ROUTLEDGE

The Great Resignation as Neoliberal Compliance and Critique

A Foucauldian Analysis

Caroline Austin

CONCEPTS FOR CRITICAL PSYCHOLOGY | DISCIPLINARY BOUNDARIES RE-THOUGHT

THE GREAT RESIGNATION AS NEOLIBERAL COMPLIANCE AND CRITIQUE

This book examines how neoliberal power shapes individual subjectivity in contemporary American workplaces through the lens of the Great Resignation—the 2021 mass voluntary job departure phenomenon.

Drawing on in-depth interviews and a Foucauldian framework, the book traces how neoliberal rationalities of choice, flexibility, and self-optimization shape the ways individuals explain their labor decisions and evaluate their lives. Rather than treating the Great Resignation as a singular rupture, the analysis situates it within longer historical transformations in governance, capitalism, and employment relations.

The book identifies differentiated modes of labor subjectivity—alignment, negotiation, and refusal—showing how workers variously inhabit, strain against, or attempt to revalue dominant norms of work and responsibility. Across chapters, it demonstrates how quitting becomes intelligible not simply as resistance or market behavior but also as an ethical and discursive practice shaped by uneven opportunities, affective demands, and institutional constraints. In doing so, the book reveals both the durability and the limits of neoliberal labor governance.

Offering a theoretically rich account of how labor and life might be reimagined, the book is intended for scholars and advanced students in sociology, critical psychology, labor studies, and social theory, as well as readers interested in work, governance, and contemporary capitalism. It will also appeal to researchers and practitioners seeking critical insight into current debates about labor, precarity, and organizational life.

Caroline Austin is a sociologist whose work bridges critical theory and applied research. Alongside academic writing and teaching, she has led community-based evaluations and policy-relevant research on work, inequality, and social well-being, bringing grounded empirical insight to questions of neoliberal governance and labor subjectivity.

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A Foucauldian Analysis

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SERIES EDITOR PREFACE

The discipline of psychology blossomed not in attic laboratories of Leipzig—which is one favorite narrative spun in the still-dominant laboratory-experimental tradition tracing its way back to the attempt to reach into domains of the mind that philosophy had been unable to reach—nor in the musings of Greek philosophers, which is another beloved motif that attempts to anchor what psychology discovers in eternal and essentialized verities about the way we think and behave. Not in these places and times, but in the early twentieth-century car factory personnel departments at the dawn of industrial capitalism among those charged with overseeing good productive and obedient conduct.

The discipline put psychologists to work in a detailed process of surveillance that tied academic and professional research to industry in projects that would not only show that this new pretend science was useful but would also come, in a vicious feedback loop, to help shape what the discipline would assume its role in society to be. Psychology has thus, from its earliest days, come to be defined by work, by our relation to work, alienated labor, as if that relation was unchanging and universal. Agree to be put to work by others, for others to profit, is the discursive imperative that underpins this kind of society. From this first cause flows the endless search for correlations that eventually prove nothing in a discursive and practical field that puts work, sometimes explicitly, always implicitly at its center.

One of the early manifestos of resistance to enforced labor under capitalism was written in prison toward the end of the nineteenth century by Cuban-born Paul Lafargue, as a pamphlet called "The Right to be Lazy." The paradox here was that this son-in-law of Karl Marx not only enacted an individual response to a social problem—a reductive process exemplified by the discipline of psychology—but, instead of settling back and relaxing while confined for giving a socialist speech, Lafargue beavered away as well to produce this liberatory text, worked hard at it.

Laziness is but one of the discursive motifs, alongside opportunity, decentering, precarity, and empowerment, explored in this fascinating book on a phenomenon that is appearing towards what some socialists wish to be the dusk-time of the exploitative political–economic system that needed to call upon psychology as its eager helpmeet. A collective process that is not consciously organized as such, but which emerges nevertheless as a resistant response to what liberal, corporate, and then neoliberal capitalism is doing to us, is coming alive in what has been dubbed "The Great Resignation." People are refusing to work.

Caroline Austin brings the work of Michel Foucault, historian, analyst, and one-time prison psychologist, to bear on the intimate link under neoliberalism between surveillance and confession, between the managed control of labor and the thought that we each should speak about their experience in the mistaken belief that we will thereby free ourselves of it. She navigates compliance demanded of us with critique that must, of necessity, appear if we are to find a way out. She takes us into market logic and shows us how people are finding a way out of it, inside and outside, "outwith" the psychology of work, so that we might work for ourselves instead of for others.

Ian Parker
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FRAMING THE PHENOMENON

The Discursive Field of the Great Resignation

In early 2021, the phrase "Great Resignation" entered the U.S. cultural lexicon with astonishing speed. Headlines announced that a "record number of Americans quit their jobs" (Tappe 2022), while speculation swirled: Was this a generational rebellion? A labor market mismatch? A pandemic hangover? Across news platforms, social media, and op-ed pages, what began as a statistical trend became a public event—something that was debated, moralized, celebrated, and condemned.

Across social media platforms, quitting became both visible and theatrical. On TikTok, videos of workers walking out mid-shift with triumphant music and captions like *#QuitTok* and *#IQuitMyJob* racked up millions of views. "Live quitting" became a trend, complete with dramatic reveals and reactions from followers (ABC News 2021; HR Daily Advisor 2023). One viral video showed a woman quitting her job with the caption, "I'd rather be broke than broken." Business Insider described it as a new genre of content altogether (Schiffer 2021). Meanwhile, r/antiwork—originally a niche space for critiques of wage labor—expanded rapidly, becoming sites for collective reflection, sarcasm, rage, and refusal (Heard and Sinehsoltan 2022).

Mainstream media struggled to stabilize the meaning of the moment. Some accounts framed the Great Resignation as a long-overdue reckoning with exploitative and "toxic" workplace cultures. Others cast it as evidence of moral decline, laziness, or a generational unwillingness to endure hardship. A *New York Post* article lamented the rise of a "pro-lazy America," blaming "too much free government aid" for people opting out of work (Ramaswamy 2022). Another headline warned that Gen Z was "resigning in droves," framing the #IQuitMyJob trend as both spectacle and moral failure (Crane 2021). Employers expressed panic about labor shortages. Economists debated the "real" causes. Pundits diagnosed a generational crisis of work ethic. And across all of it ran a current of exhaustion—mental, physical, moral—summed up by one year-end

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New Yorker piece that simply called 2023 "An Exhausting Year in (and out of) the Office" (Newport 2023).

Although often tethered to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Great Resignation persisted well beyond the initial disruptions of 2020. What began as an apparent response to crisis unfolded into a prolonged period of instability, stretching across industries and class positions. During this time, quitting came to function less as an isolated decision and more as a contested symbol—one onto which fears, frustrations, and desires about work were projected. The Great Resignation did not tell a single story. It brought together competing accounts of freedom and failure, responsibility and refusal, endurance and exhaustion.

These narratives mattered not simply because they described what was happening, but because they shaped what could be justified in response. If quitting signaled laziness or moral decline, then stagnating wages, heightened surveillance, and intensified discipline could be framed as necessary correctives. If quitting signaled refusal or critique, then attention shifted toward the organization of work itself—toward questions of dignity, care, and the limits of endurance. The struggle over how to interpret the Great Resignation was, at its core, a struggle over how responsibility for instability would be assigned, and whose suffering would be rendered legitimate or disposable.

Stabilizing the Moment: Explanation, Experience, and the Problem of Quitting

In the early coverage of the Great Resignation, scholars and commentators moved quickly to make sense of rising quit rates. Some framed it as a long-overdue reckoning—arguing that the "freedom" afforded by early pandemic disruptions gave workers space to reassess their priorities, values, and expectations (Ksinan Jiskrova 2022; Hirsch 2021; Kumar 2021). Others pointed to more concrete, though often decontextualized, explanations: family and childcare responsibilities (Corbett 2022), toxic work cultures (Sull, Sull, and Zweig 2022), burnout and exhaustion (Jiskrova 2022; Moon et al. 2023), COVID-related health concerns (Miller 2021), vaccine requirements, dissatisfaction with work–life balance (Parker and Horowitz 2022), low pay and inadequate benefits, and limited advancement opportunities (Parker and Horowitz 2022).

These accounts mapped the material and organizational terrain in which quitting became more likely. They documented real pressures, real constraints, and real inequalities shaping workers' decisions. However, in treating quitting primarily as an outcome to be explained—as

the result of shocks, preferences, or incentives—many of these analyses implicitly bracketed the question of meaning. Quitting appeared as an effect of dissatisfaction or disruption, rather than as a practice that itself demanded justification, interpretation, and moral accounting.

This explanatory orientation also converged, at times unintentionally, with dominant public narratives. Accounts emphasizing individual reassessment or generational values echoed cultural claims that workers had simply become less willing to endure hardship. Others, in celebrating quitting as empowerment or refusal, risked overstating coherence and intent, reading exits as principled acts of resistance rather than as uneven, constrained responses to deteriorating conditions. In different ways, both framings tended to stabilize the Great Resignation by translating it into familiar explanatory terms—whether as moral decline or moral awakening.

What remained less visible in these accounts was how quitting itself became a site of struggle over responsibility and legitimacy. To explain why people left is not the same as asking what leaving came to mean, or how those meanings shaped what responses appeared reasonable in its aftermath. The Great Resignation was a question not only of why workers quit but also of how quitting was rendered sensible, defensible, or condemnable within the existing logics of work. It is this problem of intelligibility—and its consequences—that the analyses that follow take as their starting point.

I did not come to this project simply because I was curious about why people were quitting their jobs. I came to it because I had already encountered the question of work as a problem—one that did not present itself as a clear injustice or a singular breaking point, but as something diffuse, normalized, and difficult to contest.

Several years before the phrase "Great Resignation" entered public discourse, I left my first post-college job at a nonprofit. It was the kind of position widely understood to be meaningful and socially valuable, the sort of work one was supposed to feel grateful to have. The reality was long and irregular hours, constant emotional labor, and a salary that barely covered basic expenses. Exhaustion set in quickly, followed by a growing sense that the strain I was experiencing was not accidental but expected.

When I sought advice—from coworkers, supervisors, and even a mental health professional affiliated with the organization—the response was consistent and unremarkable: *that's just how it is*. The phrase was not offered as critique or warning, but as reassurance. To work hard, to care deeply, to be a good employee, was to accept exhaustion as normal and sacrifice as virtuous. What struck me was not only the exploitative

conditions themselves but also how readily they had been rendered livable—how exhaustion had been folded into the moral grammar of meaningful work.

I eventually decided to leave the position without a clear plan in place. The decision did not feel like resistance or empowerment. It felt provisional, uneasy, and difficult to explain—especially in a context where endurance was treated as a marker of commitment and departure as a failure to cope. Yet, leaving altered my relationship to work in ways that were immediately palpable. I was less anxious, more stable, and more able to reflect on the conditions I had previously accepted without question.

In the years that followed, I worked across a range of precarious settings—hospitality, contract research, contingent academic work—through a pandemic, a labor crisis, and the ongoing instability that marks much of contemporary work. If I bring a story to this book, it is not one of refusal or mastery, but of being caught inside the contradictions that define work under neoliberalism: between aspiration and exhaustion, flexibility and insecurity, meaning and survival.

When stories of the Great Resignation began to circulate, they did not register as novel. They echoed tensions I had been grappling with for years, while also sharpening questions I had not yet had the language to ask. What had come to feel untenable about work, and why did those conditions remain so difficult to contest? How were endurance, obligation, and departure being made sense of in different contexts? And why did this moment persist, rather than resolving itself as a temporary reaction to crisis?

This book emerged from those questions. It does not begin with the assumption that quitting is inherently resistant or inherently deficient. Instead, it asks how people come to make sense of their lives and labor under conditions that are increasingly difficult to inhabit yet continuously normalized—and what becomes visible when the stories that once sustained those conditions begin to strain.

Quitting, Exit, and the Limits of Existing Accounts

Quitting is not new as an object of scholarly attention. Classic accounts have framed exit as one possible response to dissatisfaction or decline, situating it alongside voice and loyalty as a mechanism through which individuals respond to organizational failure (Hirschman 1970). In this tradition, quitting appears as a strategic or expressive act—one option among others for signaling discontent or reallocating commitment.

Subsequent organizational research has taken up quitting primarily through the lens of voluntary turnover, modeling exit as an outcome shaped by shocks, labor-market opportunity, job satisfaction, and social diffusion (Lee and Mitchell 1994; Felps et al. 2009). These approaches have generated valuable insight into when and why workers are likely to leave.

More recent scholarship on the Great Resignation has expanded these accounts by framing quitting as a form of refusal or critique. Some scholars interpret the surge in resignations as evidence of a broader challenge to degraded working conditions, extractive organizational cultures, and the moralization of endurance (Gerson 2024; Coin 2025). From this perspective, quitting registers not merely as an individual decision but also as a collective signal that the promises attached to work—stability, meaning, mobility—have become increasingly difficult to sustain.

While these contributions have been essential for reframing the Great Resignation as more than a labor-market anomaly, they often rest on an implicit assumption that quitting functions primarily as resistance. In doing so, they risk overstating coherence and intent, reading exits as deliberate refusals of work as such rather than as uneven, constrained, and sometimes ambivalent responses to governing conditions that remain largely intact. Such accounts can obscure the ways neoliberal rationalities continue to operate through quitting itself, shaping how departure is justified, narrated, and evaluated.

The approach developed in this book builds on these traditions while shifting the analytic register. Rather than treating quitting as a strategic choice, a behavioral outcome, or a sign of refusal alone, it examines quitting as a discursive and ethical problem—one that emerges at the intersection of public narratives, institutional expectations, and lived contradictions. By attending to how resignations are made intelligible, contested, and moralized, the analysis traces not only moments of critique or refusal but also the ongoing operation of neoliberal governmentality through alignment, negotiation, and strain.

Situating the Analytic Problem

This book takes the Great Resignation as an empirical aperture onto the organization of work under neoliberal governance. Rather than treating resignations as isolated decisions or as the aggregate outcome of shifting preferences, it approaches the moment as one in which long-standing tensions surrounding work, obligation, and endurance became unusually visible and contested. What is at stake is not simply why people left

their jobs but also how leaving—and staying—came to be rendered sensible, defensible, or suspect within prevailing arrangements of work and with what consequences for those who could least afford misrecognition.

The analysis proceeds by bringing together two closely linked lines of inquiry. First, the book examines how the Great Resignation was discursively constructed through recurring public narratives that sought to stabilize its meaning. Across media commentary, organizational responses, and everyday talk, quitting was alternately framed as moral failure, generational entitlement, market correction, or collective refusal. These constructions did not merely describe what was happening; they organized how responsibility for instability was assigned, what responses appeared justified, and whose claims to exhaustion or dissatisfaction were recognized as legitimate, while foreclosing others as excessive, irresponsible, or implausible.

Second, the book traces how individuals engaged these constructions in narrating their own experiences of work and departure. Rather than treating subjectivity as a fixed outcome or a simple reflection of discourse, the analysis attends to how people inhabit, negotiate, and strain against governing norms as they attempt to make their lives intelligible under conditions increasingly difficult to sustain. Quitting appears here not as a uniform act, but as a site where alignment, ambivalence, recalibration, and refusal intersect—often unevenly and without resolution—revealing the limits of both moral endurance and celebratory accounts of exit.

These analytic moves allow the book to examine neoliberal governance as it is lived rather than simply imposed. By reading discursive constructions of the Great Resignation alongside the forms of self-relation they enable and constrain, the analysis shows how power operates through interpretation, justification, and moral evaluation, even in moments often framed as rupture. The Great Resignation thus emerges not as a singular break from the existing arrangements of work, but as a moment in which their fragility became difficult to deny, and in which the work of sustaining, reworking, or refusing those arrangements was redistributed unevenly across workers' lives.

The book proceeds as follows. Chapter 2 situates the Great Resignation within longer-run transformations in the organization and governance of work, tracing the historical reconfiguration of employment relations, responsibility, and risk that shaped the conditions under which widespread quitting became possible and intelligible. Rather than treating the Great Resignation as an anomalous rupture, this chapter establishes the structural and political terrain within which contemporary struggles over work unfold.