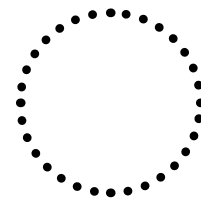


A little history of fatigue

Tom Melick



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A Little History of Fatigue

Tom Melick

No poetry concerning the people is authentic if fatigue does not figure in it, and the hunger and thirst which come from fatigue.

—Simone Weil, ‘The Mysticism of Work’, 1947

1.

Follow rats into history and you find almost every conceivable problem paired with every conceivable fantasy. In 1904, the German physiologist Wilhelm Weichardt was busy subjecting lab rats to strenuous exercise, measuring their recovery time and observing their behaviour.¹ He thought that fatigue accumulated in the bodies of rats over time, eventually resulting in their death. Weichardt suspected that a ‘fatigue toxin’, which he named ‘kenotoxin’, was the cause of death, and set about trying to isolate the chemical substance. If fatigue was an internally produced chemical it could be extracted from the overworked rats, distilled, and then injected, in small doses, into other rats—the hope being that these rats would build up an immunity. Most rats died, some lived, and eventually Weichardt thought that he had created indefatigable rodents. He became confident that he could cure human fatigue.

Armed with a vaccine derived from his super-rats, he had human subjects perform physical exercises and, once injected with ‘antikenotoxin’, had them perform the exercises again. He found that his human subjects had, like the rats, an increased

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¹ Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor*, New York: Basic Books, 1990, 142

capacity for exertion. He sprayed a classroom in Berlin with the vaccine and reported that the schoolchildren's concentration, retention, and general energy levels had vastly improved. With industrialisation well underway, and wars looming, there was great interest in Weichardt's research. For if the soldier could fight longer and rest less, if the worker could work longer and recover sooner, then the fragility and organic needs of the human body would no longer be an obstacle to its capacity as a weapon or machine. But when Austro-Hungarian military physicians carried out independent tests with Weichardt's vaccine the results were less convincing. So-called 'nerve whips' — tea, coffee, sugar, cocaine — did a far better job at thwarting fatigue, though it was always a temporary fix: fatigue returned.

2.

The fantasies of eradicating fatigue from the body are inseparable from the fantasies aroused by a certain conception of the ideal worker. Fatigue became a problem for science and medicine at the same time that bodies were being called upon to operate machinery or claim, occupy, and manage new sites for exploitation. This problem was expressed in the gap between what was being asked of the body and what the body failed or refused to do (or be). Falling into this gap was therefore the worker with an arm that was not quite a lever, legs that were not quite springs, a heart that was not quite a motor. As Charlie Chaplin famously satirised in *Modern Times* (1936), the body either adapted to the production line or was swallowed by it. Fatigue was a limit, a threshold, a condition and, perhaps most significantly, a problem to overcome.

The confluence of modern science (psychology, psychiatry, physiology, and clinical medicine), together with social

reformers and social hygienists, together with a managerial attention to efficiency motivated by profit, produced fatigue as a disorder. Fatigued people became 'moving targets', not to mention sites of experimentation.² And as the classifications of fatigue proliferated so too did the fatigued. In America, the *Index-catalogue of the Library of the Surgeon General's Office*, from 1900, listed more than 100 studies of muscle fatigue in addition to 'nervous exhaustion', 'brain exhaustion', 'asthenia' and 'spinal exhaustion'.³ Fatigue became not only a physiological problem but also an elusive 'internal' deficiency — a lethargy of will, a hiccup in the making of the New Man. The fatigued worker was not simply exhausted from being overworked but lacking in deeper, more profound ways. In a French medical textbook from 1886, fatigue is described as one of our 'sad passions', it is 'responsible for our sloth and makes us desire inaction'.⁴ In other words, fatigue produced an urge to do nothing. To seek out the sort of day where nothing at all gets done, passionately. But instead of this being registered as necessary downtime, a moment of reprieve, escape, boredom, or the possibility of being neither here nor there, a convenient morality had snuck into fatigue, requiring urgent intervention and clinical attention.

3.

One way to look at the history of fatigue is to consider how work became a commitment, a calling. If Puritanism, as Max

2 See Ian Hacking, 'Making Up People', *London Review of Books*, Vol. 28, No. 16, 2006

3 Rabinbach, *The Human Motor*, 20

4 *Ibid.*, 40

Weber suggested, imbued work with a moral duty, the ‘vital force’ in the development of capitalism, fatigue became a ‘sign’ of something wrong with the worker’s inner ear; the ‘call’ was not being heard, or worse, heard but not answered.⁵ It became a problem that fatigued workers went about their duties without commitment, vigour, or belief. That this became a problem meant that those classified as fatigued were not only lacking in physical energy but were attenuated in other ways. Seen from within Weber’s framing, where the anxiety produced by Calvinist predestination is channeled into a work ethic, fatigue could be conceived as exposing those who had fallen into the category of the ‘unelected’. If a religious ‘calling’ had, since the Reformation, entered everyday life and work as a moral issue, as Weber claimed, then any evidence of lassitude would indicate a lack of *pneuma*, a poverty of spirit. To not be energetic at work, to not commit vigorously to the duties of the job or, as we might hear today, to be unprofessional, a bludger, was to be without the necessary inner resources required to fulfill the duty of work. In other words, you can’t just do your job; you also have to really want to do your job, and be happy doing it.

Weber’s attention to an underlying history of capitalism is a useful way of thinking about fatigue and its relationship to work. But it only gets us part of the way there. For what if we try to think of fatigue as something other than a problem to be fixed, remedied, or eradicated? What if we read fatigue as an underhistory of labour? For if fatigue can be accumulated and properly felt, can it also be seized, shared, cherished?

5 Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930), London: Routledge, 1992, 124: ‘...the idea of duty in one’s calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs.’

Simone Weil, who thought of work as either the awakening of consciousness or the crushing of the human spirit, wrote of ‘Joys parallel to fatigue: tangible joys, eating, resting, the pleasures of Sunday...but not money.’⁶ Let these joys be are our coordinates.

4.

To get there, we have to go a little further in thinking through the worker’s body as a machine, and the diagnoses that followed the fatigued — including its de facto nationalisation, for example, as ‘Americanitis.’⁷ The adoption of the machine as the model for the human body, together with the notion of social decline and entropy, meant that the fatigued worker became both a warning and a drain — a canary in the mine and a tick on the bull — for ‘civilised’ society at large. With a Taylorist eye for the superfluous and the aberrant, science and capital ‘attended’ to fatigue as a growing concern of industrialisation. This was particularly evident in America (though by no means exclusively so) where the promise of the machine hinted at a return to the profits reaped from slavery, if only the body could be enhanced by technological intervention or replaced altogether. At the same time, a strange sort of separation took place at the moment of classifying fatigue.

6 Simone Weil, ‘The Mysticism of Work’, *Gravity and Grace* (1947), London and New York: Routledge, 2002, 181

7 A quick trawl through health columns of the past reveals a continued focus on the human as machine. For example, opening *The New York Times* on Sunday June 7, 1925, you might have caught the headline: ‘Americanitis is Accused of Wasting Many Lives’: ‘Ambition never overleaps itself more certainly than when it lashes the human machine to ceaseless and restless activity. The result is sure to be disastrous to the average — which is the normal — individual. Social rivalry and business competition combine in a structure that menaces the health and the very lives of multitudes.’

Fatigue and ‘Americanitis’ became a vague but easily deployable diagnosis for the modern worker, but ‘neurasthenia’ was often reserved for the intellectual class struggling to keep up with the pace of their own thoughts. In 1880, the American neurologist and electrotherapist George Miller Beard published *A Practical Treatise on Nervous Exhaustion (Neurasthenia): Its Symptoms, Nature, Sequences, Treatment*. The year after: *American Nervousness: Its Causes and Consequences*. Beard, influential in situating neurasthenia within the American psyche, reported that its symptoms were ‘most frequently met with in civilized, intellectual communities. They are part of the compensation for our progress and refinement.’⁸ Thinking oneself into progress was therefore a more refined, male, erudite, white, able-bodied, bourgeois manifestation of fatigue, whereas fatigue produced from physical labour and dreary, repetitive work was evidence of social decline. In other words, it was inevitable that the poor get fatigued because, well, they are poor, but what a tragedy that the intellectual becomes fatigued as a result of becoming more civilised, more cultured, more refined!

You might say these diagnostic patterns led to a hierarchy of fatigue by establishing that the ill-health of the worker came to indicate a deficiency in their body and spirit, whereas the fatigued mind of the ‘intellectual’ — itself an invention associated with the individualised, creative, always-thinking genius — was seen as an exceptional side-effect of progress

8 Tom Lutz, ‘Varieties of Medical Experience: Doctors and Patients, Psyche and Soma in America’, in *Cultures of Neurasthenia: From Beard to the First World War*, ed. Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra and Roy Porter, New York and Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001, 53

and modernity. If workers were not coping with the dramatic changes brought about by mass production they had to be fixed, put back together, tinkered with — and if this did not work and they were deemed irreparably defective, unable to adapt, they were ‘thrown into the streets without a job.’⁹ For a capitalism inflected with scientific scrutiny, the fatigued body, even if it continued to perform the menial tasks asked of it, would not do. Fatigue was an obstacle not only to productivity but also to a belief in the transformative powers of science and capital, both of which had chosen energy, productivity, sacrifice, and progress as the touchstones for conceiving not only of the worker’s body (as though every body were the same), but also the worker as a replaceable unit within a larger social and economic project.

5.

So fatigue did not fall from the sky, but nor did it belong only to industry and medical science. The concept of fatigue appeared in anthropology when A. L. Kroeber was trying to understand why Native Hawaiians abandoned their taboo systems in 1819, prior to the first arrival of missionaries. He offered ‘cultural fatigue’ as a theory for the dramatic change, proposing: ‘Hawaiians had become disillusioned, and tired of their religion.’¹⁰ Fatigue was one explanation for a collective

9 Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 20. I’m thinking of Weber’s description of the capitalist economy as an ‘immense cosmos’ that seems to the individual ‘an unalterable order of things in which he must live’. If fatigue was perceived as a disorder it was the worker that was at fault for being tired, rather than the cosmos.

10 A. L. Kroeber, *Anthropology: Race, Language, Culture, Psychology, Pre-history*, New York: Brace Hancourt, 1948, 404

act that brought about broad change to a belief system that had become too limiting, too burdensome, or too complicated (it seems Kroeber could not figure out which). Fatigue was the reason a collective might buckle under the weight of a system, or reject that weight altogether. Too much information; too many obligations; too many rites to perform; too little time; too many tasks hidden within tasks, like a Matryoshka doll. Or so Kroeber reasoned, perhaps trying to think his way out of the impact and violence of colonial occupation.

Kroeber's suspicion that fatigue could be a source of cultural change was not limited to belief systems. He wondered if fatigue was at the root of the French Revolution, the New Deal in America, or France's political defeatism-cum-capitulation to Nazism in 1940 (it was not that French politicians were Nazis *per se* but that they were, to a certain extent, tired of being French). 'Once an attitude develops sufficient strength, novelty as such may come to seem a virtue and a boon.'¹¹ What I take from Kroeber is that fatigue is conceived as an 'attitude' or, as he describes it elsewhere, an 'affective factor,' which has a transformative power, even a strength, within broader social, cultural, or religious limits. Fatigue is conceived as a capacity capable of bringing about change — not always good — in the social order of things. This 'affective factor' does not bring about change through action and energy but through a retraction from obligations: the dropping of duties and the disavowing of responsibilities. The way Kroeber uses fatigue as a neat explanation for cultural change is not what interests me, but it's worth considering what work fatigue does when it

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11 Ibid., 405

becomes collective. Or, suddenly comes into view as an affectively shared condition.

6.

With the above as a crude map let's begin to think about a specific kind of fatigue. Maybe you can already feel it behind your eyes, in the lower part of your back, or between the shoulders. There are specific questions that keep returning to me as I write about this: who gets to show their fatigue in public? Who has been allowed and denied the space to claim it as a creative force? Who is associated with fatigue as opposed to those associated with energy? If fatigue eludes specificity, what might that elusiveness reveal? Fatigue cannot be scheduled or managed; it comes and goes; it cannot be enclosed between a beginning and an end; it does not acquire value. It is a reduction, an instant, a slowing down. It is related and may lead to — though it is not — sleep or death.¹² Fatigue does not refuse efficiency and productivity so much as let it fall to the floor or drag along the ground or express itself with a heavy sigh. I do not want to exaggerate or celebrate fatigue as a great dismantler, but I'm curious to follow its collective threads, from its diagnostic origins as a problem in nineteenth-century science and industrial capitalism to present-day assemblages of work, capital, and that feeling of being just generally exhausted by it all — flattened, heavy, achy, and irritable. At the same time, I'm interested in fatigue as an 'affective factor' because it is, despite

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12 Matthew J. Wolf-Meyer takes a similar approach in thinking of fatigue along the same axis as sleep and death in his book *The Slumbering Masses: Sleep, Medicine and Modern American Life*, Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 2012. For Wolf-Meyer sleep has been conditioned by medicine, science, and capitalism. Sleep is therefore 'biological and social, cultural and natural, historical and emergent...'

all that is done to remedy it, a negatively active state — a state that does not increase productivity. That is to say, it is a little mysterious, often opening us up to the possibilities of staring at the ceiling or the sky, daydreaming, slowing down, refusing to participate.

What I keep puzzling over is that fatigue can be thought of as negatively active precisely because it has been obsessed over by capital and science as a loss, a waste of time, something empty, a feeling to overcome.¹³ This affective thread that I'm trying to trace leads to a larger historical fabric that is never finished as a single history nor coheres as a definitive analysis of capital, but is wrapped up and tangled within the present. Fatigue is ordinary, a felt threshold, often crushing, sometimes pleasurable — operating 'in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity.'¹⁴ Perhaps all of this is already obvious, but it is intriguing that fatigue cannot be completely valued by capital, and yet it does not heroically resist or transcend it, either. It might be overcome, or not. Capitalism cannot cure fatigue even though — or precisely because — it is produced by it. It is therefore a sort of weird inveterate problem — a little rock that never leaves the shoe.

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13 Keep in mind what Raymond Williams described as 'affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical coconsciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity'. Raymond Williams, 'Structures of Feeling', in *Marxism and Literature*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1977, 132

14 Raymond Williams, 'The Analysis of Culture' in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed. John Storey, Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1998, 36

7.

Like waste that has nowhere left to go, fatigue is produced as an everyday underhistory of efficiency and progress. Where there is capital there is a particular form of fatigue that is always arising as a shuffling nuisance or unwelcomed break. Complimentary coffee, tea, eugeroic drugs such as Armodafinil or Modafinil, vacation packages, energy drinks and diets, health retreats, vitamin powders and pills, the option of working from home or devising your own schedule, are all thin solutions and inducements that, if they do not in their own way exacerbate fatigue, lead back to it. These solutions and inducements have their origins in nineteenth-century 'cures' like the vaccine promised by Weichardt or, less obscurely, drinks such as Coca-Cola.¹⁵ Such remedies could be incorporated into what Karl Marx identified as the intensification of production, 'the law which gives capital no rest and continually whispers in its ear: "Go on! Go on!"'¹⁶ But at the same

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15 I'm looking at an advertisement for Coca-Cola from 1909 that shows a group of frocked women sipping the drink alongside copy that reads: 'Relieves the fatigue that comes from over-play, over-work and over-thinking'. An advertisement produced the following year shows a businessman leaning back from his desk with an expression of mild despair, the copy reads: 'Sometime to-day you'll be about all in. Feel as if you'd like to toss up the whole thing and just rest — but you can't. When the time comes snatch a moment from your work — seek the nearest soda fountain and get a glass of delicious and refreshing Coca-Cola. It will relieve your fatigue, cool you off comfortably, calm your jangled nerves and quench the thirst.' As Sidney Mintz's study of sugar showed, a commodity wrapped up in the history of colonial trade, class, and capitalism, a drink such as Coca-Cola does inventive work: 'Diet is remade because the entire productive character of societies is recast and, with it, the very nature of time, of work, and of leisure.' See *Sweetness and Power*, New York: Viking, 1985

16 Karl Marx, 'Wage Labour and Capital', in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978, 213

time, in the other ear: ‘You look tired. Get some rest! Get some rest!’ This inherent contradiction of working and resting — or turning rest into work, or resting to work again — is an indication that no one really knows how to handle fatigue, since it cannot be isolated within leisure or completely disgorged from work. To be sure, fatigue is a market.¹⁷ What we need to work out is whether there is a difference between the products and methods for masking fatigue and fatigue as an ordinary, albeit contextual and conditioned, moment of awareness, and whether this moment can possibly be shared.

According to Marx capital intensifies the production of labour as a process of continual transformation: ‘the division of labour is necessarily followed by greater division of labour, the application of machinery by still greater application of machinery, work on a larger scale by work on a still larger scale.’¹⁸ Thinking about the context of where I’m writing this pamphlet, the university, such intensifications would be a long list, best summarised as ‘academic labor speedups.’¹⁹

The university demands that more and more knowledge be produced at a faster and faster pace, while at the same time increasing fees, shortening semesters, eliminating departments, casualising its workforce, undermining or actively sabotaging student unionisation, advancing corporate interests, fostering

17 See Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: The Commercialization of Human Feeling*, California: University of California, 2012

18 Marx, ‘Wage Labour and Capital’, 213

19 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, ‘Doing Academic Work’ in Randy Martin (ed.), *Chalk Lines: The Politics of Work in the Managed University*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998

a culture of competition or petty professionalism, and so on. In other words, and to no surprise, the university is not a special or exceptional site.²⁰ Intensifications produce intensifications which can be noticed anywhere a specific form of energetic capital is chasing down various aspects of life. For Marx, capital menaces the everyday until every hour, habit, joy, and necessity is affected:

It usurps the time for growth, development, and healthy maintenance of the body. It steals the time required for the consumption of fresh air and sunlight. It higgles over a meal-time, incorporating it where possible with the process of production itself, so that food is given to the labourer as to a mere means of production, as coal is supplied to the boiler, grease and oil to the machinery. It reduces the sound sleep needed for the restoration, reparation, refreshment of the bodily powers to just so many hours of torpor as the revival of an organism, absolutely exhausted, renders essential.²¹

This ‘usurpation’ of life itself brings us to an unavoidable question: is fatigue work? Although this is an inherently speculative question why not follow it up and ask: what kind of work is it? Is it a work that can reveal a backdoor to the self-actualisation envisioned by Marx (through Hegel) under communism, or does it always tighten the screws of a discordant and alienated self? Do all the ways in which fatigue is invented, suppressed,

20 See Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, Wivenhoe, New York, Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2013

21 Marx, *Capital Volume I*, 373

delayed, or experienced under capitalism intensify the production of fatigue?

In order to make our way to these questions let's take a closer look at what a young Marx perceived as estranged labour. In *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx famously renovated Hegel's interpretation of history by replacing what was once the ceiling (Ideas) with the floor (Materialism). 'Spirit' is not the driving force and goal of history as Hegel had it, rather, for Marx, it is material needs. Material needs not concepts are the 'earthly basis' of history, the 'real-life process' of people, or as he wrote a year later in *The German Ideology*: 'Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.'²² What Marx retained was Hegel's concept of alienation (and de-alienation!). Instead of residing within self-consciousness as it relates to the Absolute — the single, essential, communal entity that flows through reality and at the same time constitutes it — Marx packs up and moves the entire problem of alienation to labour and property.

A worker's estrangement under capitalism might be thought of in terms of a domino effect: she works but not for herself; does not recognise herself in her labour; is not at home when she is working; has no sense of herself in what she produces. Her work is thus external and strange, like a reflection that bears no resemblance. What she produces is what she is not — a 'not me.' Not only is she estranged from what she works on, from the thing, she is doubly estranged from her 'own physical and mental energy.' Her activity is turned against her so that her

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22 Marx, 'The German Ideology,' 155

experience of work is a loss of self — summed up as self-estrangement.²³ In addition to this, as a 'species being,'²⁴ she is estranged from those around her, from her fellow workers. She does not experience life as a free activity but only as a 'means to life,' a basic existence of physical needs that is at every turn alien to her. Reality itself is snatched away. If the world must always be made, this sort of work is the stealing away of this making, the stealing away of the worker's place within her species and within nature.²⁵

This is how the story goes, and we know that the only resolution to this complete estrangement for Marx and others — that is, the only way that the worker returns to herself and to others — is through a radical remaking of history. Communism is

the genuine resolution of the conflict between man and nature and between man and man — the true resolution of the strife between existence and essence, between objectification and self-confirmation, between freedom and necessity, between the individual and the species.

Communism is the riddle of history solved, and it

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23 Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 74

24 We are a species being, and because of that we are a conscious being. Our own life is an object that is worked on. For Hegel and for Marx, we create our world and ourselves through our labour. For Hegel this labour is mental, for Marx it is material.

25 It is this assemblage of alienation for Marx that makes possible private property, the 'product, the result, the necessary consequence of alienated labour.' As he writes, 'Private property thus results by analysis from the concept of alienated labour — i.e. of *alienated* man, of *estranged* labour, of *estranged* life, of *estranged* man.' Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 74

knows itself to be this solution.²⁶

But how might this relate to the more minor, less theorised, history of fatigue? Let's keep in mind what Marx glimpsed as a riddle lodged within history. Communism is a future that is alive in the present, or as he writes in *The German Ideology*, 'Communism is for us not a state of affairs which is to be established, but an ideal to which reality will have to adjust itself.'²⁷ To take up this idea and run towards the amorphous, we could say the making of a different world always requires attitudes and affects, something that can be felt as existing even if it is not entirely material, which must be worked up and on if it is to be brought about, if it is to become a 'life-process.' Because labour is creative action — the means by which we develop the 'potentialities slumbering in nature'²⁸ — it's through labour that we can produce something other than misery, depletion, exhaustion. Labour is the means by which the world takes shape and is adapted to the needs of whoever is doing the shaping: 'Through this movement he acts upon external nature and changes it. And in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature.'²⁹ But what if the labour is an unworking? What if it is about letting our bodies sink into the world and linger on the limit that is fatigue?

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26 Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 84

27 Marx, *Capital Volume I*, 162

28 *Ibid.*, 283

29 *Ibid.*, 162

8.

So far I have kept this history of fatigue close to the body but it seems necessary now to look for it elsewhere, in the collective and ecological. In Marx's speculations about the future of modern agriculture, he envisions progress as an agent of infertility: 'all progress in capitalist agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the labourer, but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time, is a progress towards ruining the lasting sources of that fertility.'³⁰ Dive into the sea and come up for air and the story is the same: the acidification of overfished oceans and rising carbon dioxide point more and more to nature itself as a byproduct of capitalism. In this sense, we might think of fatigue as a sort of prolonged state that is felt within and without, or rather, communicates the continuity between body and world. As Marx reminds us, 'Man *lives* on nature — means that nature is his body, with which he must remain in continuous intercourse if he is not to die.'³¹ Fatigue is experienced within the body and then again outside it — like microbes, it shows the porosity, the constant back and forth, the false division between inside and out. A fatigued body slouches outside only to find — if it is there at all — fatigued soil, air and water; flowers that arrive too early or too late; birds that drop from the sky from heat exhaustion. Life is tiring and life itself is tired.

We are seeing now how the accumulation of capital corresponds to the accumulation of misery, toil, brutality, and mental

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30 Marx, *Capital Volume I*, 638

31 Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 75

degradation.³² And what if we were to extend this dual process of accumulation to say that the accumulation of capitalism — hundreds of years of it — has amassed in our bodies and our environment?³³ If the present is fat with fatigue, bursting from the seams as an accumulated result of physical and immaterial exploitation, as feeling and thought, as material needs and consciousness, could it somehow be registered and articulated anthropologically in careful and delicate ways? This takes us back to Weichardt's rats, creatures that were 'spent' in pursuit of a solution that seems plausible so long as it continues to be tested and measured by the inventor. Fatigue is a problem for those who would prefer to see it solved, or if not solved, temporarily remedied. But how can fatigue be thought of away from spurious cures and complimentary coffee? How can fatigue be stolen back?

9.

The separation between person and world is an impossible surgery. Nobody can invent other worlds without being in one to begin with. If labour is the making of something, an invention, then this making need not be heroicised on the scale of a factory or a building; labours can be small and quiet. Instead of separating these two forms of fatigue — one bodily and the other ecological — what if both were knots on the same metabolic thread? What if we followed fatigue out from our

32 Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 431

33 I'm thinking here of Rob Nixon's concept of 'slow violence' — that which 'occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.' See Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011, 2

polluted and disorderly selves and into the polluted and disorderly world to discover that they are not so different? What if there was a shared slowness between person and world? As Michelle Murphy has written with an attention to the molecular, 'when it comes to questions of pollution perhaps it is more appropriate to discuss the historical emergence of a chemical regime of living, in which molecular relations extend outside of the organic realm and create interconnections with landscapes, production, and consumption, requiring us to tie the history of technoscience with political economy.'³⁴ For a negative image of this, consider that survivalist Silicon Valley billionaires are buying land in New Zealand.³⁵ Former missile silos are being converted into well-stocked, luxury bunkers in preparation for an ecological or nuclear apocalypse.³⁶ As the world becomes more drastic and difficult, more hostile and less habitable, perhaps there will be less interest in managing and remedying fatigued bodies. Some would rather — like the 'privilege' of working from home, the outsourcing to cheap labour, the enlisting of the already-overworked into 'exciting' new 'sharing' economies, or the conversion to automation — avoid the trouble of bodies altogether.

This potential shift in focus has not passed by those who discuss biopolitics as a set of 'regulatory controls' that carefully replaced an old power concerned with death with the

34 Michelle Murphy, 'Chemical Regimes of Living', *Environmental History*, Vol. 13, No. 4, Oct., 2008, 697

35 Emma O'Brien, 'The Mega Rich have found an Unlikely New Refuge', *Bloomberg*, November 2, 2016; Hayden Donnell, 'Silicon Valley Super-rich head south to escape global apocalypse', *Guardian Observer*, Jan. 29, 2017

36 Evan Osnos, 'Doomsday Prep for the Super-Rich', *New Yorker*, Jan. 30, 2017

‘administration of bodies and the calculated management of life,’³⁷ but it does introduce an odd tangent: the avoidance of life. If we follow this thinking and apply it to current assemblages of capital, where ‘the ancient right to take life or let live was replaced by a power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death,’³⁸ perhaps we need to consider another form of capital that has the means to avoid the hassle of the population altogether; purchasing dislocation, finding and fortifying life beyond the reach of others, exercising a mastery of remaining life so as to avoid fatigued bodies, giving up on a ‘continuous intercourse’ with the world in pursuit of the last remaining sites where life does not slump with the weight of humanity. In some respects, this is nothing new. The rich and powerful have always sought enclaves away from the population; the only novel development is that these enclaves are becoming less and less viable as the world becomes more and more uninhabitable. The story of progress, as durable as it is, is running out of space, and energy.

10.

We necessarily come back to whether fatigue can be thought of as unalienated labour or a thing to reclaim. The problem might return us to Weber, but this time to his notion of communal action, which always has a structure and a law of its own that is not entirely determined by the economy. Communal action operates as feelings and belongingness.³⁹ As he observed,
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37 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1*, New York: Pantheon Books, 140

38 *Ibid.*, 138

39 Weber, *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press,

amorphous yet shared actions occur, such as the ‘murmuring of the workers,’ the disapproval of the boss, the phenomenon of ‘the “slow down” (the deliberate limiting of work effort) of laborers by virtue of tacit agreement.’⁴⁰ Within labour speed-ups there is the possibility for labour slowdowns. Within all that is done to create and profit off fatigue there is the possibility of fatigue as an awareness, an awakening. Perhaps fatigue facilitates or is an ‘affective factor’ in generating this kind of murmuring. Or to go further: perhaps fatigue can be shared as a feeling that does not feel like work, but is not leisure either. Fatigue not as empty, but as open.

I’m imagining an insistent form of fatigue that may arise from estrangement but does not lead to the false separation of person and world; a reacquaintance with expending energy and feeling that returns as joy, not misery. If fatigue can be conceptualised as an affective labour or an attitude, it might be worked at and developed as a form of awareness. If fatigue is an object of labour perhaps it can be made to do different things — fatigue not as exploitation dressed up by science as a disorder or a condition to suppress, but a moment of capability, an awareness of limits that extend beyond the individual experience of being fatigued.

I’m imagining Weichardt’s rats escaping the lab and meeting in the sewers to plot and play. I’m imagining them running through history, rediscovering all the ways fatigue has been stolen back amidst endless experiments, where the thinking
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1946, 183

40 *Ibid.*, 184

of fatigue not as a lack but as a form, something that can be shared, parallel to joy, begins to take shape. This line of thinking veers much closer to what Simone Weil meant by poetry not being possible without fatigue, or what Emmanuel Levinas saw as the possibilities that open up within fatigue, offering an instant of consciousness, 'the interval in which the event of the present can occur,' where 'the activity of inactivity is not a paradox; it is the act of positioning oneself on the ground, it is rest inasmuch as rest is not a pure negation but the very tension of a position, the bringing about of a here.'⁴¹ This does not answer the question of whether fatigue is work so much as allow moments of inactivity to be moments of noticing and possible joy. Where the work might come about, then, is in seeing how fatigue is a slowed down 'here' that puts the fatigued in touch not only with themselves but also with others, with the histories and presents of fatigued bodies and ecosystems. If fatigue always returns then it might return us to shared ground, and to the making of a different little history.

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41 Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988, 35–36



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