



Thoughts about Inefficiency

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Introduction.

Inefficiency for most people is a negative word, whereas efficiency has a very positive connotation. Efficiency is a motor for a capitalist society, and it is seen as a reason for our wealthy life. But the system behind this wealthy life is gradually, but faster and faster destroying our base of what we need for life. That system is the paradox of unlimited growth. Our mindset says we should be more efficient, faster, and always better. This mindset leads to more and more consume. In order to reduce the consume we have to develop a new, probably slower lifestyle. For example a lifestyle built on social relations and help rather than growth. In order to change our brain structure, away from performance thinking, a growing thinking, we should experiment. One easy step to start with, is the opposite of what is seen well today. So I chose to think about inefficiency.

In this essay chose an easy way of writing. I wrote down what came in my mind when I thought about efficiency of inefficiency in relation to several aspects of our systems and life.

The essay is also connected to a practical project, which I describe in a separate description.

I chose the subject because of several influences from outside. One big influence was the book I was reading that time, "Selbst Denken" by Harald Welzer, a book that asks the reader to change his mind and take action about our behaviour towards the ecosystem. Another influence was a project of a classmate here in Sweden. She tried to design a pattern you do not want to look at. Translating the Idea of doing the opposite of what people would expect from designers from visual communication to product design, I found inefficiency.

Education.

Efficiency is nowadays a totally normal term when talking about education. I primary see the German education system, but I think in other countries the development is quite similar. With the Pisa Study the proficiency of European students are compared and urges the national governments to react and provide the "best" education.

Basically the education system is an important part of our efficient society. Efficiency in schools is rewarded with good grades and is necessary to compete with others. The students are not asked to do what they what, but to do what authorities want them to do. Our school teaches us to be efficient. But also education itself wants to be more efficient.

The most obvious development regarding a more efficient education is a shorter and shorter learning time for the students, in which they have to learn more than ever before. The best examples are on European level the Bologna reform and in Germany the so called g8 which made the gymnasium one year shorter – by keeping the same difficulty level. The Bologna reform makes sense in the way that, with the bachelor and master degrees, studying and working abroad got a lot easier for European students. But it also shortened the study time for most of the students.

Many politicians see education as a tool to make people work in a certain system. The sooner they get to work the better. Young students who don't act appropriate have nowadays very fast the diagnosis hyperactivity and are calmed down by pills.

To summarize that drastically:

1. Our education system is very traditional and tries to prevent the society from experiments, from a different thinking. It is not looking in the future at all, but is based on keeping the system running.
2. Personal development of the students is not regarded with a sufficient depth. Our education tries to prevent careers with detours and wrong decisions even though they are quite natural.

What would happen if we consider inefficiency as something supportive to education?

We would stop to see curious children and those who have problems to concentrate as a problem but as a chance. Time would not matter in education. Students could concentrate more on what they are interested in, and the task for the teachers would be to urge interests. There would be a bigger focus on how the students develop instead of what they do wrong. Every single kid would be unique and a comparison with other would not make sense any more. By giving the freedom to the children not work towards being a part of the present, there would be much more chance for them to work to be part of the future.

Negative aspects in an inefficient educations can be found easily, but are all based on a conservative and capitalistic thinking. These would be first of all the costs. An efficient education mainly a cheap education and politicians apparently like to spent as little money as possible on education. The next "negative" aspect would be the missing ability to be part of the working world by, for example not knowing sufficient maths. As we never know how the "working world" will look like when the children are grown up, we can't say anything like this for sure. I also think that an education with detours, mistakes, new beginnings and obstacles makes the students more intelligent, more flexible to handle unpredicted situations, which will appear for sure.

My plea is therefore: we need more inefficiency in our education!

Politics.

Democracy is in its core deeply inefficient. Compared to other forms of government, in a democracy the time to make decisions and to act is much longer. Though, democracy in our society is viewed as the one and only legitimate form of government. I do believe in the power of democracy. And I see a danger of a democracy that tries to be more efficient. In my eyes a big problem in politics is that most people are not interested in it. A reason for this is, that in the form of democracy most countries practise, the politicians seem to be disconnected from ordinary people and that once they are elected they seem to do whatever they want but not what they promised to do.

I sometimes have the feeling, that some big companies make the laws nowadays and, just to be faster and more efficient, politicians sign these laws. Even though these companies seem to be important in some ways, their wishes often go against the majority of the people's will.

Democracy should concentrate on its core idea and try to involve the people more, or example with direct democracy where everybody votes on single laws. This is an extreme form of democracy and for sure the most inefficient.

Art, Religion, Friendship, love and family.

While dealing with inefficiency I was thinking about some topics I could not connect to efficiency. Either something can be judged in its efficiency/inefficiency or it cannot. Here some thought about three of these topics, art, religion and friendship, love and family

Art can't be efficient. Art has a message. You could say art is efficient if the message is easy to catch. But if art is seen only as a medium to deliver a message, it can hardly be art.

Religion is a tool to socialize people; it creates communities and teaches to respect your fellows. The more time you spend with religion, the more religious you are. From an economical point of view this is not efficient at all. Religion asks the people to live a less efficient life, to bethink and to socialize.

Churches, though, can be efficient. An efficient church is able to talk to many people at once. Modern media helps churches to be more efficient. History tells us, that churches can be dangerous when they want to be mighty.

Friendship, love and family do not fit into efficiency thinking. And I think if we would start to do so, it can't work out, because it would always be egoistic. For friendship always two parts are needed, so it can't follow only a single interest. A lifestyle that is very efficient does not have enough space for friendship and social interactions. When we live rather inefficient, without a completely planned and designed schedule for a career, we are more flexible and have more time for social interactions, for friendship, love and family.

the single product is smaller thanks to a more efficient production, but as many of the produced products nowadays are not used at all (maybe also because more and more efficiency made them so cheap that they are bought without a reason) on balance, a more and more efficient production in the end leads to a bigger environmental impact.

How would a new "Inefficiency thinking" affect economy?

In many ways the opposite of what I explained above would happen. Products and Services would get more expensive, due to longer production or processing time. This would lead to less consume, because not everything would be worth purchasing. Longer production time means more working time, means more work for everybody, means less unemployment. Longer production time also leads to less production, which leads to less environmental impact.

Inefficient production in a competitive economy is not working, as long as the prize is the only thing that matters. But there are examples for inefficient production that is very appreciated. These are mainly handmade products, such as individual produced furniture from a local carpenter, hand-knitted pullovers, hand-sewn puppets etc. Many people like to pay more for these kind of products, that are produced without any approach of efficiency.

Economy.

Our economy nowadays is the home of efficiency. The ideology of an ever-growing economy fit perfectly to the idea of efficiency, because the efficiency always can be improved. In economy more efficiency automatically leads to a higher gain. And a higher profit is of course what (almost) all companies are trying to get.

For that reason there are well paid people who search for inefficiency in economic systems, just to eliminate it. Where does more and more efficiency in economics lead to? First of all, it leads to less working hours, needed for the requested outcome. This might seem positive, but our experience tells us that it does not help the workers, because for them the working hours are not reduced. It leads to unemployment because companies do not need so many employees any more. Secondly, more efficiency theoretical leads to less environmental impact, for example because of lighter materials, shorter ways and less production materials. But in general more efficiency also leads to more production, so everything that is saved in a more efficient production, is spent by producing more. Of course the ecological footprint for

Living.

In this Paragraph I want to write something about the housing situation. Some time ago I read how many new apartments have to be built in my small home town in Germany in order to keep the population on the same level. I don't remember the number but I was very surprised how many it were. This shows very clearly that we occupy more and more space for living. Obviously the square meters per person are increasing a lot.

Not so long ago it was still very normal that children share their room with their brothers and sisters, but today separate rooms are the norm. Even students used to share rooms, nowadays almost hard to imagine.

This is very inefficient. People have to move more, have to clean more, have to take care of more, need more heating energy, pay more rent etc.

Does comfort beat efficiency here? Is our living situation as a counterbalance for our fast and efficient lifestyle? Of course the house is at least partly a resting area, so in this case you can see it as a counterbalance. Especially if we put a lot of value in the resting areas, we probably try to balance live between efficiency and inefficiency. But on the other hand we try to have an efficient life at home as well as outside home. Kitchens are designed to be very efficient and remote controls for all kinds of electronic gadgets, such as shutters, lights, stoves, heating, TV etc. make homes more efficient. Especially in order to spend the recreational time as efficient as possible. This is quite contradictory in itself. Do we fail to balance efficiency or does efficiency help to balance an efficient lifestyle?

The German Bauhaus movement started a new way of thinking for housing and was incredible influential until today in architecture and design. Their ideas and designs are based on efficiency. In those days that was new. It led to many concrete blocks, built all over the world to provide efficient living, so people don't have to worry about their homes and are able to work harder. Today these concrete blocks are often the least attractive houses to live in. People either ask for old houses with high ceilings and beautiful façades or they want to live in new built single-family homes. The trend shifted from efficiency to inefficiency.

Transportation.

Transportation can't be fast enough, that is why we always try to make it as efficient as possible. People travel more than ever before, long distances hardly exist anymore. Within two days you can reach most places on earth. But still engineers work on faster transportation and especially on transportation that is more efficient in energy consumption. Electric cars are now seen as the future, but first they had to prove that they can compete in speed and range with the existing petrol cars. And the car manufacturers manage to make the petrol cars more efficient year for year, so they can compete with electric cars. It is an absurd development.

The Dutch designer Jurgen Bey said in his lecture today (17th dec. 2013) at HDK that we try to win time back, when we are travelling and that makes travelling so frustrating. Because it never works. So he said we have to rethink transportation completely. His project about this subject was the slow car. A car, that goes very slow and is totally free from any known conventions. On Bey's Website he says: "It is more like a small building, a shelter that allows us to experience public spaces at a much larger scale". So he added a new value to travelling, turned it to something else.

That is certainly a way that could transform transportation from the home of efficiency to something inefficient. And I think inefficiency is urgently needed in transportation. Because trying to be efficient in transportation just makes people more stressed and helps nobody. Another thing Jurgen Bey was talking about in his Presentation was an art Project, which was a lorry bended in a way it could never move. He called it the Ultimate way of going to work: You "drive" that lorry for 20 min. in the morning, have no jams, no red traffic lights and no noise. Then you take your bike and go to your actual working place. You could say the most relaxed way of travelling is staying at the same spot.

We should start to see detours as something beautiful instead of something annoying, we should give new values to the time we spend while moving. We should travel inefficiently.

more efficient they did not have a chance. Expanding the fields was not enough. The next step was synthetic fertilizer and herbicides to get more out of one field. The next step was the genetic modified plants. The only really “successful” modification I know about so far was to make a certain plant resistant against a very aggressive mix of poisons, that kills all other plants and poisons the ground in a way that nothing else than the genetically modified plant would grow there. When the scientists finally manage to make tomatoes box shaped, we’ll come close to the ultimate efficiency in food production. The history of agriculture in the 20th century is like an perfect illustration of our aim for more and more efficiency.

Second, the fast food. Fast food is the logical result of a culture that aims for more and more efficiency. A life that is based on monetary success does not provide time for eating or cooking. Eating for many is just seen as an uncomfortable necessity, the faster we can satisfy it, the better. Fast food pictures very clearly what an efficient lifestyle makes with the people. Eating, a basic need for us humans became something we stopped spending attention to.

Third, the overproduction. A big part of our food is not eaten but goes straight into the waste. We are at a point, that still many people are dying because of malnutrition, whereas in other parts of the world foods that is imported maybe from countries that suffer hunger, is thrown away. Efficient food production made food less and less vulnerable for the western world. Efficient food production means, that all fruits or vegetables that do not fit into a certain norm, for example small potatoes are thrown away. Supermarkets throw a lot of good food away, because it does not sell so good, it looks not very fresh any more or takes too much space.

BUT we are today in a process where the awareness for all the things that go wrong with our food increases a lot. And many people take action. Inefficient food already is a big trend and fast food is not any more seen fashionable. The slow food movement is seen as a better alternative. More and more people buy organically produced food, buy locally produced food or become vegetarian, because they disagree with large food production companies that use a lot of chemicals, expand in former rainforest areas or tread animals like a photocopier treads paper. Inefficiency is spreading out in the food world. That is an exciting development and I think we are in the beginning of a revolution in food production, away from efficiency, towards awareness of high quality.

Food.

During the 20th century the way we eat has changed completely. Food got very much disconnected from its origin and became something very abstract. Food is nowadays a trading good and not a blessing we get from mother earth as it was used to be seen in older days. In many aspects food had to deal with efficiency in the past century.

First, the agriculture. In the beginning of the 20th century farmers took care of much less acres of fields than today. Most farmers had to give up and the few that survived became huge because without expanding and becoming

done without any reason or sense. That is a very good thought, because nowadays there is so much focus on the sense that got very stuck.

In my internship I build a bench for a park. The bench is really big and is built from a huge amount of wood, contains incredibly many screws and it took me really long to build it. There is nothing efficient about this bench. But it became quite beautiful. On the other hand this project would have been hardly possible, if I had gotten a normal salary for all the work I did. Good design needs time, the process of designing should not be efficient.

We as designers have to think of the effects of products that are more and more efficient, because even though such products might imply that you will have more time, people seem to have less and less time.

Design.

I think design can be both, an offspring for efficiency and an offspring for inefficiency. As a German industrial designer I am taught in the traditional German design thinking. This design thinking is based on the Bauhaus philosophy and got summarised in the famous 10 rules for good design by Dieter Rahms. This design thinking always has efficiency in its background. It might be just logical, as Germany is generally known for machines and efficiency. Efficiency in design is expressed in many ways, here the five most significant examples: First, the usage of objects should always be easy, self-explaining, comfortable and ergonomic. Second, the production-process should be cheap, energy efficient and material efficient. Third, Form follows function. Forth, designing is about improving a certain situation by solving problems. Fifth, design is a selling point.

But design does not have to be what I explained above. It does not have to be efficient. I got to know a new approach to design mainly through my internship in Rotterdam and my exchange semester in Göteborg. I think now inefficient design is more innovative than design that is more and more efficient.

But what is inefficient design? For Jurgen Bey, the most beautiful design is created by daily life and not necessarily by designers. One example was a self-made bed that was really high and in that way completely inefficient. No designer would have designed such a bed. Another example was a combination of patterns on wallpapers that was not harmonic at all but made the room very original.

For Jurgen Bey and for many others I was talking to, since I left Germany, solving problems is not the way we should design. First of all Problem solving needs a Problem, so it starts from a negative perspective. Of course, designing for problem solving is meant to be positive but nowadays designers spent a lot of time with searching for problems in a certain product in order to improve something. The Idea of leaving the problem out of the design process is very interesting. It opens up the field of possibilities immensely and is in that way very futuristic. Things do not have to make sense any more. Jurgen Bey said some things just have to be

Conclusion.

This essay judges some aspects of our life quite unilateral in a way of saying efficiency is bad and inefficiency is a solution. I intended it to do so, because I tried to be provocative. I don't want to say inefficiency is the salvation, but I want people to start seeing beauty in inefficiency and I want them to start thinking of what efficiency and inefficiency in their daily life does. Therefore I end with a request: Try Inefficiency!