

# Against efficiency

By Eva Bujalka

1.Apr.22

---

It is not surprising that, since the first tremors of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020, a number of companies have advertised their services as a means not only of supplementing income, but also of providing people a way to use their free time ‘productively’. One of the most notorious examples of this was the 2021 [Squarespace/Dolly Parton Superbowl ad](#), in which Parton ‘inverted’ the feminist labour rights spirit of her 1980 hit *9 to 5*, and instead promoted a neoliberal entrepreneurial fantasy of the gig worker dedicating their time *outside* of waged work to monetising their hobbies, celebrating their ‘5 to 9’. 5pm to *9am*, mind you, as Squarespace clarified in a press release: sixteen hours to hustle outside of traditional work hours, even in the thick of a global pandemic.

As we well know, ‘free time’ during the pandemic and especially during periods of lockdown became complicated: people had, it seemed, simultaneously too little *and* too much of it. Any number of government ads, news sites, or blogs provided recommendations for ways that people could best deal with enduring excess time at home whether they were (over)working or under-employed or comprehending their new-found unemployment. Pop articles and blogs recommended people wake early to get the most from their day, or dress as though they were going to work even if their office was in their bedroom. Government ads provided advice about ways to stay fit and healthy, and emotionally and mentally well at home. Reminded again and again that we were in this together, we were also tacitly reminded that we could stay motivated, focused and productive during this crisis.

While apps like Zoom, Slack and Asana made work from home possible, everyday life—particularly life at home during lockdown—became a new challenge that seemed to require increasing control if it was to be used ‘well’ and not wasted. Any number of news sites and tech blogs made listicles of the best apps to help keep people ‘in control’ of their time. An assortment of tech was at our disposal to help us better manage ourselves: you could use Sleep Cycle to better track your sleep (or insomnia) patterns, or Whoop to monitor your temperature and heartrate to identify the optimal time to exercise. You could use Todoist to help you organise, by way of importance, every moment of your day or week, or Calm to help you meditate or track your ‘mindfulness minutes’. While these apps and services may assist workers struggling to manage work and work-stress from home, this tech’s encroachment on everyday life—on work *and* leisure—is worth careful consideration.

While this tech is not ‘bad’ in itself, its very success relies on widespread acceptance of certain ideological and historically contingent assumptions about the ways we ought to understand and spend our time. Despite being framed as assisting or liberating people, the tech is not ideologically neutral in its construction, potential or use. Instead, it emerges out of a larger cultural trend that suggests that every moment of our day not only could but *should* be accounted for if it is to be spent well. But what happens to the meaning of our lives and to the things we do when they become just another data point in a vast catalogue? What does it mean when the pleasure of (or struggle to) sleep is treated as just another task—a form of work or work-preparation—that needs to be monitored, managed and optimised?

There are a number of popular critical responses to the imperative to stay productive during the pandemic, and this article is by no means the first. In her 2020 contribution in *Wired*, Laurie Penny argues that the ‘cope’ of self-optimisation will not save us from the pandemic.

Kiran Misra's [article in \*The Guardian\*](#) examines the untenable pressure people are under to hustle ever harder during the pandemic, whether to make ends meet or to appear resilient to employers. Similarly concerned with this productivity and efficiency imperative, I want to examine the historical formations that have led to our current circumstance: why is it that, despite so much open criticism, it is so difficult if not seemingly counter intuitive to question the presumed 'good' of being efficient and productive today?

Increasingly, we are urged to think of our work, our free time and ourselves, through the framework of efficiency—are we doing *enough* with our free time? These concerns are important to consider in the context of Oxfam's January 2022 [Inequality Kills](#) report, which outlined the unprecedented rise in inequality in the wake of COVID-19, with billionaires doubling their wealth and everyday incomes dwindling. What does the imperative to be more efficient mean in light of this growing inequality? Living *with* a global pandemic—where even the prime minister has acknowledged that we will have to live in a poorer and more disorderly world, where we are grappling with job-loss, working remotely or in insecure employment, and where, according to [a report by the Australia Institute's Centre for Future Work](#), casual and part-time employees have been the hardest hit by pandemic lockdowns in Australia—it is worth asking not simply *how can I be more efficient and productive?* but instead *why* and *for whom* are we urged to be efficient and productive? And *what is all of this efficiency for?*

Typically, the word 'efficient' refers to someone or something working competently and in a manner that achieves maximum output with minimum input, waste or effort. But this is not the way the word 'efficient' has always been used. According to Jennifer Karns Alexander in her book *The Mantra of Efficiency: From Waterwheel to Social Control*, this meaning is incredibly recent and was not popularly used until the nineteenth century. Our current use emerged during the industrial revolution and through its popularisation in the 'scientific management' movement in nineteenth- and twentieth-century America.

Scientific management theory is a theory of labour management that developed during the industrial period out of growing demands for businesses to increase productivity. Specifically, this theory of management emerged out of labour managers' efforts to better control their workers to get more out of them. One of the major proponents of scientific management in this period was Frederick Winslow Taylor, from whom we derive the management system Taylorism.

Born in 1856 into an exceedingly wealthy family, Taylor did not study law at Harvard like his father but instead became an apprentice machinist at a steel factory in Philadelphia. Perhaps because of his class, Taylor's time as an apprentice did not instill in him a sense of solidarity and camaraderie with his fellow workers. Instead, Taylor became disgruntled by what he saw as the animalistic laziness and inefficiency of his fellow workers, whom he believed *could* be working and producing at a much higher rate. With no small thanks to his family's business connections, Taylor was promoted from factory floor to foreman and eventually to chief engineer. With his promotion, Taylor presented to his fellow managers his ideas on worker inefficiency.

For Taylor, workers were inefficient because they relied on their own knowledge of the labour process. He proposed that employers could 'get more' out of their workers if they applied scientific methods to labour and controlled and standardize 'best practice'.

Taylor's method was simple: rather than allowing workers to use their own knowledge of their labour craft, which they had developed and shared for years, managers needed to reduce a worker's tasks to their smallest components. Taylor proposed that workers should repeatedly perform the same tasks, which their managers would monitor and time with a

stopwatch. Workers' bodies and actions were closely surveilled, and Taylor employed the methods of his colleagues, the scientific management theorists Frank and Lillian Gilbreth who had created time-motion capture studies of 'efficient' and 'inefficient' movements. While today the Gilbreths' time-and-motion capture studies photographs appear spectral and dystopic, Taylor and the Gilbreths believed that they could demonstrate the 'unbiased' nature of scientific management to workers—that workers could agree with managers on 'best practice' because 'best practice' was scientifically demonstrable.

Despite the scientific veneer of Taylor's methods, the real 'genius' of Taylorism was, as his critics have argued, his inversion of the control of the knowledge of the labour process. In his 1974 critique of Taylorism, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, Marxist political economist Harry Braverman argues Taylor's method scrapped workers' knowledge of the production process in favour of management's direction of 'best practice'. Taylor's division of labour into physically and mentally exhausting repetitive tasks, led to the widespread deskilling of workers and to their growing alienation from their projects. Out of increasing worker dissatisfaction under Taylorism—Taylor himself notes worker dissent and non-compliance during his hearing before the House of Representatives in 1911, as well as the disciplinary measures he believed might bring them to heel—it is necessary to ask: for whom were these new labour processes *best practice*? The workers and unions that decried Taylorism recognised that this 'best practice' was clearly not for them and was instead in the best interests of the business.

This criticism of Taylorism and scientific management is entirely warranted. Yet it is important to recognise the genuine optimism twentieth-century proponents of scientific management had for their science. The importance of this optimism should not be understated, as it maintains the ongoing popularity of these practices today. Proponents of early Scientific Management celebrated its perceived ability to make work more just and systematised, and believed that it was essential in providing workers more freedoms in and outside of work.

The US Supreme Court justice Louis Brandeis—who coined the term 'scientific management', and who was a friend and advocate of Taylor—was so taken with efficiency that in 1915 he claimed that 'efficiency is the hope for democracy'.<sup>[1]</sup> In her 2018 book *Counterproductive*, sociologist Melissa Gregg argues that these practices also received resounding support from women who, during this period, were presented with time-management strategies for running the household. Through a feminist analysis of household management literature, Gregg argues that women were urged to create to-do lists and work flow-charts so as to complete tasks efficiently and have more free time for themselves. Importantly, household management authors stressed that the study and application of their methods should not become an additional form of work. Gregg cites household management author Christine Frederick saying:

I would feel very badly about it if my earnest plea for a more efficient attitude of mind should result in nothing else but increased slavish devotion to work.

While household guides and labour managers urged workers in the early twentieth century to desire efficiency, it was not until the post-war period that efficiency became a *personal* quality. In her historical analysis of time management in the developing knowledge economy, Melissa Gregg argues that transformations in white-collar work in the 1950s led to a new, highly competitive job market that demanded prospective employees find ever more ways to demonstrate their capacity for productivity. Increasing job competition and the imperative to 'stand out from crowd' required workers to better manage their worktime *and* their everyday lives. In response, business writers developed countless guidebooks that advised on time-management. This literature, now known as productivity

and time-management literature—the precursors to self-help—emerged alongside these labour market transformations in the 1950s. Unsurprisingly, however, it was not until the 1970s and 80s, with the rise of neoliberal politics and the celebrated figure of the entrepreneurial individual, that this literature gained mass readership. Hoping to ‘make it’ in a cut-throat job market, readers looked to productivity literature’s ruthless management strategies of the one thing they could control: their time. This pursuit for control, however, reframed every moment of life, even personal life, through the cold logic of efficiency.

The encroachment of time-management practices into the personal sphere has changed the ways we think about our time outside of work. While productivity and self-help literature propose to help people ‘get more out of life’, they celebrate an instrumentalised approach to free time. For self-help writers like Stephen R Covey, personal time, time off work, is incredibly important. However, for Covey, this time is important because it helps us become better workers. In the final chapter of his 1989 bestseller *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Covey advises readers to keep track of the ways they have optimised their downtime and then ‘evaluate your performance and results.’

This instrumentalist view of time has also extended to our personal relationships. We need only think of Kate Murphy’s widely criticised 2021 *New York Times* article ‘How to Rearrange your Post-pandemic ‘Friendscape’’, and its advice on formalising, categorising and culling friendships that no longer benefit us. The persistent requirement that we submit our free time to ‘performance analysis’ turns our time and even our meaningful relationships into transactions.

Time-management is at the heart of Taylorist scientific management practices and productivity literature, and it underpins the very productivity tech we use today. This concern with time, and with our capacity to manage it is, however, less a scientific than a moral issue: is our time spent well (used productively) or wasted (used unproductively)? The moral and personal quality of these questions reposition Taylorist modes of control as no longer something imposed purely from the outside. While Taylor urged managers to control their workers to ‘get more’ out of them, productivity literature and productivity tech take this imperative and urge the individual to turn this control inwards: to self control, to self manage, to ‘get more’ out of themselves. In this way, the failure to thrive in competitive work environments, to fail to succeed or even to enjoy, becomes an individual failing, hinged on an inability to properly optimise oneself or one’s time.

While efficiency thinking and efficiency practices were supposed to save us all time and effort, the relentless pressure to be more productive, to work ‘*smarter*’, and to ceaselessly optimise our free time, has led to an epidemic of stress and burnout. News sites proliferate with articles about worker exhaustion and anxiety from increasing workloads during lockdown. In attempting to mitigate worker fatigue and absenteeism, businesses and governments have embraced mindfulness as a panacea for ailing employees. While in theory mindfulness promotes an important break from the daily grind, urging non-doing and non-judgement, the application of mindfulness in workplaces has justifiably garnered scrutiny from critics—those who see this application as not only providing workers with unpaid homework, but also as an attempt to individualise what is, in actuality, a systemic labour rights issue with unsustainable work.

Over the last decade, ‘happiness’ has become big business for institutions seeking to ‘get more’ from their workers. A happy worker, after all, is a productive worker. Political and sociological theorist Will Davies has written extensively about his concern with the ‘science of happiness’, which proposes, in so many ways, to be able to measure or quantify happiness. Whether happiness can be interpreted through FMRI scans, through wearable tech monitoring employee’s activity and heartrate, or through wristbands that let workers

communicate their feelings to their bosses, the 'science of happiness' has increasingly placed the burden to be happy on the individual, on their brain or activity levels, rather than institutions and their practices. In his 2015 book *The Happiness Industry*, Davies queries which notions of happiness are being adopted by policy-makers and businesses, and he cautions that this 'happiness science' could be used to blame workers for their own mental health issues rather than the work-practices and productivity demands that contribute to it.

Government and corporate ventures to promote mindfulness and to counteract worker unhappiness are new forms of Taylorism. Whether monitoring workers' bodies, prescribing mindfulness 'practices', or 'scientifically' locating the source of 'inefficiency' within the worker rather than the institution, the impetus is not to help workers but to 'get more' out of them. Indeed, part of the problem with worker burnout today is the all-pervasiveness of work. As work becomes more 'flexible' it becomes increasingly difficult to separate worktime from any other time. Today, our devices turn any location into a workplace and any *time* into worktime—whether we are answering work emails on our phone from bed, signing up to deliver with Uber after work, or launching our side-hustle website with Squarespace in our lunch break.

While we are still very much beholden to the legacy of twentieth century scientific management, these theories and methods attempted to eliminate wasted time and effort and bring about greater freedom at a time when people worked fixed hours and locations, with measurable outputs. However, we are not living under twentieth-century Taylorism anymore, but an internalised version in which we ceaselessly monitor and manage ourselves. The growing pressure for people to optimise their free time—for instance, signing up to the work meditation app to manage work-stress—turns our free time into just another aspect of work. Today, balancing precarious work or unemployment against real life expenditures, our decision to decline lunchtime meditation, or to take time off is hinged against the anxiety of what we *could* be doing: our free time is hinged against doing something worthwhile to *justify* it, even if that justification is only to ourselves.

This, then, is the problematic this article addresses: that, while we have developed methods and technologies to assist us in saving time, whether at work or in our personal lives, the very framework through which we have developed these approaches is itself antagonistic to the notion of free time as unproductive. What does 'free time' mean if, within such a framework, it ought to always be used productively? For Melissa Gregg, when productivity and efficiency become a *lifestyle*, they no longer promote freedom *from* work. Instead, '[t]he notion of freedom that the productive lifestyle celebrates is, perversely, the freedom *to* work.' For Barbara Ehrenreich, our freedom to ceaselessly work has become a conspicuous 'cult of busyness'—a stand-in as a signifier for success. So long as we remain perpetually busy, success and freedom are always *potentially* just around the corner. In this way, the spectacle of busyness that CEOs and business executives broadcast on Twitter—what might be called their 'conspicuous production'—positions their excessive wealth not as symptomatic of a flawed system, but as the just rewards for an efficient approach to business and life. It is important, then, to ask: are we happy to accept things the way they are? I want to suggest that this is not the only way that we have to live, and it is not the only path forward. The denigration of our free time, of time that is not instrumentalised in any way, is not something that we have to thoughtlessly accept. It is something we have been born *into*.

We have forgotten, or perhaps tried to forget, that we haven't always understood our time in this way—as measured against efficiency and productivity. What bleak future will we stumble into if we continue to forget? In some cultures, and at different points in history, idle time, time in contemplation rather than at work, was understood as the highest form of the good life. Hannah Arendt has written about the shift from *vita contemplativa* to *vita activa* in the

modern world—where, in the modern world, work and ‘activity’ take up primacy in our daily lives, as the highest order, over contemplation and inactivity. It is increasingly difficult to appreciate inactivity, or non-instrumental pursuits: of what use is idle time if it has no measurable output? By contrast, Arendt notes in *The Human Condition* that, for the Ancient Greeks, freedom from work and labour was of the highest order, and the quiet of contemplation was the Aristotelian ideal of the good life. Taking a markedly different approach, in *The Accursed Share* Georges Bataille frames his theory of sovereignty through the rejection of productivity, and celebrates non-productive expenditures like sex, art, and drunkenness as a violent disruption from the alienating world of work. For Bataille, the wonder of drunkenness is its capacity to open us up to the miraculous richness of life in the moments when we are *not working*. For psychoanalyst Josh Cohen, there is something we can learn from slackers like Homer Simpson and the Dude in *The Big Lebowski*. Drawing from their repertoires of laziness, and with reference to Oscar Wilde, Cohen proposes that, to do nothing, to refuse the distraction of work, opens us up to the potentially more challenging question: what would we do if we weren’t always working?

We are still reeling from the onset of a global pandemic, and it appears that we will be living with the austerity and uncertainty that it brings for a long time yet. For this reason, it is important that we ask ourselves *how* we want to live. This is not a frivolous question, but cuts to the core of what makes life worth living. In her original *9 to 5*, Dolly Parton, recognized that, ‘*There’s a better life, and you think about it, don’t you?*’ Dolly was singing to an undermined and underpaid class of working women, who were sick of exploitative labour practices. What a meaningful alternative to our current circumstance would look like may be difficult to imagine, but this should not foreclose our thinking about it, our imagining it.

[1] Thelen, David Paul, *Robert M. La Follette and the Insurgent Spirit*, p. 110.



**Overland’s Friday Features project is supported by the Copyright Agency’s Cultural Fund.**

*Overland* is a not-for-profit magazine with a proud history of supporting writers, and publishing ideas and voices often excluded from other places.

If you like this piece, or support *Overland*’s work in general, please [subscribe](#) or [donate](#).

**Eva Bujalka teaches creative writing and cultural studies at Curtin University, where she completed a PhD in creative writing. She is a co-director of the Curtin Extremism Research Network and teaches at the School of Critical Arts. Eva has published fiction and essays in *Meanjin* and *Cambridge: Popular Music*, and has work forthcoming in *Fast Capitalism*. Most recently she has appeared on the ABC’s The Philosopher’s Zone.**

**More by Eva Bujalka**

