



Collective chronopolitics

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review of

Gregg, M. (2018) *Counterproductive: Time management in the knowledge economy*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. (PB, pp. 200, \$24.95, ISBN: 97814780000907)

It is always a pleasure to read what Melissa Gregg writes. Her blog *Home cooked theory*, where she often posted her still raw ideas, including many for this book, was a wonderful treat to read for insight on current cultural studies of work until Gregg closed it down a couple of years ago. Readers of *ephemera* will be familiar with Gregg's prior work, in particular her book *Work's intimacy* (Gregg, 2011), and her work on affect theory, such as *The affect theory reader* (Gregg, 2010), which she co-edited with Gregg Seigworth. Both had been important references for work in *ephemera*, for example the issues on free work and affective capitalism. Gregg is exciting to read because she brings queer and feminist perspectives from cultural studies and science and technology studies to the exploration of work and media technologies today. *Work's intimacy* focused on the 'presence bleed' that professionals experience as they take their work home while using media technologies such as laptops. While that is by now a familiar story – although one worth revisiting during a pandemic in which the home office has become normalized (see also Hafermalz, 2020) – the current book is a

prequel. It provides the reader with a history of productivity as time management, and unsettles the histories of management as we know them. Reading feminist and queer histories of management is particularly thrilling considering Gregg no longer writes from Australia but now from the United States. Not directly from Silicon Valley but from Portland, where she is (by now a Senior) Principal Engineer at Intel, involved in designing technologies for managing productivity in the smart home.

The book is extremely personal, on more than one level, which adds to the intensity of the experience of reading it. Not only is the book dedicated to her father, but the postscript (previously a blog post from 2016) recounts what she calls a belated processing of her mother's death, and the ways in which her mother's interest in home economics and spiritual practices have shaped the book. Gregg also recounts the way she herself turned to self-help books, first out of curiosity, and later also to philosophical thinkers, in order to address the challenges of productivity. She openly recounts how she suffered from 'stress accumulation, angst internalization and social avoidance' [18] as she moved from academia to the high tech industry. This is more than just refreshingly honest writing, because these personal stories, scattered throughout the text, show that there is much at stake here, not just for Gregg but for all of us. That is because to be productive is such a forceful imperative today, one which demands both heroism and self-scrutiny in the mastery of one's time. Yet, in dealing with these demands, Gregg found only little support in the self-help books, and only little more in Peter Sloterdijk's work on asceticism. Her book is a gift, drawing on her own experiences and her research in the history of time management, seeking to provide nothing less than a chronopolitics for our time and collective resources for community.

The first chapter unsettles how the history of time management has been told by starting with 'the experience of women in the home prior to industrialization' [22]. Gregg shows how productivity 'was already the principal logic of the household' [33] by recounting the work of home economics and domestic science pioneers such as Ellen Richards and Christine Frederick. These are curious histories as we discover how the domestic economy was 'a matter of creating a resilient structure that

ensures refined calm in service to others' [27], or that there were corporate charts 'showing the housewife at the pinnacle of the domestic enterprise' [29]. There are also fascinating passages on Lilian Gilbreth here, whom Gregg establishes more firmly in the history of time-and-motion studies alongside her husband and Frederick Taylor. The Gilbreth Management Desk [32] is one fabulously timely piece of technology for efficiency and multitasking, and probably has resemblances to some of the hacked home office desks for the pandemic (unfortunately it seems Gregg didn't get copyright to print a picture of the desk for the book, but you can find images online).

The most unsettling section of the chapter though is about 'Mayo's Missing Women' [40], Adeline Bogatowicz and Irene Rybacki. They were excluded from the Hawthorne studies for being uncooperative, resisting orders and talking too much. Gregg shows with their story (extending the work of Gillespie, 1991) that while the Hawthorne studies and the human relations theory that followed further entrenched the productivity imperative and 'successfully married incentive and control' [47], it also infantilized and pathologized (considering their disobedience childish, and their objections to having their conversations recorded paranoid) two women who cared more about friendship and solidarity than productivity measures. Furthermore, as 'the management relation operates on norms of confession and self-appraisal that produce a regulatory effect' [47], its combination with engineering innovation (such as time-and-motion studies) 'helped to remove collective thinking from our understanding of work and its organization' [48]. There is more to be reckoned with here in the way human relations is taught and practiced today, and these feminist histories are important both in the context of a more careful historical account of Mayo, which doesn't put him on a pedestal as a saviour from Taylorism (cf. Bruce and Nyland, 2011) and with regards to his position in histories of management (e.g. Hanlon, 2016) and of psychology and therapy (e.g. Illouz, 2008).

The second chapter focuses on self-help literature and time-management manuals, which Gregg sees as 'crucial in the dissemination of productivity ideals and their commonsense principles to a wider public' [53]. Particularly

those parts of the literature addressed to executives encouraging their self-enhancement 'is another front in the broader neoliberal project to erase the vocabulary of collectivity from work' [54], as Gregg puts it. She understands time management through Sloterdijk's notion of asceticism, which makes it appear as 'a form of training through which workers become capable of ever more daring acts of solitude and ruthlessness necessary to produce career competence'; that is how this literature 'ensures the myopia necessary for professional commitment while simultaneously diminishing awareness of the work of others' [54]. If this sounds pretty sceptical of time management literature: it is – the critique of how this literature individualizes and forecloses horizons of collective action is very clear. In the chapter, though, Gregg also proceeds with a more nuanced analysis of how self-help books operate culturally.

One noteworthy aspect of Gregg's analysis is how she highlights the way techniques and technics are entangled, for example in the way a desk can serve as an 'auxiliary brain' [57-59]. Part of the point of the story here is that the media technologies we use to manage productivity today, such as apps and smart watches, have a longer history. Gregg shows how the productivity literature addresses the challenge of prioritizing tasks. So, while part of what is meant to be learnt here (in the case of Peter Drucker's advice to executives) is 'to justify inattention to unworthy tasks and to provide motivation on important items when an immediate payoff or incentive may be lacking' [63], we also get a valorization of the inane when 'clearing an inbox or organizing a calendar is a momentary pleasure that often reflects an inability to influence the broader agenda governing one's work' [62]. There is a lot on lists here as a key cultural technique for managing priorities and workflows, a technique involving constant repetition and training. There are also odd techniques for fighting procrastination, such as 'eat-the-frog', which means getting the most difficult task for the day done first. The challenge? 'Identifying what constitutes the day's frog is the crucial step to ensuring high returns and satisfaction' [64]. What is your frog for today?

The chapter also shows how 'the art of time management evolves from a system of classification benefiting discrete units of time and information to a mode of self-care aspiring to meet the transformed conditions of

immaterial labor' [73]. The self-help literature 'grants readers time to think about time', an in enforcing this reflection the productivity regime 'aspires to cognitive programming' [74]. More so, technics also increasingly impinge upon 'the intimate realm of individual psychological self-surveillance' [76]. This makes for quite embarrassing reading: the reader has to acknowledge that despite all the poking fun and critique, she has probably tried out many of these techniques, though perhaps not to the extreme or with as much humour as Carl Cederström and André Spicer (2017) in their book on self-optimization. With reading also comes the realisation of the way productivity management is self-care only at the best of times, and otherwise it largely individualizes the temporal pressures and performance demands so common to work today, as Gregg's framing in terms of athleticism (as a kind of post-secular version of the work ethic) makes clear.

The third chapter is about productivity apps, and it focuses on how personal productivity has become a matter of asking tech for help. Much of this is about aesthetics, in that apps with minimalist design 'communicate a "clutter-free" feeling' [82], simplifying messy lives. It doesn't matter what needs to get done, it is all about the process of organizing the doing: 'An aesthetically appealing app serves to displace questions about the volume or character of work that requires action. Instead, developers celebrate technology's sublime abilities to remember, predict, anticipate, and deliver' [86]. It is this tech solutionism that makes these apps so attractive and such failures at the same time. But of course, the failure is ours: we are the ones overwhelmed with work. Gregg suggests here 'digital productivity tools offer the foundational elements of a religion' [90] in that they demand that we confess our fallibility, we subsequently practice abstinence of things (like social relations) that distract us from productivity, and finally achieve omniscience, with pure creativity and optimized activity [90-91]. Again, we find ourselves athletes competing with each other in the quest to become productive.

Apart from the analysis of this quasi-religious logic of time management, with no redemption or ascension in sight, there are two further aspects of Gregg's analysis in this chapter that stand out. One is the way we get to relate to others and to ourselves. As 'productivity orthodoxy involves a

vision of mastery and control that entails freedom from obligation but not from work' [91], it requires this work to be done. On the one hand this is a question of re-establishing social hierarchies and getting others to do work for us: 'In the network era, productivity apps are the *interface* for a new kind of delegated labor' [92], where liberating oneself means burdening others. Even if these others are often imagined to be machines, such as the Google Assistant, these technologies also often serve as surrogates for human workers, reproducing racism and patriarchy, as Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora (2019) have also shown. On the other hand the 'freedom to work' [93] means that we become our own managers, in and outside of work, and this requires control, responsibility, and increasing amounts of work:

... through the adoption of productivity practices, responsible individuals create regimes of anticipation, protection, and recovery to meet the temporality of computationally inflicted schedules. This labor is preparatory and reparative as much as it is obligatory. [94]

It is these new dimensions of the labour of time management – this is the second further aspect that stands out in this chapter – which makes Gregg suggest that we have seen a 'move from personal productivity to personal logistics' [94]. The table on page 95 is perhaps the most provocative bit of analysis Gregg offers in the book (I had seen this on her blog earlier and could not wait to see her write more about it). The point is that where personal productivity was largely tied to the corporation, personal logistics is not, bringing with it a new chronopolitics and a self-management, which also operates when we don't have a job. We coordinate activities rather than complete tasks, we anticipate time rather than measure it (we could talk about the crisis of time as a measure of value here...), we bill rather than clock hours (maybe not such a big crisis...), our loyalty is with our networks not a firm, and so on. All of this reads as a very acute analysis of labour in cognitive capitalism, and it also chimes in with analyses of the way in which logistics as knowledge and practice has become much more important for organization today. If activity is all about circulation, and it becomes difficult to see the beginning and the end of it, leading to opacity and to a crisis of representation, then it is fitting that we are left with 'a repetitive set of gestures meant to console us when faced with the knowledge that there

are always too many things to do, but there may never be a sense of meaning behind the disorder' [99].

It is in the next chapter on mindful labour that Gregg tries to turn this bleak picture around. For her the 'evident need for mindfulness practices reveals the inadequacy of productivity as a way to think about work at a time that finite material labor outputs...no longer capture the quality or extent of labor being performed' [105]. If some time management techniques might help us cope despite their entanglement with the productivity imperative, then mindfulness can be considered 'a temporary fix for the challenges of contemporary work life' [105]. Gregg offers her understanding of mindfulness as her 'contribution to the vocabulary for labor politics' in cognitive capitalism [105]: while she acknowledges that mindful labor 'is admittedly limited as a form of organized resistance', she also sees how it 'offers a form of self-help for harried workers that may be useful in the short-term' and might also offer some elements for collective politics [106]. In her discussion of Kabat-Zinn and other approaches to mindfulness Gregg is careful to point to the contradictions of emphasising 'non-doing' while fixing productivity regimes; nonetheless, mindfulness and the 'chronic self-analysis' it involves can offer repair and solace and potentially 'flips the default rationale of productivity' [110].

The ambivalences of mindfulness become more pronounced as Gregg discusses mindful technologies such as the intelligent headbands Muse and Thync (see Przegalinska, 2019). These are meant to provide 'training and recovery techniques to ensure peak professional performance' [114], but can achieve the opposite: 'in failing to provide a calm state, mindfulness technology can actually generate anxiety' [115]. What is more, in comparison to more traditional forms of meditation, these technologies displace the human actor: 'they relocate the intentionality of self-reflection from the person to a device' [116], and in scanning bodies they 'expose a self that is otherwise hidden and oblivious', their 'automated empiricism registers effects without cause' [116]. While this is potentially radical for Gregg, since it involves 'the momentary suspension of a command and control view' [116], it also reifies 'the gap between mind and body' [117] contrary to what mindfulness teaches. So, while currently mindful

technology is ‘another means by which today’s workers risk being alienated from the character and value of their labor’ [120] and mindfulness ‘does not escape the broader logic of productivity governing the workplace’ [122], at least it ‘decenters, albeit slightly, the egocentric command-control dynamic that the pact between temporal sovereignty and professional competence has long upheld’ [122]. In that way, by ‘forfeiting participation in the constant drive to perform’, for Gregg, mindfulness ‘has the potential to occupy a place alongside other kinds of work refusal that acknowledge the biopolitical constitution of labor.’ [124].

It is this reading of mindfulness as a crack in the productivity regime that Gregg wants to turn into a bigger projective reflection on anthropotechnics with the help of Sloterdijk. In the conclusion, in seeking to escape the ‘hierarchy of privilege between those who choose who are scheduled... and those who are scheduled’ [130], Gregg turns to coworking spaces and morning dance parties (and curiously, the collaboration platform Slack) as two examples of ‘building atmospheres for social connection outside the temporal dictates of the organization’ [132]. First reading of these examples I could not help but think that Gregg was desperately grasping at straws – has not Slack turned into yet another annoying platform for the ‘presence bleed’ of work and the nuisance of constant messaging? Coworking spaces don’t strike me as heavens for self-directed work, either, considering the pressures start-ups or entrepreneurs, not to mention precarious artists and other groups we find in these spaces, are subject to. And Daybreaker also struck me as comparable to what in Berlin are the Berghain morning dance sessions bereft of all the excesses Berghain and other electronic music venues are otherwise known for. We also know how compatible Burning Man [136] is with Silicon Valley culture (Turner, 2009).

But then Gregg also says she holds ‘no illusion that these two subcultures [coworking and morning dance parties] are untouched by varieties of class and racial exclusivity or substantial networks of financial capital that bankroll their efforts’ [137]. Yet Gregg rightly insists that both ‘play with the constraints of the workweek paradigm’ [137] and that ‘each provides simple gestures of self-care, even luxury, that today’s generic workplaces find it increasingly difficult to provide’ [137-138]. Gregg may have a point when she

says that ‘both micro-movements... operate in the interests of the worker rather than the manager’ [138]. I just wonder if there are no better examples for alternative chronopolitics that more radically break with productivity? I am thinking for example of the magazine *Idler* and everything it stands for (a copy of which my PhD supervisor Martin Parker gave me once at the beginning of my PhD – a bad idea?), the 19th century Luddites that smashed the machines, which imposed capital’s temporal order on a new working class, or other current examples of practices of disconnection (e.g. Karppi 2018). But maybe Gregg is right not to include these: she starts from where she is and maybe where we are, too, offering us a way through the predicament of productivity and extracting a chronopolitics from time management techniques and mindfulness – tools we already have in hand, perhaps ready to be collectivized.

The book finishes with ‘Principles for post-work productivity’ [139-140], which oppose metrics, record keeping and the career, encourage co-location and supportive networks, promote collective immunology and reward collaboration. At this point, I would very much have liked the book to turn into a self-help guide, with more flesh on the bare bones of these principles. But then maybe we already know how to operationalize some of these principles. The last one in particular reminds me of conversations about the university and the undercommons (Moten and Harney, 2004) and the kinds of spaces that *ephemera* arguably already operates through: ‘The technical, financial, and temporal privileges embedded in the organization can be collectively raided to build productive atmospheres of our own’ [140]. Go for it!

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