

I'll Sleep When I'm Dead: Agency and Work in Political Imagination [SLIDE]

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I once attended a conference on the implications of Foucault's philosophy for ethics and the body. Fogged with lack of sleep and the nervous exhaustion that comes from sitting in neon-lit rooms and trying for hours to focus on read-aloud presentations, I heard one speaker repeatedly talk of "anaesthetics of existence." I dozily turned this mysterious phrase over in my head, wondering what it could mean, and how it fit with the rest of the paper. Eventually, of course, I realized that the speaker was talking too fast, running together her words, and actually saying "an aesthetics of existence," a phrase that Foucault and his interpreters often used and that made perfect sense of the rest. Lots of people have written about Foucault's later emphasis on living life as art, and the centrality to that endeavour of a certain critical ethos, including in one's relation to oneself. In the book I had just finished at the time I had myself explored examples of ethically fraught self-transformations one might undertake—changing sex, losing weight, having cosmetic surgery—as having ambiguous relationships both to conformity and to transgression. They are also (although I didn't quite say this) projects of the self that require a lot of hard work and provoke a lot of anxiety about one's relation to *agency* (that much-loved term of social science art).

I mention that I was fried when I heard this talk because of the irony of that mishearing. The idea of "*anaesthetics* of existence" stuck with me. What might that be? Perhaps it's a way of being in the world that evades the constant demand for agential conduct, and gives a one-finger salute to the political assumption that one's actions must accumulate to form a coherent self with the right kind of life project. How do we in fact cope with the demands of a speeded-up, sensorily challenging environment, in which expectations are rising about what we will get done (and what that doing says about us), even as our capacity to effect the self-development implied by these expectations is diminishing? What is the potential of a politics that resists these demands? In the years after that

conference I had a baby and went through a period of chronic pain and fatigue. I participated in angst-ridden debates about the future of the academy and of graduate education in light of increasing pressures on university teachers. I saw colleagues, former students, friends and family working jobs so demanding that their capacity to find time to spend with their loved ones or to have a minimal social life was undercut. (Others, meanwhile, struggled to find any work at all, while still others worked in underpaid or unpaid positions that drained their energies without using their talents.) All these experiences made me think very carefully about where I put my labour (and about why I often had no real choice about where to put it), and to consider anew the political quality of surprisingly complex forms of depletion caused to individuals by various work worlds. We have been thoroughly colonized by an economic logic of building human capital and increasing productivity and “growth”, so much so that it can be hard to see how we are ensnared by this logic. [SLIDE].

One of the central themes of my more recent work, then, is the paradox of tacit refusal of agency and its trappings—all those gestures large and small that we make to evade the demand that we should be individuals with articulated life projects that proceed progressively and logically toward achieving a vision of personal success; that we should further these futuristic imaginings for ourselves with devotion to wage slavery and a Protestant work ethic; that “it gets better” both individually and collectively if we “just do it” [SLIDE]. I often joke that writing a book about the limits of agency and against the rational articulation of personal projects is a paradoxical challenge. One of the themes it has led me to is sleep, which is my focus today. On the last two slides you see two annoying motivational slogans: “Some people dream of success. Others stay awake to achieve it.” And “no one looks back on their life and remembers the nights they had plenty of sleep.” Both slogans imply that personal achievement is impeded by sleep. A successful life requires not passive aspiration but conscious action. Waking work, not dreaming. Your peak experiences won’t emerge

from resting, no matter that getting “plenty of sleep” is key to human mental health. These slogans, then, link the themes of my recent work: agency-as-doing (and, in particular, doing-as-work) and wakefulness, versus refusal or passivity and sleep. [BLANK SLIDE]

My most general thesis about sleep is that the way we talk about it—which we do a lot—is profoundly culturally symptomatic. For Freud, “a symptom is a sign of, and a substitute for, an instinctual satisfaction which has remained in abeyance; it is a consequence of the process of repression” (“Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety” 20.91) In other words, a symptom is an unusual (and often damaging) repeated behaviour that comes from refusing to allow our deeper needs into conscious awareness. Sometimes, Freud elsewhere remarks, a symptom can overwhelm the subject, “paralysing him for all the important tasks of life” (Introductory Lectures 16.358). In broader terms, I am suggesting that the ways we represent and talk about sleep exhibit repeating tropes that are symptoms of cultural repression. What is being managed by these symptoms, I suggest, is the reality that not all human experience can be consciously controlled; that some parts of our lives must be given up to unconsciousness and to the undirectable and uncanny fantasies of dreams; that our time is not all our own to consciously orchestrate and fill as we wish.

In this context I am interested in projects that symptomatically imagine a future without sleep, or with a significantly diminished need for sleep, and what these say about our understandings of temporality, agency, and embodiment. I start from imagined futures in which sleep is eliminated or dramatically reduced, providing selective advantage to an elite. And I move on to show how sleep figures in a cultural imaginary most pronounced in the United States but alive and well, to my knowledge, in Canada, the UK, and Australia, where neoliberal norms of work inflect understandings of time and agency. These norms have been well explored by other commentators. They include: an insistence that the individual worker subordinate themselves to the work environment (rather than that environment accommodating the needs of workers); an increasing emphasis on

employer prerogative—the idea that the individual or business paying a wage should be able to stipulate terms of employment such as hours worked, vacation time, hiring and firing practices, etc.; and a carefully cultivated work ethic, applied disproportionately to service labour, that represents subordinating one’s life to paid work as sign of good character and, paradoxically, of robust agency. Most centrally, neoliberalism extends the goals of market capitalism into all areas of human life, including those that might otherwise be governed by non-economic values. It urges us to think of all political relationships through the lens of profitability, productivity, and capital accumulation, and to imagine ourselves as a locus for the accretion of “human capital.” These norms are profoundly individualizing and depoliticizing, and I show how representations of sleep are bound up with the social injustices of class, race, and gender. I conclude by suggesting that sleep is valuable beyond its biological necessity and that reclaiming sleep could form part of a political strategy yet to be articulated.

[SLIDE] Sleepless futures

Imagining a future without sleep or with a significantly reduced need for sleep happens in at least three contexts. First, it is a trope of science fiction, with Nancy Kress’s 1993 novel *Beggars in Spain* [SLIDE] being the best-known example. In this futuristic narrative (which starts in 2008 and ends in 2091), would-be parents with money and access request genetically-modified children with the usual desirable characteristics—normative good looks, intelligence, sporting ability, musicality. A new innovation makes it possible also to create and implant an embryo that will become a person who needs no sleep; the book opens with tycoon Roger Camden insisting on having this innovation for his imagined daughter. In a contrived narrative twist, one genetically-engineered sleepless embryo is implanted in his wife, Elizabeth, in the same month as she conceives a second embryo without modification, who will, of course, need to sleep. Thus much of the book revolves around

the parallel lives of the twin sisters, Leisha and Alice, one part of an elite Sleepless minority, the other an ordinary sleeper. Young Leisha is highly gifted—where her sleepless status is connected to being “more intelligent, better at problem-solving, and more joyous.” The Sleepless have more time to learn (Leisha has a night tutor), but their abilities are not only due to independent genetic modification combined with hours at the desk. Sleep itself is figured by Kress as depleting. As Susan Melling, genetic scientist, explains (fake science alert!):

REM sleep bombards the cerebral cortex with random neural firings from the brain stem; dreaming occurs because the poor besieged cortex tries so hard to make sense of the activated images and memories. It spends a lot of energy doing that. Without that energy expenditure, nonsleep cerebrums save the wear-and-tear and do better at coordinating real-life input. Thus, greater intelligence and problem-solving. (9-10)

Dreaming, on this account, is a random activity that wastes precious neural energy; REM sleep even “causes depression.” Later in the novel, the Sleepless are found not to age, giving them lives of unknown length, further emphasizing their temporal advantage. They become a reviled elite, living in a secure zone known as Sanctuary.

Camden and his financial mentor Kenzo Yagai are libertarian figures, prone to Randian monologues:

A man’s worth to society and to himself doesn’t rest on what he thinks other people should do or be or feel, but on himself. On what he can actually do, and do well. People trade what they do well, and everyone benefits. The basic tool of civilization is the contract. Contracts are voluntary and mutually beneficial. As opposed to coercion, which is wrong. (23)

Making one’s individuality manifest—developing one’s potential—is the purpose of a human life and what makes it good (18). The only human dignity, Yagai pronounces, comes from individual effort (24). The ideology is a bit confused (Kress was no political theorist), but the gist is that the Sleepless are individually entitled to whatever benefits accrue from their various gene-mods, and that indeed having the time to develop one’s self, especially through wealth accumulation (Camden and Yagai are both hugely wealthy from complex financial speculation and innovation), makes one a

better human. Sleepless Leisha, whizkid Harvard law graduate, has plenty of conventional potential to develop. Alice, the sleeping twin, drops in and out of the book, and cuts an ambivalent figure. She is represented as moody, making poor choices, and “stocky” or “stout”—her body itself assuming the stereotypical form of unproductivity.

This is the stuff of science fiction, but it connects quite straightforwardly with current real-life projects. Second [SLIDE], working to minimize the time we spend asleep is an actual, favoured project of some transhumanist biohackers. There are brain-stimulating devices, drugs, and training programs aimed at moving your sleep pattern from (for example) the nocturnal monophasic (8 hours of sleep at night) to fully polyphasic, taking six 20-minute naps in every 24 hours. There is as yet (to my knowledge) no ethnographic or medical research on this particular corner of the human enhancement world. Nor has anyone gone beyond journalistic commentary on a third, related context in which the need for sleep is imagined discontinued. [SLIDE] Militaries around the world have long conducted research into reducing or ending the human need for sleep. The army that sleeps less while retaining cognitive capacity fights longer and, in the long, depleting wars of attrition that are today’s conflicts, presses their advantage against enemy combatants. In all these contexts, no sleep or less sleep is not available to everyone: those who do not sleep (or who sleep significantly less) are figured as superior and having an edge on a sleeping (or *sleepier*) population.

What is the point of less sleep? The most obvious response, evident in all these examples, is that sleep is a waste of time [SLIDE], and we could all get a lot more done if we needed less of it—or even none at all. What would we be doing if we didn’t sleep? We might be, as Kress imagines, studying law, patenting scientific discoveries, running profit-making companies, or building alternative super-communities. We might be fighting wars. It’s possible we would be doing marvellous but more mundane things—having great sex, catching up with long-lost friends, or reading all the novels we always meant to read. But the dominant message about lessening the need

for sleep—at least in western anglo cultures—is that if we slept less, we could do more (as a colleague asked, would it be worth it to “dust the baseboards, finish reports, and pay taxes”?). “To be productive was to be fully human,” as Kress says (208). “I’ll sleep when I’m dead,” busy and important people like to say. Time spent in the land of nod is wasted time that could have been put to better use.

[SLIDE] **Work, agency, and wasting time**

The concept of “wasting” time clearly depends on a long and well-documented history in the industrial west of hypostatizing time—of turning the concept into a thing, and specifically a commodity (to be saved, invested, bought, sold, or squandered). Once time can be wasted, we can ask what activities epitomise wasting time, and, the assumed converse, which activities signal using time efficiently, or being productive. To be “productive” is simply to make something (not necessarily a material object); in economics, however, productivity is a more complex (and contested) measure of the ratio of labour input to the volume of output. For example, it might be measured as hours worked by a national population relative to Gross Domestic Product. To increase productivity, then, is to get more value added in a transformative process with the same inputs (or to reduce inputs without thereby reducing outputs). Productivity has been a concern of political economy since the advent of mass industrial society. Most famously the practices of Taylorism, in the second half of the nineteenth century, and Fordism, in the twentieth, aimed to increase productivity with emphases on individual worker efficiency and mass production, respectively.

If we define “work” broadly as the transformation of the world through human effort, then it is tautologically a *productive* activity. I could step out into my garden and water the plants, or sit down with my son and figure through some chess problems, or go downtown to volunteer at the library, and all those activities could be considered “work.” When we speak colloquially of being

productive, however, the kind of work involved is usually more narrowly construed. It is likely to entail a tangible output, even though the term has expanded from its most frequent use in industrial mass production to include the products of white-collar workers (and even the very ephemeral outputs that academics produce, like journal articles). Further, feminist scholars have long known that working for wages is the socially favoured form of work, while non-remunerated work is literally and symbolically devalued. Waged work is understood as achievement, as a form of entrepreneurial action, as well as a marker of good moral character. Relatedly, work that is done in public, and is hence visible and receives social recognition, is also typically highly valued: leaving one's home and going to a work site—rather than doing domestic work—more closely fits the paradigm of productivity.

In my larger project I am trying to flesh out a string of associations in a particular neoliberal imaginary. I argue that agency is linked to the successful individual accumulation of human capital and thereby disconnected from politics. Against the current of labour history, where work has been understood ambivalently as a site of collective unfreedom, work is represented as a privileged site of agency, and, in turn work that is paid (however little) is valued over the unpaid. While working for money, one tries to be productive, which requires not wasting time. Not wasting time is construed as minimizing one's need for sleep. This chain of suggestive inferences is one of the ways that sleep is ultimately linked to loss of agency.

I've been thinking about what kind of evidence base would need to be marshalled to fully develop this position. At the moment I'm working on the last two steps. The connection between wasting time and sleeping, on the one hand, and productivity and wakefulness on the other, has a long reach. [SLIDE] Alan Derickson's history of work in America in the 1800s, for example, focuses on steel workers, Pullman train porters, and long-haul truckers in the emerging industrial economy. Derickson argues that overwork and exploitation came to be justified by a contrived association

between resisting sleep—pushing on, keeping up—and being adequately masculine. In 1889 Thomas Edison [SLIDE] himself claimed to sleep only four hours per night, using power naps on work benches to catch up. He urged his work ethic and his sleep schedule on all his male employees, some of whom apparently had to be roused from factory corners. In an age that had almost no medical understanding of the functions of sleep, it was even easier for entrepreneurs and tycoons to declare that sleep is for the weak, and wakefulness is “manly.”

[BLANK SLIDE] The connection between a more contemporary neoliberal work ethic and refusing sleep is thus, on the one hand, a straightforward continuation of this tradition: sleep less, work more, increase productivity, and thereby show your aspirational commitment to norms of successful bourgeois masculinity. As Kathi Weeks argues in her book *The Problem With Work*, however, the “work ethic” under neoliberalism serves more diverse ideological functions. The good neoliberal subject is an actor—someone who takes the lead, acts decisively, takes initiatives—as well as an entrepreneur with regard to building their own human capital. One of the cruelties of current labour markets is the way that more and more jobs are *represented* as embodying this kind of autonomy and providing the opportunity to show character, while fewer and fewer opportunities to *be* this kind of agent in any meaningful way actually exist. For example, this image [SLIDE]—an ad for the company Fiverr, which provides “freelance services for the lean entrepreneur”—appeared on my Facebook feed in the context of a *New Yorker* story about the gig economy. The Fiverr campaign—“In Doers We Trust”—gets a roasting from the *New Yorker*’s Jia Tolentino, who points out that it is exemplary of an economic climate in the US in which self-reliance and driving oneself to entrepreneurial heights are taken to absurd extremes, at the expense of systemic economic critique and in the absence of a social contract to protect and support workers. I am interested in the campaign’s iconographic linking of refusing sleep not only with entrepreneurial labour but also, in turn, with “doing”—with action itself [SLIDE].

Dreaming is often taken to be the most valuable aspect of sleep and has a long history of association with creativity, imagination, and aspiration. In the Freudian tradition, the dream reveals the unconscious, disclosing in coded form that which the conscious mind has repressed and cannot tolerate in direct apprehension. Dreaming, on this view, is an integrated part of the narrative self, allowing us to manage difficult affects and reach insights unavailable to the conscious mind. The neoliberal refusal of sleep is in this way two-dimensional, returning to a pre-psychoanalytic understanding of human psychological depth—although perhaps that is the subject of another talk. The dream is also often understood as a catalyst for intellectual ephipany. For example, Julia Kristeva writes:

[SLIDE] And I very clearly remember this particular moment where I was lying in bed at night and when the word ‘abjection’ came to me, at the crossroads between different thoughts. I insist a little bit deliberately on this rather nocturnal and dreamlike situation for these situations are made possible by the fact that, at night, our conscious filters are weaker; that is, our intellectual mechanisms are at work, but by way of analogies rather than by obedience to the rigorous mastering of concepts. Thus the whole thinking-process itself becomes closer to an aesthetic process. (Kristeva in Coles and Defert, [The Anxiety of Interdisciplinarity](#), 1998:10).

Dreaming has a more explicit political role, too. [SLIDE] “I have a dream,” proclaimed Martin Luther King in 1963, projecting himself and his audience into a future of racial equality and freedom. In his speech, dreaming and doing are inseparable: as he repeats the leitmotif, he moves through a long list of examples of contemporary injustices, imagining (dreaming) each transformed as part of a better United States. Fiverr is having none of it [SLIDE]. The pointed use of a Black model next to this slogan speaks volumes about the state of racial politics in the US. Rather than wasting time dreaming of racial equality, the ad seems to say, Black people in the US could be starting their own “lean” businesses. Here it is not just that agency is achieved through work, but that *political* agency—acting to change structures of power in the name of justice—is tacitly excluded from “doing.” The ad concomitantly depreciates sleep even as dreaming, which is more often seen as existentially valuable. In tandem, the Fiverr slogan exemplifies how the cultural understanding of

what it is to be an agent becomes thinner and thinner: at its most absurd, being a doer might be reducible to staying awake.

[BLANK SLIDE] The examples I've provided so far show, if only allusively, that sleep has a race, class, and gender politics. Dreaming of a future without racism, or working against economic exploitation, are contrasted with showing one's capacity to act through precarious labour in the present. The vilification of sleep as "for the weak" is a powerful gesture of privilege. This utopian aspiration to sleep less and achieve more contrasts with the current realities of sleep deprivation, sleep disorders, and chronic insomnia that bedevil western populations, and are especially pressing for truck drivers, students cramming for exams, medical residents doing impossibly long hospital stints, and shift-workers of any kind. In the UK, "zero hours" contracts for especially vulnerable workers (like hotel and hospital cleaners, or seasonal agricultural pickers) require that workers be continuously available for work without guaranteeing any number of hours per week of work, or any particular schedule. They provide the ultimate flexibility for the employer at the extreme of income insecurity for the worker. These populations are not first in line for a biohacked sleep program. I'd like to write a dystopian science fiction novel, contra Kress, where the elite get enormous amounts of leisurely and uninterrupted sleep, considered a desirable luxury, while the sleepless are proletarians, working to support their lifestyle. Perhaps it would not be sufficiently different from our present. Aiming simply to get more sleep, in other words, is what, to paraphrase billionaire tax-evader Leona Helmsley, the "little people" do, while technologies of sleep are for the *Überman* [SLIDE] (the name of the polyphasic sleep pattern that is the apotheosis of the biohacked training).

These vigilant subjects are manly, all too Übermanly. Their sleep privilege is marked by the complexity and price of the technologies of sleep they choose. [SLIDE] Consider this ad for a long-haul red-eye. The right sleep in the right conditions will turn you from a pussy cat into a predator, if you invest in business class tickets and expensive hotel rooms. The gender coding is subtle, as it

typically is in 2017 when a small but economically and symbolically significant minority of predominantly white women do everything men do. It's a male lion, but so what? I'm sure British Airways will take just under ten thousand Canadian dollars from any woman who wants a business class bed on their New York to London flight. Using cats small and large is a clever way of signalling to the customer without picturing him. When he is represented the business traveller is almost always a middle-aged white man in a suit, an elite masculine subject doing important things that require elaborate (and expensive) services to accomplish. The affective labour of creating those services falls to flight attendants, hotel maids, receptionists and secretaries. In case you don't believe me, look [SLIDE] at this earlier (creepier, much less subtle) BA ad for "cradle seats" in business class, which Sarah Sharma points out elides maternal love and labour with the work of the seating technology (and tacitly the flight attendant), and the sleeping baby with the archetypal businessman.

For those women burdened with a double shift, or precarious and erratic paid work, or care work (paid or unpaid) that takes place at all hours, sleep's relation to labour is fraught. The kind of work that involves being routinely woken during one's normal sleep hours, or systematically deprived of sleep, is typically organized around taking care of others—home health aides, care home workers, nannies, or new parents. The people who really need sleep support are not middle-aged white men flying to New York, but the racialized women in these occupations [SLIDE]. Visions of a sleepless future are indifferent to this reality. As I've shown, they are focused instead on elite performance by people to whom cutting-edge technologies can be sold and whose productivity is perceived to have individualized value. Some people's work, in other words, is important enough that they must be enabled to do as much of it as possible, minimizing sleep. Other people, doing necessary but interchangeable and unskilled work, can be exhausted and discarded.

The value of sleep

Sleep is a biological necessity but is less often framed as an existential one. What could be the value of falling into sleep, apart from waking up refreshed at the other end? One obvious answer to which I've already alluded is that asleep we dream, and dreams have long been thought of as useful to imagination, creativity, insight, and self-knowledge. They are also significant literally and metaphorically to political action in which imaginative projection of a better future is a tool of social change. The rejection of sleep is explicitly depoliticizing, uncritically embracing a longstanding "work ethic" that individualizes and isolates precarious and exploited workers, while focusing on their characters in ways that have become both more vacuous and more vicious.

Behind the paradigm I've described is an ideological view of human subjects as separate from one another, each of us driven by the need to act, to control our actions, and to make them economically valuable. On this view, sleep is both the absence of my agency and a block to its continuous exercise. In imagining ourselves better off without it, we are not only embracing productivity, but refusing those moments of subjective experience that are blank, anonymous, or lacking in distinctiveness. In other parts of this project I have argued that even dreamless sleep is valuable because it provides a descent into "night"—an apprehension of unbounded depth, in which my own body ceases to be discrete and individualized. I defend a lived experience of night as central to human subjectivity both as a reaffirmation of identity, and as offering the possibility of anonymity. [SLIDE] In Lisa Guenther's words,

sleep is the escape that both reconnects me to the experience of primary spatiality—to the night—and also allows me to retain and even recover my sense of personal identity, my distinction from the night, the root of my own subjective existence. The temporal rhythm of alternating night and day, sleep and waking, release and return, sustains the fabric of embodied subjectivity in a world that is experienced in depth, somewhere between the extremes of pure depth and objective space (2013, 173).

This argument has a political consequence: to absent oneself in sleep offers a curious respite from the demand to be or to become an individual, where that late liberal identity is understood

through the exercise of agency. If I am right that agency has become too heavily dependent on working, as well as evacuated of political force, then the lived experience of sleep is a counterpoint to that grossly inflated yet also strangely attenuated experience of my own entrepreneurial self under late capitalism. Ultimately this may just be another way of saying that neoliberals have reason to revile sleep. But it resists that view with philosophical clout, rather than merely stating that regrettably we cannot live without the blank and useless idleness of slumber. It makes symptomatic discussion of sleep into a political issue.

Finally, the cultural imaginary that understands sleep as a waste of time and a sleepless future as one filled with workaholic “doers” is not ubiquitous [SLIDE]. Even in the US and UK, where neoliberal ideology and economic austerity have the most purchase, there is plenty of popular resistance to the glorification of precarious work. In this context, sleep is sometimes valued as a way of refusing such work. It is also praised more intrinsically as a form of meditation; a pleasure; a healing state; or a retreat. [SLIDE] *Staying woke* may be the contemporary language of social justice, but this should, as this placard inadvertently suggests, include sleep. [SLIDE]