

Towns of laziness, cities of stress

Last year, for an exhibition called ‚Idleness‘, the Berlin-based artist-architect Anke Hagemann created a map of places of laziness in Budapest. Her exploration consisted of site visits and interviews; but to experience the places she was mapping she had to experience laziness itself. And for someone who is passionate about work and tends to overbook herself, it is a challenge. The visitor’s gaze helps: when we go abroad we accept laziness as the basic mode of our existence.

Anke’s keywords organizing her map reveal her definition of laziness: „...*sit in the sun, lie on the sun, relax, bath your feet, eat, drink, shop, stroll, rest, look, wait, play cards, enjoy the view, sleep...*“ – these are easily perceivable symptoms of public spaces that work.

Of course, besides the surface-appearance of well-used good-quality spaces, there are other elements giving room for laziness: a specific constellation of lifestyle preferences, needs and resources. Work is not as it used to be, and its redefinition alters its compromised relationship with life: they may not be so easily separated anymore.

People are sitting in cafés all day long with their laptops and calling it 'work', write Holm Friebe and Sascha Lobo in their book „Wir nennen es Arbeit“ (We call it work). This publication, seen by many as the freelancers’ manifesto, attempts to introduce different conceptions of work. „The reliance on a linear career path in Germany, say Friebe and Lobo, is simply a thing of the past. ‚Digital bohemians‘, ie. young intellectuals, visual professionals and artists, define their own working schedule, and are rarely restricted to a single working location. Their work is often indistinguishable from their interests, and includes internet research, meetings, ‚business breakfasts‘. That is, laziness may not be where it apparently is.

The restructuring of economy, and consequently, of the labour market, happens everywhere and people increasingly have to be flexible and responsive to the changing working conditions. But freelancing may be more common in certain cities than in others. Is the advent of the digital bohemians a specific Berlin-phenomenon? Looking at the landscape of Berlin’s everyday activities one would think yes.

Anthony A., a London-based artist, told me about his trip to Berlin: „We met in a café in the morning, at 10am. It was already very late for me. I left to do some work, but she went on to meet other people in other cafés. It seemed to me that nobody was working in this city, they’re struggling with their schedules instead.“

This is the impression that many people working temporarily in Berlin gain of the city. The relative cost of living in Berlin is far lower than in other European capitals: Berlin workers – those having work - are the best paid in the world after Copenhagen and Zurich, in terms of their everyday costs.¹ Where it is easy to pay one’s cheap rents and living with a few hours of well-paid work a day, work ceases to be the

¹ A comparison of purchasing power around the globe. A UBS survey in 2006

central activity of one's life. But the liberation of time is an achievement that not necessarily fosters creativity, but often laziness.

„I don't like places which are so slow, says Anthony. I like ambitious places.“
Ambition often comes from the necessity of survival, of devotion and high engagement, where one uses time in a highly optimized way. The London-based architect, Aaron M. tells me: „Our doctor at the firm reminds us regularly to take our time to sit down, and not eat while walking or indeed, rushing. It is very harmful to the stomach.“

Laziness is impossible in an environment that inherently lacks time. But again, the lack of time perceived as the rhythm of the city does not necessarily reflect the hard structural components that constitute the working environment or one's working habitus. Disclaiming the explications that link the success of the British economy to hardworking individuals, the work hours in the UK are not among the highest in Europe. While being ahead of the "short hours culture" of France and Germany (around 1450 work hours a year) the UK, with its average 1675 hours, is far behind East-Central European countries like the Czech Republic or Poland, over 1750 worked hours per year.²

There are several explications on offer for the uneven distribution of time and laziness on the continent. The long hours worked in East-Central Europe are only partly due to the relative expensive cost of life, compared to wages. The domestic purchasing power of Prague, Warsaw or Budapest citizens is but a fragment of Berliners', Londoners' or Parisians' resources. Survival needs much more work in these cities than in West European capitals. The other side of the coin is the lack of time-management capacities, and the sudden opening-up of career possibilities. We're not trained to use our time efficiently and not informed enough to choose: we tend to get engaged in a variety of jobs in the same time, having regular and freelance jobs complementing each other. A phenomenon and social reflex of the 1980s: we need to keep all resources open.

The US, and particularly New York is a different story. Yesterday I received a „time sensitive material“ from the New Yorker magazine. Instead of throwing the letter into the pile of advertisements waiting for some free minutes to read them or to organize them directly into the paper can, I opened the envelope and instantly read the letter. Claiming urgency had an effect on me: it is among the few efficient ways to make something visible, worth a second, in a social environment where all activities, including social relations, are shaped by the lack of time.

New York, probably the birthplace of mass commuting, is often described as the land of overhours. The city is organized around an early institutional attempt to totally separate the work from the home. The arrangement of subway lines makes it clear that the city's infrastructure is meant to bring you to work, and then back home. You are not supposed to travel anywhere else: crosstown lines are rare and unreliable.

² OECD data

Despite to its new economy, the majority of New York workers spend the day in offices, 9am to 5pm. My colleagues at the Department of City Planning, a city government agency, have fixed work hours, 8 hours a day, plus lunchbreak. It works simply, in theory: you arrive in the morning, you log-in into the system, and you log-out when you leave, in the late afternoon. But in practice, nobody leaves when their ours are done: there is plenty of work to do, and nobody has other preferences. The good old 20 minutes Eastern European coffee breaks, the 2 hours French lunch break are unknown to the ambitions of the 9 to 5 city. The 24 hours metropolis becomes quiet after the morning rush hours: outside of the shopping and fashion districts, work has a monopoly over time. If laziness is a way of life, stress also becomes one: complaining about overhours and the lack of time becomes the favourite small talk of the office life.