and cultural theory are incorporated to examine emotional labour, therapeutic individualization, institutional flexibility, and capitalist realism. The analysis demonstrates that late-modern institutions increasingly depend upon permanently responsive yet chronically depleted subjects capable of sustaining participation despite ongoing psychological fatigue. Exhaustion emerges not merely as a consequence of institutional arrangements, but as a socially functional condition that weakens reflection, solidarity, political imagination, and long-term resistance. The article further argues that exhaustive governance contributes to declining institutional trust and the fragmentation of democratic agency by narrowing temporal and cognitive capacities for collective action. The study concludes that exhaustion should be treated as a central sociological category for understanding contemporary capitalism and institutional life. The concept of exhaustive governance offers an original theoretical framework for future sociological research on power, subjectivity, governance, and democratic participation under conditions of chronic depletion.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Exhaustion has become one of the defining conditions of contemporary social life. It surfaces almost everywhere now — in workplaces, universities, digital environments, welfare systems, even within spheres once imagined as private or restorative. People increasingly describe themselves as depleted, mentally scattered, permanently behind. Burnout, once associated mostly with helping professions or moments of exceptional overwork, no longer appears exceptional at all. Fatigue has become ordinary. In some contexts, it is even quietly moralized, interpreted as evidence that one is active, ambitious, responsive, engaged. That shift matters sociologically. It suggests that exhaustion is no longer simply a side effect of institutional life, but part of its emotional atmosphere.

What is perhaps most striking is how normalized this condition has become. Chronic tiredness rarely appears in public discourse as evidence that institutional arrangements themselves may be unsustainable. More often, exhaustion is framed as a problem of adaptation. Governments promote resilience initiatives; corporations invest in wellness programs and emotional training; universities encourage mindfulness, self-regulation, and productivity management; digital culture circulates endless advice about focus, sleep, recovery, optimization. The language changes slightly across settings, though the underlying logic remains remarkably stable: individuals must learn to manage themselves more effectively. Structural pressures disappear behind therapeutic vocabularies of balance and adjustment. Social suffering becomes privatized — sometimes so thoroughly that it no longer even appears social.

Sociology, however, has long insisted that subjective distress cannot be separated from institutional organization and historical forms of power. Weber's analysis of rationalization already pointed toward a world increasingly governed through efficiency, calculation, and administrative coordination (Weber, 1978). Foucault later showed that modern power operates not only through repression, but through the production of self-regulating subjects who internalize norms and monitor themselves accordingly (Foucault, 2008). More recent theorists extend these diagnoses into late capitalism. Rosa (2013), for instance, describes acceleration as a condition that destabilizes continuity between self and world, producing forms of temporal alienation that are difficult to stabilize psychologically. Han (2015), in a somewhat different register, suggests that neoliberal societies increasingly rely upon self-exploitation rather than overt discipline, generating subjects who experience permanent performance pressure as freedom. Yet exhaustion itself often remains oddly secondary within these accounts. It appears repeatedly across the literature — sometimes implicitly, sometimes almost hidden in the background — but rarely as a central mechanism of governance in its own right.

This article begins from a different assumption. It argues that exhaustion should not be understood merely as an unfortunate consequence of neoliberal capitalism or institutional overreach. Increasingly, exhaustion appears socially productive. Contemporary institutions seem to rely upon chronic psychological depletion in ways that are more structurally significant than sociology has fully acknowledged. To account for this, the article develops the concept of *exhaustive governance*: a mode of power in which institutions govern less through direct coercion than through the management of attention, adaptability, emotional endurance, and psychological recoverability. Exhaustion, in this sense, is not external to institutional stability. It may help reproduce it.

Concept	Primary mechanism of power	Primary object of control
Disciplinary power	Surveillance and normalization	Bodies
Governmentality	Self-regulation	Conduct
Psychopolitics	Internalized optimization	Desire and subjectivity
Exhaustive governance	Chronic depletion and cognitive overload	Psychological capacity

**Table 1.** Comparative Dimensions of Contemporary Governance Models

Exhaustive governance differs from adjacent theories of neoliberal control because exhaustion itself functions as a regulatory mechanism. Governance occurs not only through discipline or self-optimization, but through the gradual narrowing of the capacities required for sustained reflection, collective resistance, and long-term political orientation. Subjects are not primarily silenced through prohibition. More often they remain formally active — productive, connected, communicative — while becoming progressively less capable of maintaining attention over time or sustaining durable forms of opposition. The distinction is subtle, though important.

This marks a broader transformation in the sociology of power. Classical disciplinary systems depended heavily upon visible authority, rigid hierarchies, and external surveillance. Late-modern institutions operate somewhat differently. They increasingly rely upon demands for permanent responsiveness, emotional flexibility, communicative availability, and continuous self-management. The ideal subject of contemporary capitalism is not merely obedient but endlessly adaptive: capable of remaining functional despite insecurity, acceleration, instability, and fatigue. A closer look at contemporary institutional cultures — universities are a good example, though certainly not the only one — suggests that exhaustion is no longer incidental to these arrangements. At times, it appears constitutive of them.

The concept of exhaustive governance is intended partly as a response to a fragmentation within existing sociological debates. Weberian traditions illuminate rationalization and bureaucratic expansion, but provide fewer tools for understanding contemporary forms of psychological depletion. Foucauldian approaches explain self-regulation and neoliberal governmentality with enormous sophistication, yet exhaustion itself often remains undertheorized as a distinct institutional condition. Theories of acceleration identify temporal compression and instability, though they do not fully explain why fatigue becomes politically functional. Meanwhile, discussions of burnout and mental health frequently remain disconnected from broader analyses of power and institutional reproduction. This article attempts — cautiously, perhaps imperfectly — to place these traditions into closer dialogue.

The argument unfolds in five stages. First, the article revisits major sociological and critical-theoretical approaches relevant to exhaustion, including rationalization, governmentality, acceleration, psychopolitics, emotional labour, and capitalist realism. Second, it outlines the article's conceptual methodology and explains why theoretical reconstruction remains sociologically valuable despite the current emphasis on empirical measurement. Third, the analysis develops the concept of exhaustive governance more directly, examining how contemporary institutions produce conditions of cognitive overload, emotional fatigue, and permanent adaptation across multiple domains of social life. The later sections then explore the consequences of exhaustion for democratic agency, institutional legitimacy, and collective resistance under late capitalism.

The broader claim advanced here is not that contemporary institutions intentionally seek to produce suffering in any conspiratorial sense. Institutional systems are often fragmented, contradictory, and internally unstable. Intentions matter less, sociologically speaking, than systemic effects. What becomes significant is that exhaustion increasingly functions as a stabilizing condition of institutional life. Exhausted populations may continue to work, consume, communicate, adapt, and comply while gradually losing the psychological continuity necessary for sustained critique or collective transformation. It is tempting to interpret exhaustion merely as an individual pathology of overwork. Yet that interpretation may obscure a more unsettling possibility: late capitalism increasingly reproduces itself through the management of depletion itself.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Rationalization and the Exhausted Subject**

Any sociology of exhaustion must begin with the problem of rationalization. Although classical sociological theory did not explicitly conceptualize burnout or psychological fatigue in contemporary terms, it established many of the institutional dynamics through which exhaustion later became socially normalized. In particular, Max Weber's analysis of bureaucratic rationalization provides an indispensable starting point for understanding how modern institutions organize human conduct around efficiency, calculability, predictability, and continuous performance (Weber, 1978).

Weber understood modernity as characterized by the expansion of instrumental rationality into increasingly large areas of social life. Bureaucracy represented the clearest institutional expression of this transformation because it subordinated human activity to formal procedures, technical administration, and measurable outputs. The modern subject, within such systems, becomes embedded within what Weber famously described as an "iron cage" of rationalized control (Weber, 2002). Although Weber primarily emphasized disenchantment, depersonalization, and administrative domination, a closer reading reveals that rationalization also contains an implicit sociology of depletion. The bureaucratic subject is required to sustain continuous discipline, procedural attentiveness, emotional restraint, and productive reliability over extended temporal horizons. Rationalization therefore reorganizes not only institutions, but human energy itself.

Importantly, Weber did not interpret domination primarily through visible violence. Bureaucratic power functions precisely because it appears technically necessary, impersonally rational, and organizationally unavoidable. This insight remains highly relevant for contemporary analyses of exhaustion. Late-modern institutions rarely present overwork, permanent availability, or hyper-productivity as ideological impositions. Rather, they are framed as practical necessities of competitiveness, flexibility, innovation, and adaptation. Exhaustion thereby acquires moral legitimacy through institutional rationality itself.

Yet Weber's framework also has important limitations for analyzing contemporary fatigue. His account emerged during an era still largely organized around industrial bureaucracy and formal hierarchy. Contemporary neoliberal institutions often operate through decentralized flexibility rather than rigid administrative authority. Employees are encouraged to experience themselves not merely as workers but as entrepreneurial projects responsible for constant self-improvement. Exhaustion no longer appears solely as obedience to external discipline; increasingly, it emerges through internalized imperatives of self-optimization. Weber identifies the structural foundations of rationalized domination, but he does not fully theorize the psychological interiorization of exhaustion characteristic of late capitalism.

Nevertheless, Weber remains essential because he illuminates how institutional systems transform subjective life into administratively manageable activity. Rationalization fragments time, standardizes performance, and converts social existence into measurable productivity. Such processes generate conditions in which exhaustion becomes structurally recurrent rather than episodic. What changes under late capitalism is not the disappearance of rationalization, but its intensification and psychologization.

## **2.2 Governmentality and Self-Regulating Subjects**

If Weber explains the institutional architecture of modern rationalization, Michel Foucault explains how power increasingly operates through the active participation of subjects themselves. Foucault's later work on governmentality marks a decisive shift away from purely repressive understandings of power toward forms of governance that shape conduct indirectly through norms, expertise, self-regulation, and subject formation (Foucault, 2008).

For Foucault, modern power functions productively rather than merely prohibitively. Institutions do not simply constrain individuals from outside; they cultivate subjects capable of governing themselves according to socially desired norms. Schools, workplaces, medical systems, and welfare institutions become sites where individuals learn to monitor, discipline, optimize, and evaluate themselves continuously. Under neoliberal governmentality, this process intensifies further because subjects increasingly become responsible for managing risks, maximizing capacities, and transforming themselves into competitive forms of human capital (Brown, 2015).

This theoretical framework is crucial for understanding why contemporary exhaustion often appears voluntary. Individuals remain deeply attached to systems that simultaneously deplete them. The exhausted subject of late capitalism is rarely forced into compliance through direct coercion alone. Instead, individuals internalize institutional expectations as personal aspirations. Productivity becomes moralized; flexibility becomes virtuous; permanent availability becomes normalized. Failure to maintain performance increasingly appears as individual inadequacy rather than structural contradiction.

Foucault's account helps explain a central paradox of late-modern exhaustion: domination increasingly operates through freedom itself. Subjects experience themselves as autonomous agents while simultaneously reproducing institutional demands at the level of the self. This transition from disciplinary societies to neoliberal self-governance significantly expands the reach of institutional power because regulation no longer depends exclusively upon external surveillance. Individuals become both supervisors and labourers of their own lives.

At the same time, Foucault leaves several important questions unresolved. His analyses brilliantly illuminate how modern institutions produce governable subjects, yet chronic exhaustion itself remains undertheorized within his framework. Governmentality explains self-regulation, but not sufficiently the cumulative psychological consequences of endless self-management. Similarly, while Foucauldian theory clarifies how neoliberalism extends economic rationality into subjectivity, it pays less attention to fatigue as a socially stabilizing condition. A sociology of exhaustive governance must therefore extend Foucauldian insights further by examining how depletion itself becomes institutionally functional.

Such an extension is especially important because late-modern institutions increasingly depend upon permanent self-activation. Subjects are expected not merely to obey institutional norms, but to continuously reinvent themselves, remain emotionally responsive, adapt to accelerating demands, and sustain uninterrupted productivity across fragmented temporal environments. Exhaustion is not external to this process. It is one of its central outcomes — and perhaps increasingly one of its conditions of possibility.

## **2.3 Acceleration and Temporal Colonization**

While Weber illuminates the rationalized organization of institutional life and Foucault explains the internalization of governance, Hartmut Rosa's theory of social acceleration provides an essential framework for understanding the temporal structure of contemporary exhaustion. Rosa (2013) argues that late modernity is characterized by an escalating acceleration of technological processes, social change, communication, and everyday life rhythms. Modern societies no longer merely demand

productivity; they demand speed, adaptability, and permanent responsiveness. Time itself becomes reorganized according to the imperatives of acceleration.

For Rosa, acceleration is not simply a cultural preference for rapidity. It is structurally embedded within capitalist modernity because economic competition, technological innovation, and institutional survival increasingly depend upon continuous expansion and dynamism. Institutions must constantly optimize efficiency, increase output, shorten response times, and adapt to rapidly shifting conditions. The result is a society in which individuals experience chronic temporal scarcity despite technological advances ostensibly designed to save time. The paradox of acceleration is therefore that societies become increasingly efficient while individuals simultaneously experience growing feelings of insufficiency and exhaustion.

This temporal dimension is crucial for theorizing manufactured exhaustion. Under conditions of social acceleration, institutional demands are no longer episodic or spatially confined. Digital communication technologies dissolve boundaries between work and non-work, public and private, productivity and rest. Individuals remain psychologically tethered to institutional expectations even during periods formally designated as leisure. Jonathan Crary (2014) describes this condition as the emergence of a “24/7” society in which uninterrupted connectivity erodes spaces of withdrawal, reflection, and temporal autonomy. Exhaustion thus emerges not only from excessive labour, but from the colonization of attention and temporality themselves.

A closer reading of acceleration theory reveals an important shift in the nature of institutional control. Classical industrial capitalism depended heavily upon the management of physical labour within relatively bounded temporal structures. By contrast, late capitalism increasingly governs through fragmented temporal environments characterized by multitasking, perpetual updates, informational saturation, and communicative immediacy. The subject of accelerated modernity is expected to remain permanently available — cognitively alert, emotionally responsive, and continuously adaptable. Such expectations generate what Rosa (2013) identifies as forms of alienation rooted not merely in exploitation, but in destabilized relationships to time, selfhood, and social meaning.

Importantly, acceleration also transforms the structure of subjectivity. Under accelerated conditions, long-term reflection becomes increasingly difficult because social existence is organized around immediate responsiveness. Individuals move rapidly between tasks, roles, digital interfaces, and emotional demands without sufficient opportunities for cognitive integration or psychological recovery. The exhausted subject is therefore not simply overworked; rather, the subject becomes temporally fragmented. Attention itself becomes dispersed across competing institutional demands.

Yet Rosa’s framework also leaves unresolved questions relevant to the present argument. Although acceleration theory powerfully diagnoses temporal instability and alienation, it does not fully conceptualize exhaustion as institutionally functional. Fatigue appears largely as a consequence of acceleration rather than as a socially productive condition embedded within governance structures themselves. Moreover, Rosa often emphasizes the existential consequences of acceleration — loss of resonance, instability of identity, temporal desynchronization — without fully examining how exhaustion may simultaneously stabilize institutional systems by weakening sustained forms of resistance and collective agency.

This limitation becomes increasingly significant under digital capitalism. Contemporary institutions do not merely tolerate acceleration despite its psychological consequences. In many cases, they actively depend upon accelerated responsiveness as an organizational norm. Universities reward permanent productivity; workplaces valorize multitasking and adaptability; digital platforms monetize continuous engagement; welfare systems increasingly require constant administrative responsiveness from citizens themselves. Acceleration thereby becomes institutionalized as a moral and economic expectation. Exhaustion is not accidental to this arrangement. It emerges structurally from systems that require uninterrupted self-activation across increasingly compressed temporal horizons.

This creates an important theoretical tension. Whereas Foucault’s concept of governmentality emphasizes the productive stabilization of conduct through self-regulation, Rosa’s theory of acceleration suggests that late-modern institutions may destabilize the very subjects upon whom such governance depends. Exhaustive governance emerges precisely at this point of tension: it names a form of power that stabilizes institutions by depleting the capacities that institutions simultaneously require.

#### **2.4 Psychopolitics and Self-Exploitation**

If Rosa explains the temporal destabilization of late modernity, Byung-Chul Han provides perhaps the most direct theoretical account of exhaustion as a defining condition of neoliberal society. In *The Burnout Society* (2015), Han argues that contemporary capitalism has undergone a transition from disciplinary repression toward what he calls an “achievement society.” In contrast to earlier forms of domination organized around prohibition and obedience, neoliberal societies increasingly encourage subjects to experience themselves as autonomous projects of endless optimization.

Han's central insight is that late-modern domination functions positively rather than negatively. Subjects are no longer primarily constrained by external commands; instead, they are encouraged to maximize themselves continuously. Productivity, motivation, flexibility, positivity, and self-improvement become moral imperatives. The neoliberal subject is simultaneously entrepreneur, manager, and labourer of the self. Under such conditions, exploitation becomes internalized because individuals voluntarily intensify their own performance demands.

This argument significantly deepens sociological understandings of exhaustion. Burnout no longer appears simply as the result of excessive external labour demands imposed upon unwilling subjects. Rather, exhaustion emerges through internalized compulsions toward self-realization and permanent optimization. Individuals become trapped within systems in which freedom itself becomes an instrument of domination. As Han (2015) observes, achievement subjects exploit themselves while believing they are pursuing autonomy.

The importance of this framework lies in its explanation of why contemporary exhaustion often lacks visible antagonism. In classical industrial conflicts, domination could be identified through clear oppositions between workers and employers, coercion and resistance. Under neoliberal psychopolitics, however, individuals frequently interpret systemic pressures as personal aspirations. Failure becomes individualized; fatigue becomes privatized; structural contradictions become translated into therapeutic vocabularies of self-management and resilience. This psychological interiorization of institutional expectations allows power to operate with remarkable efficiency because domination increasingly appears self-generated.

At the same time, Han's analysis also introduces tensions that require further sociological development. His work often operates at a highly philosophical and civilizational level, sometimes treating neoliberal subjectivity as overly homogeneous or totalizing. Institutional differences, class inequalities, and organizational variations occasionally recede into the background. Moreover, while Han powerfully diagnoses self-exploitation, he devotes less attention to the concrete institutional mechanisms through which exhaustion is continuously reproduced across workplaces, educational systems, digital infrastructures, and bureaucratic environments.

This article extends Han's insights sociologically by situating psychopolitics within broader institutional structures of governance. Exhaustion is not merely a cultural mood or existential condition; it is materially reproduced through organizational logics requiring perpetual responsiveness, emotional flexibility, cognitive availability, and self-monitoring. Contemporary institutions increasingly depend upon subjects who continuously optimize themselves despite declining psychological resources. Such systems simultaneously intensify productivity demands while transferring responsibility for survival onto individuals themselves.

One might argue that neoliberalism succeeds precisely because exhaustion individualizes structural crisis. Fatigued subjects often lack the emotional energy, temporal stability, and collective orientation necessary to transform private suffering into political critique. Under these conditions, exhaustion becomes socially stabilizing. Individuals remain active enough to continue participating in institutional systems while becoming progressively less capable of sustained resistance or alternative political imagination. Psychopolitics therefore represents not merely a transformation of subjectivity, but a transformation in the modalities through which power secures social reproduction.

## 2.5 Additional Supporting Traditions

Although Weber, Foucault, Rosa, and Han provide the principal theoretical architecture of this article, several additional sociological traditions sharpen the analysis by revealing how exhaustion penetrates emotional life, institutional identity, and political subjectivity under late capitalism. What emerges across these perspectives is not simply a sociology of overwork, but a broader account of how contemporary institutions increasingly extract affective, cognitive, and existential capacities from subjects themselves.

Arlie Hochschild's concept of emotional labour is foundational in this regard. In *The Managed Heart* (1983), Hochschild demonstrates that late-modern economies increasingly commodify emotional expression itself. Workers are required not merely to perform tasks, but to regulate feeling, display empathy, maintain positivity, and produce emotionally desirable interactions. Emotional regulation thereby becomes economically productive labour. Crucially, this process generates forms of estrangement extending beyond classical alienation from labour alone. Subjects become partially alienated from their own affective experiences as emotional life is reorganized according to institutional expectations.

This insight becomes even more significant under contemporary communicative capitalism, where emotional self-management extends far beyond traditional service professions. In educational systems, care work, digital environments, platform economies, and precarious labour markets, individuals are increasingly expected to remain emotionally adaptive, psychologically available,

and socially responsive despite chronic instability. Exhaustion therefore cannot be reduced to excessive workload alone. Increasingly, institutions depend upon the extraction of emotional energy itself.

Eva Illouz (2007) extends this diagnosis by demonstrating how emotional life becomes integrated into therapeutic and market rationalities simultaneously. Under emotional capitalism, psychological vocabularies of healing, self-awareness, and emotional reflexivity become deeply intertwined with systems of productivity and self-management. Individuals are encouraged to narrate, monitor, optimize, and evaluate themselves continuously through therapeutic discourse. What appears emancipatory may therefore operate ambivalently. Structural contradictions become translated into individualized projects of emotional adjustment.

This therapeutic individualization is sociologically significant because it alters how exhaustion is interpreted politically. Stress, burnout, and psychological fatigue increasingly appear as failures of resilience rather than consequences of institutional organization. Similar dynamics have been identified within feminist analyses of neoliberal subjectivity, where emotional self-management and compulsory resilience become normalized institutional expectations (Gill & Donaghue, 2016). Contemporary wellness culture often promises recovery while leaving exhausting structures fundamentally intact. One might argue that neoliberalism increasingly neutralizes critique by transforming structural suffering into therapeutic administration. The exhausted subject is encouraged not to resist institutional demands, but to survive them more efficiently.

Richard Sennett's analysis of flexible capitalism further deepens this argument by emphasizing the destabilization of continuity itself. In *The Corrosion of Character* (1998), Sennett argues that contemporary labour regimes erode durable narratives of identity, long-term commitment, and institutional belonging. Flexibility becomes moralized, while permanence increasingly appears dysfunctional. Subjects are expected to remain continuously adaptable within environments defined by insecurity, short-termism, and perpetual reinvention.

Such instability produces more than economic uncertainty. It fragments temporal coherence itself. Under flexible capitalism, individuals repeatedly reconstruct identities, competencies, and social roles in response to shifting institutional expectations. Exhaustion emerges not only from labour intensity, but from the endless requirement to remain adaptable without stable horizons of continuity. Institutional systems increasingly depend upon subjects capable of tolerating chronic instability while continuing to participate within organizational structures that no longer provide lasting attachment or meaning.

Mark Fisher's concept of capitalist realism introduces a crucial political dimension to this analysis. Fisher (2009) argues that neoliberal capitalism increasingly presents itself as the only imaginable social reality, narrowing the horizons of political imagination itself. Structural crises — precarity, depression, anxiety, exhaustion — are experienced as private failures rather than systemic contradictions. The result is not simply ideological domination, but a contraction of political possibility.

This insight intersects directly with the concept of exhaustive governance. Exhaustion weakens not only physical endurance or emotional resilience, but also the cognitive and temporal capacities necessary for collective imagination. Fatigued populations often remain socially functional while becoming progressively less capable of sustained political orientation. Survival consumes the energy required for resistance. Under such conditions, institutional systems stabilize themselves partly through the management of exhausted subjectivity.

Taken together, these traditions reveal exhaustion as a multidimensional sociological condition involving emotional commodification, therapeutic individualization, institutional instability, and political depoliticization. Yet existing theories remain fragmented. Exhaustion appears repeatedly across contemporary social theory, but rarely as a central mechanism of governance in its own right. The concept of exhaustive governance seeks to address precisely this theoretical gap by explaining how late-modern institutions increasingly reproduce participation through the management of cognitive, emotional, and temporal exhaustion itself.

## 2.6 Theoretical Gap

The preceding traditions collectively demonstrate that contemporary sociology possesses substantial analytical resources for understanding rationalization, self-regulation, acceleration, emotional commodification, and neoliberal subjectivity. Weber explains the expansion of bureaucratic rationality; Foucault illuminates governmentality and self-discipline; Rosa diagnoses temporal acceleration; Han theorizes self-exploitation; Hochschild analyzes emotional labour; Illouz explores therapeutic capitalism; Sennett examines institutional flexibility; Fisher critiques the narrowing of political imagination. Yet despite their considerable insights, these approaches remain only partially integrated. Exhaustion repeatedly appears within sociological theory, but often indirectly, fragmentarily, or as a secondary consequence of broader transformations.

This fragmentation constitutes the central conceptual gap addressed by the present article. Existing literature tends to interpret exhaustion primarily in one of three ways: as a psychological pathology, as a by-product of neoliberal labour conditions, or as an

existential symptom of accelerated modernity. What remains underdeveloped is a sociological theory of exhaustion as institutionally productive power. Contemporary institutions do not merely generate exhaustion unintentionally; increasingly, they operate through conditions of managed depletion that stabilize organizational systems while individualizing structural contradictions.

The concept of exhaustive governance seeks to synthesize these fragmented traditions into a unified sociological framework. Exhaustive governance refers to a mode of institutional power in which cognitive overload, emotional depletion, temporal fragmentation, and compulsory self-optimization become central mechanisms through which subjects are governed. Unlike classical disciplinary power, which relied heavily upon visible authority and external coercion, exhaustive governance functions through the continuous mobilization and depletion of psychological capacities themselves.

Importantly, this concept does not imply deliberate conspiracy or centralized intentionality. Institutions are internally contradictory and often incapable of fully controlling the consequences of their own organizational logics. Nevertheless, sociologically, systems may reproduce forms of domination regardless of conscious intent. The critical point is that late-modern institutions increasingly depend upon subjects who remain active, adaptive, emotionally responsive, and permanently available despite chronic depletion. Exhaustion thereby becomes socially functional because it weakens capacities for sustained reflection, solidarity, and resistance while maintaining ongoing participation in institutional life.

A closer reading of contemporary social conditions reveals that exhaustion occupies a paradoxical position within late capitalism. Institutions simultaneously recognize exhaustion as a crisis and reproduce the very conditions that intensify it. Burnout prevention programs coexist with expanding workloads; wellness discourse accompanies increasing precarity; digital flexibility erodes temporal boundaries; therapeutic language individualizes structural suffering. Such contradictions suggest that exhaustion is not external to neoliberal governance but deeply embedded within it.

The concept of exhaustive governance therefore contributes to sociology in three principal ways. First, it reconstructs exhaustion as a central sociological category rather than a peripheral psychological phenomenon. Second, it synthesizes fragmented theoretical traditions into a coherent framework linking rationalization, acceleration, self-governance, and emotional commodification. Third, it expands contemporary theories of power by demonstrating how institutions increasingly govern not despite exhaustion, but through it.

The following section outlines the methodological strategy through which this conceptual synthesis is developed.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This article adopts a theoretical and conceptual sociological methodology. Its aim is not to measure burnout statistically or document psychological distress empirically. Rather, the article attempts to develop an analytical account of why exhaustion has become so persistent — almost ordinary — across late-modern institutions. In that sense, the argument operates within a broader tradition of reconstructive social theory concerned less with isolated empirical variables than with underlying institutional logics and historical patterns of power. The objective is not simply to combine existing theories of late modernity, but to rethink exhaustion itself as a socially productive mechanism of governance. Instead of treating fatigue as an individual psychological condition, the analysis asks how different institutional processes gradually converge around the management of depleted subjectivity.

Methodologically, the article draws upon conceptual analysis, immanent critique, and theoretical reconstruction. Conceptual analysis helps clarify how exhaustion appears across different sociological traditions and why it cannot be reduced entirely to therapeutic or medicalized understandings of stress. Immanent critique, meanwhile, makes it possible to identify tensions internal to existing theories of rationalization, acceleration, neoliberal governmentality, and psychopolitics. The intention is not to dismiss these traditions. In several respects they remain indispensable. Yet when read closely, they also leave exhaustion strangely underdeveloped — present everywhere, though rarely theorized directly. Theoretical synthesis therefore functions here less as a mechanical combination of perspectives than as an attempt to trace a recurring sociological pattern that becomes visible only when these traditions are placed into dialogue.

This approach follows a long trajectory within interpretive and critical sociology in which theoretical innovation emerges through reconstruction rather than through empirical accumulation alone. Weber's analysis of rationalization, Foucault's work on governmentality, Rosa's account of acceleration, and Han's reflections on psychopolitics each illuminate distinct dimensions of contemporary institutional life. At the same time, none fully explains why exhaustion appears so structurally embedded across otherwise different social domains. The present article proceeds from the assumption that sociology sometimes advances not by discovering entirely new phenomena, but by recognizing latent connections between processes already partially visible within fragmented debates.

The article does not assume that exhaustion is experienced uniformly. Quite the opposite. Psychological fatigue remains unevenly distributed through class relations, labour precarity, gendered expectations, racialized inequalities, migration status, disability, and unequal access to social protection. A more comprehensive sociology of exhaustion would require extensive empirical investigation into these variations. That work remains necessary. The aim here is narrower, though perhaps more foundational: to establish the conceptual conditions under which exhaustion can be understood sociologically as a mechanism of governance rather than merely a subjective reaction to overwork.

For this reason, the analysis operates at a relatively high level of abstraction. Rather than focusing on individual institutions empirically, the article identifies recurring organizational tendencies visible across workplaces, universities, digital infrastructures, welfare systems, and precarious labour regimes. These tendencies include accelerated responsiveness, communicative saturation, emotional self-management, fragmented temporality, and continuous adaptation. None of these dynamics are entirely new in themselves. What matters is their convergence. Taken together, they suggest that late-modern institutions increasingly depend upon subjects capable of remaining functional despite chronic cognitive and emotional fatigue.

There are, admittedly, risks involved in this kind of conceptual sociology. Abstraction can flatten institutional differences or drift toward overly totalizing claims. Critical theory occasionally falls into this trap. Contemporary institutions remain contradictory, uneven, and historically unstable; subjects are never fully reducible to structures of domination. People negotiate institutional expectations in unpredictable ways. They resist, reinterpret, withdraw, adapt, sometimes all at once. The concept of exhaustive governance should therefore not be understood as a closed explanatory system with universal reach. It is better approached as a heuristic framework — provisional, perhaps incomplete — intended to illuminate structural tendencies within late capitalism that existing sociological vocabularies do not yet fully capture.

The methodological contribution of the article lies precisely in this reconstructive effort. By placing theories of rationalization, acceleration, emotional labour, psychopolitics, and neoliberal governance into closer conversation, the analysis attempts to reposition exhaustion from the periphery of sociological inquiry toward the centre of debates on institutional reproduction and political subjectivity. The sections that follow develop this framework more directly by examining how contemporary institutions increasingly govern through the organization — and gradual depletion — of human attention, emotional endurance, and psychological recoverability.

#### **4. THEORETICAL ANALYSIS / FINDINGS**

##### **4.1 From Disciplinary Power to Exhaustive Governance**

The preceding sections argued that contemporary sociology possesses substantial theoretical resources for understanding rationalization, acceleration, neoliberal subjectivity, and emotional commodification, yet lacks an integrated framework capable of explaining exhaustion as a mechanism of governance in its own right. This section develops the concept of exhaustive governance more directly by examining how late-modern institutions increasingly govern through the continuous depletion of cognitive, emotional, and temporal capacities.

Classical theories of modern power frequently emphasized visible structures of authority. Weber's analysis of bureaucracy centered on hierarchical administration and procedural rationality (Weber, 1978), while early Foucauldian analyses of discipline examined surveillance, normalization, and bodily regulation within institutions such as prisons, schools, and factories (Foucault, 1977). These forms of domination depended heavily upon spatial enclosure, temporal regulation, and external supervision. Subjects were disciplined through systems that constrained conduct visibly and organizationally.

Late capitalism, however, increasingly operates through less centralized and more diffuse forms of governance. Under neoliberal conditions, institutional control no longer depends primarily upon direct coercion. Instead, individuals are encouraged to internalize productivity imperatives as ethical obligations directed toward the self. The ideal subject is not simply obedient, but permanently active — flexible, emotionally responsive, communicatively available, and continuously engaged in self-optimization. This transformation marks a significant shift in the sociology of power because institutions increasingly govern through activation rather than prohibition.

The concept of exhaustive governance refers precisely to this transformation. Exhaustive governance describes a mode of institutional power in which systems reproduce compliance by organizing conditions of chronic fatigue. Cognitive overload, accelerated temporality, emotional self-management, and permanent responsiveness are not incidental side effects of institutional life; increasingly, they become embedded organizational norms. Institutions depend upon subjects who remain functional despite exhaustion, adaptive despite instability, and productive despite declining psychological resources.

Importantly, exhaustive governance does not require centralized intentionality. Institutions may reproduce exhausting conditions even while formally acknowledging burnout as a social problem. Universities implement wellness initiatives while

intensifying productivity metrics; corporations promote mindfulness while extending expectations of permanent availability; digital platforms encourage “connection” while monetizing uninterrupted engagement. These contradictions reveal an important sociological dynamic: institutional systems increasingly recognize exhaustion symbolically while simultaneously reproducing the structural conditions that intensify it.

One might argue that this transformation reflects a deeper shift within capitalism itself. Industrial capitalism primarily extracted physical labour within relatively bounded temporal frameworks. By contrast, contemporary capitalism increasingly extracts attention, emotional energy, communicative activity, and psychological flexibility. This transformation reflects what Lazzarato (1996) described as the growing centrality of immaterial labour within post-industrial capitalism. Human subjectivity becomes integrated into production more deeply than before because economic value increasingly depends upon cognitive responsiveness and affective participation. Under such conditions, exhaustion acquires institutional functionality. Depleted subjects often continue participating within organizational systems while possessing diminished capacities for sustained reflection, resistance, or collective mobilization.

This dynamic helps explain why contemporary exhaustion frequently appears politically passive. Exhausted individuals may remain intensely active at the level of everyday survival while becoming increasingly disconnected from broader forms of social critique. Energy becomes absorbed by immediate adaptation rather than collective transformation. A sociology of exhaustive governance therefore suggests that fatigue is not merely a consequence of institutional arrangements but one of the mechanisms through which those arrangements stabilize themselves.

#### **4.2 The Institutional Production of Cognitive Overload**

If exhaustive governance operates through depletion, then cognitive overload represents one of its primary institutional mechanisms. Contemporary institutions increasingly organize social life around conditions of informational saturation, fragmented attention, communicative immediacy, and perpetual responsiveness. Individuals are expected to process expanding quantities of information while simultaneously adapting to rapidly shifting institutional expectations. Cognitive strain thereby becomes normalized as an ordinary condition of participation within late-modern society.

Digital infrastructures play a particularly significant role in this process. Communication technologies initially appeared to promise greater efficiency and flexibility. Yet rather than reducing institutional pressures, digital systems often intensify them by dissolving temporal boundaries between labour, communication, administration, and private life. Email, messaging platforms, algorithmic notifications, performance dashboards, and social media environments produce conditions in which subjects remain psychologically tethered to institutional demands even outside formally designated working hours (Crary, 2014). As Davies (2015) argues, contemporary neoliberal institutions increasingly govern through the management of measurable performance, emotional responsiveness, and competitive self-monitoring, extending market rationality into everyday psychological life.

This transformation extends beyond workplaces narrowly understood. Universities require continuous administrative engagement from students and academics alike; welfare systems increasingly transfer bureaucratic responsibilities onto citizens themselves through digital self-management; precarious labour markets demand constant networking, retraining, and self-promotion; platform economies depend upon uninterrupted visibility and engagement. Across these domains, institutions externalize organizational burdens onto individuals, who must continuously monitor, update, optimize, and respond.

A closer reading reveals that cognitive overload is not simply a matter of excessive information. It also reflects the fragmentation of attentional continuity itself. Subjects move rapidly between tasks, interfaces, emotional registers, and communicative environments without opportunities for sustained concentration or psychological recovery. Rosa’s (2013) theory of social acceleration becomes especially relevant here because acceleration destabilizes coherent temporal experience. Attention becomes dispersed across competing institutional demands, generating forms of cognitive fatigue that extend far beyond traditional understandings of overwork.

The consequences of such fragmentation are sociologically significant. Sustained reflection requires temporal continuity, cognitive stability, and protected spaces of withdrawal. Under exhaustive governance, however, these conditions become increasingly scarce. Subjects remain occupied by immediate responsiveness and administrative maintenance. The resulting exhaustion is therefore not only physical or emotional; it is epistemic. Individuals struggle to maintain sustained forms of critical attention necessary for political analysis, democratic participation, or collective organization.

At the same time, institutions often reinterpret these pressures through individualized vocabularies of productivity and adaptation. Difficulties concentrating become personal deficits; emotional depletion becomes poor self-management; exhaustion becomes evidence of inadequate resilience. Structural contradictions thereby disappear into psychological narratives of

optimization. This individualization is crucial because it prevents cognitive overload from being widely recognized as a systemic condition. Exhausted subjects frequently blame themselves for conditions produced institutionally.

One of the central claims emerging here is that cognitive overload weakens collective agency precisely because it narrows temporal horizons. Individuals absorbed by continuous adaptation possess limited capacities for long-term political imagination. Immediate responsiveness displaces reflective distance. Under such conditions, institutions reproduce participation while simultaneously eroding the cognitive conditions necessary for sustained resistance.

#### **4.3 Exhaustion and the Fragmentation of Political Agency**

One of the most consequential dimensions of exhaustive governance concerns its effects upon political agency itself. Classical theories of domination often assumed that exploitation, inequality, or crisis would eventually generate collective resistance. Marxist traditions, in particular, frequently treated crisis as potentially productive of political consciousness and social mobilization. Contemporary exhaustion complicates this assumption profoundly. The problem is no longer simply that subjects are dominated, but that they become progressively less capable of sustaining the cognitive, emotional, and temporal capacities required for durable political action.

This transformation is deeply connected to the neoliberal privatization of suffering. Structural conditions such as precarity, burnout, instability, and anxiety are increasingly interpreted through individualized frameworks centered on resilience, coping, self-management, and emotional adaptation. Fisher's (2009) concept of capitalist realism is especially important here because it explains how systemic contradictions become psychologically internalized rather than politically externalized. Individuals encounter structural exhaustion primarily as personal inadequacy. Critique collapses into self-correction.

Exhaustive governance therefore weakens political agency not primarily through repression, but through the fragmentation of attention and temporality. Democratic participation requires more than formal political inclusion. It depends upon capacities for concentration, continuity, reflection, and sustained engagement with collective problems. Yet accelerated institutional environments systematically erode these capacities by organizing social life around immediacy, responsiveness, and permanent adaptation. Survival consumes the energy required for resistance. Berardi (2009) similarly argues that semiocapitalism increasingly overloads cognitive and affective capacities, producing conditions of chronic psychological exhaustion and political paralysis.

Rosa's theory of social acceleration clarifies why this process becomes politically destabilizing. Accelerated temporality compresses social experience into reactive presentism, weakening continuity between past, present, and future (Rosa, 2013). Political imagination, however, depends precisely upon the capacity to envision alternative futures collectively. Under conditions of chronic exhaustion, subjects become increasingly oriented toward immediate navigation rather than long-term transformation. The future narrows into management of the next demand, the next task, the next crisis.

Importantly, exhaustive governance does not eliminate political participation altogether. Rather, it reorganizes participation into fragmented and low-intensity forms compatible with chronic fatigue. Digital environments create unprecedented levels of connectivity while simultaneously dispersing attention and destabilizing durable collective organization. Individuals remain permanently informed yet politically immobilized. Emotional reactions circulate rapidly through communicative networks, but sustained mobilization becomes increasingly difficult to maintain over time. Outrage accelerates; organization fragments.

This condition produces a paradoxical form of democratic life. Subjects continue voting, expressing opinions, consuming political information, and participating symbolically within public discourse while experiencing declining capacities for sustained civic engagement. Exhaustion produces compliant subjects even within formally democratic societies. Governance operates not by eliminating participation, but by weakening the psychological conditions necessary for collective resistance and long-term political imagination.

At the same time, this argument should not be interpreted deterministically. Exhaustion does not abolish resistance altogether. Under certain conditions, fatigue itself may become politically generative, particularly when private suffering is collectively recognized as structurally produced rather than individually experienced. Yet exhaustive governance alters the terrain upon which resistance emerges. Political struggle increasingly concerns not only material inequality or ideological domination, but the recovery of attention, temporal continuity, and cognitive endurance themselves.

#### **4.4 Exhaustive Governance and the Crisis of Institutions**

The central paradox of exhaustive governance is that late capitalism increasingly depends upon forms of psychological depletion that simultaneously undermine the long-term legitimacy, trust, and stability of institutional systems themselves. Late-modern organizations require subjects who remain productive, adaptable, emotionally responsive, and continuously engaged. Yet the

cumulative effects of chronic exhaustion often erode trust, weaken institutional attachment, and intensify experiences of alienation. Institutions therefore reproduce conditions that stabilize participation in the short term while potentially destabilizing legitimacy over longer temporal horizons.

This contradiction appears across multiple institutional domains. Universities expand productivity expectations while reporting escalating mental-health crises among students and faculty. Healthcare systems demand emotional resilience from workers operating under chronic overload. Welfare bureaucracies intensify administrative complexity while simultaneously emphasizing personal responsibility and self-management. Digital labour platforms rely upon permanent connectivity while generating increasing dissatisfaction, anxiety, and psychological fragmentation. In each case, institutional systems require forms of participation that gradually exhaust the very subjects upon whom those systems depend.

Weber's analysis of rationalization remains highly relevant for understanding this contradiction. Rationalized institutions prioritize efficiency, calculability, predictability, and administrative control (Weber, 1978). Yet rationalization also tends to depersonalize social relations and subordinate human needs to organizational imperatives. Under late capitalism, these tendencies intensify because institutions increasingly operate under competitive pressures requiring continuous optimization and acceleration. Human capacities become treated as endlessly expandable resources despite obvious psychological limits. Earlier critiques of overwork and expanding productivity demands identified similar tendencies within advanced capitalist economies (Schor, 1991).

The result is a crisis not only of exhaustion, but of institutional meaning itself. Rosa (2019) argues that modern societies increasingly suffer from forms of alienation rooted in failed relationships between subjects and the social world. Institutions appear less as sites of collective purpose and more as systems demanding permanent adaptation without offering meaningful reciprocity. Individuals continue participating because withdrawal often carries severe economic or social consequences, yet institutional attachment becomes increasingly fragile.

This fragility helps explain the growing prevalence of institutional distrust across many late-modern societies. Exhaustion does not simply weaken individuals internally; it reshapes broader relationships between subjects and institutional authority. Citizens encounter organizations less as sources of stability or collective orientation and more as environments of administrative pressure, acceleration, surveillance, and emotional depletion. Trust erodes because institutions appear incapable of protecting the psychological conditions necessary for sustainable social life.

At the same time, institutions frequently respond to these crises through managerial and therapeutic strategies rather than structural transformation. Burnout prevention initiatives, wellness programs, resilience training, and mindfulness interventions proliferate across organizational settings. Such responses are sociologically revealing because they acknowledge exhaustion while often leaving underlying institutional logics intact. Structural contradictions are displaced into individualized practices of adaptation. Exhaustion thereby becomes administratively managed rather than politically resolved.

One might argue that this managerialization of exhaustion reflects a broader feature of neoliberal governance. Institutions increasingly seek to optimize the coping capacities of subjects rather than reduce the exhausting conditions embedded within organizational systems themselves. This approach allows institutions to preserve existing productivity structures while shifting responsibility for survival onto individuals. The exhausted subject becomes simultaneously victim and manager of institutional depletion.

The contradiction remains unstable, however. Systems that continuously deplete cognitive and emotional capacities risk undermining long-term legitimacy, loyalty, and social cohesion. Exhaustive governance may therefore contain self-destructive tendencies because institutions increasingly reproduce themselves through forms of psychological depletion that gradually corrode the social conditions necessary for durable institutional trust.

#### **4.5 The Limits of Resistance Under Conditions of Exhaustion**

If exhaustive governance weakens political agency and destabilizes institutional legitimacy, a crucial question follows: what forms of resistance remain possible under conditions of chronic exhaustion? This question is sociologically significant because many classical theories of critique implicitly presuppose subjects capable of sustained reflection, organizational continuity, and collective mobilization. Yet exhaustive governance operates precisely by eroding these capacities through acceleration, attentional fragmentation, and the continuous absorption of psychological energy into processes of adaptation.

Under such conditions, resistance itself becomes exhausting. Subjects confronting precarious labour regimes, administrative overload, digital saturation, and emotional instability often possess limited cognitive and temporal resources for sustained political engagement. Even where structural contradictions are clearly recognized, recognition alone does not generate collective

transformation. Political agency requires endurance. It requires continuity of attention, emotional persistence, and the capacity to maintain orientation beyond immediate survival.

This dynamic helps explain one of the central paradoxes of contemporary capitalism: widespread dissatisfaction coexists with relatively limited structural transformation. Burnout, anxiety, institutional distrust, and social alienation have become pervasive features of late-modern societies, yet these conditions do not consistently produce organized alternatives. Exhaustion narrows the practical horizon of resistance because survival increasingly consumes the energy necessary for political imagination. Subjects remain occupied by navigating instability rather than transforming the structures that produce it.

At the same time, it would be mistaken to interpret exhaustive governance as a fully closed or totalizing system. Such a reading would underestimate both the instability of institutional power and the unpredictability of collective action. Exhaustion may also generate rupture when institutional demands become psychologically intolerable. Contemporary anti-precarity movements, labour struggles, critiques of digital capitalism, and forms of mental-health activism increasingly emerge around shared experiences of fatigue, burnout, and emotional exhaustion. Under certain historical conditions, depletion itself may become politicized.

Nevertheless, the sociology of exhaustive governance suggests that contemporary resistance faces constraints distinct from earlier forms of industrial conflict. Collective action now requires more than ideological critique or material organization alone. Increasingly, it requires the recovery of attentional continuity, temporal autonomy, and psychological recoverability itself. The struggle over exhaustion therefore becomes simultaneously political and existential because it concerns the conditions under which subjects remain capable of collective agency at all.

This raises broader questions concerning the future of democratic life under late capitalism. Democratic institutions formally depend upon active citizens capable of reflection, solidarity, participation, and long-term engagement with collective problems. Yet exhaustive governance systematically weakens these capacities through permanent acceleration and managed fatigue. Contemporary democracies may therefore risk reproducing forms of passive participation in which subjects remain formally included while progressively losing the psychological conditions necessary for meaningful democratic agency.

The concept of exhaustive governance does not imply that domination is irreversible. Institutional systems remain contradictory, and subjects continue generating unpredictable forms of solidarity, refusal, and resistance. Yet the analysis developed throughout this article suggests that exhaustion has become one of the primary terrains upon which contemporary struggles over power, subjectivity, and institutional legitimacy are increasingly organized. Sociology can no longer treat exhaustion as a secondary consequence of modern life. Increasingly, exhaustion constitutes one of the central mechanisms through which late capitalism reproduces itself.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The concept of exhaustive governance proposed in this article seeks to reposition exhaustion from the margins of sociological inquiry toward the centre of contemporary analyses of power, institutional life, and subjectivity. Existing sociological literature has produced rich accounts of rationalization, acceleration, neoliberal governmentality, emotional labour, and psychopolitics. Yet these traditions have often approached exhaustion indirectly — as symptom, consequence, or psychological aftermath. The present analysis suggests that exhaustion should instead be understood as institutionally productive. Contemporary systems increasingly stabilize themselves through the management of depleted forms of subjectivity.

This theoretical shift contributes to sociology in several important respects. First, it expands prevailing understandings of power. Classical sociological theories frequently emphasized domination through coercion, surveillance, ideology, or disciplinary normalization. Exhaustive governance does not replace these mechanisms entirely, but it reorients attention toward the governance of psychological energy itself. Under late capitalism, institutions increasingly depend upon subjects capable of continuous activation despite chronic fatigue. Governance therefore operates not only through the regulation of behaviour, but through the organization of attention, temporality, emotional responsiveness, and cognitive endurance.

Second, the article contributes to debates on neoliberalism by clarifying why contemporary exhaustion often appears individualized despite its structural origins. Burnout, anxiety, and cognitive overload are frequently interpreted through therapeutic or managerial frameworks emphasizing resilience, wellness, and self-care. Such interpretations obscure the institutional production of depletion by translating structural contradictions into private responsibilities. The sociology of exhaustive governance suggests that this privatization is not incidental. Individualized coping strategies often function to stabilize institutional systems by preventing exhaustion from becoming fully politicized. Contemporary wellness culture may therefore function less as a challenge to institutional exhaustion than as a mechanism for restoring depleted subjects back into systems of productivity. Its promise is recovery, but its institutional effect may often be reintegration into the very arrangements that

produced exhaustion in the first place. Petersen (2011) similarly argues that contemporary health discourses increasingly individualize structural problems by framing wellbeing as a matter of personal responsibility and self-regulation.

This argument also complicates certain assumptions within critical social theory. Earlier traditions frequently presumed that intensifying contradictions would produce collective consciousness and political mobilization. Yet chronic exhaustion may weaken precisely those capacities necessary for sustained critique and organization. The exhausted subject is not simply oppressed; the subject becomes cognitively fragmented, temporally compressed, and emotionally depleted. Under such conditions, resistance requires more than ideological awareness. It requires access to the psychological and temporal conditions necessary for collective agency itself.

At the same time, it is important to avoid overly totalizing interpretations of contemporary power. Exhaustive governance should not be understood as an all-encompassing system that eliminates autonomy or resistance completely. Institutional systems remain contradictory and unevenly organized across social contexts. Experiences of exhaustion differ significantly according to class relations, labour conditions, gendered expectations, racialized inequalities, disability, and access to social protections. Moreover, subjects continue generating forms of solidarity and critique that cannot be fully reduced to institutional logics. A sociology of exhaustion must therefore remain attentive to contingency, variation, and the possibility of rupture. One possible limitation of the exhaustive governance thesis is that it risks interpreting exhaustion too uniformly across institutional settings. Not all forms of fatigue are politically stabilizing; under certain historical conditions, exhaustion may also generate refusal, withdrawal, rupture, or collective revolt.

Indeed, one limitation of the present article is its relatively high level of abstraction. Theoretical reconstruction allows broader structural tendencies to become visible, yet it may also obscure institutional specificity and empirical variation. Future research should therefore investigate how exhaustive governance operates differently across organizational fields such as higher education, digital platform labour, healthcare systems, welfare administration, and precarious service economies. Comparative empirical work would be especially valuable in examining how exhaustion is distributed unevenly across social groups and national contexts.

The concept of exhaustive governance may also open new avenues for interdisciplinary dialogue. Sociological analyses of exhaustion intersect increasingly with debates in political theory, media studies, labour studies, psychology, and critical technology research. Questions surrounding artificial intelligence, algorithmic management, digital attention economies, and remote labour infrastructures suggest that cognitive and emotional depletion may become even more central to future forms of governance. Contemporary capitalism appears increasingly dependent upon extracting not only labour time, but attentional continuity and psychological availability themselves.

A further implication concerns democratic life. Democratic institutions presuppose citizens capable of sustained reflection, collective participation, and meaningful engagement with public life. Yet exhaustive governance systematically erodes these capacities through acceleration, fragmentation, and permanent responsiveness. This does not necessarily imply the disappearance of democracy in formal terms. Rather, it suggests the emergence of increasingly fatigued democracies characterized by passive participation, weakened solidarity, and declining capacities for collective imagination. The sociology of exhaustion therefore raises broader questions concerning the psychological conditions required for democratic agency under late capitalism.

Ultimately, the significance of exhaustive governance lies in its attempt to conceptualize a historical transformation in the relationship between power and subjectivity. Contemporary institutions no longer govern primarily through visible repression alone, but through the continuous mobilization and depletion of human capacities. Exhaustion has become woven into the ordinary rhythms of institutional life so deeply that it frequently appears natural, inevitable, or privately generated. Sociology must resist this normalization. A closer examination reveals that exhaustion is neither merely individual nor accidental. It is increasingly structural, institutional, and politically consequential.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This article has argued that exhaustion should be understood not merely as a psychological condition or unintended side effect of late-modern life, but as an increasingly central mechanism through which contemporary institutions organize and stabilize social order. Existing sociological traditions have provided important insights into rationalization, governmentality, acceleration, emotional commodification, and neoliberal subjectivity. Yet these approaches have often treated exhaustion indirectly — as symptom, consequence, or experiential aftermath. The concept of exhaustive governance was introduced here to address this theoretical fragmentation by reconstructing exhaustion as a sociologically productive condition embedded within institutional power itself.

The analysis demonstrated that contemporary institutions increasingly govern through forms of psychological depletion, temporal fragmentation, and compulsive self-optimization. Unlike earlier forms of disciplinary domination centered primarily on visible authority and external coercion, exhaustive governance operates through the continuous activation and depletion of subjects who remain permanently responsive despite chronic fatigue. Individuals are expected not only to work, but to remain communicatively available, emotionally adaptable, psychologically resilient, and endlessly capable of reinvention within accelerated institutional environments.

Importantly, the argument advanced throughout this article does not imply that institutions consciously seek to exhaust populations in any coordinated or conspiratorial sense. Institutional systems are contradictory, fragmented, and often unstable. Nevertheless, sociology has long recognized that domination does not require centralized intentionality in order to produce systematic effects. The critical point is that contemporary institutional arrangements increasingly depend upon forms of participation sustained through conditions of depletion that simultaneously weaken reflection, solidarity, and long-term political imagination.

A central implication of this framework concerns democratic agency. Exhaustive governance not only transforms labour relations or institutional culture; it reshapes the psychological conditions under which collective political life becomes possible. Democratic participation requires attentional continuity, temporal stability, emotional energy, and capacities for sustained engagement with public life. Yet accelerated institutional environments systematically erode these capacities through permanent responsiveness and fragmented temporality. Exhaustion therefore emerges not only as a health problem or workplace issue, but as a broader sociological problem concerning the future conditions of democratic subjectivity itself.

At the same time, the concept of exhaustive governance should remain open to revision, contestation, and empirical elaboration. The present article has operated at a relatively high level of abstraction in order to establish a conceptual framework rather than provide institutional case studies. Future research will need to investigate how exhaustion operates unevenly across social classes, labour regimes, national contexts, digital infrastructures, and organizational forms. Such empirical work remains essential for understanding the differentiated experiences and political consequences of exhaustion under late capitalism.

Yet even at the conceptual level, one conclusion appears increasingly difficult to avoid: exhaustion has become one of the defining social realities of contemporary institutional life. Modern societies no longer govern solely through ideology, discipline, or economic necessity. Increasingly, they govern through the management of human energy itself. Late capitalism increasingly reproduces itself not simply through the extraction of labour-power, but through the management of recoverability itself. Sociology therefore faces an important theoretical challenge. It must begin treating exhaustion not as a peripheral pathology of overworked individuals, but as a central structural condition through which late capitalism reproduces itself.

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