

Employment Struggles and the Commodification of Time: Marx and the Analysis of Working Time Flexibility

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This paper explores new working time arrangements around a critique of the 'commodification of time' to illuminate the contradictions of such new flexibilities. Two features of these new arrangements are seen as relevant for evaluating the Marx/Engels analysis. Firstly, those arguing the commodification of time represent all [can you suggest a wording that will make clear what this 'all' refers to?] having become a commodity outside of the processes of exchange for labour power. Significantly – and central in all working time arrangements – it is labour power that is sold, be it for a particular period of time, rather than the time itself. Hence, working time arrangements set boundaries against 'free' time or time in which labour power is not sold as a commodity, that 'free' time which was recognised in the traditional arrangements – fought over in early industrialism – which set premium payments against anti-social hours within 'overtime'. New working time arrangements tend to blur the boundaries between 'free' and 'working' time, assuming an availability of labour power to capital. While much of the promotion of flexibility stresses the possibility of making adjustment to suit social and domestic requirements it is more usually the means for altering working time to meet the demands of capital. The much vaunted case of Volkswagen has led to 'working time accounts' becoming the established temporal arrangement within the German car industry and increasingly becoming the norm for other European auto producers. The name given to these new working arrangements within the motor industry suggests that time has indeed become further commodified. For workers within these new time regimes, the hours owed to their employer is displayed along with their earnings – and deductions – on their wage slip.

As indicated, such systems of flexible time were also apparent to Marx in the changes instituted by industrial capital to ameliorate the impact of the regulation imposed by the Ten-Hour Bill. He offered the metaphor of the actor on stage and in the wings which seems useful for understanding our contemporary arrangements. In practice we now must distinguish between the operational time and time in which individual workers are engaged. Previously, premium payments – of 'time and a half' and so forth – recognised time as heterogeneous, as 'social time' with a value beyond exchange of labour power. The uniformity of flexible time represents a qualitative move towards a homogeneous measure of clock-time now stored in a system of exchange of time for money, allowing capital to increasingly control labour time through extending and accumulating 'time debt'.

Marx and the Problem of Time

The question of working time has been central to the debate around the emergence and development of modern industrial society casting a mask of progress over our perception of the historical. Such a linear temporality appears reflected in Marx's view of history as progression through the development of modes of production: primitive communism through feudalism and capitalism to communism. It may also be represented by the centrality of 'labour time' within his analysis where moves to a reduction of the working week – as in some general ethos of social progress¹ – might seem the measure of improvement in working conditions. Recent discussion of working time has revolved around the introduction of the European Union's Working Time Directive² which has highlighted the differences between the experience of 'long-hours culture' in

¹ See Blyton, P. *Changes in Working Time: an international review*, Croom Helm, London & Sydney, 1985

² The 1993 Working Time Directive 93/104/EC, See also Neathey, Fiona, and James Arrowsmith. Implementation of the Working Time Regulations. Department of Trade and Industry, Employment Relations Research Series. No 11 2001. the implications of this are monitored in annual reports in *EIRO*. eiro Observer. *EIRR*. 1997

the UK and aspiration towards a 35-hour week elsewhere.³ Policy makers have notably used the idea of a work-life balance,⁴ a juxtaposition which might give some immediate credence to Marx's early writings with an inference that the experience of work alienates the worker, that somehow 'work' is outside of – and counter posed to – life.⁵ The direction of policy, driven by a feminisation of labour markets in the last half-century,⁶ is presented as allowing employees a flexibility within working hours to accommodate family and other commitments outside of work. The idea of a standard working week – a '9 to 5' job – has seemed to disappear with the introduction of a plethora of new working arrangements. These not only include an expansion of part-time working amongst students as well as women with childcare responsibilities, but also – as we shall see – forms such as annualised hours and 'working time accounts'. There is a widespread literature arguing that working time is not only extending but becoming more intensified⁷ and making greater demands on employees. Kunda, for instance, in his study of employment in a 'high-tech' corporation observes that, for the 'organisational self':

Work is at once seductive and repulsive; nonwork time must be protected. Maintaining a time boundary between the two is considered important and difficult and is thought to require discipline and effort: one has to combat both the company's demands and one's own impulses, not easily distinguished, to allocate more time to work and to the organisational self that is formed in its context.⁸

There has also been the promotion of the '24/7 society' with the deregulation of opening hours in licensed premises, extension of supermarkets opening hours, and the round the clock corralling of 'customer care' advisors in call centres. This, as we shall see, may not make extended demands on working time itself but certainly could mean greater demand on 'availability to work' in more flexible working patterns. Changes in working time arrangements have not only affected new workplaces in expanding service industry but have also meant changes in sectors which appear most tied to the more traditional production industries. As Beynon *et al* conclude, on the basis of their seven case studies of employment change and despite the re-regulation of the working time directive:

The removal of restriction on working-time schedules and reductions in the costs of flexible working provided managers with room for manoeuvre in the context of changed external conditions.⁹

There appears a contradiction in the current discussion. On the one side is the rhetoric of increased independence of employees to manage their own time in conjunction with other commitments, while on the other is the increased pressure for employees to be available for work beyond immediate contractual obligation.¹⁰ The object of this paper is to explore the relevance of Marx's

³ For discussion of Germany and the introduction of the 35 hour week see: Blyton, Paul, and Rainer Trinczek "Renewed interest in work-sharing? assessing recent developments in Germany." *Industrial Relations Journal* 28 (1): 3-13. . 1997 Bosch, G. "From 40 to 35 hours: Reduction and Flexibilisation of the Working Week in the FRG." *International Labour Review* 129 (5) 1990 and his "Working time: Tendencies and emerging issues." *International Labour Review* 138 (2): 131-149 1999. For France see Jefferys, Stephen. "A 'Copernican Revolution' in French Industrial Relations: Are the Times a' Changing?" *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 38 (2): 241-260. 2000.

⁴ This comes from both the EU and particularly the UK Government, see eg *Balancing work and family life: enhancing choice and support for parents*. HM Treasury and DTI. 2003.

⁵ "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts" *MECW* 3,

⁶ See eg Hakim, Catherine. 1996. *Key Issues in Women's Employment: Female Heterogeneity and the Polarisation of Women's Employment*. London and Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Athlone

⁷ For a recent book presenting this view for the UK see Bunting, Madeleine. *Willing Slaves: How the Overwork Culture is Ruling Our Lives*. London: Harper Collins 2004. For the USA see Schor, Juliet B. *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure*. New York: Basic Books 1992.

⁸ Kunda, Gideon *Engineering Culture: Control and Commitment in a High-Tech Corporation*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia 1992 p 167

⁹ Beynon, Huw, Damien Grimshaw, Jill Rubery, and Kevin Ward. *Managing Employment Change: New Realities of Work*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002

¹⁰ This echoes the contradiction noted by Harry Braverman in his pioneering examination of the capitalist labour process. *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*. New York and London: Monthly Review Press 1974 between the idea that work was requiring increased skill and discretion while experience – and ultimately his own analysis - indicating a de-skilling of labour.

analysis to discussion of the new working time flexibility. First it indicates that Marx offers a metaphor on working time which, while addressing the reductions in working time with the introduction of the 10-hour Bill in the 19th century, captures the working experience of the turn of the 21st century. The analysis of labour time as a commodity opens areas of understanding of conflicts and tensions made transparent through the idea of partial commodification with a different articulation of the subordination of labour to capital taking shape in the encroachment of the demands of commodified time into free time. In beginning to address this contradiction, we must note that a feature of the emergence of industrial capitalism – in the commodification of labour – took labour outside of the domestic setting placing it spatially within the factory and in the office. It also located that labour temporally in the construction of a distinction between ‘working time’ and ‘free time’. This is not a contrast between work and leisure but between that time in which human labour is productive of exchange value and that time when it is not, between labour time as a commodity and free time when labour power is not in the form of a commodity.¹¹ Hochschild, drawing from interviews with employees for a large US corporation and their families, indicates that:

families and local communities must daily face a competing urgency system and rival conception of time. Company deadlines compete with school plays. Holiday sales at the mall vie with hanging out at home. The company’s schedule and rules have come, for workers, to define those of families...the debut of a certain kind of product and its ‘product life cycle’ came to prevail over personal anniversaries and school holidays. When family events did take precedence, they did so on company terms.¹²

A central premise of this paper is that policy has addressed the flexibility of working life – the work/life balance – precisely because employers have demanded more flexible working hours. While many sectors of workers have always been expected to work temporal patterns which encroached on what had been considered ‘unsocial hours’ – of nights, weekends, holiday periods – these had warranted additional payment in recognition of our social construction of time.¹³ Time itself was not considered homogeneous but payment systems – clearly because of the mobilisation of organised labour – recognised the complex of our temporal understanding in a tariff of extra payments.

The next section will consider some of the current changes in working time arrangements, with particular concern for annualised hours and ‘working time accounts’. Then we indicate Marx’s analysis of labour time and generalised commodity production to then further discussion of the idea of the ‘commodification of time’ to indicate the continued relevance of his ideas in understanding changes within the management and organisation of labour within contemporary – increasingly global – capitalism.

Working Time Flexibility

It is possible that the turn of the 21st century is seeing as dramatic a re-conceptualisation of the nature of working time as experienced in the early twentieth. The very mechanical routines established under the influence of mass production and scientific management – the potential application of time study and ‘clockwork’ organisation of the labour process – set the template against which contemporary notions of ‘flexibility’ can be hypothesised.¹⁴ While Ford’s River Rouge Plant proved more the anti-utopia of ‘modern time’ than prototype of a universal mode of

¹¹ Hence unpaid domestic labour would be ‘free time’ only in the sense that it is unpaid; for a discussion of this see the collection Malos, Ellen. *The Politics of Housework*. London: Alison & Busby 1980.

¹² Hochschild, Arlie Russell *The Commercialisation of Intimate Life: Notes from Home and Work*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2003 p 146. See also her *The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work* Metropolitan Books, New York 1997

¹³ I will not go into the arguments around ‘social time’ but for a classic statement see Gurvitch G *The Spectrum of Social Time*, D. Reidel Publishing Company, Dordrecht-Holland 1964

¹⁴ See for example the analysis and prescriptions presented in Piore, M. J. and Sabel, C. F. *The Second Industrial Divide: Possibilities for Prosperity*, Basic Books, 1984 and Womack, J. P., Jones, D. T. and Roos, D. *The Machine That Changed The World*, Rawson Associates: Macmillan, New York, 1990; from a rather different perspective also Braverman *op cit*.

regulation,¹⁵ alternative forms of 'flexible mass production' were pioneered in the early years by GM and others.¹⁶ The system of mass production, which increasingly drew on the labour of women, allowed the space for varied working patterns - for instance 'twilight shifts' - to incorporate gendered family responsibilities. The strength of trade unions also led to an accommodation to the commodification of working time. The outcome of organised struggle led to increasing bargaining over premium rates for unsocial hours where these were worked either routinely or as part of 'overtime' to cope with fluctuation in demand. This did not mean that working time could not be squeezed and practices intensified. The main challenge to 'Fordism' came with the western industrial crisis of the 1980s and the appropriation of ideas apparently emanating from the continually successful Asian Rim economies, particularly Japan. Reflections on the failings of western manufacturing led to a 'japanisation' with the appropriation of organisational and management techniques seemingly responsible for this eastern ascendancy.¹⁷ Quality Circles, Teamworking, TQM and 'bell-to-bell' working were introduced with a sense that western manufacturing industry had to 'change or die'. It was therefore not surprising that a package that included *just-in-time* methods for inventory management to minimise overheads in stock would also address the temporal requirements for the 'resource' of human labour power. Arrangements were increasingly introduced which challenged ideas of a standard working week and normal - 'social' - time. Below we shall illustrate the argument with two brief cases, one of 'annualised hours' typical of the chemical industry and the other of the 'working time account' from the motor industry.

Our main concern here with 'time' is as boundary between that expended in 'labour', where labour is sold as a commodity, and 'free time' outside of that contract. This may also concern the immediate reproduction of labour power. Such boundaries have always been rather blurred and the outcome of negotiation and struggle. In early industry - as we see below - new work discipline may have emanated from the rise of factory production where work became separated spatially from other activity. Marglin¹⁸ argues that it was the very need to establish this capitalist work discipline rather than any technological innovation that led to the shift from workshop to factory. But, as with the persistence of workshops and the 'sweated trades', ambiguity remained between working and free time, whose definition usually depended on the relative strengths of fractional labour and capital. Shift arrangements may have been established to cover the varied demands of working patterns so that - for example - restaurant workers cover 'split shifts' meeting demand for lunchtime and evening opening without the lull of the afternoon. Railway workers have contested work patterns which might give non-work breaks between journeys far from home.¹⁹ In the construction industry, travel to work time might be considered as working time, whereas miners' time to shower after a shift was discounted.²⁰ Zerubavel indicates how, in a US hospital, doctors are always on call whereas nurses, even when at their normal station, can still be 'off-shift'.²¹

Symbolically, therefore, the time clock may represent some, now rather antiquated, boundary between work and 'non-work' times. But the reality is far more ambiguous. Developments such as the pager, mobile phone and laptop computer seem to have reversed the spatial demarcation and closed the space between home and workplace. This has made employees continually available to the demands of work.²² More formally there has been an emphasis on 'bell-to-bell' working which

¹⁵ In contrast to the Regulation School, see Aglietta, M. *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation*, NLB, London, 1976

¹⁶ Hounshell, D. A. *From the American System to Mass Production 1800-1932: The Development of Manufacturing Technology in the United States*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1984

¹⁷ See eg Oliver, N. and Wilkinson, B. *The Japanization of British Industry: New Developments in the 1990s*, Blackwell Business, Oxford, 1992

¹⁸ Marglin, S. A. What do bosses do? The origins and functions of Hierarchy in Capitalist Production. In A. Gorz (eds.): *The Division of Labour: The Labour Process and Class Struggle in Modern Capitalism*, pp. 13-54, Harvester Press, Brighton, 1976

¹⁹ See Pendleton, A. The Barriers to Flexibility: Flexible Rostering on the Railways. *Work, Employment and Society* 5: 241-257. 1991

²⁰ Hughes, J. and Moore, R. *A Special Case? Social Justice and the Miners*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1972

²¹ Zerubavel, E. *Hidden Rhythms: Schedules and Calendars in Social Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1981

²² see for example Bell, E. and Tuckman, A. Hanging on the Telephone: Temporal Flexibility and the Accessible Worker. In R. Whipp, B. Adam et al. (eds.): *Making Time: Time and Management in Modern Organization*, pp. 115-125, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002

corrodes even the travel time from gate to workstation and de-commodifies labour necessary for the immediate preparation for productive activity. Traditionally many sectors, from the health sector to chemical processes, have required shift working to provide working cover for extended or round the clock working. However these sectors have, through differential payment, recognised an heterogeneity in our social conception of time. Some working times have been valued more highly than others in a complex of plus payments for 'unsocial' hours. Plus payments were given for nighttime work, for weekends, for holiday periods, or for whatever times where considered outside of recognised or socially accepted working periods. However some new working arrangements have attempted to abolish these distinctions and in the process homogenise conceptions of working time. Labour time thus becomes a more standardised commodity. One such approach has been 'zero-hours' contracts where employees remain on call but without any employer commitment to paid working time. Here we can consider two approaches, those of 'annual hours' and of 'working time accounts', which both represent the homogenisation of working time as well as allowing an extension of the subsumption of labour with capital's control permeating into formally free time.

It is estimated that by the end of the 20th century around 600,000 employees were working some form of annual hour's arrangement in the UK;²³ over ten percent of these were school teachers with others spread through manufacturing, transport, services, and most other sectors. Eliminating overtime, these contracts require employees to work a fixed number of hours over the year allowing flexibility for employer demand to meet seasonal or other fluctuation in demand. Within the shift patterns, as is normal in the chemical industry, plant operatives may be required to attune to daytime, afternoon, and night working within a six week cycle. Rest days are sequenced across the full week with weekends, and public holidays, effectively abolished. Workers are expected to schedule any personal events, including elective surgery, within rest periods which are periods when call out can still be required. Christmas or New Year are worked, if they are required in the operatives' scheduled working roster, without any premium payment. These arrangements often include some hours on call for covering for absent colleagues, emergency, or other reason, so minimising the need for separate cover arrangement. Thus there is an arrangement whereby these workers become available for callout by their employer during formally non-work periods, owing the employer hours in a debt bargain and becoming 'available for work' beyond that time which is formally rostered.²⁴ Not surprisingly, therefore, those employed on such apparently arbitrary working patterns involving call-out develop means of avoiding such intrusions on their time. Workers on such a pattern on a chemical process plant – exclusively male – indicated tensions in relationships with familial responsibilities and childcare as well as with general social relations.²⁵

An innovation in the German motor industry which has spread into broader European practice is the 'working time account'.²⁶ Reductions in working hours – with commensurate loss of pay – emerged to counter pressures for job losses at Volkswagen creating 'the company that breathes'²⁷ or one able to quickly adjust to market demand without the problem of hiring and firing of experienced labour. Later adjustment, introduced at BMW and increasingly adopted across the European motor industry, allowed averaging of working time across a (largely hypothetical) working life so that, while a notional average of a 35-hour week may be a formal requirement, there is no actual hours' norm for the working week. Actual hours worked can fall within a wide corridor of expectations and prior arrangement of shifts can mean large fluctuations. Working shifts, agreed with unions in advance, depend on the demand for cars and production is slowed or stopped as well as raised with fluctuations in working time. When this was introduced into Rover, at the time a

²³ IDS *Annual Hours*, Income Data Services, London, 1999, see also IDS *Annual Hours*, Incomes Data Services, London, 1996

²⁴ An early example of this arrangement was at the fertilizer processing plant of Norsk-Hydro in Immingham, discussed in Fox, J. Norsk Hydro's new approach takes root. *Personnel Management*: 37-40. 1988, Fox, J. Reaching a single union agreement. *Employment Gazette*: 611-616. 1987 and Linn, I. *Single Union Deals: A Case Study of Norsk-Hydro Plant at Immingham, Humberside*, Northern College in conjunction with TGWU Region 10, Barnsley, 1986

²⁵ Interviews with chemical plant operators and shop stewards

²⁶ For discussion of German working time arrangements see Bosch, G. and Lehdorff, S. Working Time. In G. Szell (eds.): *European Labour Relations*, pp. 189-220, Gower, Aldershot, 2001 Lehdorff, S. *Factories with Breathing Power*, Amsterdam, 2001

²⁷ For an account by the VW Personnel Director see: Hartz, P. *The Company that Breathes: Every Job has a Customer*, Springer, Berlin, 1996

BMW UK subsidiary, long lay-offs were counted against such hours leading to the accumulation of a 'time debt' by workers, indicated as such on their pay-slips.²⁸ Because of low demand production was halted around Christmas giving a long break from work but an accumulated time debt. 'Working time flexibility' was the most unpopular agreement and cause of considerable tension.²⁹ Thus in this new working arrangement time increasingly approximates to a commodity which is not only bought and sold but can also be accumulated within time debt employment relationship. But this is not turning 'time' fully into a commodity but blurring boundaries between commodified and de-commodified time as work permeates into non-work temporality. As a condition time becomes more homogenised, breaking its special social character.

Marx and the Analysis of Time

A central feature of Marx's analysis of capitalism was the sale of labour time as a commodity; the defining feature of capitalism as 'generalised commodity production'. We might argue with the penetration of capital into the labour process leading to an intensification and increase in the porosity of the working day; the central dynamic of the capitalist production being that 'time is saved'. Marx and, more so, Engels,³⁰ argued that campaigns over the 10-Hour Bill were central in the development of an industrial economy and that its establishment and fate reflect changing class composition. Within a graphic metaphor Marx indicates the centrality of the extraction of labour power within capitalism:

Capital is dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks. The time during which the labourer works, is the time during which the capitalist consumes the labour power he has purchased of him.³¹

Thus labour power is extracted from the labourer in the process of exchange of wages for that labour. However, this is no equal exchange of values but the wage paid, times of working, and the very intensity of work are the outcome of political struggle between classes. As Marx elaborates, in part of the working day the labourer works to produce for their own subsistence – to exchange labour for the price of its reproduction – while the remainder is surplus value appropriated by the owner of capital. This extraction of surplus value, the extraction of surplus labour, 'is the specific end and aim, the sum and substance, of capitalist production.'³² The drive to maximise this surplus is the driving force for the revolutionary transformation of the labour process under capitalism. Initially the means by which surplus can be increased is through the extension of the working day but, increasingly and alongside relative surplus value, labour power becomes more productive with the transformation of the labour process in the production of absolute surplus value.

Marx sees a move from 'formal' to 'real' subordination of labour where the extension of working time is replaced by increase in the productivity of labour through the revolutionising of the means of production. Therefore the time taken for labour power to produce the equivalent of its own replacement is minimised both through the increasing porosity of the working day – squeezing out non-productive labour – and through the removal of unproductive times, especially where such hours of work are regulated. Commenting on the result of the restriction of working hours – in fact for child labour – as a result of the 10-Hour Bill, Marx observed that:

During the 15 hours of the factory day, capital dragged in the labourer now for 30 minutes, now for an hour, and then pushed him out again, to drag him into the factory and to thrust him out afresh, hounding him hither and thither, in scattered shreds of time, without ever losing hold of him until the full 10 hours work was done.

²⁸ Interviews with employee representative at MG Rover, Longbridge.

²⁹ *ibid*

³⁰ "The English Ten Hours' Bill" and "The Ten Hours' Question" in *MECW (Marx Engels Collected Works)* 10.

³¹ Marx in *Capital MECW* 35 p. 241

³² Marx *op cit* p 302

What we have is an emerging discrepancy between operational time of the workplace and individual working time of workers. Marx continues, using a metaphor which seems as appropriate for current debate on working time as it appears for the 19th century debate:

As on the stage, the same person had to appear in turns in the different scenes of the different acts. But as an actor during the whole course of the play belongs to the stage, so the operative, during 15 hours, belonged to the factory, without reckoning the time for going and coming.³³

While we might find a linear view of time in the work of Marx, the development of modes of production, here is something very different. Rather than a continued commodified time created within the generalised commodity production of capitalism we have a metaphor of time which can be located within the mainstream of social science. Like the 'actor' the worker in the flexible workplace is on call, waiting on the wings for the cue to reappear on stage.

Thompson and Time Discipline Under Capitalism

While Marx outlines the structural revolution represented by the capitalist mode of production and the transformation of the labour process, his analysis lacks a sociological account of the accommodation of the nascent labourer to the new work disciplines. It was E P Thompson who gave historical substance to the accommodation of labour to the new time regime in his influential 1967 article in *Past and Present*.³⁴

In that well known paper³⁵ Thompson argues for the growing dominance of clock time over task based time as the basis for work discipline. He points to the works of charismatic Protestantism as well as other evangelists of capitalism arguing the new sacredness of 'time' with time becoming the very measure of effort within the factory and the means by which such a complex division of labour could be synchronised. The natural rhythms of task-based work – where bursts of activity might be interspersed with periods of rest and revelry – are replaced by the uniformity of clock time.

Those who are employed experience a distinction between their employers' time and their 'own' time. And the employer must *use* the time of his labour, and see it is not wasted; not the task but the value of time when reduced to money is dominant. Time is now currency: it is not passed but spent.³⁶

As well as indicating the very metaphorical links between time and money - with time as currency to be spent - Thompson indicates also the very boundaries between commodified working time and 'free time' or own time which remains uncommodified. It may be required for the reproduction of that labour power but still remains outside of exchange and also – however much regimented by other temporal demands – remains private time. While there may be initial resistance to new clock-based time discipline, organised labour increasingly takes on its rationale.

The onslaught, from so many directions, upon the people's old working habits was not, of course, uncontested. In the first stage, we find simple resistance. But in the next stage, as the new time-discipline is imposed, so the workers begin to fight, not against time, but about it.³⁷

Thus, instead of such indiscipline as 'St Monday' – when, carrying on traditions of saints day indulgences, weekend absenteeism might be extended into designated working-time – organised workers began to use their increasing power to pressure for a shortened working day and to gain 'overtime' payment for working extended hours or outside of the regular working pattern. Thus the very heterogeneity of social time, which gave added value to certain times of day, week or year, became sanctioned in the increased complexity of negotiated payment systems; 'unsocial hours'

³³ *ibid* MECW 35 p 295

³⁴ Thompson, E. P. Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism. *Past and Present: a journal of historical studies* 38: 56-97. 1967

³⁵ "Time and Work-Discipline ..." has been republished a number of times either in full or extract; for example Thompson's own *Customs in Common* (1993) New York: The New Press or the collection M.W.

³⁶ Thompson, *op cit* p. 43

³⁷ Thompson, *op cit* p 60

warranted additional payments of 'time and a half', 'double time' or whatever in a complex of exchange values. But, for Thompson, there remains a relatively primitive development of capitalist relations. Time and money enter into the social equation as medium and modes of simple exchange with the imperative that neither should be wasted. What is emergent in the new work flexibility is that time should be saved. This is not just through the intensification of labour but through the accumulation of time debt for workers. In a society dominated by consumer credit, workers build up time debt to their employer.

Time Arguments

Critics of Thompson's account of the historic commodification of time have pointed to the multiplicity of time codes which may exist within society. Pre-capitalist societies do not hold exclusively to task based time³⁸ nor is clock time as dominant in capitalism as Thompson seems to imply. As Whipp argues³⁹ in an account illustrated with the case of time rationale at Rover cars through the 20th century, Thompson "seriously underestimates the continued range and diversity of how time is experienced by people as both workers and actors in other social settings and interrelations of these experiences of time." Such an approach to a multiplicity of time codes, it can be argued, is inherent in this new time rationale of struggles 'about time' which constructed a whole arrangement concerning 'normal' and 'over' time work periods, the assumption of periods designated as working time and of free time and the penetration of work into free time considered 'anti-social' and therefore priced higher than socially accepted times for working. While, as Glennie and Thrift (1996) conclude, we are moving "away from, rather than towards, the hiatus of synchronised Modernity" even such modernity needed to recognise differentiated time.

What we have seen with new working time arrangements such as annual hours and working time accounts is that 'time', in such arrangements, has become undifferentiated or homogenised. While these illustrations are drawn exclusively from manufacturing industry such a process of homogenisation is likewise encroaching through the relaxation of licensing hours, shop opening, and the school day, as well as working patterns increasingly adopted across the service sector. While temporal flexibility is often presented as offering employees freedom to choose their working hours to suit other obligations, commitments or social preferences⁴⁰ and changes in regulation are sometimes presented in these terms, if we adopt Marx's approach to time we find that quite the opposite is indicated. Changes in working time have been seen to be the extension of a commodity relationship, with capitalism extending its penetration deeper into 'free' time, or into the private life of wage workers. These workers sell their labour but the boundary of labour time has become indistinct.

Marx has been shown to offer more than an analysis of the commodification of time pure and simple. Although examining new working patterns of the 19th century, the master of metaphor⁴¹ offers a simple way of seeing these new patterns. Hassard in a recent review of time metaphors,⁴² examines two polarities of homogeneity-heterogeneity and linearity-cyclicity of time which can be linked to the idea of the commodification of time. The very processes of calculation to which time becomes subject under industrial capitalism means pressures towards both linearity and

³⁸ See Glennie, P. and Thrift, N. Reworking E. P. Thompson's 'Time, Work-discipline and Industrial Capitalism'. *Time & Society* 5: 273-299. 1996

³⁹ Whipp, R. 'A time for every purpose': an essay on time and work. In: P. Joyce (eds.): *The Historical Meaning of Work*, pp. 210-237, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987 (quotation p 219)

⁴⁰ See for instance the DTI Flexible Working: The Right To Request And The Duty To Consider: A Guide For Employers And Employees 2003

⁴¹ See for example Terrell Carver *The Postmodern Marx* Manchester University Press 1998

⁴² Hassard, John (2001) "Commodification, construction and compression: a review of time metaphors in organizational analysis", *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 3 (2) 131-140, this draws from Heath, L. *The Concept of Time*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1956 and Jaques, E. *The Form of Time*, Heinemann, London, 1982

⁴² Hassard, John (2001) "Commodification, construction and compression: a review of time metaphors in organizational analysis", *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 3 (2) 131-140, this draws from Heath, L. *The Concept of Time*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1956 and Jaques, E. *The Form of Time*, Heinemann, London, 1982

homogenisation with attempts by capital to regularise costs. As we have seen, the very extension of the commodification appears a process of homogenisation of time. The very essence of the Modern/Fordist labour process is the drive for the efficient use of capacity. There is also an extension of 'linearity' associated with commodification. Rather than the 'cycle' being the predominant metaphor, with the perpetual return of the new day or season, time now passes in a state of continual progress with no return; 'time is money' and hence should not be wasted. Expensive means of production are pressed into continuous production with 'downtime' a cost against potential output. Despite the potential of capacity for such flow technology in the chemical industry, for instance, it is still vulnerable to external cyclicity of demand. Plant producing and mixing chemicals for fertilizer production are still susceptible to natural cycles as farmers use them at times fitting in the growing season.⁴³ In the motor industry – with a labour process capable of continuous mass production – the capacity is still adjusted to demand. But a linear capacity demand is still governed by seasonal cycles. Demand for vehicles is higher or lower at different times of the year and longer cycles – over the life cycle of particular models – also have a strong influence. The reasons why the contemporary labour process sees a move away from regular and traditional work patterns is in part because they never met the actual demands which were often cyclical, this irregular demand being compensated for through overtime working (and perhaps also forms of casual or casualised labour). In the UK motor industry up till the 1980s, also, there were periodic lay-offs because of overproduction which could be seen as the background for strikes as management had little incentive to resolve grievances to maintain production for which there was no market.⁴⁴ More important for the change is the cost to management of working overtime at a premium hence overt efforts to weaken organised labour were also associated with changes in working pattern which reduced such extra costs.

Thus work discipline becomes associated with temporal patterns which themselves might be relatively fluid. Many industries and sectors worked outside of the traditional pattern of weekday nine-to-five but this was accepted as working 'unsocial' hours, paid – like overtime – at a premium rate. Alongside this work pattern are articulated other temporal frameworks, the timetables and calendars which frame the patterns of tasks and events across working and free time. Accounts of the commodification of time usually seem to differentiate between periods for the sale of labour power – under work time discipline – and the remainder as the period for the reproduction of labour power. In this way Harvey⁴⁵ – in an interesting account of different forms of payment for labour time associated with a large construction project – argues that capital not only pays labour to work but also, as it needs a period for reproduction, not to work. Commodification is a process rather than an absolute state; commodification of time is dependent upon labour becoming available to capital for sale as labour time. This infers a shifting boundary between commodified and de-commodified – or free – time. In grasping this Marx offered not just the argument concerning commodification but also an interesting metaphor suitable for grasping the nature of working time within flexible work regimes. The worker might be seen as an actor in the theatre. The actor may be onstage or waiting for their call in the wings. What this indicates is the increasing blurring of free and working time as well as a move towards the accumulation of time debt; extending the 'time is money' metaphor that not only is time now 'spent' but that the very dynamic of capitalism is that 'time is saved'. This indicates the continued relevance of Marx's analysis of commodity production in understanding the basis of labour time and wage labour but also draws directly from Marx appropriate metaphor for the new – homogeneous and non-linear – forms of temporal flexibility.

⁴³ Bell, E. and Tuckman, A. Hanging on the Telephone: Temporal Flexibility and the Accessible Worker. In R. Whipp, B. Adam et al. (eds.): *Making Time: Time and Management in Modern Organization*, pp. 115-125, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002

⁴⁴ There is a huge literature on employment relations in the motor industry but on this point see for instance Clack, G. *Industrial Relations in a British Car Factory*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1967; Turner, H. A., Clack, G. and Roberts, G. *Labour Relations in the Motor Industry*, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London, 1967; Williams, K., Haslam, C., Johal, S. and Williams, J. *Cars: Analysis, History, Cases*, Berg, Providence, 1994

⁴⁵ Harvey, M. Economies of Time: A Framework for Analysing the Restructuring of Employment Relations. In A. Felstead, N. Jewson et al. (eds.): *Global Trends in Flexible Labour; Critical Perspectives on Work and Organisations*, pp. 21- 42, Macmillan Business, Basingstoke, 1999

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