



University of HUDDERSFIELD

University of Huddersfield Repository

Bryson, Valerie

The politics of time

Original Citation

Bryson, Valerie (2007) The politics of time. *Soundings a Journal of Politics and Culture* (36). ISSN 1362-6620

This version is available at <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/2538/>

The University Repository is a digital collection of the research output of the University, available on Open Access. Copyright and Moral Rights for the items on this site are retained by the individual author and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full items free of charge; copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided:

- The authors, title and full bibliographic details is credited in any copy;
- A hyperlink and/or URL is included for the original metadata page; and
- The content is not changed in any way.

For more information, including our policy and submission procedure, please contact the Repository Team at: E.mailbox@hud.ac.uk.

<http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/>

The politics of time

Valerie Bryson

Valerie Bryson argues for resistance to the results-oriented 'clock-time' of the capitalist economy.

In recent years, a number of time related issues have risen up the political agenda in the UK. Concern about the damaging effects of long working hours is widely articulated. The TUC's 'It's About Time' campaign aims to put long hours and work/life balance at the top of the workplace agenda,¹ many feminists see such workplace reform as a precondition for sex equality, and politicians across the political spectrum claim to support flexible, 'family-friendly' working conditions. And, partly because of EU pressure, there has been a series of measures since 1997 providing workers with more family leave entitlements, some legal protection against excessively long hours, and more opportunity to work flexible hours.

This article discusses the alleged ill effects of long working hours, before digging below the surface debates to look at time itself in more detail. It argues that we experience and relate to time in many ways, but that our society is dominated by one particular kind of time - the measurable, results-oriented clock time of the capitalist economy. Failure to recognise other temporal needs and rhythms, particularly those associated with caring responsibilities, has damaging social effects, and it also reflects - and sustains - deep-seated gender inequalities. Tackling the dominant time culture and asserting the value of other kinds of time is a critical political step that casts fresh light on current inequalities and opens up new ways of thinking about a more humane and equitable society.

1. See the 'Changing Times' website on www.tuc.org.uk/work_life/index.cfm?mins=377.

So little time, so much to do ...

Contrary to the widespread expectation that technology would liberate us from toil, we now seem to be working harder than ever before. Surveys repeatedly find that people feel overworked and too busy, with not enough time for their families, their friends or themselves, and new terms such as 'time poverty', 'time famine' and 'hurry sickness' have been coined to describe their sense of stress. In this context, it is at first sight surprising to find that there has been a long-term *decline* in average working hours. However, this trend has been countered by a steady increase in time spent travelling to work and by an increase in women's employment, so that in many households less adult time is available to run the home and care for family members; rising life expectancy also means that an increasing number of workers have caring responsibilities for elderly parents. State support for family responsibilities falls far short of what is needed, and this produces a significant 'care deficit' and a 'time squeeze' in many households, as people struggle to juggle the needs of workplace and family.

A significant minority of employees continue to work extremely long hours, with around 4 million working over 48 hours in an average week, and around 1 in 6 working 60 hours. While some long-hours workers welcome the opportunity to earn overtime, a majority say they would prefer to work shorter hours but are unaware that they have a legal right to do so. Some fear that, in a culture of 'presenteeism' and job insecurity, their career will suffer or they will lose their job if they refuse overtime. Many work unpaid overtime because they are simply required to do more work than can be fitted into a 40 hour week; and many have become trapped in a work-to-spend cycle in an economy that treats growth as an end in itself and sees any decline in consumption as a sign of recession.

According to many commentators, the resulting time pressures are having damaging effects on individuals, their families and society as a whole, contributing to a range of physical and mental health problems, a breakdown in social cohesion and a decline in economic effectiveness and civic engagement. Meanwhile, government ministers and public officials exhort us to take more interest in politics, eat fresh vegetables rather than convenience foods, read more with our children, walk them to school, keep an eye on our elderly neighbours, act as school governors, take more exercise, get more involved in our local communities - while not forgetting that our primary role as citizens is

to participate as members of the paid workforce and avoid depending on state benefits. The hours simply do not add up - people cannot work the hours that full-time employment so often demands if they have family responsibilities and are active members of their community.

Political theorists and commentators have long recognised that money is an unequally distributed political resource whose possession provides access to power and influence. They have, however, generally failed to see that free time is also a political resource, and that this too is both scarce and unequally distributed. If citizens are constantly pressed for time, civic life will suffer, and groups whose time poverty is most acute will find it particularly hard to get a political voice. As discussed in the next sections, some feminists have identified time pressures as a key factor behind women's continuing economic disadvantage and political under-representation.

Inequality begins at home

The discussion so far has, as is conventional, equated 'work' with paid employment. However, many unpaid domestic activities also constitute work in the sense that they could in principle be done by a paid worker; many are also essential to the survival and well-being of society. They are also time-consuming, and if someone is cleaning, cooking or looking after children they cannot at the same time be working for money, attending a political meeting or enjoying free time. Some feminists have successfully argued that this invisible work should be recognised in government economic statistics, and at the end of the 1995 UN World Conference on Women in Beijing, many governments (including the UK) agreed to conduct regular time-use studies as a way of measuring and valuing unpaid work.

Such studies confirm both that unpaid work is economically valuable and that, although men in western societies do significantly more in the home than they used to, this does not match the increase in women's paid employment hours and falls far short of domestic equality. Many feminists claim that women's 'double shift' of paid and unpaid work leaves them little time for political involvement: contrary to earlier feminist hopes, women seem not to be 'having it all' but 'doing it all'. Indeed, it seems that little has really changed since the British suffrage campaigner and socialist Hannah Mitchell famously complained, nearly one hundred years ago, that: 'No cause can be won between

dinner and tea, and most of us who were married had to fight with one hand tied behind us'.²

Given their ascribed family responsibilities and current conditions of employment, many UK women opt out of pursuing a career, choosing instead the 'Mummy track' of less demanding and/or part-time work, or dropping out of the labour market, when their children are young. This pattern has negative consequences for the economy, as women's abilities are under-utilised. It also means that many women are at least partially economically dependent on a male partner's wage, and that over a quarter of women in the UK have no independent income at all; women are also more likely than men to live in poverty. Such dependency and poverty are incompatible with the status of full citizenship and are linked to women's continuing political under-representation. They reflect a failure to recognise the value of women's contribution to society, or to see that many apparently independent male citizens are in fact care receivers, dependent on the time of those who service their daily needs. One consequence is that an increasing number of highly educated young women appear to be choosing not to have children, rather than losing their independence and/or struggling to combine work and family life.

Many feminists have long campaigned for changes in conditions of employment, so that women can more readily combine reasonably paid employment with domestic responsibilities; they are also increasingly calling for men too to be enabled to contribute more in the home. Although in the UK equal opportunities has usually been seen as allowing women to compete with men on existing terms, these arguments are at last feeding into policies. Not only has maternity leave been extended significantly in recent years; fathers too now have a right to some paternity leave, new entitlements to parental leave are in principle open to men, workers with family responsibilities are entitled to have requests for flexible working considered, and conditions of part-time employment have improved.

Welcome though these measures are, they do not challenge the 'normality' of the long hours that a successful career so often demands, and that can only readily be worked by those whose domestic needs and responsibilities are met by someone else. Given the traditional allocation of time and responsibilities, there is

2. H. Mitchell, *The Hard Way Up*, Virago 1997, p130.

Soundings

a danger that they will be seen as policies for women only, leaving men's 'domestic absenteeism' and workplace advantages unquestioned, particularly as new fathers are eligible for very limited leave compared to mothers. Scandinavian experience suggests that generous maternity leave actually strengthens traditionally gendered responsibilities; it is only when a period of parental leave is reserved for men (as currently in Norway, Sweden and Iceland) that men become significantly more involved. The 'gender equality duty' that came into force in the UK in April 2007, and requires all public bodies to demonstrate that they are actively promoting equality for women and men, is likely to lead to some improvements.

However, long hours and a culture of 'presenteeism' remain endemic in the private sector; maternity and parental leave provision still lags behind most of Europe; and UK workers retain the right to opt-out of the 48 hour maximum week established by the EU Working Time Directive.

Nevertheless, as a series of recent reports for the Equal Opportunities Commission makes clear, there has been a shift in men's aspirations and practices: nearly a third of fathers work flexitime in order to balance their work and family commitments, 80 per cent take leave when their child is born, and many say they would take more if they could afford to.³ Here public opinion seems significantly ahead of the law, with a majority of citizens saying that better support for working carers, particularly fathers, is a priority, and that party policies on this would influence their vote.

What free time?

If people are to be politically active, they need 'free time', that is, time left after deducting paid and unpaid work, personal care and sleep. While the patterns are not clear-cut, access to this scarce resource often seems to reflect and sustain wider socio-economic inequalities. In particular, although time-use studies at first sight refute the feminist claim that women have significantly less free time than men, closer examination shows that women's free time is often highly fragmented and unpredictable (15 minutes in the morning if the baby doesn't wake, half an hour in the afternoon if the children play next door ...). Their leisure time is also often combined with childcare, and although many mothers may appear to be free in the evening, they are likely to be 'on call' and unable

3. See www.eoc.org.uk/research.

to leave the house unless another adult can be there. In contrast, men's time is generally more 'usable': even if they work long hours, they are more likely to be able to arrange to meet someone after work, attend a governors' meeting or go to a weekend conference.

Similarly, although long hours working is concentrated amongst managerial and professional employees, less well paid workers lack the capacity to 'buy time' (for example by taking a taxi instead of a bus, or paying for domestic help); their working hours tend to be more inflexible, they more often have to work anti-social hours and they are less likely to be able to afford to take their family leave entitlements. These problems are compounded for working-class women, who often fit more than one poorly paid part-time job around their family responsibilities, while the redistribution of domestic and caring work from better paid families to paid workers (usually women, usually poorly paid, often migrant) shifts the 'care deficit' from economically privileged to disadvantaged families, 'freeing up' time for the former at the expense of the latter.

Time in capitalist societies

While careful use of time-use studies can help reveal patterned inequalities, time-use studies depend on a particular and limited perception of both free time and time itself. The very notion of 'free' time gained its meaning in relation to capitalist employment, in which workers generally sell their time rather than the products of their labour. It rests on the assumption that work is an alien, imposed activity, involving a loss of humanity, free expression and self-direction. As in the current rhetoric of 'work-life balance', work is seen as a sacrifice of life, undertaken only in order to earn a wage; this dominant perspective also often assumes that time left over from this is free time, available for workers to spend as they please.

Many people, particularly women, do not experience a distinction between working and free time. The sense that their time is not their own is particularly acute for those carers who are permanently 'on call', even when apparently at leisure or asleep, and for those whose 'second shift' of caring for their family occupies all their time out of paid employment. As described above, there has been a move towards re-defining such responsibilities as a form of work. However, the time they take is often forgotten, for example by those who insist that lone mothers should be in paid employment rather than dependent on state benefits. There is also a widespread

Soundings

sense that family responsibilities should be motivated by love alone and that they therefore should not be seen as work. Although time-use studies help reveal the time people spend on unpaid responsibilities, they do so in terms of the language of the capitalist economy; as such, they can only measure their value narrowly as exchange value or price, rather than as human worth or importance.

This point is linked to broader issues around the ways in which we experience and understand time - which seem to be culturally variable, rather than either innate, or a straightforward reflection of the natural world. Some historians have identified a significant change in human relationships with time in western societies between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, coinciding with the advent of capitalism and factory production. This has often been described as a shift from a traditional to a modern time culture: that is, from a natural, seasonal, local, task-oriented time, in which people got up when it was light, went to bed when it was dark, did their work according to the demands of the season and then rested, in a timeless, endless cycle, to the time of wage labourers, paid according to how long they worked rather than what they produced, with their hours and pace standardised according to the needs of the mechanical production process and the maximisation of profit. From this perspective, the commodification of labour required by capitalist production was bound up with a new form of time discipline, based on the commodification of time. This in turn depended on a view of time as an abstract, quantifiable, divisible resource that could be bought, sold, saved, invested, spent or wasted, and on the prior development of accurate mechanical clocks.

Men's time and women's time

Workers' initial resistance to the principle of time discipline soon gave way to a more limited struggle over working hours. However, although today's dominant time culture equates time with the results-oriented, commodified time of the clock, this does not exhaust our human relationship with time. Our bodies have their own temporal needs and rhythms, we experience time subjectively (it often appears to speed up or slow down), and at any moment we are never simply in the present but also in the past and future, in a mesh of hopes, fears, memories, plans and predictions.⁴ More particularly, providing emotional support, or looking after

4. See the influential work of Barbara Adam, particularly *Timewatch*, Polity Press 1995.

children or sick or elderly adults, often requires attention to 'natural' temporal rhythms that cannot appropriately be automated or subjected to considerations of 'time management', but are often necessarily slow and in the present; the processes of feeding, cleaning, dressing and reassurance are repeated over and over again, and their timing is determined at least partly by need rather than the clock (you change the nappy because it is dirty, not because it is four o'clock).

While gender roles are fluid and variable, and we all necessarily inhabit more than one 'time culture', the traditional association of caring responsibilities with women and paid employment with men makes it meaningful to describe these as 'women's time' and 'men's time' respectively. This description helps us link the contrast between relational/caring time and the clock time of the paid workplace with the more general privileging of men's experiences and needs. Thus, as gendered inequalities in time-use interact with differences in 'time culture', women's temporal perspectives are marginalised or ignored in public debate, and the rhythms of family life are increasingly forced to conform to the economic rationality of clock time - for example, children are rushed through dressing and breakfast so that they can get to their childminder or school on time, and parental 'to do' lists include spending set periods of 'quality time' with their family. The experience of paid care workers, expected to allocate their time strictly according to the clock and to 'switch off' when their shift is over, highlights the general difficulty of fitting the more 'natural' temporal rhythms of care into a rigid time-frame, as the intangible processes and relationships that good care involves are lost in a plethora of efficiency targets and a mountain of paperwork.

'dropping a child off at nursery is not the same as dropping the car off at a garage'

If we assert the value of 'women's time', we can see that the physical and emotional needs of children and adults do not necessarily conform to the demands of the clock: dropping a child off at nursery is not the same as dropping the car off at a garage, relationships with partners and friends have their own, frequently unpredictable, rhythms, paid care workers cannot check properly on the welfare of a confused elderly person in a fifteen minute visit, and patients are likely to recover more quickly if the nurse who changes their sheets 'wastes' a few minutes chatting to them. The problem is not simply that people are pressed for time, and therefore find it difficult to care for others as

they often wish (although this is very important); it is also that their activities are being forced into an inappropriate temporal straitjacket based on the logic of market capitalism - that is, an economic system based on the pursuit of profit rather than the satisfaction of human need or the expression of creativity.

Time-use studies and 'women's time'

While time-use studies can expose some time-related pressures, they are in danger of confirming the capitalist logic of men's time. In particular, studies based on time diaries, which are generally regarded as the most accurate, assume that we can record our days as a sequential list of discrete activities that can be assigned a monetary value. This perspective can only see care as an 'activity', with episodes of care following or succeeding episodes of paid employment or leisure. However, caring often involves simply 'being there' rather than doing something that can be recorded in a diary, while caring responsibilities can permeate the whole of a carer's life, constraining how they spend their time even when they are not actively providing care. The studies also see time as something that can be straightforwardly owned and used by individuals, ignoring its relational nature, and the extent to which usable time for some is created by the domestic work of others - including the work of planning and coordinating household timetables, most often done by women, that enables family members to participate in school, work and social life outside the home.

Even within their own terms, time-use studies have often under-estimated the 'time costs' of childcare and other caring responsibilities. Because time diaries often ask respondents to record only one activity in each time slot, they lose sight of the care that is combined with it - as when watching television or cooking a meal in the company of children.

Many recent studies, however, including the largest (2000-2001) UK national survey, have asked respondents to identify what else they were doing and whether any children or other adults were present. The resulting data shows that although parents are spending more time with their children than they used to, they partly achieve this by combining childcare with other activities, including leisure. This is particularly the case for mothers. Such 'multitasking' can be seen as a form of work intensification that would be seen as a form of increased productivity if it were paid. Its prevalence helps explain why people perceive themselves to be increasingly time pressed, even though average time in employment has declined.

Towards a politics of time

This article has been underpinned by three linked beliefs: that the ways in which time is used, valued and understood in contemporary capitalist societies are damaging the health and welfare of citizens and their families; that they make it difficult to engage in community and political activities; and that they help maintain gender inequalities in public and private life. In the interests of society as a whole, they should be challenged and changed.

The progressive 'politics of time' would have a dual starting-point. Firstly, it would expect 'normal' employees, men as well as women, to have family responsibilities and a life outside the workplace. Employment policies and pension entitlements should therefore assume that most employees will need to take leave or work reduced hours at some points in their life, and that if someone works for money for sixty hours a week they are likely to be an irresponsible citizen, neglecting their social and civic duties, and free-riding on the domestic labour of others. Secondly, it would link current debates around parental leave and flexible employment to a radical challenge to the all-encompassing nature of commodified clock time. Rejecting the assumption that all human activities can or should be organised or measured by the mechanical time of the clock, it would assert the value of time that is not measured by money, but that responds to human needs, whether these be to perform particular tasks in however long this takes, or to care for and communicate with others, or to build relationships. As part of this, it would insist that paid care workers should be treated as professionals, with a workload that recognises that good quality care cannot be delivered quickly, but involves the time-consuming development of human relationships. This means that the provision of care will not be profitable, but will have to be provided or subsidised as a public service.

Unions are likely to play a key role in pushing for these changes and to work to extend them internationally, in the knowledge that poor terms of employment elsewhere are likely to create a downwards pressure on pay and conditions. Conversely, they are likely to be opposed by powerful economic interests, not only because they may threaten short-term profitability, but also because they represent a threat to the underlying temporal logic of capitalism and the market economy. Nevertheless, the social and economic costs of workplace stress, population decline, the loss or under-utilisation of trained women workers and the growing 'care deficit' mean that employers may also have

Soundings

a long-term collective interest in providing more 'family-friendly' conditions of employment (although state regulation rather than simple exhortation will be needed to prevent 'good' employers being undercut by less scrupulous or far-sighted competitors). While a more radical shift to recognise and accommodate the temporal needs of human relationships may seem impossibly utopian (indeed uchronian), the cost of ignoring them may be even greater.

1