

<http://somatosphere.net/2013/03/longing-for-sleep-assessing-the-place-of-sleep-in-the-21st-century-part-1.html>

## Longing for Sleep: Assessing the Place of Sleep in the 21st Century - Part 1

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By Simon Williams and Matthew Wolf-Meyer

*Sleep has been in the news for the past decade or so as a matter of growing concern. Along with this popular, medical and scientific attention, social scientists have been increasingly interested in sleep as an object or process of study. The first major sociological book published on sleep was [Simon Williams' Sleep and Society](#) (Routledge, 2005), after which a number of other monographs and edited collections followed, including Williams' latest book on [The Politics of Sleep](#) (Palgrave, 2011). In 2012, [Matthew Wolf-Meyer](#) published the first anthropological study of sleep in the United States, [The Slumbering Masses](#) (University of Minnesota Press, 2012). In the conversation that follows, Williams and Wolf-Meyer assess the field of social studies of sleep, discuss their commonalities and differences, and think about the future of sleep and its place in the social sciences and humanities.*

*The conversation is appearing in three posts for the purpose of comments and responses. (Read [Part 2](#) and [Part 3](#)). The entire interview is also available [here as a pdf](#).*

### **1. Can we speak of a 'turn' to sleep matters within the social sciences and humanities today, and if so why?**

**MWM:** There does seem to be broad interest in sleep these days – from the [Huffington Post](#), to documentaries like Alan Berliner's [Wide Awake](#), to [This American Life](#) and [Radiolab](#) episodes, to humanities and social science scholarship – but I'm a little hesitant to say that we're on the other side of a turn where the study of sleep from within the humanities or social sciences makes immediate and necessary sense. We have a number of people across the humanities and social sciences writing about sleep – particularly pre-modern sleep and the late 20<sup>th</sup> century medicalization of sleep – but we haven't really reached the point where studying sleep isn't considered novel, nor have we reached the point where scholars are seeking out increasingly obscure topics to discuss in

relation to sleep. We are, instead, really at the tip of the proverbial iceberg of sleep-related research (particularly of the critical kind) and are in the position of waiting for quite a bit of novel work to be done. Beyond just having sketches of what sleep looks like in a number of places around the world (of which we really have little scholarly documentation), there's quite a bit of material to cover and we haven't really reached the critical mass of scholars where it seems that this will happen in the short term.

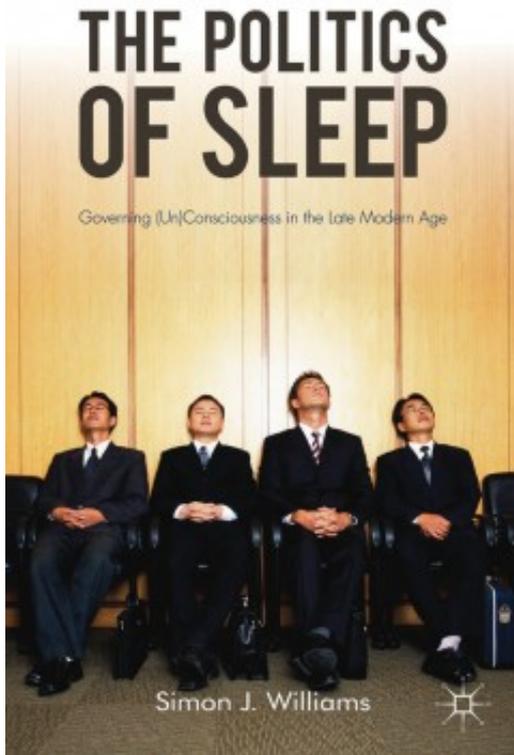
There is some really great work that's been published in the recent past and a lot of stuff that I'm looking forward to. In the first camp, people like [Roger Ekirch](#) and [Kenton Kroker](#) have provided the foundation for people to start thinking about comparative histories of sleep – both lived experiences of it, in terms of Ekirch's work on the pre-industrial day, and its scientific genealogies, in terms of Kroker's work on American sleep science (I really hope to see people start working on sleep science in Japan and Italy, which both seem to have some notable differences from dominant sleep science). [Brigitte Steger's](#) work on Japanese sleep – which is voluminous but not yet entirely in English – is one of the few cases of real ethnological documentation, and [Hannah Alheim's](#) work on sleep in Germany and [Benjamin Reiss'](#) research on 19<sup>th</sup> century sleep in the United States should help fill in more ethnological and historical gaps. But I've yet to hear of people conducting research in the global south on sleep (other than Australia), and so it seems that the relationship between colonialism and sleep is being largely ignored (outside of Reiss' work). The one sort-of exception is [Maryinez Lyons'](#) research on 'sleeping sickness' (or trypanosomiasis) in Zaire, which really isn't about sleep per se, but addresses the medicalization of a set of symptoms that get interpreted as related to sleep.

It seems to me that where most of the attention is focused is on adding depth to the scientific understanding of particular disorders – a humanist strain that works against contemporary medicalization efforts. [Shelley Adler's](#) work on nightmares and [Eluned Summers-Bremner's](#) book on insomnia immediately spring to mind here. I'm not sure that obstructive sleep apnea and restless legs syndrome can hold up the same kinds of projects – they're comparatively newer and there isn't anything particularly romantic about their symptoms – and there's a short list of possible topics here, but narcolepsy seems to be an obvious target.

**SJW:** I am inclined to agree with you on this count. Despite the wider turn to the body and affect in the social sciences and humanities today, and despite the promising green shoots of work on sleep matters so far, we are still a long way off from anything approaching a 'turn' of this kind to sleep within the social sciences and humanities as yet, or in the foreseeable

future I suspect.

Sleep indeed, in the main, remains a neglected or marginal matter within the social sciences and humanities even now, as if this vital third of our individual and collective lives was somehow 'off-limits', a 'step too far' or of limited relevance to social science and humanities scholarship 'proper' given its predominant waking concerns, commitments and values.



We are still then at an early stage in these developments and debates, including the case making stage as to why 'sleep matters matter,' so to speak, for the social sciences and humanities. That's why I welcome the chance to have this discussion and debate with you in *Somatosphere*, given sleep is clearly a rich, fascinating and indeed vital issue for the social sciences and humanities to study. This for example, as I argue in [The Politics of Sleep](#), includes sleep as both 'problem' and 'prism': the former involving a more direct focus on sleep matters as such, the latter taking sleep as novel vantage point from which to explore any or all other aspects of social, cultural, historical and political life.

As for the examples of promising scholarship on sleep matters you mention so far, I would add two related points. First, the discipline which has arguably witnessed the greatest critical mass of work on sleep-matters so far has been sociology. Second, this work extends far beyond the concern with the 'medicalization' of sleep that you mention.

On the one hand, for example, there have indeed been important strands of sociological work on the medicalisation of sleep and associated matters to do with healthicisation, an admittedly clumsy term, or healthism. But even here, this work has often sought to explore the limits of any such medicalization to date, and/or to think beyond any such terms of reference or concepts of this kind, including my own work on the politics or biopolitics of sleep and alertness, and the work of other sociologists such as [Steve Kroll-Smith](#) — who has also of course done some other very illuminating and valuable work on the changing fate and fortunes of the workplace nap, as have scholars like Brigitte Steger whom you mention and [Megan Brown](#) too within the humanities.

On the other hand, much of this recent sociological work has not really engaged directly with medicalization debates very much, if at all. The main focus has instead been on the ‘doing’ and ‘disruption’ of ‘normal’ sleep in everyday/night life, including the sleep of children and young people as well as adults. In doing so this sociological work has emphasized the fact that much of this doing is both gendered and relational through processes of ‘negotiation’ with significant others, be they partners or parents. So we might term this a ‘relational’ emphasis on sleep matters in everyday/night life, if you like. But another related strand of sociological work here of late has also looked at the ‘bigger picture’ in terms of the wider social and cultural patterning of sleep and health across the life course in terms of factors such as socio-economic status, gender and age: what we might call the ‘social patterning and life course’ approach. I am thinking here for example, on both counts, of the work of [Sara Arber](#) and colleagues who has really been at the forefront of these sorts of sociological ‘relational’ and ‘social patterning’ approaches and agendas on sleep matters in recent years.

Further anthropological as well as sociological examples of this sort of work, of course, can also be found in the recent special issue of *Social Science and Medicine* on [‘sleep, culture and health’](#); a collection which further underlines the critical importance of social science contributions to the study of sleep and health which extend far beyond medicalization agendas.

So all in all then, this amounts to ‘progress,’ of sorts, but much still remains to be done nonetheless. Perhaps too, on this latter count I could add to your list of possible candidate sleep disorders in need of deeper, richer, cultural histories, sleep walking and sleep paralysis as well as narcolepsy. [Antonio Melechi’s](#) work on sleep walking certainly springs to mind here, for instance, as does [Corrine Weisgerber’s](#) study of sleep paralysis, but I am not aware of anything much else to date within the social science and humanities, though I may be wrong there.

Let me however, end here with a final important point or qualifier to our discussion and considerations so far, namely the multiple references to sleep that may be read or recovered in philosophical texts and traditions, from Aristotle to Kant, Plato to Levinas. Readers, in this regard, may find [Simon Morgan Wortham's](#) valuable and welcome new book, [The Poetics of Sleep: From Aristotle to Nancy](#) (Bloomsbury 2013) an engaging and instructive text on sleep and the philosophical imagination.

## **2. What do these recent engagements add to prevailing understandings of sleep within sleep science and sleep medicine?**

SJW: Well, leaving aside any quibbles one may have with the very assumptions or terms of reference embedded in this question – is ‘add’ the right word or relevant criteria here, for instance, and can we not just as validly and valuably pose the question the other way round? – the answer I think, succinctly stated, is that engagements of this kind help to further *contextualize* and *enrich* our (social, cultural, historical and political) appreciation and understanding of sleep matters in all their complexity and multiplicity. By this, for example, I mean both a greater appreciation and understanding of: (i) the diverse meanings and metaphors, practices and places of sleep or sleeping around the world, both past and present (i.e. the what, how, when, where, with whom of sleep matters) and; (ii) the social, cultural, historical and political dimensions and dynamics of sleep science and sleep medicine itself, including of course its own changing construction or shaping through time and culture as well as its social and political implications for how we come to ‘know’ and ‘govern’ sleep, of which more shortly no doubt.

There are also I think, as this suggests, different roles the social sciences and humanities may play here on these counts, ranging from what one might term more ‘complementary’ or ‘convergent’ if not ‘collaborative’ ventures with sleep science and medicine — as in say some of the studies included in the aforementioned special issue of *Social Science and Medicine* on ‘sleep, culture and health’ – to other more ‘critical’ agendas – as in say your own work on sleep medicine in America, which as I read it poses critical questions about the degree to which ‘variations’ in sleep have come to be regarded, through the capitalism-medicine complex or nexus, as ‘disorders’ or ‘problems’ in contemporary times.

Both agendas have valuable contributions to make of course, but in the former case there is more of a concern to document and elucidate, often through large scale survey research, the relationship between social and cultural factors, sleep problems and health in ways that add to, broaden or complement public health research on the problems and risks of poor

sleep for health. In the latter case, in contrast, there is more of an attempt to critically analyze these very 'problematizations' of sleep today, and to reflect on their wider social, cultural and political significance, including alternative possible positions and perspectives on these very matters, radical, romantic or otherwise.

In either case however, as I argued in my book *The Politics of Sleep*, there is I think a need to be more reflexively aware about the role the social sciences and humanities themselves are playing here in the 'co-production,' to borrow a useful term from science and technology studies (STS), of the very issues they seek to study. So, whether 'complementary,' 'critical' or whatever, we too are participating in part in the very problematisation and indeed politicization of sleep matters today, including ironically perhaps the risk of further raising public concerns and anxieties about their sleep, even if or when our message is to challenge or question any such problematisation.

Perhaps too I should add, as a sort of addenda to this last point, that it is not simply these engagements with sleep matters in the social sciences and humanities to date that are implicated here. So too is the majority of scholarship in the social sciences and humanities which continues to dismiss or disregard sleep matters: a neglect, that is to say, which itself reproduces and reinforces, unintentionally or otherwise, dominant sleep negating attitudes, ideologies and values in the wider 24/7 society far beyond academe.

The main point nevertheless is that the social sciences and humanities do indeed have a lot to 'add' or contribute here I think, both on their own terms and through their multiple roles and relations with sleep science and sleep medicine inside and outside the sleep laboratory or clinic.

**MWM:** The one class that I teach that has some sleep-related content is a lecture course called '[The Biology of Everyday Life](#).' I've been reticent to teach a class that's just about sleep, in part because I'm worried about precisely what you outline at the end of your answer – there's a way that it might just reify dominant conceptions of normal sleep by looking at a series of 'abnormal' or culturally-marked forms of sleep. What the rubric of the biology of everyday life does is to put sleep into conversation with other biological functions that get wrapped up in cultural interpretations – sex, eating, breathing, defecating, death – and treats it on equal footing. I mention this because one of the examples I often talk about with students is the scholarly study of sex, which is very rarely about sex itself and more often about second-order treatments of sex (e.g. sexual identity, reproduction, pornography, etc.). But studying sex for the past 50 years

(I'll just go with a genealogy that starts with Foucault and Kinsey) has opened up a vast array of theory and analysis, not limited to identity, but surely indebted to it.

I do think there is an additive function to the study of sleep, at least in this modest respect: sleep is so often a part of subjectivity that attending to it opens up another way to think about people, bodies and the social. Like you mention regarding the emergent sociology of sleep, sleep is the basis for a number of social interactions, and not attending to it leaves a rather dubious gap in our knowledge about individuals and society. True, it may be rather limited, but as you mention, totally ignoring this third of our lives is perverse. We might know that we've collectively gone through a turn towards sleep when scholars start including chapters about sleep (or biological processes more generally) alongside chapters devoted to gender, sexuality, class, race, and the other identity markers we so readily accept as meaningful.

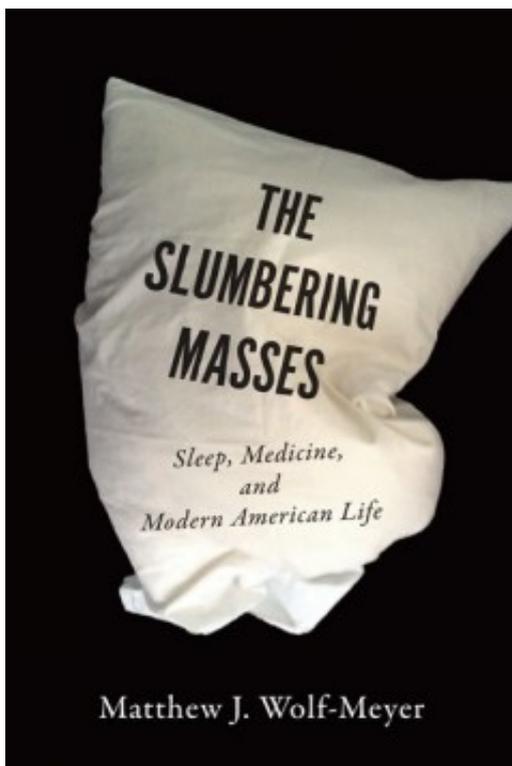
Extending the biology of everyday life discussion though, I find it also really important for scholars to actually address biology and physiological experiences in their research and theorization, since the dismissal of actual biological experiences doesn't really get us anywhere. The challenge facing many of the scholars working on sleep in the social sciences and humanities is what we might give back to science, beyond simply debunking through critique. Maybe we need to think about what we can 'add' to the science and medicine of sleep. Part of this is developing theoretical models and language that cut across disciplines and build more robust conceptions of self and society, biology and culture. Epigenetics seems to be one bridging mechanism, although I fear that it may already be over-determined. Until we start to find robust and supple ways to talk across disciplines, we'll be stuck in our present situation where the study of sleep (and everything else) is primarily ethnological rather than deeply critical.

### **3. Has this led to any genuine advances in the social sciences and humanities themselves in your view?**

**MWM:** Answering this question makes me feel a little dour. This is not to slight any of our colleagues who we discussed above, but I don't really think we've gotten to the point where studying sleep is opening new theoretical or methodological vistas. As I mentioned above, it seems that much of the extant studies of sleep and society have really worked to expand and deepen the theoretical models that already exist, and have not bothered so much with wholly new theorizations or methodological models – although we might get there. It seems to me that we're still in

the first wave, and that until we've laid a robust foundation we might not really be able to 'advance' – first scholars needed to theorize nationalism before they could start to talk about transnationalism, after all. But maybe in saying such, I'm betraying my naïve assumption about what counts as an 'advance' – that it should be something rather new or surprising.

That being said, one of the things that the modest turn to sleep seems to be indicative of is an interest in the banal. So often, I find that scholars are drawn to the exception rather than the rule – sort of following [Georges Canguilhem's](#) interest in the study of the normal through the pathological. I often suggest to people that we've too often been drawn to the second-order representations of things and processes rather than the things and processes themselves – that is, like I mentioned above, there's the critical study of food, but not of eating; there's the study of sexuality but not sex. Surely the study of sleep also traffics in this interest in the symbolic and representation, but the phenomenological work on sleep – like your own – helps us strip away some of the cultural layers that might be distracting. But this depends upon a couple basic tenets: that, contrary to Foucault et al., we can come to understand (or at least posit) a human biology prior to discourse; and, secondly, that there is merit in accepting some scientific conceptions of the human, at least instrumentally, in order to reach other goals. Across the scholars working on sleep, I can't think of one who's so bold as to argue that there's no such thing as sleep and that it's pure social construction. Given that, it seems like we're collectively on board with these two tenets, however temporary our acceptance of each of them is.



We might think about this in terms of

what seems to be one of the most profound advances that the study of sleep has turned up so far, namely Ekirch's rediscovery of non-consolidated sleep in Europe and North America (which I provide a footnote to in [The Slumbering Masses](#)). That we used to sleep differently and that consolidated sleep might be socially constructed has the potential to radically unsettle the science and medicine of sleep – and to open up possibilities for thinking about what else has been shaped so thoroughly by the civilizing process (to invoke [Norbert Elias](#)) as to totally escape notice or critique.

I think about this move towards temporary foundationalism in the social sciences as running parallel to the demise of basic science in the U.S.: just as social scientists are starting to get interested in basic biological processes, the government funding for the scientific study of these basic processes is disappearing (in favor of 'translational' science and medicine and epigenetic research). But maybe that's just the nature of the pendulum: science moves one way, so social science moves in the opposite direction, never to meet. Or only to meet briefly in the middle, sometimes with dubious results, sometimes with more promising ones. So maybe the advance that we're making is that we're taking a step back (so to speak) in order to see a broader canvas of social and physiological experiences.

But, again, these seem to be early days in the social and humanistic study of sleep, and as we move forward, there should be an ever-widening and deepening set of perspectives. And one of the effects of these moves should be the critique of our assumptions about sleep itself. Once things get to that point, it seems like we'll pass the first rubicon on the way towards more profound advances in the social sciences and humanities more generally.

**SJW:** I have argued much the same thing as to what scholarship in the social sciences and humanities on sleep has, or hasn't, added to our existing theories, concepts and methods so far. And there is no small irony in this current state of play, of course, when it comes to sleep of all topics: engagements, that is to say, however interesting and illuminating, which further reinforce rather than problematize our concepts and concerns with waking life, even when allegedly studying sleep.

We are also pretty much on the same page I think regarding the biological (as well as the banal) matters you mention, which are clearly critical issues in my view for scholars in the social sciences and humanities to further engage with and attend to.

Having said that, we can point to few notable examples of work of this kind which does I think break some new ground in relation to sleep 'itself,' so to speak, including (as you mention) both Ekirch's work on segmented slumber in pre-industrial times and other more phenomenological explorations of sleep (such as [Drew Leder's](#)) and my own work extending these insights further to embodied questions of sleep, vulnerability and human rights. Again however, we might add here some of Sara Arber and colleagues recent work too, which utilizes watch [actigraphy](#) to explore the dyadic and disruptive elements of sleeping together in everyday or every night life. Now watch actigraphy, of course, is a measure that has long since been used by sleep researchers interested in tracking sleep beyond the lab or clinic – and debates continue as to its merits as a sleep measure at all given its proxy status – but incorporating such measures into sociological research on the gendered dynamics of sleep across the life course does at least represent another attempt to get at sleep as such (or sleep itself), as well as all the other more familiar (or second-order in your terms) sociological and anthropological stuff that surrounds or embeds it.

And yes too, as you suggest, we can perhaps reasonably expect more work that breaks genuinely new ground here in future in the social sciences and humanities after this 'first wave,' particularly if one considers the broader turn to biological and corporeal-material matters in the social sciences and humanities today, and associated calls for new engagements with the life sciences today, in sociology and beyond. Like [Nikolas Rose](#), I think engagements of this kind are quite literally vital for the future of the social sciences and humanities, and sleep is a good place to explore and develop some of these issues, in terms of the 'always already' complex, reciprocal, relations between biology, biography, culture, self and society.

Finally let me say in this light, harking back to some of your qualms in response to the previous question and anticipating some of the issues we will doubtless be discussing shortly, that there is surely plenty of scope here, in both our research and our teaching, for problematizing or challenging (rather than reproducing, reaffirming or 'reifying') dominant conceptions of 'normal' sleep, as your mention of Ekirch and the position taken in your own book surely demonstrate. So I would encourage rather than dissuade you from teaching classes of this kind on sleep, as I am now starting to do myself with both sociology and medical students, as another valuable if not vital way to get your message across!

[Continue to Part 2](#) — [View the full interview in pdf form](#)

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