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Capitalism and the Political Economy of Work Time

Christoph Hermann



A fascinating both theoretical and historical overview, which at the same time is so close to current working-time policy challenges. Definitely a comprehensive introduction and a pleasure to read!

Steffen Lehndorff, *Institute for Work, Skills and Training,
University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany*

While much has been written about the defeat of labor movements since the end of the 1970s, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the intensification of workloads and greater corporate control over workers' time – even though these so profoundly impact working class lives and carry such great potential for mobilizing resistance. *Capitalism and the Political Economy of Work Time* is the crucial starting point for correcting this unfortunate neglect.

Sam Gindin, *former research director of the Canadian Auto Workers and Packer
Chair in Social Justice, York University, Toronto, Canada*

Work time has perhaps been the subject of more confusion and controversy than any other concept in Marxist theory. With formidable intellectual clarity, Christoph Hermann unravels the theoretical tangles whilst never forgetting the real-life contestation between workers and employers. In the process, he demonstrates the continuing relevance of Marxist theory for understanding labor in the twenty-first century. This book establishes Christoph Hermann as a leading thinker in contemporary political economy.

Professor Ursula Huws, *University of Hertfordshire, Hatfield, UK*

Work time is an extremely timely issue – not only for workers who suffer from increasingly long work hours, but also for an alternative and sustainable mode of development and living. The book stands out for combining both perspectives, as well as for illuminating theoretical debates and practical struggles. A very valuable contribution to political economy and ecology!

Professor Ulrich Brand, *Department of Political Science,
University of Vienna, Austria*

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Capitalism and the Political Economy of Work Time

John Maynard Keynes expected that around the year 2030 people would only work 15 hours a week. In the mid-1960s, Jean Fourastié still anticipated the introduction of the 30-hour week in the year 2000, when productivity would continue to grow at an established pace. Productivity growth slowed down somewhat in the 1970s and 1980s, but rebounded in the 1990s with the spread of new information and communication technologies. The knowledge economy, however, did not bring about a jobless future or a world without work, as some scholars had predicted. With few exceptions, work hours of full-time employees have hardly fallen in the advanced capitalist countries in the last three decades, while in a number of countries they have actually increased since the 1980s.

This book takes the persistence of long work hours as a starting point to investigate the relationship between capitalism and work time. It does so by discussing major theoretical schools and their explanations for the length and distribution of work hours, as well as tracing major changes in production and reproduction systems, and analyzing their consequences for work hours.

Furthermore, this volume explores the struggle for shorter work hours, starting from the introduction of the ten-hour work day in the nineteenth century to the introduction of the 35-hour week in France and Germany at the end of the twentieth century. However, the book also shows how neoliberalism has eroded collective work time regulations and resulted in an increase and polarization of work hours since the 1980s. Finally, the book argues that shorter work hours not only means more free time for workers, but also reduces inequality and improves human and ecological sustainability.

Christoph Hermann is a senior researcher at the Working Life Research Centre in Vienna and a lecturer at the University of Vienna, Austria.

Routledge frontiers of political economy

Are capitalist economies nearing the end of a long-term trend toward shortening the work week? Even with the enduring financial crisis, working time is getting longer and employment or job sharing is becoming passé. This book examines the root causes of the trends and issues with work time using a pluralist approach – assessing theory, history, and public policy from a comparative perspective. Fresh new arguments for shortening working time to promote self-determination, equality, and an ecologically sustainable society, are offered.

Deborah M. Figart, *Professor of Education and Economics,
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- 190 Capitalism and the Political Economy of Work Time**
Christoph Hermann

Capitalism and the Political Economy of Work Time

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Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	xix
<i>List of tables</i>	xx
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xxi
1 Introduction	1
PART I	
Work time theories	5
2 Neoclassical, Weberian, and institutionalist perspectives	7
3 Marxist, post-Marxist, and feminist perspectives	24
4 Causes and consequences: debating work time theories	44
PART II	
Work time, production, and reproduction	57
5 From Fordism to lean production	59
6 The fragmented world of service work	79
7 Gender persistence in domestic work	96
PART III	
Work time struggles	107
8 The establishment of a normal work day and week	109
9 Work time reduction and flexibilization	133

PART IV

Conclusions 155

10 Neoliberalism and the surge in work hours 157

11 Capitalism and work time 184

Bibliography 201

Index 228

Figures

4.1	Average yearly work hours (1870–1998)	48
10.1	Average yearly work hours (1960–2008)	175
10.2	Per capita work hours (1970–2008)	176

Tables

4.1	Development of work time, productivity, and GDP	50
8.1	Work time around 1870	112
8.2	Phases of work time reductions	125
8.3	Development of paid vacation	128
9.1	Development of part-time employment (percent)	146
10.1	Average weekly full-time hours	176
10.2	Distribution of weekly work hours in 2008 (percent)	179

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1 Introduction

The Great Recession, which shook the world economy in 2007, and despite some signs of recovery still causes widespread unemployment in 2014, has brought the contested nature of capitalism back to the center of academic and political attention. Two observations are particularly revealing for the relationship between capitalism and work time: we are far away from the 15-hour week predicted by John Maynard Keynes in his well-known essay “Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren,” written in the midst of the last major crisis – the Great Depression. What is more, and in direct contrast to the Great Depression when trade unionists and progressive politicians in the United States and elsewhere fought for a 30-hour week to limit unemployment, shorter work hours were not on the political agenda during the recent crisis – even though short-time working has proved a viable tool to avoid job losses in countries such as Germany. If anything, the crisis has increased pressure on those who still have a job to work longer and more flexible hours – and, ultimately, for more years before retirement.

The starting point of this book is the observation that despite the partial move to the 35-hour week in France and Germany, work time reductions have slowed down markedly since the 1970s. In some countries (full-time) work hours started to increase in the 1980s and 1990s, but more often it was per capita hours that have grown during the last three decades – after decreasing during the postwar period. Given the end of the secular decline in work hours, this book raises a number of questions regarding the role and nature of work time in capitalist societies: why did work hours not decrease to the extent one might have expected from the dramatic gains in productivity and living standards achieved over the past 150 years? Why did work hours decrease up to the 1970s, but thereafter stagnated in most countries and even increased in some cases? Why did work hours become more flexible, and why did flexibilization promote polarization? Why is unpaid domestic labor still mainly carried out by women in spite of the major increase in female employment rates since the 1960s? Finally, why are shorter work hours no longer on the political agenda despite high unemployment and a looming ecological crisis?

This book argues that in order to understand the development of (paid and unpaid) work time in the past 150 years, it is essential to understand the contradictory and contested role of work time in capitalist societies. The book,

2 Introduction

hence, takes a political economy perspective on work time rather than a purely economic, sociological, or political scientific approach. Following the traditional political economy approach of Karl Marx, and others, it combines theoretical reflections with historical enquiries and a thorough examination of the present situation. Specific attention is paid to the development of production and reproduction systems, as well as to the struggle for shorter work hours and the impact of neoliberalism on working lives. The different perspectives on work time are also reflected in the structure of the book. *Capitalism and the Political Economy of Work Time* encompasses four major parts: the first part deals with work time theories; the second part explores the links between work time, production, and reproduction; the third part captures major struggles for shorter work hours, including the struggle for the eight-hour day and 35-hour week; the fourth part concludes with an examination of the impact of neoliberalism on work hours and discusses the role of work time in capitalist societies, including the link between shorter work hours and human and ecological sustainability.

The first part of the book presents major theoretical approaches and their explanations for the length and distribution of work time. Chapter 2 covers the neoclassical, Weberian and institutionalist schools of thought. Despite different explanations for the length and distribution of work time, they share the assumption of that capitalism is characterized by a certain degree of rationality and stability. In contrast, the approaches covered in Chapter 3 – “Marxist, post-Marxist and feminist theories” – point to major contradictions in capitalist social systems. Chapter 4 provides a discussion of the different views of major controversies such as the self-chosen or socially constrained nature of work time; the role of living standards, productivity, and the search for surplus labor; the impact of institutions and social struggles on the development of work hours and the emergence of country-specific differences in work time; the role of work sharing in the fight against unemployment, as well as the tension between paid, unpaid and socially necessary work time.

The second part explores changes in production and reproduction systems and their impact on work time. Chapter 5 describes changes in industrial production following from the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism and lean production and consequences for work hours, while Chapter 6 analyzes the various fragmentations in work time spurred by the highly diverse character of the service economy. Chapter 7 leaves the world of paid work and explores the transformation of household labor, which affects the hours women spend in paid employment.

The third part of the book focuses on struggles for shorter work hours. Chapter 8 describes the struggles that led to the introduction of the ten-hour day between the middle and the end of the nineteenth century, the eight-hour day after the First World War, and the 40-hour week in the interwar period and after the Second World War. Chapter 9 presents the main features of the introduction of the 35-hour week in Germany and France in the 1990s and early 2000s, as well as the rise of part-time work as an alternative to collective work time reductions and the introduction of paid leave periods in Sweden and Denmark.

The fourth part of the book provides some conclusions with respect to the role of work time in capitalist societies. Chapter 10 explores the impact of neo-liberalism on the length and distribution of work hours. It argues that in the last decades the granting of concessions and exemptions from collective work time norms, the erosion and decentralization of collective bargaining, the flexibilization and individualization of work hours, as well as the workfarist restructuring of welfare states, have caused a surge and polarization of work hours. Chapter 11 brings together the insights from preceding elaborations and discusses the relationship between capitalism and work time. By doing so it specifically addresses the persistence of long work hours, the need to strengthen solidarity against the market, the simultaneous compression, extension, and variation of work time in capitalist societies, the challenge to promote worker as opposed to employer flexibility, the role of more free time as an alternative to more consumption, and the question of necessary social labor time. The book ends with a list of arguments for a 30-hour week.