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Victor Mazin

Times of Laziness

Summary:

This essay studies the phenomenon of laziness through the text of the famous Russian novel “Oblomov,” written by Ivan Goncharov in the mid-19th century when feudalism was to be displaced by capitalism. Laziness became a form of Oblomov’s in-activity – dreams, reveries, contemplation – resisting the new order of time capitalization, including a future mass-media informational society. According to one particular schizophrenic’s ideas, Lenin’s pseudonym indicated a principle place of laziness (in Russian “len”) in the communist project, though Lenin himself considered the phenomena of Oblomov as a principle obstacle to the realization of his project.

Happy are the idlers that can permit themselves to hold utility, usefulness and profit(2) in contempt. Their laziness supplies them with the possibility of ignoring contemptible utility. Art can be useless. Art sanctions the happy idler’s life. Laziness opens up the possibility for the idle passage of time, for idling away the hours. The other times of laziness: dreamtimes, times lost in thought, times of contemplation, times of daydreams, hallucinations, times of depression.

Laziness is best described as a cultural phenomenon-or as a phenomenon of Russian culture at the very least-in Ivan Goncharov’s classic novel “Oblomov”. By the way, in 1907, the famous anarchist Pyotr Kropotkin wrote that you can find Oblomov in any corner of the world. The novel “Oblomov” was published in 1859. Goncharov wrote it slowly, tortuously, over a period of eleven years. Its hero has become a paradigm for enculturated laziness.

I. ONEIRODROME (3): THE BIRTH OF THE IDLER

In Russia, “Oblomov” has become a widespread moniker denoting incorrigible laziness.(4) Yet the idler, the lazy person does not live in Russia, nor does he live abroad. Instead, he lives in Oblomovshchina, in the Land of Oblomovism. The loafer cannot abandon this country, even if he knows that he lives there, even if he dreams its name-Oblomovism-“at night, written on the walls in letters of fire, as at Belshazzar’s feast.” (187) (5) But how does one reach this land of laziness?

How did Oblomov become Oblomov?

To answer this question, Goncharov turns to the hero’s childhood, attempting to explain his becoming-Oblomov. Because “not a single detail escaped the child’s searching attention: the picture of his home life was being indelibly stamped on his memory; his pliable mind was nurtured on the examples before him, unconsciously planning his own life after the pattern of the life around him.” (104) The program of “laziness” traces and paves its path, prescribing the future.

After describing Oblomov’s Petersburg routine, Goncharov plunges his hero into a dream, which “stop[s] the slow and lazy flow of his thoughts and instantly transfer[s] him to other times, other people, other places.” (93) This chapter is the only part of the book that carries a title aside from a number (IX). This title is “OBLOMOV’S DREAM”. Life declares itself monotonously through numbers, but dreams announce themselves in words. It is the dream that interrupts the “slow and lazy flow of thoughts”, that “instantly”

takes the dreamer to other places and times. It is the dream that awakens him from invariance and monotony, from the repetition of what is always the same. Love of sleep both characterizes the loafer and brings him out of the land of laziness. As the hero dreams, the reader finds himself in the hero's childhood, in his personal history and the history of his society, taking its time, unhurriedly moving from feudalism to capitalism. This dream unconsciously draws out its program of life onto the life of its surroundings. Like dreams, like childhood, laziness opposes the principle of reality. Laziness is born in childhood.

The oneirodynamics of experience do not only speed away the hero and the reader through the landscape of childhood; they also come to a standstill from time to time: the entire village of Oblomovka falls asleep in Oblomov's dream. Sleep puts a halt to any attempt at action. Sleep is the most effective way of resisting the hustle and bustle of early capitalism: to sleep, perchance to dream... Dreams are Oblomov's "birthplace". Oblomov's dream consists of two parts. The first part demonstrates the perfection of childhood's laziness by law. Oblomov is seven years old. The second part already contains some kind of concern with the principles of reality. At this point, Oblomov is already 14.

The dream begins with panoramic descriptions of landscapes and nature. Here, everything promises "a calm, long life till the hair turns from white to yellow, and death comes unnoticed like sleep." (95) Dreamlike life until death, a life that has nothing to fear because it simply does not exist, because it is always already "behind us". To die, to sleep. There is no such thing as time.

There is nothing unexpected here; there is no such thing as change. Time is rhythmic. Time flows according to a natural calendar. Life in Oblomovka is synchronized with the cycle of nature and its existential moments: birth-marriage-death. In this country squire's paradise, history does not exist, or to be more precise, it is subordinated to the circular flow of the eternal return. All is quiet and dreamy.

There are no strangers here. No news. No crime. No passion, because "no violent passions or daring enterprises agitated the inhabitants; and indeed, what passions or enterprises could agitate them? They knew nothing but what they knew of themselves." (6) (98) In his dream, Oblomov only encounters relatives and others dear to him: his gentle nanny and her caresses, his mother, who died long ago, his father, who puts off all business for later and abandons himself to daydreams, his servants, who do not let him do anything on his own. There are no strangers; there is none of the desire that they might engender. Hence, Oblomov's formula: "I cannot want what I do not know." (197)

Once he awakens from his dream, Oblomov falls into a world of work and worry. A world that resents sleep and laziness as indolence. A world ruled by commercial ethics. A world inhabited by his friend, the insurance agent Stolz.

II. OBLOMOV THE IDLER – STOLZ THE ACHIEVER

During the second half of Oblomov's dream, indolence is a defense against labor. Oblomov is 14. At this time, he is preparing to enter the newly formed hierarchy of early capitalism. Young Oblomov's parents are preparing him for work, but they are also defending him from it at the same time. The inhabitants of Oblomovka "endured work as a punishment laid upon [their] forefathers, but they could not love it and avoided it whenever they could, believing it was possible and right to do so." (116)

Most dictionaries, both Russian and English, define laziness through a dislike or an inability to work: laziness is the disinclination from work, stemming from a lack of (laborious) desire. Oblomov does not understand why it is necessary to work. Why work? Why study? These kinds of questions never even enter the mind of his antipode, Stolz. (7) Stolz is a man of action. Stolz does not question or doubt the Law of his father. His Protestant-Father works within him, pointing him toward new achievements.

The world of capitalism lives according to the law of uninterrupted motion. Time is always running out. Faster and faster. Higher and higher, up the hierarchical ladder. Each new position taken reveals the next position to be conquered. A project's completion marks the beginning of the next project. Satisfied desire engenders the next desire. Oblomov sees this as rivalry and envy. "Not one of them has calm, clear eyes; all infect one another with misery and bitter worry, all are painfully striving for something. And if, at least, it were for truth, for their own and other people's good. But no, a comrade's success makes them turn pale. Only one desire [...]: to bring the other man down and to build his own welfare on the enemy's ruin." (175) The world of capital's unrestrained motion always carries over into the future; in doing so, it defers the

present. This universe of expanding capital makes Oblomov's head spin. One question keeps returning to his mind: and when do they live? Through his inactivity, he resists teleology and the tenacity of its purpose, which is to postpone life, to put life off for later, for another time, another place. His place is Oblomovka. In Oblomovka, people "were altogether deaf to economic theories about the need for rapid turnover of capital, increased production, and exchange of goods. In the simplicity of their hearts they understood and put into practice only one way of using capital-keeping it in a chest." (121) Nor did anyone in Oblomovka "particularly believe in mental troubles either; they did not think that life could consist in striving for some distant aim; they were mortally afraid of strong feelings; and while in some places, people's bodies are rapidly consumed by the volcanic action of inner, spiritual fire, the souls of the Oblomovka inhabitants rested, peaceful and undisturbed, in their comfortable bodies." (115-116) The boundaries of indolence are the borders that bind the body. Torpor returns to the body. Sloth wallows in the body.

Not only the universe of capitalism, not only desire, but also the channels and flows of information are constantly expanding. As early as the mid-19th century, Oblomov provides evidence of mass-mediatization, which represents yet another endless, self-effacing movement, yet another expansion of the universe. Oblomov tells Stolz of a man who was extremely surprised when he found out that Oblomov never bothered to read the newspapers. In his astonishment, the mass-media man began to "carry on about Louis Philippe as though he were his own father. Afterwards, he pestered me why, did I think, had the French ambassador left Rome? Good heavens, to condemn oneself to swallowing a daily supply of world news and shouting about them all the week till the supply runs out! Today Mehmet Ali has sent a ship to Constantinople and he puzzles his head why. Tomorrow Don Carlos has a reverse, and he is fearfully worried. Here they are digging a canal, there a detachment of troops has been sent to the East-dear me, you might think there was a fire! He is dreadfully upset, he fusses and shouts as though the troops were after him! [...But] one can see that they are fast asleep in spite of all their shouting. Their all-embracing interests are a cloak for emptiness, for being out of sympathy with everything!" (175-176) Oblomov is talking yet about another "wakeless dream", the dream of a (universal, highly conductive) mass-medium, engulfing the human being in the mass-medial oneiroid, where the unlazy move from place to place with astounding speed. Yet as this alien dream gains momentum, it invariably becomes an endless nightmare.

The unlazy man flies, wracking his brains with the flow of information and finances. He works on-the-fly. Until his very dying. He flies until he dies, which is soon. The unlazy man has long since flown past Oblomovka's river of life, where there was no rat-race, no necessity to chase the pace of time. Oblomov does not understand: what is the point of this speed, if it erases the human being? He has no comprehension of the motivations that drive someone who is consumed by labor. Instead, he asks himself existential questions: "When does one live?" and "What should one live for?"

Stolz's answer: "For the sake of work itself and nothing else. Work gives form, and completeness, and a purpose to life." (183) But Oblomov has a different program. The name of his program is avos'.(8) Oblomov relates to what needs to be done according to the principle of perhaps. This principle implies that any dealings or doings might work themselves out somehow. Perhaps, god willing. As such, it is one of the most traditional reactions to the prospects of change. Perhaps (avos') alleviates the pressure. There is no longer any need to do anything at all. "And perhaps Zahar will contrive something so that I need not move; let's hope they'll manage without turning me out-put off the alterations till next summer, or not do them at all; well things will be arranged somehow! After all, I can't really...move!..." (90) Goncharov describes these three magic words-perhaps (avos'), maybe and somehow-as soothing and calmative, while Pushkin, in turn, calls avos' the "people's Shibboleth", marking it as a distinctive, identifying trait. It is not the content but the pronunciation of the word "Shibboleth" that allows "us" to identify "them" as Others. Shibboleth is an untranslatable idiom. In the tenth chapter of "Evgeny Onegin", Pushkin writes:

*Avos', o Shibbolet narodniy,
Tebe b ya odu posvyatil...*

Perhaps, o people's Shibboleth,
I'd dedicate this ode to you...

Oblomov attempts to go against himself. He tries to follow the path taken by his friend, his counterpart, his Other,(9) Stolz: “[But] this means to go forward.... And to do this all my life! Goodbye, my poetic ideal! It’s like being in a smithy, it isn’t life; it’s continual noise, flame, heat, clatter.... When am I to live? Hadn’t I just better stay?” (188) Perhaps time will tell, god willing; perhaps there is no need to chase time; perhaps we can move with time, without interrupting or breaking its natural pace.

Two friends, Oblomov and Stolz, a Russian and a German: both are two sides of the same coin, like East and West, like Labor and Celebration. They engender one another. Stolz knows the goal of life, which is neither peace nor love. Stolz becomes himself by working, by dissolving himself in work. And although he fears the prospect of losing himself in love, he wants to use this love in order to awaken Oblomov from his laziness.

III. LAZINESS _ LOVE _ DEPRESSION

Stolz attempts to cure Oblomov of his laziness through love. He introduces Oblomov to Olga. Stolz is acting as if he were a homeopathic doctor, attempting to eliminate one illness (laziness) by introducing another (love). Just like dreaming, just like loafing, love leads to the loss of self, “because a man stricken with love has no thoughts to spare for watching with the eye of a scientist how an impression steals into his soul and casts a spell [dream] over his senses, causing him to lose his sight; his self gradually disappears and passes to him or her, to his beloved.” (395-6)

Oblomov’s love for Olga ends in what one calls an *oblom* in Russian, a break-off: Oblomov quits, cuts out, breaks down. Laziness turns out to be stronger than love. Oblomov returns to the land of laziness.

But to make matters worse, the landscape has changed. Its laziness no longer corresponds to the sleepy lethargy from which Oblomov awakened in order to love. This former life has lost its meaning. Oblomov has lost himself. It is as if he had left his dream, his childhood’s cocoon, only to fall deeper and deeper, into a time before the happiness of childhood, to times of timelessness, of death. He no longer answers any questions, no longer notices what is happening around him, and even fails to realize that he is crying. “[He] gazed for hours at the snow falling and making drifts in the yard and the street, covering the stacks of logs, the hen-houses, the kennel, the garden, the kitchen-garden, forming pyramids out of the posts in the fence—all was dead and wrapped in a winding-sheet.” (390) Oblomov is resurrected to his defunct life in depressive laziness.

IV. PHANTASM – RESISTING THE PRINCIPLE OF REALITY

Laziness offers a defense against choice, duty, and responsibility. But laziness is also the painful, endless birth of new life; its depressive contractions give birth to creativity. As such, laziness is labor.(10) For Oblomov, laziness is the “birthplace” of thought: “I dare say when you see me pull the blanket over my head you think I lie there like a log and sleep; but no, I don’t sleep, I keep thinking deep deliberations...(11) ” (88) Laziness is the territory of deliberation, daydreams, fantasies. Oblomov could have been a creator; he could have been an artist, a writer. He could have been like Goncharov, for example.

For the artist, there is no final parting with the fantasies of childhood. In the process of growing up, Oblomov obviously finds out that a fairy tale is a fairy tale, but still “the fairy-tale had mingled with reality in his mind and he sometimes unconsciously grieved that the fairy-tale was not life and life not a fairytale. (111) Much like an artist, Oblomov does not want to part from his daydreams and fantasies. His world is the world of imagination. The real world only provides him with fear and grief. Even if he stops believing the fairy tale, “even if the belief in phantoms disappear[s], fear and vague anxiety remain in its place.” (114) The phantoms return.

With their appearance, they recreate a phantasmal world, a world that puts up desperate resistance to outer reality. “And perhaps it was the everlasting quiet of the sleepy, sluggish life, the absence of movement, and of any real terrors, adventures, and dangers that made man create a fantastic world amidst the real, where his idle imagination could have free play...” (112)

Dreams and imagination are the flip-side of work, activity, labor. Dreams are secret labor. No one knew and no one saw Oblomov’s inner life. Everyone thought that all he could do was lie around and maybe eat once in a while. Only Oblomov’s antipode “Stolz, who knew him well, could have testified to his abilities and to the volcanic work of his ardent mind and tender heart.” (63) Listening to Oblomov’s dreams in full, Stolz

calls him a poet. Stolz is able to recognize the artistic nature of Oblomovism.

As for Stolz himself, he dares not laugh at dreams. This is because he is afraid of them. He has oneirophobia. He is afraid of himself; he fears that he might become like his Other, his friend Oblomov. Dreams-call them sleep-could destroy his ideal of work, of labor. Goncharov says that dreams have no place in Stolz's soul. But still, Stolz fears the appearance of Oblomov's phantom. Stolz is a pragmatic. For him, the oneiro-experience of dreams, day-dreams, whimsies, laziness is a fundamental source of danger.

V. LENIN, HAUNTED BY THE SPECTER OF OBLOMOV

Goncharov the writer is dead and gone. So are the landowners and the country squires. Even Oblomov is no longer with us. But his specter is alive and well. It even made a surprising reappearance where it was least expected-in the "enthusiasm" of emancipated socialist labor.

Opposed to any form of labor in principle, this specter was not just an economic phenomenon, but a political phenomenon as well. Many people have noted laziness as the decisive factor in the collapse of the Communist system. Communism's main problem was rooted in the absence of the necessary "[class] consciousness" that might have freed labor of greed, transforming it into a joyous activity. One might say that Lenin's project broke down because of laziness and its resistance to rationalization.

Lenin's project was based on laziness.(12) This idea was first formulated by the poet, artist, and dreamer Anatoly Peregud. During the 1960s, instead of engaging in socially constructive labor, he began to cover the asphalt of the streets in his home-town Sevastopol with the Communist slogan "All Strength for the Battle for a Better Future!" Diagnosed with schizophrenia, Peregud was interned in the Crimean Psychiatric Hospital No. 1, where he continued with his creative work for the rest of his life.

Peregud claimed that Lenin had taken his pseudonym to demonstrate the necessity of laziness.(13) Only laziness can save humanity. Communism is not emancipated labor, but the unleashed ability to be lazy. The specter of Oblomov immediately revealed itself in the project of Communism. Evidence for the truth of Peregud's schizo-idea can be found in the fact that Lenin was haunted by the phantom of Oblomov on numerous occasions. Writing on the early years of the Soviet state, Lenin notes that "old Oblomov is still around, and we will need to wash, clean, rub and scrub him, before he can be of any real use."

The specter of Oblomov has infiltrated the paranoid machine of closely structured, rationalized, compulsive time. Its usefulness lies in the fact that it is able to sow doubt in the Stolz-machine, which is "all bone, muscle, and nerve, like an English race-horse. [...] [Stolz] made no superfluous movements. If he was sitting, he sat still; if he was active, he used only such gestures as were necessary. [...] It seemed as though he controlled his joys and sorrows like the movements of his hands and feet and treated them as he did the weather." (160) The specter of Oblomov is a virus in the Stolz-machine.

Oblomov lives. But there is no place for him on the gravy-train bound for Effectivity, Career Advancement, Success, or Productivity. His place is where Anatoly Peregud ended up: the psychiatric ward. Foucault claims that the inability to work is the first criterion for madness. However, the loafer, idler, the lay-about might find salvation on the margins of the paranoid social machine, on the terrain of art. Here, they let you dream and sleep. Or, at the very least, art retains the temporary right to break down or quit the paranoid-obsessive work of the machine. Art is haunted by the specter of Oblomov who "will never worship false idols, [whose] soul will always be pure, honest, good. His soul is clear as crystal; there aren't many men like him, they are rare; they are like pearls among the crowd. His heart cannot be bribed." (487)

Translated from the Russian by Thomas Campbell

References:

Goncharov, I. (1959). *Oblomov*, trans. by N. Duddington (Geneva: Heron Books, 1959)

Notes:

- 1) A.S. Pushkin, Mozart and Salieri, trans. Alan Shaw, <https://members.aol.com/afrrshaw/mozsal.htm>
- 2) Translator's Note: All three notions are summed up in the Russian word polza. [All of the footnotes that follow are the translator's notes.]
- 3) Contraction of oneiroid and aerodrom (=Russ. airport). Oneiros (Greek) = dream (or in a broad sense any dream-like state, ex. hallucination, delusion) + dromos (Greek) = run, place to run [cf Virilio's dromosphere as a speed-sphere).
- 4) The name Oblomov is derived from the Russian noun oblom, which denotes the result of the verb oblomat' (=to break off).
- 5) All page numbers refer to Ivan Goncharov (1959).
- 6) The last phrase of Natalie Duddington's translation has been altered. Her translation read: "They knew their own limitations", which does not really correspond to oni znali tolko sebye.
- 7) Like Oblomov, the family name Stolz has a meaning, namely "proud or pride" in German.
- 8) Avos' is an untranslatable Russian word that denotes "mayhap" or "by chance", and might be mistranslated as perhaps.
- 9) Both drug (=friend) and drugoi (=Other) come from a common Indo-European root. The reason for their differentiation is unknown. Cf. Bakhtin, who alludes to this common root with the term of drugost'. The friend is automatically the Other; difference is the possibility for dialogue or friendship.
- 10) While this seems paradoxical in Russian, it actually makes metaphorical sense in English. Labor means work, childbirth and creativity (labor of love). This gives a special connotation to the Marxian "emancipation of labor". As the proletariat emerges from the rationalized series of contemplative-depressive contractions and free-flowing expansions, gaining historical subjectivity, it realizes that every job is a potential labor of love...
- 11) Dumayu vse krepkuyu dumu: the Russian дума (=thought, contemplation, but also legislative body) has the connotation of laborious contemplation, rather than free thought or thought in and of itself (mysl). Perhaps consideration or deliberation are better translations. Krepkaya дума (=deep, strong consideration), in turn, has yet another allusion to sleep and dreams, which in Russian, can be strong (krepkiy son). All these nuances, yet again, are impossible to translate.
- 12) The pseudonymic family-name Lenin and len' (=laziness) are related by homophony.
- 13) The source of the pseudonym Lenin is actually unknown. Some say that Lenin named himself after a river in Siberia near a place to which he was banished, while others claim that it actually refers to his nanny, whose name was Lena. No one really knows. Perhaps it really is the Russian len' (=laziness)? At the same time, this idea seems truly insane, because it breaks the mythical norms of the historical Lenin as the inventor of the Soviet work-ethic.