Episode Book

EPISODE #5576

Lying Flat as a Tactic: The Quiet Opt-Out

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SYNOPSIS

In 2021, a Chinese forum post titled "Lying Flat Is Justice" was censored and denounced on state television — for advocating nothing more than doing the minimum. This episode takes Daniel's question seriously: is lying flat a viable strategy for social change? We trace the family tree from foxi to tang ping to bai lan, follow the parallel evolutions in Japan's satori generation, Korea's N-po cohort, and America's quiet quitting wave, and dig into James C. Scott's "weapons of the weak" to understand why deniable, low-profile resistance has always been how people without power push back. Plus: the psychological contract, the Hirschman exit-vs-voice problem, and why management had to invent a whole taxonomy of terms for behavior that was always formally compliant.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

In April of two thousand twenty-one, a man on a Chinese internet forum wrote a post called "Lying Flat Is Justice," and within weeks the phrase had been scrubbed from the platforms and denounced on state television.



Herman

For doing nothing.



Corn

For doing nothing very deliberately. And Daniel wants to know whether that nothing is actually a strategy.



Herman

Right, because we've done the origins of this before. What Daniel's asking this time is different. He's asking what it means as a tactic.



Corn

Here's how he put it. He thinks lying flat is one of the more reasonable propositions for social change floating around, because it's non-violent in a world that's had more than enough violence, and because it's eccentric enough to attract attention, and attention spreads messages. But the part he keeps circling is the deniability. People are justifiably worried about losing their income if they protest, and lying flat leaves just enough room to say you weren't protesting at all, you were just tired. He doesn't buy that it's defeatist, either. His line is that if capitalism were a newsletter, this is an opt-out, not deleting your email account.



Herman

That's a good distinction.



Corn

And then he asks the two questions. Did it spark aligned movements in other countries. And have there been comparable quiet, targeted forms of protest through history, not the Western model where the dumpsters burn and the riot police get called, but the quieter version.



Herman

So before we go anywhere, we should be precise about what tang ping actually is, because the version that made it to the West got flattened.



Corn

Flattened how?



Herman

It gets described as young Chinese people giving up. That's not it. It's a rejection of the 996 system, nine in the morning to nine at night, six days a week, on the theory that the returns had stopped justifying the hours. The actual practice is doing the minimum required, refusing unpaid overtime, lowering your material desires on purpose. It's a reduction of ambition, not a cessation of work.



Corn

So not lying in bed.



Herman

Not lying in bed. The phrase people used was lying down flat and getting over the beatings. That's the register. It's someone deciding the beating isn't worth the prize.



Corn

And there's a family of these terms, right? It didn't come out of nowhere.



Herman

Foxi came first, around twenty seventeen, twenty eighteen. Buddha-like. A sort of generalized apathy, gentler than what came later. Then tang ping in twenty twenty-one. Then bai lan, which translates roughly as let it rot, and that one's more cynical. And you get the physical version too, the rural retirement enclaves. The Guardian ran a piece in May twenty twenty-four about a seaside town called Aranya that had turned into a haven for people doing this.



Corn

What did the authorities do?



Herman

Censored the term. State media pushed back on it directly. Which tells you they read it as a threat rather than as laziness. You don't write editorials against people who are just tired.



Corn

You write editorials against people who've found something that works.



Herman

That's the tell, yes.



Corn

So let's take Daniel's deniability point seriously, because I think it's the sharpest thing in the prompt. The reason this protects your income is that it's indistinguishable from ordinary burnout. There's no strike, no picket line, no firing offense. If your boss asks why you left at six, you say you were tired, or you had family things, or you did your contracted hours. All true. All unfalsifiable.



Herman

And that's not a loophole they stumbled into. It's the whole design.



Corn

The Western mirror makes it obvious. Quiet quitting, twenty twenty-two. The Guardian defined it as doing just enough in the office to keep up, then leaving on time and muting Slack.



Herman

Which is a definition of employment.



Corn

The top comment on Hacker News was exactly that. Doing your job to expectations and leaving on time, so not overdoing your job is basically quitting in their eyes. Ridiculous.



Herman

The employer's expectation was never the contract. It was the surplus above the contract. And when people stopped donating the surplus, management had no vocabulary for it, so they invented one.



Corn

Which is where it gets funny. You don't invent a term for something that isn't threatening.



Herman

Right. Quiet firing shows up in the Wall Street Journal in twenty twenty-two. Loud laborers shows up on CNBC in twenty twenty-three. That's management scrambling to name and police behavior that is formally compliant. If it were just laziness, you wouldn't need a taxonomy.



Corn

You'd need a performance review. There's a comment I keep thinking about, from one of the threads. The problem doesn't originate from anything a violent revolution would resolve. It comes from the way we engage in peaceful transactions.



Herman

That's the whole thesis of the movement in one sentence.



Corn

Because a riot attacks symbols. This withdraws participation from the transaction itself. You're not storming the building, you're declining to be a customer of the arrangement.



Herman

And there's a psychologist who framed it well. Ashley Weinberg, at the University of Salford. She talks about the psychological contract, the unwritten expectations of loyalty that sit on top of the written one. When the organization violates those, employees withdraw the discretionary effort that was never contractual in the first place.



Corn

So it's reciprocity, not surrender.



Herman

It's reciprocity. The employee is holding up their end of the actual agreement and declining the imaginary one.



Corn

Which brings Daniel's newsletter line back around. If the current arrangement is a newsletter, this is unsubscribing from the marketing emails while keeping the account.



Herman

It's an opt-out, not a deletion. You still work. You just stop handing over the unpaid overtime, the emotional investment, the aspirational consumption. It's a reduction of the surplus, not an exit from the economy.



Corn

And the surplus is the part that was never priced.



Herman

The surplus is the entire margin.



Corn

So that's the mechanism. The question is whether it spreads, because the pattern shows up everywhere once you start looking.



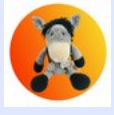
Herman

It does, and I'd argue the causation is diffuse. This is parallel evolution more than export. Japan is the original template. The satori generation, hikikomori, the NEET category they call niito. Withdrawal from a hyper-competitive economy that had stopped rewarding the competition.



Corn

How far back does the Japanese version go?



Herman

The satori generation label is from around twenty ten, but the behavior predates the label by a decade. And hikikomori as a clinical and social category goes back to the nineties. So Japan ran this experiment first, and the West mostly didn't notice.



Corn

Then Korea.



Herman

Korea's version is the N-po generation. N-po means giving up N things. Courtship, marriage, children, home ownership, and the list extends. It's the same structure as tang ping with a different national costume.



Corn

And the US version is quiet quitting and the Great Resignation.



Herman

And r/antiwork, which is the more explicitly political wing of it. There's a Washington Post thread from twenty twenty-one, on a jobs report, where commenters were explicitly comparing the Great Resignation to tang ping. Same sentiment, different continent, no evidence one caused the other.



Corn

What about India?



Herman

Cornell did a study in twenty twenty-two on delayed marriage among what they described as young, male and aimless. And the commenters on that were invoking tang ping by name. So the vocabulary travels even when the movement doesn't.



Corn

And then the individualized versions, which I think are the biggest category. Van life, tiny homes, mini-retirements, moving to a cheaper country.



Herman

That's the same logic with better branding. Reduce your burn rate until the arrangement stops owning you.



Corn

There's a through-line under all of it. A generational collapse of faith that effort yields security. In China it's sharpened by youth unemployment and a surplus of roughly thirty million men from the One Child Policy, which makes the marriage market a losing game for a large cohort by arithmetic alone.



Herman

One commenter put it flatly. They all have a similar sentiment, that the promise of a better life through hard work is a lie. The pandemic just accelerated what was already underway.



Corn

That's the sentence. Everything else is the costume.



Herman

And it explains why the movements look different but behave the same. In each case the deal stopped clearing, and people stopped bidding.



Corn

Now, Daniel's second question is the one I actually wanted to get to. Historical precedents. The quiet version. And there's a framework that fits this almost too well.



Herman

James C. Scott. Weapons of the weak.



Corn

Explain it for the people who haven't read it.



Herman

Scott's argument is that people who can't afford open confrontation resist in everyday, low-profile ways. Foot-dragging. Feigned ignorance. Deliberate inefficiency. Dissimulation. Small sabotages that are individually deniable and collectively expensive. He was writing about Southeast Asian peasantries, but the mechanism is general.



Corn

And lying flat is a textbook case.



Herman

It's almost the purest case. There's no organization, no leadership, no demands. Just a large number of people independently deciding not to try as hard.



Corn

Which is also the weakness. There's nobody to negotiate with.



Herman

That's the tension, and I don't think it resolves.



Corn

What about the more formal versions? Work-to-rule.



Herman

Work-to-rule is the same deniability structure in a union context. You follow the rules exactly, and productivity collapses, because every real workplace runs on a thousand small rule violations that nobody wrote down. Formally compliant, functionally disruptive. It's been used for a century and it's very hard to discipline, because the worker is doing precisely what the manual says.



Corn

Same as Hilbert's logbook, actually.



Herman

Same structure, yes.



Corn

And then the deeper historical cases. Slave day-to-day resistance, peasant non-compliance, tax avoidance, the informal economy. Monastic withdrawal as an implicit critique of the world it left.



Herman

All of it is the same move. You don't attack the system. You decline to feed it.



Corn

Which raises the obvious objection, and I think we should air it rather than pretend it isn't there. The Atlantic, the Washington Post, the Financial Times all ran pieces calling quiet quitting a fake trend. Worse than nonsense was one of the lines.



Herman

That critique has a real core. A lot of what got labeled quiet quitting was just ordinary disengagement, and ordinary disengagement is as old as employment. If you squint, the trend is a media narrative imposed on burnout.



Corn

But the counter is that the naming is the event. The fact that management had to invent a term, and then invent counter-terms, tells you something changed in the expectation.



Herman

The behavior may be ancient. The refusal to be ashamed of it is new.



Corn

There's a comment I want to use. Laying flat, quiet quitting, these movements are not accidental.



Herman

They're a signal.



Corn

They're a collective bargaining position expressed through behavior instead of demands. Which is a strange thing to be, because it's a bargaining position with no representative at the table.



Herman

That's the Hirschman problem. Exit versus Voice. Lying flat is Exit. You leave the arrangement rather than arguing inside it. And Hirschman's point was that Exit is a real form of influence, but it's a blunt one, because the organization doesn't have to respond to you. It just has to survive without you.



Corn

And if enough people exit quietly, the organization can absorb it as apathy.



Herman

Which is exactly what it looks like from the outside. You can't tell the difference between a protest and a slump.



Corn

That's the same ambiguity that protects the participants. It's a feature and a limit at the same time.



Herman

It's the same property.



Corn

So the honest answer to Daniel's question is that quiet withdrawal is real, it's old, it recurs, and it's hard to tell from giving up. And the people doing it have an interest in keeping it that way.



Herman

I don't think we can resolve that, and I don't think the episode needs to.



Corn

Agreed. I want to sit in it for a second, though. There's a demographic angle that I think makes the state response make more sense.



Herman

Go on.



Corn

Lying flat, delayed marriage, and collapsing birth rates are linked. You can't suppress one without suppressing the others. So when Beijing censors a phrase about working fewer hours, it's not really about labor productivity. It's about whether a generation is going to reproduce.



Herman

And that's a much bigger fear than a strike.



Corn

A strike is a negotiating position. A birth strike is an existential one.



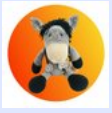
Herman

That's the part that makes the official reaction legible. You don't write editorials against lazy people. You write them against people who've found a way to leave.



Corn

So the state's interest here is demographic as much as ideological.



Herman

More demographic, honestly. Labor unrest they have institutions for. A cohort that quietly declines to form households, they don't.



Corn

Which makes the deniability even more threatening. You can't arrest someone for not having children.



Herman

You can only make it more expensive to not have them, which is the opposite of what you'd want to do.



Corn

That's a trap of their own making.



Hilbert

I did eleven months on nights at a self-storage place.



Corn

Where was that?



Hilbert

Off the highway, past the fairground. Booth at the gate, monitors, rounds every two hours. Sign the logbook, walk the aisles, back to the booth. That was the whole job.



Herman

And what did you learn?



Hilbert

That the building was half empty. That's the first thing. You walk those aisles at two in the morning and you count the padlocks, and it's maybe half. And the owner wasn't worried about it. He made more off the late fees and the abandoned units than he made off the rent.



Corn

Say that again.



Hilbert

The business model was people overcommitting and then quietly giving up. You rent the unit for the stuff you can't let go of, you fall behind, you keep paying the late fee because cancelling means admitting you failed. And then one day you stop paying entirely and he auctions the contents. He did better on those months than on the good ones.



Herman

So the facility was monetizing the sunk cost.



Hilbert

He was monetizing the sunk cost. The stuff in the unit was worth less than the unit. Everybody knew that except the person paying for it.



Corn

And you did the job to spec.



Hilbert

I did exactly what the manual said. Rounds every two hours. Logbook signed. Nothing more. And they couldn't fire me, because I was doing the job. They just hated me for it. You'd get the look on the way past the office.



Herman

What look?



Hilbert

The look you get when you've done nothing wrong and it's still a problem. I knew that look pretty well by the end.



Corn

You don't think lying flat is defeatist.



Hilbert

I think it's the first honest thing anyone's done in decades. You know what the owner said to me once? He said the unit doesn't cost him anything when it's empty. It costs him when somebody cancels, because then he has to clean it out and re-list it. So the ideal customer is the one who keeps paying and never comes back.



Herman

That's a business built on people not noticing.



Hilbert

Lying flat is just noticing. It's cancelling the unit. You don't burn the place down. You just stop paying for something you stopped using two years ago.



Corn

The system doesn't collapse.



Hilbert

It doesn't collapse. It gets annoyed and invents a new word for you. That's all it does. I've seen it from the booth.



Herman

Did he ever say anything about the empty units?



Hilbert

He said the empty ones were the ones he was proud of. Because those were the ones where somebody finally let go. He said it like it was a compliment. I don't think he meant it that way.



Corn

Hilbert, that's the cleanest version of the whole argument I've heard all episode.



Hilbert

It's just a storage facility.



Corn

It's never just a storage facility.



Hilbert

No. It isn't.



Corn

The question underneath all of this is whether exit actually changes anything, or whether it just lets the system off the hook by removing the people who might have pushed for reform.



Herman

I don't think there's a clean answer. Quiet movements rarely force change on their own. They get absorbed as apathy, or they get renamed and sold back to you as a lifestyle brand.



Corn

But they might be the only option for people who can't afford to burn dumpsters. That's the part I keep coming back to.



Herman

It's the honest part. The people with the least room to protest loudly are the ones who end up protesting quietly.



Corn

There's one more thing I want to put on the table before we close, and it's the cutting-room floor item. The Church of the SubGenius.



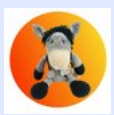
Herman

The slack people.



Corn

Their whole theology is built around not buying into the productivity religion. It started in the late seventies as a joke, and it's still running. There's a strain of Western culture that's been making this argument for fifty years, and it's been filed as comedy the entire time.



Herman

Which is how you get to say it without getting censored.



Corn

That's the whole trick.



Herman

One forward thought, then. If lying flat is exit rather than voice, the thing to watch isn't whether it forces reform. It's whether the institutions can survive a generation that's stopped paying for the unit.



Corn

That's the storage facility question. Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop, our producer, who has been at the desk the whole time.



Herman

This has been My Weird Prompts.



Corn

If you want to send us something, email us at show at my weird prompts dot com. We'll be back soon.