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CUTS #3

From Careers to Atmospheres

Melissa Gregg

CAMEo Cuts

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From Careers to Atmospheres

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The third issue of CAMEO Cuts examines the changing social relations of time and self-management at work. Melissa Gregg shows how the dispersed organization increasingly relies on technologies and platforms that aim to improve personal productivity and efficiency, but tend to do so at the expense of collectivity. She explores how it might be possible to create new forms of elective association – ‘productive atmospheres’ – based on shared resources and care rather than metrics of individual performance. This forms the argument of her forthcoming book *Counterproductive: Time management after the organization* (Duke University Press).



About the author

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From Careers to Atmospheres

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Over the course of a century, time management in the workplace enacted a progressively personalized relationship to efficiency. Whether in popular or institutional form, career-enhancing training programs encouraged an intimate relationship to one's work, defining professionalism in terms benefiting the organization and its machines. Sanctioned methods for time and self-management amplified workplace initiatives aimed at erasing the practical and ideological means of experiencing labor as collective. We see this in the scientific management of Taylorism, the human relations tradition of Elton Mayo, the self-auditing company executive and the app-monitoring, mobile professional of today. Throughout history, workers have been encouraged to take part in record-keeping pursuits that have disaggregated and individualized labour in the name of progress. Casting workers as high potential actors imbued with drive, the productivity imperative legitimated professional ambition as self-improvement and progressive momentum, removing the incentive for individuals to acknowledge their output in relation to group effort. The athleticism of time management – proving one's job *fitness* – required a turn away from social and collegial dependencies.

For workers, the consequences of this history have been profound. Not only did the efficiency demands of the organization come to be singularly prioritized in the interests of personal survival, beyond the workplace, a battery of mass-market texts and technological aids supplemented

the professional curricula consolidating in universities under the rubric of management studies. To submit oneself to the discipline of time management – and to do so willingly, as an elective effort – became an expected cultural norm. Today the successful entrepreneurial individual is trusted to perform a “permanent reform or revolution” of the self to avoid redundancy in a competitive job market.¹ Productivity's recursive rationale suits a generalized condition of austerity in which “anyone not prepared to ‘fling himself into the fray... has already lost.’”²

Despite their resilient attraction as secular science, many of the earliest theories and techniques of time and performance management map poorly onto the present. This is due to the gradual disintegration of the organization and the work it contained. The notion that work is carried out through a series of individual choices regarding time, based on unique interpretations of classification and order in fixed and bounded locations, ignores the structural conditions that govern today's corporate firms, not to mention the cumulative impact of so many apparently personal decisions on a social and global economic field. As professional work has become distributed, digitized and personalized, so too have the technologies designed to monitor and evaluate efficiency. The latest productivity tools enacted through software platforms and wearable devices are the end of a long line of delegated logistical work that has been the burden of some bodies in some places to bear more than others. Productivity services typically rely on

a hidden infrastructure of low-paid primary production, support and service work, as well as domestic labour and care, in order that they may function. If there was any doubt that time mastery depends on inferior others, the names of some of the leading providers of delegated work are enough confirmation: “Task Rabbit” is as dehumanizing as Amazon’s “Mechanical Turk” in the growing ecosystem of virtual online assistance.³

Advocates see these software platforms as evidence of the resources now available to workers to earn a living outside the inconvenience of rigid imposed schedules. Set against the longer history of labour struggle, however, the rise of on-demand labour apps is a mixed blessing, revealing what is at stake when servitude is required to advance the benefits of productivity. Digital platforms orchestrate an unregulated job market which separates wages from employers and thus the expectation of baseline income and benefits. The configuration of work as it is carried out in these transactions means that employment location, management, scheduling and pay no longer align in one place.⁴ Another way of saying this is that “platform capitalism” ruptures the relationship between employment and time.⁵ What is traded for the convenience of a contract, contingent or “gig”-based lifestyle is any hope that workers *can* control time.

This is why digital labor platforms stress the flexibility of their scheduling apparatuses: the productivity mandate that fuels the practice of time management posits the attractive idea that it is possible for us to focus on consequential matters for predetermined periods. That we hold the power to control life’s unpredictability through the deployment of protective infrastructures is the fantasy necessary for productivity’s appeal. This

persistent belief in time management as an ostensibly achievable and desirable goal pervades the register for labor demands even at a time when jobs with material outputs, defined hours and suitable payments are increasingly rare. The growing disconnect between labor performance, measure and value in a service and data-driven economy must be understood before turning to *alternatives* that may prove more accommodating and empowering for workers in the present and future. In addition, acknowledging feminist, race-and class-sensitive histories means that the equation between temporal sovereignty and freedom in work must be constantly questioned. As Sara Ahmed notes, “When being freed from labor requires others to labor, others are paying the price of your freedom.”⁶ Recalling Sarah Sharma’s words, a politics of temporal awareness “means recognizing how one’s management of time has the potential to further diminish the time of others.”⁷ The pleasure of being productive – to work on the most visible, valued and rewarded labor in a company or a culture – should not come at others’ expense. Productivity is not a virtue if it requires temporal subordination in the attainment of elite gratification.

Escaping the Enterprise

To escape the notion of productivity inherited from the enterprise requires thinking beyond work-centric categories of assembly and achievement. In what follows, I offer two case studies that express the positive qualities to be found in productivity when this involves building *atmospheres* for social interaction outside the socio-temporal dictates of the organization.⁸ While neither example is without flaws, I see them as useful stimulus for advancing further efforts in imagining and constructing post-work livelihoods and

futures.⁹ Consider them as an invitation to continue this conversation collectively, as fellow theorists, workers and activists.

Atmospheres I – Co-working spaces

Co-working spaces are a physical assemblage of social networks and pooled resources where independent, remote and contract workers gather together in a shared location. Paying membership to a community space on a month-to-month basis, co-workers invest in an infrastructure for the development of new identities, affiliations and rituals that compete with the corporate career reward structure – to the point where enterprise customers are turning to successful shared office operators like WeWork to solve their talent retention problems.¹⁰ Like other consumer-driven platform innovations – AirBnB, Kickstarter, Etsy and others – co-working operators share a desire for more meaningful work beyond the ideals of productivity that defined employment in the organization era. Their venues provide tools to generate work and income such that livelihoods need not depend on traditional 9-5 employment.

In 2016 I began talking with Thomas Lodato about his research on co-working spaces, struck by the growing number of shared office locations appearing in my local neighborhood around Portland. For my Intel job, I was interested in the burgeoning ecosystem of startups and small businesses arising from these venues; both Thomas and I wanted to find out what the “co” in co-working really captured. Did it mean community, as so much of the advertising for co-working spaces maintained? Or did it mean something specific to the kinds of collaboration enabled by the physical layout of the buildings inside? Over the course of a year, Thomas and I shared notes from fieldwork

conducted across the US, Europe and Asia, drawing together overlapping observations.¹¹ In co-working, we observed, community refers to a combination of “camaraderie, collegiality and knowledge transfer fostered through spatial proximity.”¹² In promotional copy for co-working spaces, community is often shorthand for what Seb Olma calls the “serendipity” of co-working, which can appear artificially manufactured in some contexts.¹³ Current projections from Emergent Research point to 26,000 co-working spaces worldwide and something like 3.8 million individual members by 2020.¹⁴ Whether or not these figures hold, the phenomenal growth of co-working can be understood in terms of the emphasis knowledge workers place on the right *atmosphere* for personal productivity. Co-working’s key benefit has been to offer comfort amenities—free coffee, beer, and snacks; inspirational quotes painted on walls and displayed through neon signage; on-site therapy dogs, massage, and yoga—in addition to aesthetically pleasing lounge areas that allow individuals to feel close to something; something that *might be happening*. The renewed popularity of co-working as part of the post-2008 economic recovery also suggests that shared work location is one important factor in offsetting the instability of a precarious career path. While co-working providers don’t directly generate employment security or job leads, they provide the social and material infrastructure upon which such valuable connections and opportunities can be realized. If freelancers have always lived at the whim of the market, bearing the burden of securing their own contracts, tools and resources, it is the lack of social interaction in independent work that can negatively affect workers’ wellbeing.¹⁵

Co-working is the physical manifestation of a larger international community making

use of Instagram accounts, Twitter hashtags and Facebook pages to promote workstyles outside company walls. Search for #coworking or #digitalnomad on social media and witness the array of users promoting travels and adventures beyond the conventional career itinerary. These communities operate on the premise that the world can be navigated easily and efficiently through shared know-how, namely, brokerage services that will facilitate safe passage through cities and countries that gain an economic benefit from wealthy workers' presence. Co-working spaces are a vital channel for this global class of mobile workers, securing the social and practical resources to enjoy a world *through work*. And yet, it is hard not to recognize that the privilege of digital nomads often depends on a superficial engagement with local communities, just as the commodified form of community offered by co-working behemoths derives speculative value from the collision of real estate and business interests.

Atmospheres II – Daybreaker

Daybreaker is an occasional morning dance party that began in 2013 and has since spread to numerous US cities as well as Toronto, Paris and London. Appropriately, it was conceived in a Brooklyn falafel shop by founders Radha Agrawal and Matthew Brimer after a long night out. The thought was to “take the energy and inclusiveness of the nightclub scene and infuse it into the weekday morning routine” – inverting the conventional dance experience requiring darkness and drugs.¹⁶ The pre-dawn parties are designed to disrupt the monotony of the working week, allowing access to great music and inspiring locations for patrons to bliss out and relieve stress. “The idea is this: Arrive before dawn, dance like crazy to hot beats from popular DJs, and then go to work feeling amazing.”¹⁷

Daybreaker’s mix of live DJs, entertainers and boutique fitness instructors come together to lead a party of typically 400-500 paying guests and begin the day on a natural high. Before the dancing commences, pre-ticketed yoga sessions allow gathering attendees to wake gradually, while local vendors offer gourmet juice, coffee and breakfast items as part of the price of entry. The further benefit of the dance dimension, as the sober clubbing trend also documents, is the chemical hit of the endorphin rush. The pleasure of this physical exertion accentuates what time management gurus have long identified as the “Prime Time” of early mornings. “Morning is a time when you have the most amount of energy potential inside of you,” Brimer notes in explaining Daybreaker’s origins.¹⁸ Event promotion celebrates both the mental clarity and the adrenaline hit that dancing at dawn delivers.

Daybreaker parties are a notably collective example of popular mindfulness practices seeking attunement with the body’s rhythms and patterns. Amidst the frenzy of the dance, Daybreaker creates an opportunity to witness the body’s natural sensations and experiences without the noise of stimulants or other signal scrambling distractions. Daybreaker makes a spectacle of this vital knowledge, taking it to an extreme, at a time of day and week when this behavior is socially unexpected. Rather than turning inward, reflecting on the story of the individual’s body—the solipsistic potential that haunts some commercial mindfulness practices—the gatherings purposefully explore the body’s pleasures in combination with a large group. Daybreaker events are designed to unleash affective contagion: assembling a multitude of bodies to witness what they will do. In this way, Daybreaker extends the premise of other quasi-spiritual fitness companies that have

fanned a niche market by offering sensuous aesthetic environments for members. These lifestyle brands (like the SoulCycle chain made famous by Michelle Obama) encourage a kind of physical exertion that fuses mindfulness techniques with athleticism.¹⁹ They suit the requirements of an urban milieu where contaminated environments provoke the desire for what Peter Sloterdijk would call “immunological bubbles.”²⁰ Unlike the healing ambitions of conventional mindfulness, however, Daybreaker is explicitly hedonistic in its aim to unsettle the norms of the working week. Gatherings provide an oasis from the grind of city life in assembling various nutrients that will replenish the mind and the soul in the midst of habitual routine. The locations for each event are typically several steps removed from the heart of the city’s financial district or the grittier parts of the urban environment. In a particularly popular Daybreaker form, parties are held on a boat in the Hudson (NYC) or the Bay (San Francisco) - marking a temporary separation from the city grind.

Daybreaker is not the first morning dance phenomenon, but its international appeal suggests that there is something similar in the experience of living and working in large, affluent cities, whether LA, Seattle or London. The audience imagined for the events shares the language and privilege of the white, wealthy elite also drawn to mindfulness technologies.²¹ In contrast to the Baby Boomer bohemian, however, social media promotions for Daybreaker emphasize attractive, style-conscious and youthful participants with the time and the means to participate in a rich sensory wonderland. The price of entry to the event provides access to a well-heeled and well-connected clientele – a networking opportunity for the aspiring class. Daybreaker LA organizer Argine Ovsepyan told CBS that guests are generally “young professionals

that are rocking life... You could be next to an entrepreneur that runs three companies, which is pretty epic.”²² Burning Man is cited as the most useful comparison, but “without the dust, drugs or bikes.”²³

Daybreaker hints at the new coordinates for social activity appropriate for today’s professionals who see no fun in commonplace genres like Friday night drinks.²⁴ The growth in wellness and health conscious lifestyles in proximity to the work cultures of the successful tells a story of affective reengineering amongst a new urban gentry whose boutique tastes have grown in tandem with the widening gap between rich and poor in the United States. News coverage for Daybreaker parties lists them with tags dedicated to the topic of “green living,” an indication of Daybreaker’s grander aspiration to encourage more intelligent engagement with nature by paying heed to internal and external rhythms. The Daybreaker atmosphere encourages workers to experience the pleasures of time spent differently – to break with the commuter treadmill of corporate athleticism. The drug-free status of these events makes a feature of their health orientation, all the while opening the experience of elevation to a range of potential participants from different cultural and religious traditions. Daybreaker transcends any one belief system to reawaken spiritual awareness through a simple and powerful premise: organizing joy at collectively witnessing the dawn.

Towards Productive Atmospheres?

In sharing these examples of productive atmospheres, my aim is not to hold them as ideal case studies for a postwork future. As *Fortune* noted, describing the Daybreaker event at Macy’s Manhattan Department

Store in 2016: "It'll all be over in time to go to work."²⁵ I hold no illusion that these two subcultures are untouched by varieties of class and racial privilege, or substantial networks of financial capital bankrolling their efforts. It is not incidental that both arise from a Manhattan milieu that harbors a degree of wealth that is unimaginable to the majority of ordinary workers. Where I do find hope is in the way that both co-working and day dancing play with the constraints of the work week paradigm, trading on the idea that they produce a different orientation to time. Each example calls out the damage caused to workers' wellbeing by the 9-5 routine instituted by the organization. And each provides simple gestures of self-care, even luxury, which the majority of today's workplaces find it increasingly difficult to provide. Whether it is the cacao bar at breakfast or the refresher pack in the WeWork bathroom, these atmospheres for productivity offer amenities for a worker who is destined to endure a long and unpredictable work day.

Overall, what I like about both micro-movements is that they operate in the interests of the worker rather than the manager. In different ways, both offer spaces of support and repair for individuals who seek to practice the principles of mindfulness and find purpose in the work that they inevitably have to do. Co-working and Daybreaker reintroduce the pleasurable social relation that the efficiency metrics of the organization stripped from view. These communities use technology and local geography to introduce new rituals centered on shared time and presence. Attending Daybreaker or subscribing to a co-working space will not revolutionize corporate business practice; indeed, each clearly supplements its obvious failings. This raises the question with which I want to end this short essay: What models of productivity

do we need – what forms of affiliation, performance and ritual – for a future outside the corporation?

My conclusion is that we need to move our aspirations for productivity from the corporate to the collective interest. Productive atmospheres are truly revolutionary when they undo a century of managerial strategy and initiate a form of collective solidarity that is not dependent on labour. We urgently need political visions that celebrate practices of selflessness and care to challenge the embedded egotism of enterprise-serving job norms and pervasive industry myopia. At a time of global environmental threat, the athleticism of accomplishment has to be rejected for its utter dependence on the growth mentality that exploits our finite resources.²⁶ In Sloterdijk's words, "individual immunity is only possible as co-immunity."²⁷ Our decisions about work and our ability to classify which tasks are worthwhile expenditures of time are part of a larger societal discussion necessary to establish shared infrastructures that will sustain a range of meaningful work practices in the long term. Building atmospheres rather than careers is a necessary step in this transformation.

Endnotes

¹ Ulrich Bröckling, "Gendering the Enterprising Self: Subjectification Programs and Gender Differences in Guides to Success." *Distinktion*, no. 11 (2005): 18. Sianne Ngai observes a similar trend of subjective reconfiguration drawing on Paulo Virno in the introduction to *Ugly Feelings*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007. p. 4.

² Bröckling, *ibid*.

³ Lilly Irani, "Difference and Dependence Among Digital Workers: The Case of Amazon Mechanical Turk." *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 114 (1), 2015: 225-234. See also *In The Crowd*, which documents Mary Gray and Siddharth Sury's year-long study of online crowdworkers in the US and India. <http://www.inthecrowd.org/> (Accessed May 17, 2017).

⁴ Neha Thirani Bagri, "Startups in the gig economy will go to great lengths to avoid calling their employees employees," *Quartz*. April 6, 2017. <https://qz.com/952034/startups-in-the-gig-economy-like-uber-and-deliveroo-will-go-to-great-lengths-to-avoid-calling-their-employees-employees/> Accessed May 17, 2017. For a full discussion, see Arun Sandarajan, *The Sharing Economy: The End of Employment and the Rise of Crowd-Based Capitalism*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016.

⁵ Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity, 2016.

⁶ Ahmed's larger point is imperative: "Black women and women of color; working-class women; migrant women, women who have worked in the factories, in the fields, at home, women who care for their own children as well as other children, such women have become the arms for other women whose time and energy has been freed... If the freeing up of time and energy depends on other people's labor, we are simply passing our exhaustion on to others." *Living a Feminist Life*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2017. p. 85.

⁷ Sarah Sharma, *In the Meantime: Temporality and Cultural Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014. p. 149.

⁸ Here I follow the example of Timon Beyes and other critical management theorists who introduce the philosophy of aesthetics to provide the contours of a reimagined, and more socially just organization. See Beyes, "Art, Aesthetics and Organization" and other chapters in *The Routledge Companion to Humanities and Social Sciences in Management Education*. Chris Steyaert, Timon Beyes and Martin Parker (eds). London: Routledge, 2017. My reading of Daybreaker is also informed by ongoing conversations with Mark Banks, who describes the politics of class, labor and transcendence in "Being in the Zone of Cultural Work," *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research*, Special issue, Capitalism: Current Crisis and Cultural Critique. Johan Fornas (ed.) Vol 6, 2014: 241–262.

⁹ Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

¹⁰ The corporate co-working trend is often regarded as an affront to the collectivist origins of community co-working, as well as an assault on the traditional serviced office real estate market. One way of thinking about the role of co-working in the current intersection of high tech and real estate investment is that it provides an outlet for critique of the dominant paradigm for arranging work in the enterprise. In her influential study of gay family life, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship*, Kath Weston argues that alternatives to a norm often serve to reinforce the dominance of the established model. Even a strong and vocal appreciation of deviations from tradition can underscore the significance of the socially sanctioned version of the practice. In exercising a new opportunity to work alongside *colleagues* that they choose, coworkers display some of the elective affinities that are central to sustaining queer life, even while they rely on the normative idea of the company office to differentiate their choice. Weston, *Families We Choose*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

¹¹ Our research on labor conditions emerging out of austerity also explores the role of civic hacking in the provision of professional skills training and the normalization of sacrificial labor in the tech industry. See Carl DiSalvo, Melissa Gregg and Thomas Lodato, "Building Belonging." *Interactions*, Vol. 21, Number 4 (2014): 58-61;

¹² This and the following quotation appear in our co-authored paper, "Managing Community: Coworking, hospitality and the future of work." *Affect in Relation*. Birgitt Röttger-Rössler and Jan Slaby, eds. Forthcoming.

¹³ Seb Olma, *In Defence of Serendipity*. Repeater Press, 2016. I thank Seb for further practical assistance in this fieldwork during my visit to the Netherlands.

¹⁴ Small Business Labs admits the difficulties in tracking a booming market with the non-standard data available internationally in their otherwise compelling forecast: <http://www.smallbizlabs.com/2016/08/coworking-forecast-44-million-members-in-2020.html> Accessed May 22, 2017.

¹⁵ Stephen R. Barley and Gideon Kunda, *Gurus, Hired Guns, and Warm Bodies: Itinerant Experts in a Knowledge Economy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.

¹⁶ Coleen Shalby, "Weekday morning dance parties are now a thing." July 13, 2015. <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/art/start-your-morning-by-going-to-a-7am-sober-rave/>. There is irony in this objective given that Rhada and twin sister Miki admit in interview that they are essentially unemployable. The pair have avoided any typical career path through a run of successful start-up businesses of which Daybreaker is but one; of the portfolio of ventures the twins manage, a line of sustainable underwear designed to rid the world of menstrual shame is another. The twins cite their athletic background as crucial to their business acumen in (the now defunct) *Racked*: <http://ny.racked.com/2016/5/23/11717668/miki-radha-agrawal-thinx-daybreaker-williamsburg-nyc> Accessed June 4, 2017.

¹⁷ "4 Booze-Free, Mindful Events to Check Out This Summer." <http://www.care2.com/greenliving/4-booze-free-mindful-events-to-check-out-this-summer.html> Accessed June 4, 2017.

¹⁸ In Shalby, *ibid*.

¹⁹ SoulCycle's generous early valuation attracted multiple write-ups in business media outlets, including this *New York Times* profile: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/09/upshot/soulcycle-you-say-cult-i-say-loyal-customer-base.html>. Michelle Obama's SoulCycle passion is outlined in a subsequent NYT piece, "A Beat and a Bike: Michelle Obama's Candlelit Habit," https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/11/us/politics/a-beat-and-a-bike-michelle-obamas-candlelit-habit.html?_r=0 Accessed May 22, 2017.

²⁰ Peter Sloterdijk, *Bubbles – Spheres Volume 1: Microspherology*. Translated by Wieland Hoban. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011.

²¹ Evgeny Morozov, "The Mindfulness Racket," *New Republic*, February 23, 2014, accessed September 1, 2016, <https://newrepublic.com/article/116618/technologys-mindfulness-racket>.

²² <http://losangeles.cbslocal.com/2015/12/16/at-daybreaker-a-dance-party-to-start-the-day/>

²³ *Ibid.* On the productive networking potential and creative frisson of Burning Man in the West Coast tech aristocracy, see Fred Turner, "Burning Man at Google: A Cultural Infrastructure for New Media Production." *New Media & Society* 11 no. 1-2 (February/March 2009): 73-94.

²⁴ This suggests an evolution from the dominant form of professional affect and work-related socializing I described in "On Friday Night Drinks: Workplace Affects in the Age of the Cubicle." In *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, 250-268. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.

²⁵ <http://fortune.com/2016/04/13/macys-daybreaker-dance-party/>

²⁶ Clive Hamilton, *Growth Fetish*. London: Pluto Press, 2004.

²⁷ Peter Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life*. London: Polity, 2013. p. 450.

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