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Working-Through Wellness: Critical Perspectives on the Contemporary Wellness Dispositif

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In this paper, we examine the institutionalised demands and imperatives that govern the contemporary working subject. Our starting point is the thesis advanced by both Alain Ehrenberg and Eva Illouz that since the 1960s institutions are no longer characterised by a strict culture of prohibition and discipline. Instead, institutions seem to be increasingly animated by the norms and practices of a "culture of self-care", enriched by therapeutisation (Ehrenberg) and emotionalisation (Illouz). However, this does not mean that the disciplinary regimes that Foucault focuses on are simply disappearing. They persist, albeit in a different form, and we demonstrate this by looking at three central aspects of contemporary wellness: (a) specific spatial arrangements, (b) the performance of bodily practices and techniques and (c) ritualised interactions. We argue that in wellness facilities disciplinary regimes become effective through interpellations that are inscribed in rigid temporal-spatial orders and demand the body's docility. Insofar as this process relies on those norms that Ehrenberg and Illouz reserve for post-Fordist labour, the wellness space can ultimately be understood as a labour space. For what is at stake is the productivity of the subject.

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1. Introduction

"I've been expecting you!" I hear a voice calling as I stand at the reception of a spa. The voice belongs to a middle-aged man wearing glasses and a white T-shirt with the inscription "Relax Coach" on it. He comes running towards us euphorically. I pay the 120€ affording me a so-called "Relax! Day Vacation Deluxe", thank the receptionist, and follow the Relax Coach, who is eager to show me and my companions around the spa, eventually leading us into a long underground corridor illuminated by violet light. At the end of the corridor, we climb a few steps to get to a large, echoing, and lively swimming hall, equipped with whirlpools, slides, and a large water mushroom under which some children enjoy themselves. While my gaze falls on the bridge running over the pool, which leads to an outdoor pool equipped with large water bowls, from which the spa takes its name, the Relax Coach activates the lift. We get inside and he selects the third and thus the highest floor on the number pad. Once at the top, we have to go through a turnstile in order to enter the spa area we have booked. The place is wood-clad, moss-walled, quiet, and discreet—and, as the Relax Coach assures us, reserved exclusively for us.

"A place reserved for us": This phrase already indicates that the wellness space grants access differentially. While indoor pools and "fun spas" may be visited by both the middle-class family treating itself to a relaxed weekend and the shift worker, thus making them somewhat egalitarian because they are accessible to the broad public, exclusive and expensively equipped "high-class spas" are reserved for a wealthy upper-class clientele. It is not unusual for such spa landscapes to offer bathing rooms at different prices, at least not in German-speaking countries. It reflects the attempt to cater to people with different socio-economic statuses. As we argue in the following, the "feel-good promise" evoked by everyday cultures such as architectures of wellness must be understood within the context of a wider societal change that affects the everyday working life of the "post-Fordist social character" (Eichler 2013, 10; our translation). Indeed, work today is structured in such a way as to prompt the subject to balance hard work with self-care in the form of wellness. We argue that the wellness practices and wellness products imposed on or offered to the subject can be read as a symptom of contemporary Western capitalist culture. Our analysis of the relationship between wellness and labour echoes the socio-critical studies by Alma-Elisa Kittner et al. (2010), Klaus Schroeter (2006), Elisabeth Mixa and Edith Futscher (2006) as well as Mixa (2016), who, following Michel Foucault, speaks of a "feel-good dispositif" (Mixa 2016, 2) that organises the spaces of wellness.[1] Whereas Mixa et al. concentrate

[1] As far as the history of the wellness idea is concerned, note that the discourse has its origins in 29 lectures given by the social physician Halbert L. Dunn on the topic of high-level wellness. Within this context, he coined the neologism "wellness" as a portmanteau of "well-being" and "physical fitness" (Dunn 1959). Dunn's great achievement as regards the challenges of modern life was to give the US health movement a slogan which pointed out that "[the] great challenge

on the paradoxes of the feel-good promise and ponder the transformations of everyday cultures that combine different wishes and yearnings in terms of wellness, we take a different approach. Our focus is on the institutions, spaces, and architectures within which wellness experiences are linguistically, emotionally, physically, and habitually performed.

Our considerations are based on two theses. The first is that wellness particularly addresses bodies within the bourgeois middle class that are exhausted by the post-Fordist work ethic. At first sight, the increasing attention paid to people's well-being is nothing to object to—indeed, it seems only natural—in a society in which, as Alain Ehrenberg suggests in *The Weariness of the Self* (1998), the ability and willingness to work constitute the highest values. However, the constant exhortation to participate in the aesthetic (self-)practices of the wellness industry—think, for example, of the admonition to manage one's self and one's time so as to allow for regenerative rest periods in order to gain "true sovereignty over body and mind" (Kittner and Scheller 2010, 3)—poses the question whether wellness can actually still be understood as a "sanctuary of immediate life" (Adorno 2005, 169)—that is, as the opposite of work.[2] As Adorno argues, the concept of freedom remains strictly "shackled to its contrary" (Adorno 2005, 167) and may even be a mere "appendage to labor" (Adorno 2005, 169). This becomes evident from, among other things, the fact that the notion of wellness has become a part of organisational and corporate cultures. Companies that expect great effort from their employees thus like to integrate the terminology of wellness into their health-promotion concepts and encourage their staff to take part in wellness measures in order to gain better control over the stress factors that might affect their work.[3] This suggests that wellness is deeply rooted within the logic of work, since the point of taking a break is not simply to take a deep breath and to recover but to restore the working body as quickly and as efficiently as possible, which in turn requires a specific form of work. Therefore, our second thesis is that the relationship between work and wellness is co-constitutive rather than dichotomous.

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at the older ages is how to keep a person fit until he dies" (Dunn 1959, 229). Against this background, the story of the wellness movement and of its initial prospering in the late 1960s can be seen not only as a history of the marketing of harmless aesthetic pleasure formulae but as a history of biopolitical interests. We seek to show that today the practice of wellness no longer revolves primarily around the value of health (as was the case with Dunn) but instead is oriented towards the value of productivity.

[2] The critical discussion surrounding the continuity between work time and leisure is a classical topos of first-generation Critical Theory—a topos still debated today (Virno 2004).

[3] It is not only tech giants like Google, Facebook, Amazon, and Microsoft but also research and educational institutions such as universities and retail companies that offer their employees programmes of this kind.

In the following, we argue that the structures of post-Fordist work continue at precisely the point where the self—in order to live up to the growing demands of the performance society—is expected to devote itself to a form of self-care that the present culture of consumption promotes as wellness. This being so, it is clear that the current wellness trend does not represent a neutral or arbitrary development but symbolises a cultural practice that is part and parcel of the post-Fordist work ethic. In other words, there is a specific complicity between the prevailing work ethic and the promises of the wellness industry. We aim to develop the wellness dispositif against the background of a change in the social norms that, according to Alain Ehrenberg (1998) and Eva Illouz (2007), govern the psychic apparatus of the working body[4] in late capitalism and constitute a subject liable to suffer from depression and become exhausted. We show that within this context the wellness experience conveys the promise of bringing about a comprehensive rehabilitation of the working body (1). Next, we take an empirical look at the wellness dispositif, based on a field study of three high-class spas in the Austrian, German, and Swiss Alpine region conducted in 2019.[5] We demonstrate that the promise of wellness cannot be fully realised, since wellness today is dominated by a normative set of interpellations that operate spatially and temporally and are dedicated to the productivity of the body (2). This transformation of the body ultimately produces a new form of labour that appropriates elements of both Fordist and post-Fordist morality, and whose significance for contemporary society remains to be grasped (3).

2. Towards a Critical Theory of Wellness

In order to render plausible that the wellness dispositif is a specific expression of an affective discourse that shapes the current work culture, let us recall the central arguments put forth by Ehrenberg, for example in his essay *The Weariness of the Self* (1998). As we see it, Ehrenberg's reflections form a suitable framework for an investigation of the wellness dispositif, because they help us conceive of the latter as part of the societal shift that was characteristic of the change of individuality at the beginning of the

[4] We continue to speak of a working body in order to emphasise the importance of the body for processes of subjectivisation. As both Ehrenberg and Paul Ricœur argue, it is difficult to imagine what a subject would be without its body. Ricœur expresses this as follows in *Oneself as Another*: "Possessing bodies is precisely what persons do indeed do, or rather what they actually are." (Ricœur 1992, 33)

[5] Michaela Bstieler undertook this field study as part of her Master's thesis in Educational Sciences (Bstieler 2020). In order to offer representative examples of the wellness sector, she selected spa facilities that are an integral part of the global tourism and leisure industry. Using participant observation (Cohn 2014), the depth-hermeneutic method developed by Lorenzer (Lorenzer 1973, Bereswill et al. 2010) and an interpretation workshop (König 2018), it was possible, by turning to actual wellness facilities, institutions, interactive practices, and languages, to render visible the specific wellness imperatives that go along with the meticulously staged wellness architecture.

21st century (Ehrenberg 2010a). Thanks to his critique of the neoliberal segregation of society in contemporary democracies, there is a political dimension to his socio-historical œuvre that we consider fruitful for a critical theorisation of wellness. The starting point of Ehrenberg's analysis, which is based on the conviction that pathologies are the product of social relationships, "an attitude, a mindset heavy with multiple social practices and representations of ourselves in a society in which values associated with autonomy [...] have been generalized" (Ehrenberg 2010a, xxx), is a subject that since the 1960s develops its pathologies no longer in a prohibitive society but in a society of unlimited possibilities (Ehrenberg 2010a, 305). According to Ehrenberg, this changed social character is the result of a thoroughgoing structural change that is most clearly evidenced by the success of depression and of the anti-depressant *Prozac*. "Depression", Ehrenberg states, "began its ascent when the disciplinary model for behaviours, the rules of authority and observance of taboos that gave social classes as well as both sexes a specific destiny, broke against norms that invited us to undertake personal initiative by enjoining us to be ourselves." (Ehrenberg 2010a, 4) Whereas neurosis, according to Ehrenberg's thesis, was still the pathological face of the border of the disciplinary society "between the allowed and the forbidden" (Ehrenberg 2010a, 4), depression mirrored the suffering from the tension between "the possible and the impossible" (Ehrenberg 2010a, 4).

Similar to Foucault's theorisation of power, Ehrenberg's diagnosis of society is not only concerned with the repression of the new social body. Rather, he also points out what results positively from the replacement of the rule of law by the new rule of the possible for the social body. Ehrenberg's particular interest in the question of how the replacement of coercion by possibility produces and normalises new social norms is evident in his description of depression as a "drama of a new normality" that simultaneously produces "a new prescriptivism" (Ehrenberg 2010a, 140). Compared with the "old" power, we might argue with Foucault, the "new" power has the advantage "that it doesn't only weigh on as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse" (Foucault 1980, 119). Although Ehrenberg himself does not refer to Foucault, he too seems to have in mind a productive power that affects and constitutes the social body in an entirely new way. As he sees it, today's social character suffers from the illusion of infinite possibilities, feeling itself compelled to use them continuously and repeatedly, instead of suffering from the call of restraint that the persistent compulsion under the law of the forbidden and the permitted produces.

Analysing those positions in psychiatry he uses as interpretational means for his genealogy of depression—for example, Freud's conflict model (Freud 1908) and Janet's

deficit model (Janet 1909)—Ehrenberg registers a hidden reference to conflict that, in fact, is the "normative centre of democratic life" (Ehrenberg 2010a, 10) in both private and political terms. At the level of subjective behaviour, thought, and action, the rules and limits that have structured communal life over a long period of time thus appear to have softened and become virtually invisible. When Ehrenberg goes on to say that "the development of one's self became, collectively, a personal affair" (Ehrenberg 2010a, 117), his aim is to position the new subject as a "psychic" being whose agenda henceforth is the ceaseless self-administration of life. As authors such as Eichler show, this also applies to current working conditions (Eichler 2013). In this context, the latter notes the paradox that the "promise of freedom" (Eichler 2013, 13) accompanying the democratisation of work is successively absorbed by obligations that the subject imposes on itself out of fear of failure. Seen in this light, it becomes clear what Ehrenberg means when he says that the new freedom and sovereignty "does not bring about the rule of the private individual" (Ehrenberg 2010a, 7). Rather, they stimulate and produce values such as innovation, communication and motivation, which are external to labour—after all, they have to be trained outside actual working hours—but from now on are included in the evaluation of the work performed. From this it follows that the structural shift described is accompanied not only by competitiveness but also by a diffusion in perception, because it is no longer possible to stipulate clearly what constitutes "work" and what should be deemed "leisure". The volatility of this difference seems to be the result of the post-Fordist work ethic, which has recently moved eerily close to the self.

In other words, the economic changes of the last third of the 20th century have played their part in the construction of a new working body by promoting a form of interiority that operates on the basis of "inner balance and tranquility" (Ehrenberg 2010a, 186) and is obsessed with continuously optimising and commodifying a person's own mental, emotional, organisational, and social abilities. As Ehrenberg points out a few years later in *La Société du malaise* (2010), the credo of the new (private) self-care, which from now on structures the collective psyche, is already evident in the patients treated by Ralph R. Greenson in the post-war period (Ehrenberg 2010b, 75). Greenson claims that his analytical subjects seem to be "ready and eager to make contact and to communicate" and are "very conscious of their skill or awkwardness with words and language" but nevertheless "belittle their accomplishments and have little faith in their genuine merits" and are "unduly concerned with their social standing" (Greenson 1958, 243). Ehrenberg views this as the anticipation of a performance imperative, which he places before his considerations on the economisation of the personality. As he sees it, whereas at the time of Freud the study of sexuality possessed high strategic value, nowadays it is

the study of identity that is more in line with the spirit of the age. This focus on the self and its performance—therapeutic practice can, in the final analysis, also be understood as work on the formation and maturing of the self—finds a parallel at an institutional level in the ongoing staging of the self in a world (of work) that demands that one be categorically open to the indeterminate.[6] The merit of Ehrenberg's studies of exhausted subjectivity, which he derives from historically changing models of illness, certainly lie in bringing to light the transformations in constraints, norms, and demands that shape and constitute our contemporary democracies at the macro level and our everday structures at the micro level. In doing so, he comes to blame the decline of conflict for the current malaise, thus identifying not only a central political implication of his thought but also the point of departure of the struggle for an egalitarian society. A weakness of his social theory, however, is that he does not spell out the institutional consequences of this social change, especially at the level of micropolitics. In order to bring together subjectivity and sociability in the context of the workplace, we therefore seek recourse to Eva Illouz's social theory. Illouz formulates her social theory, which she wants to locate within the programme of Critical Theory, against the backdrop of the fact that the normative power of the private has become increasingly important in the organisation of capitalist culture and the workplace. To make her point, she invokes the presence of practices of feeling and emotion that have been negotiated and institutionalised in the workplace in the form of moral claims. What is remarkable here is that Illouz's theory must be opposed to the liberal dispositif that strictly separates the "private" and the "public" realms, as advocated, for example, by Hannah Arendt (Arendt 1998): By conceiving of the political from the outset in terms of its emotional dimension, she thwarts the supposedly natural affiliation of the emotional with the feminine, private space. Indeed, the critique of this purported connection between the emotional and the private forms the normative starting point from which Illouz views contemporary subjectivity.

In her Frankfurt Adorno Lectures, published as *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (2007), Illouz contends that institutions are increasingly regulated and controlled by emotions. As she puts it, "the private self has never been so

[6] The last point in particular ties in with what Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello say in their extensive work *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (1999). As they point out, measuring the "access to the condition of great man" (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007, 122) within the spirit of capitalism means showing the willingness to abjure values such as stability, rootedness, adherence, and allegiance. Being equipped for the "projective city", on the other hand, would mean marketing oneself as part of a "*highly activated section of network*" (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007, 104) in a self-conscious, compromising, assertive, creative, and particularly flexible way. What is expected of the working body if it wishes to qualify for the protective city is thus the ongoing and continuous practice of availability and freedom. Mark Fisher has repeatedly and impressively demonstrated the fatal consequences that may ensue from this work ethic (Fisher 2013, Fisher 2015).

publicly paraded and harnessed for the discourses and values of the economic and political spheres" (Illouz 2007, 4). In the context of the workplace, this transformation can be measured by the change in the *criteria* used to evaluate work. Today, values such as emotional satisfaction, introspection, self-direction, and, above all, the ability to express oneself and be creative have become part of the production process (Illouz 2008, Cabanas and Illouz 2016). At the level of the subject, these new values manifest themselves as a specific form of self-management that implies a "new dexterity with one's appearance" (Illouz 2007, 19); at the level of institutions, they can be seen in new styles of speech and knowledge practices. According to Illouz, it is the language of psychology that holds these two levels together: From the employers' point of view, the language of psychology is attractive because it not only promises to increase profits but also holds out the prospect of neutralising class struggles (Illouz 2007, 17). From the workers' point of view, what speaks for the new emotional style is that now it is not social position but personality that is the focus of workers' control. Furthermore, the concession of capitalist employers to absorb workers' grievances and emotions suggests to workers a democratisation of social relations in the workplace and conveys values such as equality and cooperation (rather than inequality and dependence). Against the backdrop of this development, it also becomes clear why mechanisms of recognition are gaining in importance: once the evaluation of work is no longer primarily based on skills but on whole persons, the entire work process revolves around the ongoing stabilisation and economisation of one's self (Illouz 2007, 22).

Self-care is thus elevated to a principle, even an imperative, of post-Fordist work. Moreover, as Foucault points out in *The Care of the Self*, the demanded intensification of one's relation to oneself has produced a new relation to the world. Strictly speaking, the imperative "became instilled in ways of living; it evolved into procedures, practices, and formulas that people reflected on, developed, perfected, and taught. It thus came to constitute a social practice, giving rise to relationships between individuals, to exchanges and communications, and at times even to institutions" (Foucault 1986a, 45). As examples of this complete institutionalisation or implementation of emotions and affect control in the workplace, Illouz cites not only a new, excessive form of introspection that—if one follows the literature that gives advice on good management—is about "seeing oneself from outside, so to speak, in order to control one's impact on others" (Illouz 2007, 19). Besides such a practice of negative care, ideals of humanistic or positive psychology, whose image of the human being is based on "the universal tendency for growth, self-actualization and the realization of one's unique potentiality" (Shachak and Illouz 2010, 22), seem to inform the current orientation of *human resources* departments. An aspect that Shachak and Illouz (2010) cover in this context

concerns a more recent form of psychosocial intervention that, in their estimation, turns on the commodification of positive emotions of well-being—so-called (life) coaching. As a strategic aid for coping with everyday life, coaching is meant to foster self-realisation, the idea being that this takes place via a restructuring of the self into the manager of its own life. Constantly switching between psychological and economic logics, this form of guidance defines not only "a mode of sociability in which an always precarious sense of self must be preserved" (Illouz 2007, 21), but rather an "advanced stage in the commodification of personhood" (Shachak and Illouz, 2010, 30) that is invading our institutions. Against the backdrop of this "therapeutic narrative" (Illouz 2007, 27), it now becomes possible to analyse the extent to which the new values that Ehrenberg and Illouz define in the context of contemporary institutions also dominate the current spa landscape.

3. Organising Temporalities: Wellness as Work

The preceding remarks on the wellness dispositif have made it clear that there is good reason to assume that wellness is in the clutches of the post-Fordist work ethic. This becomes evident not only when we think of the axis between therapeutisation and emotionalisation but also when we think of the axis between tension and relaxation, which define both areas, wellness and work. Drawing on a sample of descriptions from the field study, this section of our paper argues that wellness has to be understood as a specific body work that produces the wellness subject in the first place. This production is based on so-called interpellations that are ritualised, habitualised, and internalised through a) specific spatial arrangements, b) the performance of concrete practices and bodily techniques and c) interactions as well as verbal codes. As we demonstrate below, the specific form of work here consists in the correct internalisation and perfection of these procedures, which are permeated by time regimes—an aspect Ehrenberg and Illouz do not consider. It is this temporal dimension of the wellness experience in particular that we seek to account for in what follows.

Category A—Spatialising Intimacies

The analysis of the ritualised processes and intersubjective practices of wellness requires a more precise description of the wellness space itself. There are two divergent modes according to which wellness spaces can be structured: a "logic of passivity" and a "logic of activity," the distinguishing criterion being the way *temporalities* are organised in the respective areas. Whereas spaces of passivity suggest a certain timelessness—an anti-temporality—spaces of activity, conversely, exhibit a fine temporal parcellation and encoding. In order to understand the logics of these spaces, let us turn

first to spaces of passivity, which are commonly referred to as "quiet rooms" and stand in sharp contrast to the rest of the spatial wellness structure. As the following field note taken from Bstieler's field study (see footnote 5) and describing a stay at an expensive designer spa points out,[7] spaces that follow the logic of passivity establish a threshold of calm and intimacy:

> The spa consists of a cuboid stone block, with a pool set in the centre and protected by stone walls. Around the stone block are several entrances, some of which are hidden or difficult to access. We finally decide on a room where we first have to swim through a very narrow entrance in order to come into a grotto permeated by shimmering light. [...] Later we repeat this process. After we have arrived somewhat exhausted in the interior space, we look at the play of light and notice that it has a very hypnotising effect. My companion nearly falls asleep. I ask him why he feels good here despite his hydrophobia. His answer is: "You're protected from the outside. No one can come here easily, and you can just let yourself go." It is quite a long while before he wants to leave the grotto. (Field note from 4 June 2019.)

The hidden entrances indicate that this space cannot be readily occupied by the subjects. Indeed, the initial impression it gives is one of remoteness, otherness. In architectural terms, this seemingly private, quiet, intimate, and exclusive space is constituted by the separation from the public pool placed at the centre. Because these spaces of passivity are screened off from the other spaces of the bath, they also fulfil the most important criterion Foucault ascribes to heterotopias. These, he argues, are spaces that, through their specific mode of being, subvert functional or established spatial orders (Foucault 1986b, 24). However, it is not only the spatial order that is involved in the production of intimacy; the temporal order plays a vital role, too. The fact that the scene, apart from the reference to repetition ("later"), has no references to time—which, as we point out below, makes it an exception—reinforces the impression that what is involved here is an attempt to provide protective nooks in which subjectivity can be briefly stored and conserved under the condition of a withdrawal into one's self.

In contrast to spaces of passivity, which suggest a certain timelessness (which lasts at least until the gong sounds for the next sauna session), spaces of activity engender a precise sequence of organised and timed bodily activities. The wellness treatments that act directly on the skin, shaping and changing it, are thus set within a specific time

[7] This field note is from a spa that was conceived by an architect of international renown. The architecture of the facility contrasts with the traditional buildings of the region, which comprise many densely arranged single-family homes, and it also clashes with the surrounding landscape. These contrasts have, however, been integrated into the building as meaningful elements. Because of the exclusive services it offers, this spa primarily seeks to attract well-to-do customers.

frame. The following description, taken from a field stay in a modern spa in the Alpine region,[8] describes the coordination of wellness practices within a given schedule:

> So we take a handful of salt, enter the steam bath and expose our bodies to the damp heat for about three minutes until the pores open up. Then we rub the salt into our bodies and let the peeling work until it mingles with the sweat, leaving only a greasy veil behind. After about 15 minutes, we leave the steam bath to begin the subsequent treatment: a shower that comprises three phases—lukewarm, ice cold, and hot. I repeat this procedure, until I, relatively satisfied, embark upon the final phase of the treatment: the "floating relaxation", a room in which several hammocks have been installed, designated as a quiet zone with soothing background music. "I love this room", states one saunagoer. Before I can ask her to give reasons for her statement, she adds: "Here, you feel as blissful as a baby." (Field note from 16 May 2019.)

This passage confirms that heterotopias are always also "heterochronies" (Foucault 1986b, 26)—that is, they are attuned to temporal sequences and distances but also to ruptures and shifts. More to the point, it becomes clear how the body is shaped through specific time indications ("about three minutes", "around 15 minutes") and rhythms ("three phases", "I repeat the procedure") and is affected on a sensory and tactile level before entering the final phase of the treatment: the "floating relaxation", which seems to do away with temporality so that actual rest can occur. Although the description focuses on technical aspects, there is one emotion ("relatively satisfied") that makes itself felt precisely at the moment the subject exits the time-controlled sequences and enters timeless floating relaxation. This marks a threshold where the emotion becomes visible as the subject's claim or attempt to do wellness "properly" so that, thanks to the repeated and rhythmic exercises, the feeling of relaxation is finally obtained. Moreover, this scene indicates how the disciplinary measures, already arranged architecturally and temporally but very subtly so, are internalised by the subject. At the moment of entry into floating relaxation, the subject—now no longer working actor but passive consumer—cannot but surrender to a form of relaxation that seems timeless and endless.

The sanctuary that is repeatedly sought can be interpreted here against the background of the need for a return to a space of relaxation believed to be lost. This space seems to be imagined as relaxing because it is able to subvert, at least briefly, the work habits established in the wellness space and the narrative of "time as currency", which,

[8] Because the spa is close to various ski resorts that offer high-quality accommodation and exclusive restaurants, this facility attracts both winter tourists and an international clientele. The spa features a four-star hotel and alpine-style family suites, thus being family-friendly and child-friendly as well.

as E.P. Thompson points out, has dominated the labour market and its normative values since the 18th century (Thompson 1967). Against the "moral critique of idleness", which, coupled with a "moral time-piece" is tied up with the ideology of putting every minute to *use*, these quiet rooms seem to be experienced as counter-spaces and counter-times that allow to "pass the time", *to waste time*. Even more, as Paul Preciado stresses in the context of his "unfurnished house", such quiet rooms can be understood as interstices that "temporarily dam up the time of repetition [...] and suspend the imperious claim of the norm" (Preciado 2020, 242; our translation). One's flight into such spaces does not only reinforce the desire for a cosy sense of well-being; it also reflects the reverse of the perceived exhaustion that also seems to govern human experience in the context of wellness spaces, as we show below. What the descriptions ultimately present us with is the outline of a subject bathing in an intimate owned space that is maintained against the resistance of a demanding work environment. In this way, the descriptions proffered can be understood as an indication or even a topographical expression of the desire for a self-sufficient space of intimacy and interiority.[9]

Category B—The Relieving Cry

As soon as we turn to the practices and body techniques celebrated, for example, in the context of sauna infusions, it becomes clear that it is not only corporations that accord with the emotional market described by Illouz but also wellness spaces. Looking at the treatments, one cannot fail to notice that there are a number of surprising stressors that shape the wellness body, train it, and make it compete with others. The negotiation of the balance between pleasure, endurance, and exhaustion seems to accompany the wellness subject continuously. This is particularly obvious in the following description of a field stay at a spa in the moorlands of the Alpine foothills:[10]

> Sitting on my lounger, I observe the sauna rotation. Shortly before 1 p.m., a couple saunters past me. I hear a woman urging her partner to hurry up because the infusion is about to start. [...] A few minutes later, another couple regrets just having missed the infusion. After about fifteen minutes, the guests trickle back to the bathhouse to take a shower. Some swim out into the external pool; others walk in the

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[9] With Freud, such withdrawal or return fantasies could also be interpreted as manifestations of unconscious death wishes (Freud 1920). The artefacts in the wellness space and the signifiers used to designate them ("floating relaxation") evoke things like a "final resting place" or "eternal peace", where the subject finds total (ultimate) relaxation beyond work.

[10] The building has the design of a so-called cabinet spa. Instead of featuring a spacious bathing hall, the spa has several thematically separated areas, each generating a differentiated and contemplative atmosphere, spatial impression, and bathing experience.

> promenade garden. When two women come towards me, I cannot help asking them how they found the sauna infusion. "Brutal", is the surprising answer I get. Upon further inquiry, they specify that the sauna infusion had been "hot, almost too hot", but that this might have had something to do with the fact that they had been sitting "right at the top", where it is known to be hottest. Another sauna guest announces in passing that the second infusion would have been enough for him. They finish by suggesting that I should arrive at least five minutes earlier next time so as to be sure to get a place. (Field note from 11 May 2019.)

Again, the repeated references to time markers ("shortly before 1 p.m.", "after about fifteen minutes", "five minutes earlier") indicate that wellness involves a meticulously planned programme that must be punctiliously followed if optimisation of physical awareness, the goal of wellness, is to be achieved. In this way, wellness is *transformed* into a specific form of work. That wellness cannot do without a performance-related impetus that determines the speech, thinking, and action of the wellness subject becomes evident from a tension that contrasts with the wellness agenda of total relaxation: Although the consumers complain about the heat generated during the sauna infusion, they try to convince others to also experience this setting, which, again, is *too* confined and *too* hot. The subject of wellness thus emerges thanks to an interpellation that demands that it submit to the temporal rhythmisation and rules-based ritualisation of wellness in order to attain the best possible relaxation outcomes. The price to be paid for this is different forms of bodily exertion and exhaustion.[11] Strong emotions such as bodily discomfort and uneasiness seem to be a prerequisite for successful well-being. In short, the opening for relaxation is at the same time a closure. The "I am relaxing" that constitutes the wellness space as a space to unwind is at the start replaced by "I am suffering", which shuts out the existing objective of wellness. The invitation to participate in the programme *despite* these physical complaints reveals that what we are dealing with is a disciplinary dispositif: It is a matter of participating in the too-hot sauna infusions in order to ultimately gain sovereignty over one's own body. At the same time, this call for participation is emphasised by means of an emotional vocabulary that enforces companionship or, rather, competition.

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[11] Intervention into one's corporeality is not always pleasant and desired and can sometimes produce disagreeable and unwanted feelings. Here is what Adorno has to say on the use of the body on holiday: "An exemplary instance is the behavior of those who let themselves roast brown in the sun merely for the sake of a tan, even though dozing in the blazing sun is by no means enjoyable, even possibly physically unpleasant, and certainly makes people intellectually inactive. With the brown hue of the skin, which of course in other respects can be quite pretty, the fetish character of commodities seizes people of themselves; they become fetishes to themselves." (Adorno 1969, 170)

As the description above makes clear, there is another aspect to this command to learn and adhere to a certain time management. The portrayal of wellness as a rare commodity stimulates a culture of competition that in the end constructs two types of wellness subjects: those who are prepared to align their stay with the infusion plan so as to participate in the tasks set and those who do not form the bodily knowledge—we could also, following Pierre Bourdieu, speak of habitus (see Bourdieu 1998)—necessary for wellness and thus do not (in this way) take part in the treatments. What we are dealing with here, then, is a series of different practices through which wellness affects the body, leading to a specific form of interpellation. The following description perfectly captures the formation and practice of the bodily habitus invoked.

> I go out into the promenade garden, heading for the kelo sauna, where the sauna session is just coming to an end. Sweaty bodies walk out of the sauna. It does not take long for a queue to form around the ice-cold plunge pool, which not only offers the very best way of cooling down but also instigates the cold stimulus that is an essential part of the wellness experience. I watch as one man after another slides swiftly into the ice-cold water, sinks his head into it, and then resurfaces with a short, relieved cry. Then the spectacle is over. (Field note from 11 May 2019.)

The physical schemes that the wellness subjects bring to bear whilst taking the cold bath can be viewed not only as a performative expression but as the result of the practice of wellness. The acquisition of a physical scheme that is in harmony with the idea of the wellness space does not mean, however, that one obtains intellectual knowledge about this space; nor does it signify the training of certain stimuli. The scheme is instead learned via habituation. In this sense, the "short, relieved cry" may be interpreted as a symptomatic expression of bodily knowledge that documents the wellness experience *as* wellness experience. It attests to a subject which has learned to familiarise itself with the rules and requirements of the wellness space, to submit to its practices, and to pay attention to getting its limbs into the right position—in this case, this means bringing about the experience that runs counter to the overly brutal and hot setting by plunging into the cold pool. Viewed thus, the cry of affirmation of a corporal situatedness in the wellness landscape is tantamount to a performative testimony with which the wellness subject wishes to signal to other subjects endeavouring to achieve perfect relaxation: I worked through it, I'm relaxed!

What also characterises the wellness experience, then, is a kind of competition-oriented performance ethos that stipulates that suffering necessarily precedes enjoyment and that those who put themselves through more pain can find even greater enjoyment. Although in the context of extreme sports the connection between endurance and

liminality is obvious—think of peak climbing, where, as Margret Grebowicz illustrates in *Mountains and Desire*, it is a matter not only of constantly pushing the body to the limit of its own physiological capacity but of pushing the boundaries of what is (humanly) possible (Grebowicz 2021, 9–18; 61–70)—the way in which pleasure, feeling, and performance are produced spatially and temporally in the context of wellness is a novelty. The cry of relief let out before others as part of the cold-water bath is symptomatic in this regard. The fact that over the course of the consumption of wellness products, infrastructures, and practices pain has to be affirmed so as to assert oneself as a wellness subject becomes clear in the exhortation to participate in the sauna infusion that is experienced as "brutal". As such consumption activities also stimulate dark, oppressive, or unsettling moods that need to be overcome competitively, there is good reason to understand wellness institutions as competitive spaces that continuously register the vulnerability of the wellness subject. As Danièle Linhart emphasises, subjectivity in the context of work is more and more extended to the intimate sphere of workers, whose emotions are exploited (Linhart 2009, 212). As a result, the expansion of the sphere of action—a bodily technique called "progression" in extreme sports, which, as Grebowicz points out, extreme athlets themselves have criticised as a "dangerous ideology" (Grebowicz 2021, 66)—increasingly produces vulnerable subjects who are haunted by a constant sense of exhaustion (Linhart 2009, 212). As we go on to show, these interpellations also apply in a paradoxical way to the rules of interaction within the field.

Category C—The Relax Coach

By shifting the focus towards interactive stabilising practices, we now turn to moments of targeted and spontaneous exchange that occur either in the form of ritualised speech or in the form of background conversations, both providing new impulses for exploring the explicit and implicit norms of wellness. In this context, emotion work—a form of work whose significance Arlie Hochschild was one of the first to illuminate against the background of emotional socialisation for both private and public life (Hochschild 1983)—forms the starting point of our considerations. It is not surprising but rather makes perfect sense that emotion workers can also be found in wellness. The underlying idea seems to be to generate positive feelings that are to be imprinted on the emotional memory of the wellness subject, supposedly leading to long-term relaxation. The following description shows, however, that so-called wellness and sauna coaches not only set a certain framework for relaxation but can also lead to friction and even conflict if, for example, rules are violated. Here, the "Relax Coach", whom we have already introduced at the beginning of this paper, appears as a figure who is supposed to ensure

compliance with the rules and the timetable. The following description comes from a stay at a spa in the Alpine area (see footnote 8).

> After some time, we realise that we have missed out on a snack entitled "greetings from the kitchen". Although we are still full from breakfast, we expect that we will still be able to catch up on of the snack, so we swim inside and seek out the Relax Lounge. There, we meet the Relax Coach, who points out almost desperately that he has already been looking for us and that we have now missed the first snack. After issuing this warning, he is keen to take to his heels. (Field note from 16 May 2019.)

The demand to seek culinary enjoyment is linked here with emotion work in that well-being and woe depend on the wellness subject's willingness to be in the right place at the right time. Seen in this light, the relaxation coach bears similarities to the "bell-ringer" discussed by Giorgio Agamben in his rereading of Western monasticism (Agamben 2013, 20).[12] If a time lapse occurs, punishment follows. In such a case, the coach acts as an admonishing authority who disciplines the wellness subject by making his concern known, introducing it as a direct consequence of the wellness subject's failure. In a place where the well-being of individual subjects should be the highest priority, the disclosure of the coach's emotions can be viewed as an opportunity to call the wellness subject to order. The Relax-Coach, in other words, ensures that "form" in the sense of the rule and "relaxation" come to a threshold of indistinguishability in the practice of wellness. In this sense, he might be seen not only as an emotion worker but as third party representing social norms and embodying the relaxation imperative ("You have to relax!"). The following scene, which takes place some time later during the same field visit, also suggests as much:

> The final infusion of the one-day spa visit is scheduled for 5:55 p.m. In order to pass the time until then, we treat ourselves to an Aperol spritz on the roof of the spa loft till the Relax Coach rapidly approaches us to complain that things cannot go on like this and that we need to coordinate our planning better for the next visit. He had, in fact, been waiting for us on the ground floor in order to hand out the second "snack from the kitchen". He seems very dissatisfied and almost offended. For this reason, our companion apologises on our behalf and promises to do better, whereupon he gives in and avows that he will also try to do better. (Field note from 16 May 2019.)

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[12] In his book *The Highest Poverty*, which is an attempt to reconstruct in great detail the life of monks, Agamben quotes the Benedictine Peter Damian to decipher the significance of the "bell-ringer" for the normative order: "The bell-ringer must realize that no one in the monastery should avoid forgetfulness more surely than he. If any hour of the Divine Office is not said at the proper time, either because it is too early or because it is too late, it is clear that the whole order of the hours to come will be upset" (Peter Damian, quoted from Agamben 2013, 20–21).

The different expectations that become manifest between the actors result in an emotional dissonance that compels those involved to negotiate new roles. The mutual admission to "try to do better" makes it clear that wellness is based on a whole catalogue of norms the subjects need to fulfil (and maintain) in order to achieve the desired state. In the above description, this catalogue of norms becomes visible at the very moment of failure and subsequently leads to a correction of action, to learning the "right way to act", and thus to an evaluation of the social role in the field. The forced adjustment to the demands made and the imperatives that become visible in this description make it obvious that it is the figure of the Relax Coach who ultimately commands the emotional behaviour of the wellness subjects.

The social interactions that happen during the wellness day solidify the imperatives of recovery. The malleability of the ideal wellness subject is—as Foucault has already pointed out with regard to the example of the prototypical soldier (Foucault 1977)—realised through specific techniques that work directly *on* the body. With its movements studied, guided, and coded, it is configured according to a positive economy. The paradoxical figure of the Relax Coach also, and in particular, inspires further reflection on the wellness dispositif. The responsibility for relaxation is manifested here in an employee who has been charged with the task of creating, maintaining, accelerating, and, if necessary, even demanding well-being. The resulting relaxation imperative can be understood in terms of the control of the physical activities that demand a permanent integration into the structures and docility of the body, "exercising upon it a subtle coercion" (Foucault 1977, 137). These structures are symptomatic insofar as they latently condense a number of injunctions ("Unwind! Let yourself go! Get fed! —*Relax!*"). They demonstrate once more that the wellness space is a place of economic integration that is characterised by a corresponding paradigm of governance, the implication being that spaces of relaxation and intimacy never exist in and of themselves. Instead, they must always be understood in terms of their acquisition, appropriation, preservation, and defence—this is what accounts for their exhaustive character.

4. Concluding Remarks: The Relaxation Imperatives of Wellness

Looking back at the wellness dispositif we have developed with Alain Ehrenberg and Eva Illouz against the backdrop of the working culture in late capitalist western democracies and at the descriptions from the field study, the following picture emerges: Wellness is a specific form of body work that is habitualised through concrete practices and bodily techniques. The habitualisation of these practices is normatively produced in wellness institutions through concrete interpellations that act on the wellness subject both spatially and temporally. As can be seen from the field descriptions, this body work in the form of wellness can no longer be measured (only) by the value of health. Insofar

as wellness always also produces stress, competition, lassitude, guilt, and punishment in the context of the treatments consumed, it stands to reason that wellness practices have become focused on the subject's productivity and performance. The conclusion that can be drawn from this is that institutions of wellness are not domination-free spaces but exhibit aspects of disciplinary power, which Ehrenberg considers to be the characteristic of Fordist labour. As we see it, Ehrenberg's thesis must be modified, at least as regards this point. For the example of wellness makes clear that the Fordist model of a culture of prohibitions and commandments is also at play in post-Fordist work cultures. How this new type of work, which exhibits *both* post-Fordist norms of behaviour and Fordist disciplinary models and time regimes, relates the social character of the present and affects the resilience of subjectivity is a question that merits closer examination. In this regard, it might be helpful to look more closely at Foucault's biopolitics lectures (Foucault 2008) in order to grasp the intersections between the disciplinary and neoliberal structures that also govern the wellness space. In particular, to further theorise the self-government of the wellness subject, it would be beneficial to include in the discussion the invisible and subtle arts of government and self-determination imperatives.

Yet, even as regards the wellness space, the old insight of Paolo Virno that "there is not a clean, well defined threshold separating labor time from non-labor time" (Virno 2004, 103) is valid. Just like labour, wellness calls for expenditure. The specific form of this expenditure is the production of a kind of relaxation that aims at retaining or restoring the capability of the working body, without, to be sure, releasing it from the prevailing work and performance ethic. At present, the governmental arts, which have both hard modes (the forbidden and the commanded) and soft modes (the possible and the impossible), seem to find their way into the institutions of wellness. Thus, we have shown that wellness is based on social imperatives that address an exhausted bourgeois middle-class subject and thereby reflect the economic logic that has made this exertion a prerequisite for survival. This is one of the reasons wellness, imagined as the other of work, ultimately appears to be an essential part of work; it is not exterior to work but an integral aspect of a society exhausted by the omnipresent obligation to work.

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