



# Ich sage

Daniel Jewesbury

I have nothing to say,  
I'll say it anyway.

Ich sage:

I'm trying not to be so

directionless. And hesitant.

But everything seems to be converging here, at this point, where I'm writing this: by road, by rail, on foot, on the water. It looks like the destination, and this makes it hard to know which way to go from here.

I'm wandering about at the edges of a dead city. I'm trying to figure out how you might break in; how you could break through the protective surface and find out what's underneath. I don't believe that loitering is a creative act in itself. At least, not automatically. But I walk to find a place that I don't know exists, trying to get there by a route I don't know. I stand outside shops, cafés, and bars, not wanting to go in, without really knowing why. Keep going, look for the next one. Whole days have passed in this way.

Neighbourhoods make me nauseous once I have rehearsed their pattern a few times. One little triangle of streets, which in recent years has filled with bars and restaurants and boutiques, gives me a feeling that my lungs are being crushed, makes me experience a rising panic; because here, the victory became too brazen, too calculated and deliberate. Even the trendies who shop and drink in these places can't afford to, not really. The place is so full of a desperate, barely repressed anxiety that I have to walk on. Another area suddenly strikes me like a north London suburb in the 1970s; the tatty antique shops are encrusted with a defeated nostalgia.

And walking is just a means to an end. I know how it works, I understand how to use it as a tool.

I know that you can use the same map in any city so long as you just rearrange the parts, because all the same parts are there: they're a little different these days, the functions different from before, but the same blood still flows through the arteries: you and me.

I'm looking for the places where the city's unconscious erupts, where its desire becomes irrepressible. I'm not looking for the parks and gardens, or the cafés or bars or nightclubs, though some of these can be interesting.

I'm looking at sex and logistics.

I'm interested in death in the garden colony.

I'm wondering about how we suspend our disbelief, so that we still see the city as a piece of magic; so that we don't see what happens behind the screen.



A number of people have observed that Marx did not devote much attention to studying the means of distribution, that he gave no account of the *textures* of distribution, and how important they are in the efficient operation of capitalism. This gives rise to certain problems. A dominant myth of our age is that of the 'smoothness' of capitalist space, an idea that has particular appeal in the contemporary era of supposedly frictionless data. Global financial centres, joined by ultrafast networks, are commonly understood to transcend the complex material world with its blockages and unevenness. The 'information economy' somehow no longer needs actual things that have to be assembled from raw materials and transported around the world. In lieu of actual space, in which urban experience takes on distinctive characteristics and atmospheres (and where distance and time have a proportionate relationship), we apparently now have the 'non-places' of dataspace, where bits flow effortlessly and time and distance collapse into one another.

At the logistical hub of Berlin, where containers are loaded and unloaded between truck and train, we can perhaps get a more nuanced and realistic understanding of contemporary capitalist space. A shipment is collected, an undocumented casual labourer is deported, a parcel is returned to sender without ever having left the depot. A truck driver waits seven hours until his load is ready, and yet the robotised straddle carriers and container gantries race up and down throughout the night.

Ned Rossiter, an Australian theorist (who I used to work with in Northern Ireland), writes about the particular characteristics of 'logistical space' and why understanding it is so crucial to gaining a grasp of the contemporary city and contemporary capitalism, and the ways that might still be found to interrupt them both. He writes that highly complex logistical software

'Materialities of Software: Logistics, Labour, Infrastructure', 2014, at <http://nedrossiter.org/?p=387>

systems can measure real-time labour productivity and follow stock in transit or keep tabs on it in the warehouse; the columns and rows in balance sheets and stock lists are made actual, constantly up-to-date, populated by real labourers carrying out specific tasks. Spreadsheets become material things, in which individual truck turn-arounds and stevedoring operations can be tracked, so that the company's margin can be shown in real time. How much are we worth *right now*? Whose productivity is poor, who needs to be penalised? "Central to logistics is the production of new subjectivities of labour," he says. The 'real' world is made to correspond to the idealised, smooth dataspace, with consequences if it fails (the company relocates somewhere labour is cheaper, the shipping company is fined by the port authority for turning a ship around too slowly, the labour force are sacked and replaced by computerised stock transfer systems).

Human time is captured by code (*but human time has always been captured, whether by machines, or before that, by the time of the land, the slavery of agricultural life and the desperate desire to have enough to eat*). Yet there is still an unavoidable accumulation of dead time; the system doesn't work the way it could, because humans can't work continuously, and humans are still necessary for some tasks. How can we see this slackness in the system? Here in Moabit, we can see it in the lines of articulated lorries parked up in the lay-bys at the north end of Beusselstraße, in the unassuming transit pensions and the cluster of casinos and bars nearby; and most particularly in a distinct set of signs that are gathered together in this geographically small area. A sex shop across from one pension, on the corner of Siemenstraße and Beusselstraße; a sexkino just down the road; the blue LED signs advertising massages; and, most tellingly, the aged condom machine near one of the truck stops.



Esther Leslie, writing about Walter Benjamin, notes especially the passages where Benjamin discusses the respective functions of the *flâneur* and the whore in the modern city (we can understand Benjamin's nineteenth-century *flâneur* to be somewhat analogous to the contemporary artist, restlessly looking for a cheap(er) home in the city from where to sell his or her wares, trawling, colonising and describing its outer edges as well as its fashionable centre). Both artist and prostitute are exemplary urban subjects, for a number of reasons; most crucially, both have something to sell and need to have the

correct amount of visibility in order to sell it. Too little, and there's no sale, and nothing to eat; too much, and their solicitous loitering attracts the wrong kind of attention.

"The *flâneur* traverses an economic space where wares are sold – poetry, journalism, knowledge – in the marketplace. If this is acknowledged then the *flâneur's* subjectivity is allied with others who sell themselves ... rather than with all men. He is subservient to the market. For example, Benjamin writes: "In the *flâneur*, the intelligentsia sets foot in the marketplace ostensibly to look around, but in truth to find a buyer".'

And on women in Benjamin's writing, Leslie finds

"Women as consumers – especially of fashion – and women as consumed, as whores, as wives, as workers. The focus on women in Benjamin's studies of capitalist modernity is extraordinary. The female body is laid out as the landscape of hell and Benjamin provides a guided tour."

Benjamin himself, writing in the *Arcades Project*, differentiates them:

"The *flâneur*, in seeking to identify with the 'crowd' [*Volksgemeinschaft*], was no radical but a reactionary, a dupe thrilled by consumerism. The prostitute – commodity, seller and consumer – is unable to mask the social contradictions and succumb to illusions. She may well be, indeed, the worthiest heroine of modernity."

To Benjamin, this strange ability of the prostitute simultaneously to be a consumer (of those things that are the necessary accoutrements of her job, most particularly fashion or some bastardised version of it), the vendor of a commodity, and that commodity itself, captures all of the tensions and instrumentalizations of urban modernism in one exemplary subject. In the era of enforced entrepreneurialism, the legalised prostitute is possibly the ideal self-employed worker, mentally tallying her income and expenditure and assessing her productivity (in real time) as she lies in the cab of a Mercedes 18-wheeler.





1987 IN 21

1987







In this landscape, this intensely productive dataspace, is the prostitute a tolerated addition, the human equivalent (shipped specially from Riga, or Kiev, or Sofia) of the variety of other comforts available to the truckers (themselves from Posnan, Tallin, Bologna, Viseu, Littlehampton); or is she simply an undocumented marginal labourer? Does the State have an account for her?

After all, on one hand Berlin's attitude to prostitution is refreshingly honest; why should capitalism pretend to take a 'moral' stance on what people do with one another's bodies, so long as they declare any profits made? Capitalism is amoral, by definition. Yet for some reason, the legal brothels, the destinations of any number of enthusiastic sex tourist businessmen and Easyjet weekenders, are still mainly around the edge of the city, around the Ring.



Every so often the truckers become bored of the bland transit hotels, the sexkino, the all-night casino, the porno mags and the half-hour of paid sex in the cab of their vehicle. Beneath the bridges, in the bushes, on the wide open banks of grass leading down to their lay-bys and truck stands, under the moonlight, they spontaneously converge and make love to one another, sometimes in pairs, often in large groups. The prostitutes, if they join in, charge no fees on these evenings, even sometimes making a contribution themselves, perhaps buying a crate of beers from the *Späti*.

As I sit on my rowing boat on the Schlachtensee or the Plötzensee, I can't help thinking about Thérèse Raquin, getting her lover Laurent to drown her husband Camille on the boating lake. Zola treats the non-productive space of workers' leisure as the natural place to kill someone; it's a sort of revenge for presuming that one had permission to leave the city. The city should be all-consuming, provide all one's needs, it should have no 'outside' that is visible or contemplable from 'inside'.

Then again leisure really had no place in the nineteenth century of Zola or Walter Benjamin, which was what made the *flâneur* such an atypical specimen. Mass urban leisure is a thoroughly contemporary phenomenon, invented to fill the void left by no longer actually making things, which was what the



city was supposed to be there for. The city was never meant to be a vast adult playground.

The evangelists' cemetery at the north-western side of Plötzensee is overlooked by the garden colony of Plötzensee-Wedding. All those people coming to their weekend cabins to escape the city, confronted by all this very prim, orderly death. On the other side of the lake, the untended old headstones of the Friedhof am Plötzensee are surrounded by sunbathers, sometimes naked. *Et in urbem ego. Bin ich noch in die Stadt?*



Just as different places co-exist simultaneously in the the same geographical location – because the city is inscribed differently in us all, in our bodies, our embodied memories and habits – so an apparently singular place is made possible, or perhaps that should be ‘made plausible’ – temporarily believable – by the interrelation of quite different spaces and different times. The gleaming Mitte, the museums and the shops, the squares, the



architecture, the whole explicit statement, squats upon all its hinterlands, a modern-day fortress, like the fortified European towns that WG Sebald wrote about at length, or the colonial town described by Frantz Fanon; so we really can't talk about there being any 'non-urban' spaces now, we can only talk about the fortress and the hinterland, the power, and that which services and maintains it. Everything else is the distance in between; it is not measured in miles or kilometres, but hours and minutes. Every site is urban now, all the more so if it happens to preserve some apparent effects of 'rurality'.

*Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille, 1974 (1989), MIT Press*

The thing about all this quasi-rural space, all this idyllic relaxation within the bounds of the city itself, is that it is a doomed attempt to pretend that the city, the space of concentrated productive labour and the magical creation of profit, does not need to exist any more. The old city centre turns into a tourist destination, or becomes entirely dedicated to shopping, eating and drinking, to approved behaviours that strive to mask the functions and structure of the city, to distract us and 'amuse' us. The old factories become creative hubs, where 'work' is reinvented as a playful collaborative act; the shipyards become heritage centres, where 'work' is mythologised as something epic and somehow quaintly anachronistic; and as Denis Hollier, reading Georges Bataille, points out, *everywhere* becomes a museum. All the real functions of the city are disguised, hidden away, relocated further and further out, near the logistics centres and the quasi-rural fringes. Hollier thinks about how the slaughterhouses are replaced with more edifying spectacles: "For lack of an animal, they kill time".

The city has not gone away. The clean workspaces and the monumental museums, the public streets turned into shopping malls, merely conceal the city's re-orientation. It is turning itself inside out, growing, sprawling. At the truck stop they have just killed a goat. The prostitutes are cooking it in pieces on an Aldi disposable barbecue while the truckers engage in oral sex beneath the motorway.

Made by Daniel Jewesbury at **ZK/U**, Berlin, in July 2014  
with thanks to Brown & Brí and Richard West

For an out-of-date website, visit [www.danieljewesbury.com](http://www.danieljewesbury.com)  
See also <https://ulster.academia.edu/danieljewesbury>

[info@danieljewesbury.com](mailto:info@danieljewesbury.com)



