

# Working time : a return of an old issue?

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## 1 – Place of working time with respect to other uses of time

Before presenting recent developments in working time, it is useful to frame them with a more general analysis of the evolving relationship between work and life. The viewpoint we defend here gives a preponderant place to working time over other social uses of time, an influence which is still too often underestimated. However, all studies of this issue, from those examining time-budgets and the link between types of leisure and types of work, to those investigating the impact of flexibility upon life (or non-work time), make clear working time is playing a crucial role in individuals' lives and in the way they allocate the time available to them. The reasons for this are diverse and, it goes without saying that there are also a lot of debates about them. Without going into details, we may indicate that for some, the importance of working time is related to cultural values and work ethics (Elchardus & Glorieux, 1995) or to the importance of the culture of consumption which chains people to work (Schor, 1991, 1998) ; for others work provides individuals with the basis for social relations (Schnapper, 1993) and social cohesion to society. This latest approach of course conflict with the compliance to work for getting an income. The fact that the most common form of work, i.e. wage labour, always implies to some extent heteronomy means also that the impact of it goes far beyond working time and may invade all domains of life (Vincent, 1987, Gorz, 1988, Meda, 1995).

However, the 'centrality' of working time is less controversial. It is admitted that time uses are organised following gender, professional status, age, as well as the (expressive or instrumental) relation towards work. It is almostly common sense that working time impinge on and disrupt the time given over to other social activities, relegating them to the background, and to have greater influence on life choices, as Madeleine Bunting pointed out in her remarkable book "Willing slaves. How the Overwork Culture is Ruling our Lives"(2004).

This very general assertions need to be considered within the context of gender-based social relations (Kergoat & Hirata, 2002, Cockburn). The gender division of labour (with in particular the gender-based character of domestic activities) runs up against the centrality (in terms of time) of paid work. Traditionally, the centrality of salaried working time is said to affect women less, because of the greater importance they confer on the private domestic area, following the traditional sexual division of labour. But this assertion is contradicted by facts. Women not only want to have a professional activity and to remain in the labour market, but some of them, like men, even give first place to their careers and on realizing themselves through work. The fact that they are less succesfull, because of a glass ceiling is important but does not change our argument. On the contrary. They have to put much more time and energy into their professionnall activity to break this ceiling what means that choices do have strong consequences, on work as well as in life. For them, time (of work and life) is transformed into a crucial, essential issue. Other, often less qualified women, are working – often part-time – in the services sector, suffer time constraints which are difficult to reconcile with the main domestic responsibilities and tasks they still assume in the first stance. They will nonetheless be forced to

continue their professional activity in order meet the financial needs of the household. Moreover, work and transport times run directly counter to household time. This holds true for men and women alike.

Even so, balance of work and life is often seen as an issue of reconciliation of work and family and tends to be associated with women's paid work. Whilst institutional responses to the issue of conciliating work and life do exist (from broader nursery facilities for small children to domestic help), budgetary constraints (public finances) mean they are insufficiently developed. Apart from the single parent households, fathers are rarely considered as being able to make good the deficiencies of the collective structures. Their work is providing as much, if not more, of the household income and therefore we confront again the centrality of paid work... This reflects the social constraint of working for an income, and as men's salaries tend to remain higher than women's, conciliation is not their problem. The European employment strategy launched at the Lisbon Summit of 2000 aims to increase employment levels in every category (women, young people, senior citizens) (Bouquin, 2000, 2006). Of course, this strategy remains compatible with part-time work as well as flexible working hours. Where previously social policies may have promoted women's withdrawal from the labour market with 'pro-family' social benefits (Esping-Andersen, 1996), today they are developing an arsenal of measures (tax credits, benefits which can be cumulated with paid work) aimed at keeping people in work which is most often low paid work and instable employment (Gray, 2004). We are therefore forced to observe that social (class) divisions and gender (sex) divisions interact and tend to reconfirm the primacy of working time over other social times, whether in a job and paid, or domestic and unpaid.

## 2 - Current trends in working time

A whole range of sociological and labour economic studies are revealing significant trends with respect to working time. Before reflecting upon the driving forces behind such developments, we need first to draw up a rapid inventory:

- **The dispersion of working time** and work schedules over the day, week, month and year (Perilleux, 2001). The limitation of work to a certain set of hours (nine to five, in the week) is tending to disappear. The « round the clock » or 24/7 society is obviously an urban society, and hard-working (but structured as a function of wage work, with informal and clandestine work an integral part of it) (Elchardus, 1996). From a situation in which only manufacturing industry (steel, automotive, refineries) and vital services (hospitals, emergency wards, night watchmen, maintenance) involved shifts and night work, every sector is now tending towards activity at any time of day or night. Night work is now accessible to women, and the portion of salaried workers involved in shift work and nightwork is increasing overall. The portion of salaried employees called on to work weekends is also rising (Bouquin, 2006).
- **Time differentiation and intensification.** Working time first of all, but also other social times can, by contamination, vary considerably in intensity and density, alternating "empty" periods with highly intense periods (DARES, 1999 ; 2000 ; Valeyre, 2001). Since the early 1980s, the loosening of fixed working hours has been part of an extension of irregular work schedules since the early eighties whereas in the seventies, it was conceived as an individual possibility of adjustment. Normative working time is measured today in a given volume of hours a month, a quarter or a year, instead of in hours per week. We are witnessing a blurring of the boundaries between working and non-working time and we are seeing a growing permeability between them. This is particularly true in forms like part-time employment with daily variations in hours or very

short work shifts (two or three hours), the never ending working day for certain professions (f.e. truck drivers) or the ones that are completely unaware about the moment when they will be working and when not (zero hours contracts). The use of ICT and the deterritorialization of economic activities are also fuelling this movement (delocation of service activities towards low cost labour zones, call centres, remote work and teleworking etc.).

- A real, albeit unevenly distributed, **increase in working time**. The best-known case is that of the United States (Schor, 1991). In almost a decade, starting from the early 1980s, annual working times increased by 163 hours, equivalent to an additional month's work. This trend is particularly marked among persons with monthly salaries, i.e. not hourly waged, that is, managers, technicians and engineers. Globally, the trend that Juliet B. Schor observed in 1992 has continued. Working time per head (active population) has now passed the 2000 hours/year mark. From 9 weeks' difference within Europe in 1990 we have passed to 15 weeks in 2000. In Europe we are seeing the same trend, even if less explicit. But the negotiation of collective agreements reinstating the 40 hour week is significant. More latently, this trend towards longer working hours is also expressed in growing amounts of overtime, people working two jobs, etc... It is true that average weekly working hours, as calculated from surveys by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, have tended to stagnate at around 40 hours since the early 1980s. But these are statistical averages, whilst national data show that the proportion of persons of both sexes working on average more than 40 hours has been growing regularly for a dozen or so years. [\[insert examples?\]](#)

The trends of dispersion and intensification are less controversial than the one of an increase. Some are contesting by making an addition of working time over people's lifetimes. On this scale, we have supposedly passed below the 40000 hour threshold. This discourse is a continuation of that of the 1970s, (Fourastié, 1965) heralding a society of leisure, of free time, the 1000 work hours year, etc. But this kind of accountancy totally disregards social reality and socio-demographic differences. Unlike sociologists like Roger Sue (1994), we cannot turn society as a whole into a statistical average. Others will tell us that the working week continues to exist, that flexibility is bounded by new regulations, corresponding to a post-industrial, if not post-Fordist era (Lallemant, 2003). As a result, they tell us, work schedules have become more differentiated, less standardized. But that's all. Personally, we would say that even if the increase of working time is not a general trend, it is a real one that cannot be neglected. A banalization of the trends that are taking place, sometimes linking them to socio-cultural developments (individualism, post-modernism), also fails to take account of real impact upon social life.

For our part we believe that what we are seeing are varying trends, not all converging, and not all of them affecting social categories and social groups in the same way. Our approach is therefore more cautious, more critical and more open to the social developments that are under way. Some of these are contradictory and we need therefore to mention certain counter-trends. First of all we need to point to what can explain or, failing this, shed at least some light on the trends we have described.

### **3 - Direct and indirect causes**

Without trying to rank the causes in any hierarchical order, it is nonetheless valuable to point to those factors which appear to directly determine the situation, and those which appear more to propel these changes in a more general way, which percolate through the regulatory framework, and are expressed by changes in the conduct of social actors and individuals.

#### ***a) Laws and rules***

- The softening up and breaking apart of regulatory frameworks, whether by over-regulation, by the decentralisation of industrial relations and the development of plant-level agreements, by the increasing number of law-producing bodies and forms of law, or by the development of “soft law” (voluntary systems) alongside legally binding frameworks tends to push the differentiation of working time
- The move from a homogenous to varying definitions of working time (with or without breaks, recognition of “on call” times, differences between regulatory and real working time, maximum and average working time);
- The absence of norms and rules for workers without rights (undocumented ones), or unable to press their rights (in SMEs), or those who fall outside the purview of labour law (lacking of any collective bargaining coverage), owing in particular to cascading sub-contracting (hotel and catering, building, transport) or the absence or weakness of labour inspectorates tend to foster increase of working time and flexibility of it

#### ***b) Social behaviour***

- Job insecurity, salary moderation and eroding purchasing power have generated a willingness to work overtime;
- People’s availability for work varies considerably depending on their age and social and family situations (with or without children, availability of child care) so they will be disposable or not to spend more time to work.
- A strong work ethos, demanding career development in a competitive environment, the extension of the community self-mobilization model to society as a whole, namely the “active society”.

#### ***c) Organizational logics***

- The presence of “high performance work systems”;
- The use of new technologies to extend the degrees of supervision (the new panoptic in or with ICT);
- The extension of efficiency and quality targets to every sector of activity (services, factory operators, public sector, etc.);
- Tighter time constraints and deadlines, with teams or individuals working in controlled autonomy;
- The development of multi-skilling and the cumulation of tasks (multi-task operators), which in the context of chronic understaffing mean that people work more intensively;
- The immediateness of the process, co-action and presence of the customer in the process;
- Individualized remuneration systems producing inter-individual competition.

#### ***d) Dynamics of accumulation of capital***

- The competitive environment, as an artefact (internal to multinationals) or not (on replacement markets, market shares are always gained at someone else’s expense), is tending to accelerate technological cycles, product cycles, production cycles and, ultimately, to raise labour productivity expressed in time units (quantity of wealth produced in a number of time units);
- Growing competition in the labour market, with the unemployed functioning as a “reserve army”, even if this is being attenuated by social segmentation with insiders and outsiders;
- The short-term horizon of profitability ratio’s and return on own equities (ROE) is encouraging this acceleration.

Of course, we should point out that these factors are all operating simultaneously and (partially) autonomously. Some have a short pace and others are more part of “the *longue durée*” as historians would say. For example, some are short-term following the changes in labour law or following the market and its oscillations, whilst the long-term aspect of the “re-commodification of wage labour” is certainly an intervening factor in the return to the “time of the merchants” (Supiot, 1999), but has no direct relationship with the long-term aspect of organizational logics. More globally, it is clear that the flexibility paradigm (Neumann, 2005) has played a key role in the changes we have described, in particular by loosening the vice which imprisoned working time in precise and stable daily and weekly working schedules. This movement towards flexibility has subsequently spilled over into years and working lives. The paradigm of flexibility is also echoed in the consumerist and hedonist aspirations and the “possessive individualism” of an unequal but still affluent society.

#### **4 – Which social consequences?**

To date, few detailed analyses have been undertaken. Even so, let us cite the research undertaken in Belgium by Ignace Glorieux and Mark Elchardus in the nineties (Elchardus, 1996 ; Glorieux e.a., 2005). Following them, we can observe a **major desynchronization of social time and growing tension in social relations**, first of all within the family, and then between individuals and institutions. The adjustment of institutional timetables (crèches, services, etc.) towards extendable and flexible hours has helped to lower these tensions, at least on or within households. But flexibilisation is gradually taking hold of every dimension of work and life. The dynamism of social desynchronization will therefore also invade, first the week, then the month and finally the year and lifetime. On the other hand, the need for collective rhythms remains, and even if the authors link this need to the Durkheimian problem of social cohesion, we can only agree with them. Chronobiological and sociological studies conducted in the fifties and sixties (Roberts, 1998) proved the extent to which night work and the sleep irregularities associated with shift work led individuals and couples into crisis situations and even to psycho-socio-medical pathologies (depression, eating and sleeping disorders, etc.).

**A second, and no less important consequence is the monetisation of time.** Edward P. Thompson had already mentioned this in his famous text on the disciplining of time by the industrial revolution, with his phrase “Time is now currency. It’s not passed but spent.” (1991). Spending means trading, and monetization gradually feeds a market. This dynamic goes further with the invasion of non-work time by the same economic rationale of efficiency and the logic of timesaving (not “wasting one’s time”) which previously applied solely to (paid) working time. This was already perceptible from the beginning of the “leisure society” when Jean Baudrillard observed how leisure time had become impregnated by the ideology of alienating work (1970 (1996)). A “time market” is coming into being, reflecting first of all social disparities in disposability of time and the speeding up of work time. Certain people lack time and therefore have to “buy” it, not only by purchasing certain products (convenience foods). In order to keep coping with their life styles (nomadic and mobile), they purchase certain goods and services such as buying time by delegating domestic and family tasks to a new kind of servants (proximity jobs, home helps). In many cases, the time compression inherent to their work and lifestyle leads to the direct trading of time units (sharing, swapping), either with their life partners or with third parties. The monetization of time is also reflected in pricing systems: the more flexibility you need (trading of tickets and time schedules), the higher the price; the longer ahead you book your ticket, the cheaper it is. Distance is not the only parameter, there is also the service rendered, including at the “intangible” level of availability. This monetization/commodification of time is participating in and amplifying the acceleration of social

times. Contemporary society appears to be entirely mobilized by the lack of time (Aubert, 2003 ; Bunting, 2004). Certain flee it by rushing forward, for others it becomes a forced march.

**5 – A hesitant critique of the centrality of working time** One could if one wanted treat contemporary developments as all part of one, single trend. But counter-trends to the centrality of work do exist and are also appearing. These mainly take the form of individual behaviours and conduct, but can include collective action. We can mention the case of qualified managers and employees who refuse promotion to protect the balance between their work and life. This reflects a “gorzian” relationship to work, which considers its heteronomous nature as inevitable and seeks therefore to reduce its volume or its destabilizing effect vis-à-vis other spheres and activities. In the same vein there is also the aspiration to reduce one’s working time. This demand for more leisure or free time is sometimes so strong that the concrete formula is of little importance (from career breaks to time credits, or part-time as particularly in the public sector). One can also include the desire of older employees to stop working before the official retiring age, owing to health, fatigue, etc. Imposed or not, we can observe how the success of the early retirement system in the private manufacturing sector, or again of early retirements, from age 53 or 55, in the non-profit or public sector, is no longer the lesser of two evils. Another aspect of such a critique is reflected in the refusal to accept employment if it is being poorly remunerated compared with unemployment benefit, or because the working conditions are perceived as unsustainable. Last of all, let us mention the recent “go slow” and “slowing down” movement, or other formulas which now express the voluntary choice of doing things more slowly. Where output restriction signalled resistance to the Taylorian system, “slowing down” is a form of individual resistance to utilitarian time pressure.

It is certainly necessary to qualify the above. First of all by material gained through field work, participatory observations, and surveys. The minority character of these counter-trends has also to be seen in the light of the power of economic and organizational logics and the weakness of collective players in this field. For example, the fact that trade union organizations grasp the issue of working time only in connection with the question of employment and, in most cases, following an orientation which conforms with company profitability, is far from neutral. On top of this there are differences in individual conduct. In given situations in any one group, certain individuals will at times be tempted to seek escape to the time pressure ; others will conform with the behavioural norms required in their work and therefore with the time constraints associated with it; others will resign themselves to the situation, whilst some – calculating risk and opportunity– will waver between passive and active resistance.

## **6 – Why can we speak about « the return » to an old issue ?**

In the 19th century work time formed a central aspect of the social question. In 1811 the enlightened industrialist Robert Owen called for working time to be limited in order to keep this dimension outside the competition between nations. Still in the 19th century, the United Kingdom was one of the pioneer countries to legislate on working time, followed quickly by Germany, and later the other continental countries (Biernacki, 1995). Even in the United States, from the second half of the 19th century, the nascent workers’ movement made this question a central issue (Roediger, 1989). Limiting working time to prevent it invading people’s entire lives was at the heart of the movement for the 8-hour day. The issue was linked, first of all, to that of the quality of life, at work and outside work. In the course of the second half of the 20th century, the issue returned to the forefront of the social stage, but this time as a means of redistributing work, as a lever for creating jobs. In the 1980s, when companies were in a crisis of profitability, any reduction in working hours had to avoid being « anti-economic ». Very soon, it became an instrument for restructuring working time and workplace

organisation towards greater flexibility. This was something to be negotiated, and rather at individual company level. The exception of France's 35 hour law is only a partial exception. Whilst the Aubry I and Aubry II Laws succeeded in reducing legal working hours – and if they indeed resulted in the creation of 500,000 new jobs this is because economic growth came along at the right time – the negotiating framework has left a clear margin for flexibility, which is now tending to diminish the notion of overtime. In Germany too, the 28 hours agreement at Volkswagen has served as a model/test bench for a much wider annualization, with today a variable week from 24 to 48 hours (3 to 6-day weeks).

We can therefore observe how even a legal reduction in working time has led to its being more flexible. Such flexibilisation will then tend to subordinate other social times to working time, to reconsolidate the centrality of working time over the social organisation of times, and even colonize non-working time (leisure, family) by an economic rationale.

In general, this flexibility paradigm once again confronts us with the age-old issue of the delimitation / restriction of working time vis-à-vis other social times. What differentiates the present day from the 19th century is the fact that the other social times are also subject to a logic of « time accounting » typical of a utilitarian, merchant-type rationalization. It will therefore not be enough to put a (de)limitation and reduction of working time back on the agenda. Nor to pose the question of defining its boundaries, as in many cases individuals (with their nomadic lifestyle and objects) are themselves the vectors of the porosity between out-of-work time and working time. If any opposition movement is forming, it will have to question both the centrality of work and working time as well as the general rationalizing-utilitarian logic. Sovereignty over time (becoming once again master of one's time) is just one aspect of the question, as the purpose and ultimate use of this time plays just as much a role as the effort to control it.

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