

Sleep is revolution in an insomniac world: What dreams may come

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Le Monde Diplomatique, English Edition, June 2014

Capitalism doesn't sleep. And it doesn't like you sleeping either. You're not producing or consuming, and you're not on call.

Anyone who has lived along the west coast of North America may know that, each year, hundreds of species of birds migrate seasonally along that continental shelf. One of these is the white-crowned sparrow, which has a highly unusual capacity for staying awake, for as long as seven days during migrations. This behaviour enables them to fly and navigate by night and forage for nourishment by day, without rest. Over the past five years the US Defense Department has spent large amounts of money to study these creatures. Researchers with government funding have been investigating the brain activity of the birds during these long sleepless periods, with the hope of acquiring knowledge applicable to human beings.

The initial objective is the creation of the sleepless soldier, and the project is only one small part of a broader military effort to achieve at least limited mastery over human sleep. The near-term goal is the development of methods to allow a combatant to go for a minimum of seven days without sleep, and in the longer term perhaps at least double that, while preserving high levels of mental and physical performance. Existing means of producing sleeplessness have always been accompanied by deleterious cognitive and psychic deficits (reduced alertness). The scientific quest is not to find ways of stimulating wakefulness but to reduce the body's *need* for sleep.

As history has shown, war-related innovations are inevitably assimilated into a broader social sphere, and the sleepless soldier would be the forerunner of the sleepless worker or consumer. Non-sleep products, aggressively promoted by pharmaceutical companies, would become first a lifestyle option, and eventually, for many, a necessity. 24/7 markets and a global infrastructure for continuous work and consumption have been in place for some time, but now a human subject is in the making to coincide with these: a provisional opening onto some of the paradoxes of the life-world of 21st-century capitalism.

Sleep, in its profound uselessness and intrinsic passivity, with the incalculable losses it causes in production time, circulation and consumption, will always collide with the demands of a 24/7 universe. The huge portion of our lives that we spend asleep, freed from simulated needs, subsists as one of the great human affronts to the voraciousness of contemporary capitalism. Most of the necessities of human life — hunger, thirst, sexual desire, and recently the need for friendship — have been remade into commodified or financialised forms. Sleep poses the idea of a human need and interval of time that cannot be harnessed to profitability, and remains an incongruous anomaly in the global present. In spite of all the scientific research, it frustrates and confounds any strategies to exploit or reshape it. The reality is that nothing of value can be extracted from it.

Incompatible with productivity

It should be no surprise that there is an erosion of sleep now, given the immensity of what is at stake economically. Over the 20th century there were steady inroads into sleep — the average North American adult now sleeps approximately six and a half hours a night, an erosion from eight hours a generation ago (in the mid-20th century the adage that “we spend a third of our lives asleep” seemed to have an axiomatic certainty), and down from 10 hours in the early 20th century. Sleep is a reminder of a pre-modernity that has never been fully exceeded, of the agricultural universe that began to vanish 400 years ago. The scandal of sleep is the way our lives are embedded in the rhythmic oscillations of solar light and darkness, activity and rest, work and recuperation, that have been eradicated or neutralised elsewhere.

By the mid-17th century, sleep had been loosened from its stable position in obsolete Aristotelian and Renaissance frameworks. Its incompatibility with modern productivity and rationality began to be identified, and Descartes, Hume and Locke, among others, disparaged sleep for its irrelevance to the operation of the mind or the pursuit of knowledge. It became devalued when consciousness and volition, utility, objectivity, and self-interested agency were privileged. For Locke, sleep was a regrettable interruption of God's intended priorities for human beings: to be industrious and rational. In the first paragraph of Hume's *Treatise on Human Nature*, sleep is lumped with fever and madness as an obstacle to knowledge. By the mid-19th century, the asymmetrical relation between sleep and waking began to be conceptualised in hierarchical models in which sleep was understood as a regression to a lower and more primitive mode in which supposedly higher and more complex brain activity was "inhibited". Schopenhauer was a rare thinker who proposed instead that only in sleep could we locate "the true kernel" of human existence.

In the 19th century, after the worst abuses of European workers during industrialisation, factory managers realised that it would be more profitable to allow workers modest amounts of rest to enable them to be more effective and sustainable producers in the long run, as Anson Rabinbach showed in his work on the science of fatigue. But by the last decades of the 20th century, with the collapse of controlled or mitigated capitalism in the US and Europe, there ceased to be any internal necessity for rest and recuperation as components of economic growth and profitability. Time for human rest and regeneration is now too expensive to be structurally possible within contemporary capitalism. Teresa Brennan coined the term "bioderegulation" to describe the brutal discrepancies between the temporal operation of deregulated markets and the physical limitations of the humans required to conform to these demands.

The decline in the long-term value of living labour provides no incentive for rest or health to be economic priorities, as recent debates around healthcare have shown. There are now very few significant interludes of human existence (with the exception of sleep) that have not been taken over as work, consumption or marketing time. In their analysis of capitalism, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello have pointed to the forces that esteem the individual who is constantly engaged, interfacing, interacting, communicating, responding or processing. In affluent regions of the globe, most of the borders between private and professional time, work and consumption, have been dissolved. The highest premium is placed on activity for its own sake: "To always be doing something, to move, to change — this is what enjoys prestige, as against stability, which is often synonymous with inaction." This model is not some transformation of an earlier work-ethic paradigm, but an altogether new model that requires 24/7 temporalities for its realisation.

Nothing is ever fundamentally 'off'

Of course, people will continue to sleep, and even megacities will still have nocturnal intervals of relative quiescence. Nonetheless, sleep is now cut loose from necessity or nature. Instead, it is conceptualised as a variable but managed function that can only be defined instrumentally and physiologically. Recent research has shown that the number of people who wake themselves up once or more at night to check their messages or data is growing exponentially. One prevalent linguistic figure is the machine-based designation of "sleep mode". The idea of an apparatus in a state of low-power readiness remakes the larger sense of sleep into a deferred or diminished condition of operability and access. It supersedes an off/on logic, so that nothing is ever fundamentally "off" and there is never an actual state of rest.

As the major remaining obstacle — the last of what Marx called "natural barriers" — to the full realisation of 24/7 capitalism, sleep cannot be eliminated. But it can be despoiled, and methods and motivations to accomplish this are fully in place. Public spaces are planned to deter sleeping, often including the serrated design of benches that prevent a human body from reclining on them.

The injury to sleep is inseparable from the dismantling of social protections. Just as universal access to clean drinking water has been devastated by pollution and privatisation, with the monetisation of bottled water, it is not difficult to see a similar construction of scarcity in relation to sleep. All of the encroachments on it create the insomniac conditions in which sleep must be bought (even if the purchase is a chemically modified state only approximating sleep). Statistics of soaring use of

hypnotics show that, in 2010, around 50 million Americans were prescribed compounds like Ambien or Lunesta, and many millions more bought over-the-counter sleep products. It would be misguided to imagine an amelioration of current conditions that would allow people to sleep soundly and wake refreshed. Even a less oppressively organised world would not likely eliminate insomnia. The historical significance of sleeplessness and its particular affective texture depend on its relation to collective experiences external to it, and insomnia is now inseparable from many other forms of dispossession and social ruin globally.

One of the many reasons human cultures have long associated sleep with death is that both demonstrate the continuity of the world in our absence. However, the only temporary absence of the sleeper always contains a bond to a future, to a possibility of renewal and freedom. It is an interval into which glimpses of an un-lived or postponed life can edge into awareness. The nightly hope for the insensible state of deep sleep is an anticipation of an awakening that could hold something unforeseen. In Europe after 1815, during several decades of counter-revolution, reversals and derailments of hope, there were artists and poets who intuited that sleep was not necessarily an evasion or escape from history. Shelley and Courbet understood that sleep was another form of historical time — that its withdrawal and apparent passivity also encompassed the unrest of becoming, essential to the nascence of a more just and egalitarian future. In the 21st century, the disquiet of sleep has a more troubling relation to the future.

Located somewhere on the border between the social and the natural, sleep ensures the presence in the world of the cyclical patterns essential to life and incompatible with capitalism. Sleep's anomalous persistence has to be understood in relation to the ongoing destruction of the processes that sustain existence on the planet. Because capitalism cannot limit itself, the notion of preservation or conservation is an impossibility. Yet the restorative inertness of sleep counters the deathliness of all the accumulation, financialisation and waste that have devastated things once held in common.

Now there is actually only one dream, superseding all others: it is of a shared world whose fate is not terminal, a world without billionaires, which has a future other than barbarism or the post-human, and in which history can take on other forms than nightmares of catastrophe. It is possible that — in many different places, in many disparate states, including reverie or daydream the imaginings of a future without capitalism begin as dreams of sleep. These would be intimations of sleep as a radical interruption, as a refusal of the weight of our global present, of sleep that can always rehearse the outlines of more consequential renewals and beginnings.