

Opinion **Employment**

The balance between idleness and burnout proves elusive

The idea that hard work is killing us all — as well as killing the planet we live on — has become persuasive and ubiquitous

VIV GROSKOP



Working a job you hate to buy stuff you don't need is not the greatest use of anyone's time © Toby Melville/Reuters

Viv Groskop APRIL 7 2023

The author's latest book is 'Lift As You Climb: Women and the Art of Ambition'

Which is more noble: To work to the point of burnout? Or to be as idle as possible? Both are worn as badges of honour or of shame, sometimes depending on how you were brought up, when and where you were born and certainly which industry you work in. Sometimes it's the call to Stakhanovism. Sometimes the call of the duvet. It depends on what's going on in your life and which way the wind is blowing. Either way, most of us experience the pull of these two extremes at some point. And the polar opposites are now rapidly becoming highly politicised.

In the British context, I suspect we envy people who have found a happy medium: those who seem to be fulfilled and busily happy while not overworking. But we Brits also harbour a not-so-secret suspicion that these high-functioning types are actually work-shy or even grifters, contriving things so that someone else has to do everything.

Plus, these people are all the more irritating because they have the nauseatingly self-satisfied "work-life balance" that we are all supposed to aspire to but can't be actually bothered with because the balancing business sounds too much like bloody hard work. We are conflicted about this and perhaps at our most content when we can moan about other people's lives. Hurrah.

In the French context, there's a simpler, bolder solution: the philosophy of "ne rien faire" (to do nothing). This is — for some — close to a human right. In a speech opposing French President Emmanuel Macron's attempt to increase the pension age from 62 to 64, far-left leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon recently spoke of "le droit de marquer la pause dans l'existence." Let's call it "the right to a quiet life." You might want to fill the time, he suggested, with poetry, painting, singing or just doing whatever you, as an individual, want to do, rather than what others want you to do. In any case, he added, relentless devotion to productivity is destroying the planet.

So who is right? I won't even mention the US version of all this: the birthplace of bossing it, hustle culture, "lunch is for wimps" and unpaid (therefore non-existent) parental leave. Surely it's the failure of the American dream of the 20th century that has boosted this key concept: working a job you hate to buy stuff you don't need is not the greatest use of anyone's time.

The idea that hard work is killing us all — as well as killing the rock we live on — has become persuasive and ubiquitous. This week, a study by the British centre-right think-tank Onward diagnosed "burnout Britain", a place where mobile phones are blurring the lines between work and leisure, contributing to "higher levels of exhaustion and a lower sense of wellbeing." It cited research showing that Britons are "too knackered" for once-essential activities like going to the pub, meeting friends or exercising, compared with the amount of time we devoted to these pursuits in the 1970s. The greatest victim, according to these researchers, is volunteering, which has halved in four decades.

But the report's less obvious agenda reveals, surprise, surprise, the opposite of Mélenchon's advice — and it clearly rebuts Labour's growing interest in the four-day working week, dismissing this as too narrowly focused on the problem of "volume". In any case, the mention of volunteering always gives me horrifying flashbacks to David Cameron's ill-fated "Big Society" which was basically a way of saying "Look after yourselves because no one else is going to."

The real tension here is one that many of us face in our own working lives. How do you balance material comfort and personal ambition with peace of mind and civic duty? How do you recognise the boundary between diligence and overwork? Onward's study is frustrating because it uses the word "burnout" so casually. Clinical psychological burnout is debilitating and unmistakable with symptoms of anxiety, depression and extreme stress. It's not when you can't be bothered to go to the pub because a new episode of *Succession* has just dropped.

But sadly Mélenchon's romantic proposition is equally, disappointingly casual. He makes the moral and philosophical cost of overwork clear. Yes, we risk our souls and the planet. But can those realistically be offset against people's economic expectations?

The problem, as any passive-aggressive Brit will tell you, is that the solution lies somewhere between cheap poetry and expensive burnout. It means working just enough so that your work never consumes you and resting just enough so that sometimes you need a rest from resting. May the smug git who achieves all of that be subject to the contempt of us all.