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Chris Nyland

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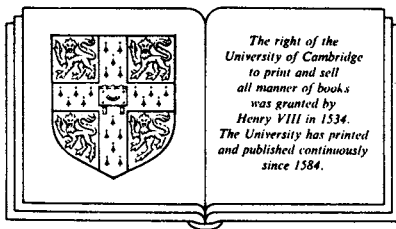
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The University of Wollongong



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To
BERENICE

Contents

Preface	<i>page</i> ix
Acknowledgements	xiii
1 The history of worktime thought	1
2 Empirical evidence and worktime theory	37
3 Worktime and the effort bargain	67
4 The rationalisation of worktime	99
5 The internationalisation of rationalised worktimes	156
Conclusion	194
References	204
Index	215

Preface

Between 1870 and 1980 total annual paid working time in the major nations of the industrialised capitalist world contracted by approximately 40 per cent. This book attempts to explain how it is that this dramatic development occurred. A general discussion of the worktime issue is opportune because this topic traditionally becomes a major political and economic issue in times of high unemployment. During periods of economic crisis the labour movement invariably puts forward the argument that standard times should be reduced in order to spread the available work amongst as many individuals as possible. The ongoing crisis that has emerged following the end of the “long boom” has proved no exception to this general rule. An examination of the worktime issue is necessary, moreover, because the contemporary worktime debate is still dominated by the belief that the primary reason time standards have contracted to the extent they have is the rising incomes workers have enjoyed through the last century. Despite some limited attempts to widen the debate as unemployment has increased since the early 1970s, this basic hypothesis remains the core of modern worktime theory.

The central theme in this volume is that the changing nature of worktime is not primarily explained by worker preferences for income and leisure. Rather, it is argued, the primary causal factors bringing about this development have been the changing nature of the capitalist production process and the changing nature of the demands this process places on the psycho-physiological capacities of human beings. The work shows that this hypothesis is not an original contribution to the worktime debate but rather that it has a lineage dating from the late eighteenth century and that, indeed, in the first half of the present century it was considered a virtual truism.

To explain how and why twentieth-century standard worktimes have contracted to the extent they have it is necessary to understand the nature of the economic revival experienced by

x **Preface**

capitalism in the years immediately after the First World War. It is argued in this work that the regeneration that occurred at this time is primarily explained by the rapid expansion of the processes associated with rationalisation or scientific management. The major changes to worktime that occurred during the 1920s and subsequently were an integral element in the development of this new science. It is further argued that the nature of scientific management has been seriously misunderstood by the overwhelming majority of contemporary scholars. Few have been willing to acknowledge the enormous contribution to society's capacity to eliminate poverty the development of this science made possible. Fewer still, outside the socialist nations, have recognised the potential its further development has for enabling human beings to throw off the dominance of the invisible hand of the market and to give people the ability to direct their own history.

This work then is concerned with the issues of working time, the rationalisation of production and the long-term viability of capitalism. The argument makes the following substantive points:

1. Worktime is not merely a function of income, as is claimed by both marginalists and many radicals. The theoretical underpinnings of the income argument are criticised and shown to be little more than unsubstantiated assertion.
2. It is suggested that Marx's understanding of capitalist competition, human capacities and the inverse relationship between working time and intensity led him to conclude that capitalist societies would be characterised by a tendency to reduce the length of time workers normally spent at their place of paid employment.
3. The science of management pioneered by Frederick Taylor was not merely a tool available to employers for increasing the exploitation of workers. It was a double-edged sword that could be and was utilised by the labour movement to advance its interests. The workers thus played a positive role in bringing about the rationalisation and further development of the forces of production.
4. An explanation is provided for what has long appeared the greatest weakness in Marx's economics, that is, the

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

xi

apparent invalidation by history of his prophecies concerning the rate of profit, cyclical crises and the immiseration of the working class. It is suggested that this seeming failure is explained largely by the rise of scientific management, which gave birth to a new capitalist epoch; further, that the present period of decay into which capitalism appears to have fallen may well signal the end to this stage of development.

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