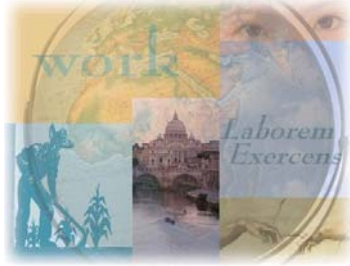


Work as Key to the Social Question

The Great Social and Economic Transformations and the Subjective Dimension of Work



The Evolution of Working Time During the 20th Century and its Implications on Values

by Giovanni Gasparini
Università Cattolica, Milan

The social construction of working time

In the last twenty years or so social scientists have been more and more involved in the analysis of time and its complex interrelationships with industrialized and contemporary societies. In particular, the subject of time has become an important one for general sociology and some specific branches of it such as the sociology of knowledge, the sociology of everyday life and industrial sociology, to name only a few.

The underlying basic idea is that time is a social institution or a social construct; this applies particularly to “social times”, a term which is nowadays currently used to indicate the existence of distinct spans of time which are allocated—daily, weekly, monthly or during the daylife course—to specific activities or performances which are shared by a great number of individual actors.

For example, it is usual, in Western contemporary societies, to envisage working time, free time, or educational time as specific and distinct social times. Thus, when we affirm that working time is a social time, we stress the fact that within a given system a certain construction of the relationship between time, work and society as a whole has been taken up and implemented: its result is precisely the individuation of a distinct social time.

This process is particularly evident when we consider the outstanding changes which were put forward by industrial revolution and industrialization in England and subsequently in other European and American countries during the 19th century. The key element in this connection is that industrialization brought about a peculiar separation of the space-time of the industrial work from the surrounding environment, that is from other social units and from the workers' everyday life.

As historians and social scientists have observed, in all ancient and pre-industrial societies

work and life were deeply interconnected and blurred, either for a peasant or a craftsman or any other worker. This holds no more in an industrialized society, in which the factory system attains for the first time the aim to make working time separate and distinct from, and even opposed to, the time of everyday life.

In a now famous article which was written in 1967, the English historian E. P. Thompson focused on the central role played by time in shaping the experience of industrialism on the part of the workers. He insisted on the basic change which industrial revolution brought about from a task-oriented to a time-oriented work (Thompson, 1967). The time discipline which workers had to undergo in the factory, and which was represented in practice by the clocktime ruled by the entrepreneur, was a new type of constraint. At the beginning, and for some decades, this was very hard to accept by the workers: punctuality and regularity in fact represent two peculiar characters of the construction of working time which industrial revolution brought about and to which workers were unaccustomed.

Notwithstanding successive critical studies, it would be hard to deny that Thompson's analysis enlightened the way in which working time has been constructed as a social time in the first phases of industrialism and in fact has continued to be later, during the 19th century. And even in the first half of the 20th century the progressive spread of Taylorism and Fordism reinforced and strengthened the pattern of regularity, punctuality and clocktime dependence of industrial work. In this connection, suffice it to remind that Taylor himself states that all his system is based on the scientific study of times, by far the most important element in his theorization (Taylor, 1903).

To sum up roughly the main characters of working time in the starting phases of industrialization and even in the subsequent ones, including the first half of past century (see Gasparini, 1986, 1990 and 1994), we might state that working time:

- a. is characterized by long or very long hours during daily and weekly time, especially in the course of the 19th century: this means among other things that leisure or free time is practically out of reach on the part of the working class until the last decades of the century, when the workers obtain some significant reductions of their working hours;
- b. is uniform and rigid for all the workers of a given factory, enterprise, branch and even a local community or a country: all the workers share more or less the same time schedules as regards beginning, pauses and end of the work during the day, the week and the year;
- c. is a quantitative time, which is precisely measured, subdivided and controlled by the clock, as stated in particular by the principles of Scientific management and tayloristic organization;
- d. has a pervasive effect not only on the lives of the workers and their individual times but also on the social rhythms and functioning of families and local communities, as well as on the times and schedules of education, public and private

transport, commercial activities etc.: as has been widely recognized, working time represents the key social time of industrial societies;

- e. can be considered, on the whole, a typically constrained time, which demands on the part of the workers a behaviour of high regularity and punctuality.

Of course, the aforesaid list of characteristics applies to salaried or dependent workers, who have become the large majority of labour force in Western industrialized societies: for them, the concern and the struggle for shorter working hours proved to be crucial. So, we can but agree with what was affirmed since the early Thirties by an article of the authoritative *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, which states that, “Only when work has become regularized and crystallized as a distinct activity does the problem of the hours of labour arise. (...) In this connection it is especially important to distinguish between independent and dependent labour: even in comparatively advanced civilizations independent labour - or what merely appears as such - permits of no easy separation of working from non-working time” (Woytinski 1932).

The history of the labour relations in the last century or so shows that the unions' struggle for shorter working hours, together with the action brought forward by the various countries in the field of labour legislation and welfare state, was successful and resulted, generally speaking, in a considerable reduction of working hours in industrialized societies, at a daily, weekly and yearly scale.

At the same time, this implied the construction of a new social time, i.e. leisure (the corresponding of French *loisir*) or free time, as one of the most important social times of industrialized societies as from the end of the 19th or the beginning of the 20th century. Leisure began to take place in the second half of the 19th century, when the first considerable reductions of the workday and workweek made it possible for the workers to apply to activities such as travels and trips, sports, hobbies etc., and to conceive the idea of having and spending holidays. Previously, the access to what we name leisure would have been impossible to members of the working class and, also of the petty bourgeoisie (see Corbin 1995).

Some major changes concerning working time

The long-run trend concerning the reduction of working hours for salaried workers can be considered as a universal achievement throughout the 20th century in industrialized countries (see, e.g., Hart 1984; Grossin 1994), but its extent varies according to various world areas.

In the present post-war period, the trend for the reduction of working hours has been particularly enhanced in Western European countries, where unions proved to be effective in launching their grievances in this connection. In most countries pertaining to the European Union, a schedule of 7-8 hours per day, frequently from Monday in the morning to Friday in

the afternoon, with at least 4-6 weeks of annual paid holidays (totalling an average of about 1500-1800 yearly working hours, apart from overtime) has become usual in the Eighties and Nineties for most full-time salaried workers. The general claim for a 35 hours working week, which was advanced some years ago by European unions, has been now legally adopted in France and is not far out of reach in some other European countries.

On the other hand, some recent analyses point to a different situation in the USA, where the reduction trend seems to be stopped and even opposed by a contrary tendency in the two last decades (see Schor 1991).

In any case, the long-run trend concerning the reduction of working hours has been paralleled in the last decades, especially from the Seventies on, by a new powerful tendency, concerning the flexibilization of working time. This represents, as a matter of fact, a part of the wider phenomenon of temporal flexibility which is now under way within the temporal frames of our contemporary social systems. Generally speaking, by temporal flexibility we mean a displacement and diversification of time behaviour on the part of the actors (or the subunits) pertaining to a social unit: this may imply the actors' capacity to modify or alter the common rules and practices concerning the temporal organization of an activity or a social situation (Gasparini, 1994).

Flexibilization of working time refers to the adoption of a variety of schedules and working time arrangements within the same enterprise or branch. This means that workers are no more tied to a unique and general temporal framework as concerns length of working hours as well as beginning, pauses and end of the work.

Thus, temporal flexibility seems to represent a challenge to the previous situation of working time as described above, since it is opposed to the principles of temporal uniformity and rigidity which for a long period ruled the character of working time.

Actually, a major problem involved in temporal flexibilization refers to the new demands of synchronization (or re-synchronization) which are being expressed on the side of the enterprise or work organization, which has to cope with a wide set of working time schedules and whose operating time has become longer than the one of any of its members (Gasparini, 1991).

So, in private and public organizations it is now available a wide array of work contracts which are characterized by so-called non-standard or atypical working hours: we can mention here shift work and part-time work in several forms or patterns, weekend work, compressed workweek, job-sharing, temporary and fixed term work, etc. Moreover, flexibility is the core element in flexitime schedules, which have become quite common in administrative or service work and can cope with the workers' individual needs concerning starting and finishing time.

From a conceptual point of view, we might distinguish between a temporal flexibility of the worker and one for the worker, according to the fact that initiative is taken either by the enterprise for its own purposes or by the workers in order to improve their quality of life.

But in practice the two cases can be frequently blurred, even as far as the real outcomes of a given atypical form of working time are taken into consideration. A case in point is represented by recent French laws of “annual modulation” of working time, which have been negotiated with enterprises and workers’ unions and allow seasonal variations in the length of the working week.

To sum up the sense of the current discussion concerning working time flexibility, it is undeniable, on the one hand, that the present economic and employment situation shows a growing number of forms which are demanded and implemented on the firms, initiative and are likely to be unpleasant for the workers since they imply “unsocial” working hours (such as night work, Sunday work etc.). On the other hand, some forms of flexibility have been envisaged and to a certain extent realized for the workers’ convenience and in view of their possibility to adjust working time and life time: even apart from flexitime, this is precisely the rationale of the *travail à temps choisi* (or “chosen working time”), an interesting proposal and perspective which was opened in the Eighties in France by Echange et Projets, an association lead by J. Delors (Echange et Projets, 1980). The principles of this proposal, which has received a considerable attention in the framework of French industrial relations, are centred on the faculty given to the individual worker to reduce in various forms the amount or length of his standard working time, as well as on his right to come back later to a standard (full-time) working pattern.

We also have to mention in this connection the role which has been played by part-time work. According to a very wide survey which has been effected in 16 European countries (over 30,000 people involved), part-time work represents for women an important way of combining professional duties and family duties (European Foundation, 2000).

Trying to sum up the main results of our previous analysis, we might say that the evolution of the working time cannot be identified solely with the amount of hours worked by a worker. In fact, we have to account for three interrelated sides or dimensions, namely (see Gasparini, 1990 and 1994):

- a. length (or *durée*), i.e., the amount of time worked during a day, a week, a cycle of weeks, or a year: this dimension, which is by far the most evident, can be referred to as “external working time”, in that it represents in a sense the external envelope and framework which delimits the contract of employment;
- b. rhythm, which concerns the intensity of working time within a given *durée* and can be referred to as a sort of “internal working time”;
- c. temporal placing of work, which concerns the position of working time in a certain zone of the day, the week or the year: this dimension can be named “relational working time”, since it shows the interrelations of working time with the worker's everyday lifetime.

Apart from other considerations, this three-fold distinction is likely to cast some light on the historical evolution of industrial relations concerning negotiations on working time. Thus,

confining ourselves to some broad outlines, we remark that the delimitation of “external” working time represented an absolute priority in the first phases of industrialization, when working hours were excessively long and gave no room to free time; this dimension, however, is still crucial in our days, mainly because of its supposed positive effects on employment: the present European issue of a 35 hours workweek gives evidence of it. “Internal” working time emerged then subsequently, alongside with the spread of Scientific management and Taylorism, which was developed as from the First World War; we can also remember that the wide movement of workers’ protest which occurred in Western countries in the late Sixties and in the Seventies can be interpreted to a certain extent as a conflict concerning precisely the rhythms of work organization. Finally, so-called “relational” working time was the latest dimension of working time to appear and become an object of negotiations both in collective bargaining and individual arrangements of working conditions: this corresponds to the overwhelming emergence of the issue of flexibility, and particularly of working time flexibilization within business organizations, as previously observed.

During the Eighties and Nineties, a characteristic way of connecting two of the above-mentioned dimensions has been represented in various European countries by a trade-off between external and relational working time. In other words, collective bargaining between firms and workers’ unions has often resulted in a trade-off between a reduction of working hours in exchange for an increasing flexibilization of working time, which in several branches and enterprises has been extended to inconvenient or unsocial hours, such as the ones covering evenings, nights, Saturdays and Sundays. But it is dubious that the workers’ unions will be able in the future to continue to act in a trade-off logic.

There is a growing tendency of many work organizations, both private and public, to operate as incessant or continuous organizations, 24 hours a day, 365 days per year: this impinges on part-time and shift work and demands the workers’ acceptance to work in inconvenient or unpleasant temporal zones. This process seems more developed in Northern America (Melbin 1987), but is now under way in Western Europe, too.

The aforesaid remarks can be evaluated also taking into consideration the situation and possible evolution of free time and leisure. In particular, it is evident that, in case of a progressive and massive extension of so-called atypical working hours, the very existence of the week-end as we know it, and even of a Sunday free from work for the great majority of people in Western countries, would be threatened.

The tendency towards a blurring of working time and free time represents another related and crucial question, which is linked with temporal flexibilization and with so-called process of disembedding. According to A. Giddens (1990), disembedding represents a major feature of present radical modernity and involves a separation of time from space. Some technological realizations can be mentioned in this connection, like for example telework, which enacts a clear-cut disjunction of the worker's space-time from the firm's space-time, and mobile telephone.

In addition to this, we have to remember that some major changes are underway in the

world of dependent work, in connection with the situation of harsh economic competition, market globalisation and high unemployment rate. For many workers the content of work is becoming more knowledge-based, more feasible by computers or portable technological artefacts like mobile phones, and less dependent on the amount of time spent in the firm (see, e.g., Boulin, Cette, Taddéi, 1992).

Moreover, independent work or self-employment in various forms is increasing and, according to some authors, is likely to experience a strong development in the next years (Handy, 1994). Recent data from the above-mentioned European survey show in fact that in most European countries a favourable attitude towards independent work is extending, to a remarkable extent, on the workers' side (European Foundation, 2000a).

Some remarks could be added in relation to the present development of fixed term work contracts, as well as to the widespread practice of precarious work in several areas and countries: these phenomena may be viewed in fact as a further contribution to the process of flexibilization.

All in all, the new powerful trend represented by temporal flexibilization of work, as well as of ways of life, is likely to exert a remarkable impact on the reconstruction of social times. But we think that the influence of temporal flexibility is likely to go along for decades with the previous pattern of synchronization and separation between different social times and space. So, to take the field of work, it is correct to observe that until now some of the new processes have been adopted only by a minority of individuals: in Europe, telework has got a very limited implementation, and so-called typical salaried workers continue to represent on the whole the majority or at least a great part of the active population in many countries.

For these reasons, instead of envisaging a scenario consisting of a wild and generalized flexibilization (as put forth by some American authors such as Rifkin, 1995, and Sennett, 1999), we prefer to imagine in the future a scenario in which different patterns of work and leisure will coexist and will be all legitimate, in a sort of mixed situation in which some temporal zones of synchronization, like Sunday for leisure and night for rest, will likely to be preserved for the majority of the individual actors (see Taddéi 1986; Gasparini 1996).

The issue of values

The aim of this final section is to express some remarks concerning the connection of the foregoing analysis with human values, in a general perspective and with a special reference to John Paul II's encyclical *Laborem exercens* (1981).

The two preceding sections have shown, either in an explicit or an implicit way, the concern for some major human and social values which are embedded in the analysis of working time within industrialized systems. Three of such general and shared values can be remembered here: firstly, the value of liberty, which can be connected with the claim both of reduction and flexibilization of working time “for” the worker; secondly, the value of

equality, which is especially linked to workers' action and social policies aiming at establishing contracts and laws with a common framework of rights about working time, annual holidays, and pension schemes; thirdly, the value of quality of life, which in contemporary post-industrial societies rests, among other things, on a viable balance between working time and leisure.

Neither *Laborem exercens* (1981) or the subsequent encyclical *Centesimus annus* (1991) deal with the problem of working time as we have called it forth in a sociological perspective. However, it is significant, from our viewpoint, that *Laborem exercens* takes into account human and social sciences in order to make some statements concerning human work and labour: for the first time in a papal document, sociology is expressly cited and referred to, in section 4 of the encyclical (see Gasparini 1982). The core indications on values expressed by *Laborem exercens* turn around the subjective dimension of work, as compared with the objective dimension represented by technique: the pontifical document emphasizes man as subject of work, the personal dignity of work, as well as the experience of reciprocal solidarity shared by workers. Even if the issue of working time is not named here, it would not be difficult to link it to the so-called subjective dimension: in fact, it is evident that such dimension is implied by values of liberty, equality and quality of life which have just been mentioned as major outcomes of the debate and social dynamics concerning working time. It could be added that the tendency towards a growth of independent work, provided it corresponds to really autonomous work, also emphasizes such subjective dimension.

But let us go into some specific questions which are exposed by *Laborem exercens*, in order to find some possible points of contact between the encyclical and the reality of working time. We shall hint here briefly at three distinct issues.

A first question is considered by the overwhelming issue of unemployment (cf. *Laborem exercens*, section 18), which has been for years a key social problem, especially in the European Union. It is now widely recognized, even if not unanimously, that an appropriate policy of reduction and restructuring of working time can have significant consequences in lowering unemployment rates. This might be possibly the outcome of the challenge of the 35 hours workweek which has been or is being adopted in some European countries. Alongside with reduction of working time, some measures of temporal flexibility can be effective in order to enhancing employment or lowering unemployment: part-time jobs and atypical forms of work can be cited here.

A second case can be made in relation to the peculiar position of the working woman, between work and family (see *Laborem exercens*, section 19). As a matter of fact, the considerable growth of part-time work in several countries has played the main function to allow women to cope jointly with work duties and family duties. Part-time work is not a panacea and presents some well-known inconveniences, but it is good to remember at least two facts: firstly, part-time work is not necessarily or usually a precarious form of work, contrary to a rather spread opinion, since it is normally ruled by collective agreements and labour laws; secondly, according to a recent survey in European countries, most part-timers have voluntarily chosen this form of work, which is generally considered by women as a

satisfying or rather satisfying way of working (European Foundation 2000).

A third point concerns rest, which is mentioned by *Laborem exercens* in relation to Sundays, annual holidays and pension schemes available to workers (section 19). The question implied here is primarily the one of the growth of leisure and free time in contemporary societies, as a counterpart of the reduction of working time: on principle, the development of free time, combined with mean extension of life in present industrialized countries, can be viewed as a factor of a richer daily life for contemporary actors. But it has to be observed that flexibility of working time and of ways of life is concerned as well: as a matter of fact, the development of atypical forms of working time and atypical jobs could provoke undesirable or unsatisfying outcomes on the part of the workers involved, which would work during unsocial temporal zones. Moreover, a generalization of temporal flexibilization of work might cause serious problems of synchronization between actors, and eventually a drastic fall of week-end and even of Sundays as common temporal zones free from work.

The last observation reminds us of the ambivalent role which can be played by working time in relation to the general issue of values. Sociology is not directly involved in the choice of values and in judgements concerning values; however, as a human and social science, it is quite sensible to the construction of social situations which embody and reflect some great values shared by contemporary actors and systems, such as autonomy, equality, and quality of life.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

J.-Y. Boulin, G. Cette, D. Taddéi (1992), "Le temps de travail, une mutation majeure. Introduction générale", *Futuribles*, 165-166: 718.

A. Corbin (1995), *L'avènement des loisirs 1850-1960*, Paris, Aubier.

Echange et Projets (1980), *La révolution du temps choisi*, Paris, A. Michel.

European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (2000), *Full-time or part-time work: realities and options* (by G. Gasparini, et al.), Dublin, European Foundation.

European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (2000a), *Self-employment: choice or necessity?* (by F. Hujgen, et al.), Dublin, European Foundation.

G. Gasparini (1982), "Laborem exercens: questioni aperte", *Il Progetto*, 2, 8: 54-58.

G. Gasparini (1986), *Il tempo e il lavoro*, Milano, F. Angeli.

G. Gasparini (1990), *Temps et travail en Occident*, in J. F. Chanlat (ed.), *L'individu dans*

l'organisation - Les dimensions oubliées, Montréal-Paris, Les Presses de l'Université-Laval - Eska: 199-214.

- G. Gasparini (1991), "Temporal flexibilization of work: some problems facing European trade unions", *The work flexibility review*, Tel-Aviv University, 2: 1-7.
- G. Gasparini (1994), *La dimensione sociale del tempo*, Milano, F. Angeli.
- G. Gasparini (1996), "Time, culture, and society: some problems and perspectives between 20th and 21st century", Paper presented at the Isida International Symposium, Palermo, May 22-24.
- A. Giddens (1990), *The consequences of modernity*, Cambridge, Polity Press.
- W. Grossin (1994), *Les temps de travail*, in M. De Coster, F. Pichault, *Traité de sociologie du travail*, Bruxelles, De Boeck: 127-144.
- C. Handy (1994), *The empty raincoat*, London, Hutchinson, Random House.
- R. A. Hart (1984), *Réduire le temps de travail*, Paris, Oede.
- John Paul II (1981), Encyclical *Laborem exercens*, Rome.
- John Paul II (1991), Encyclical *Centesimus annus*, Rome.
- M. Melbin (1987), *Night as frontier*, New York, The Free Press.
- J. Rifkin (1995), *The end of work*, New York.
- J. B. Schor (1991), *The overworked American*, New York, Basic Books.
- R. Sennett (1999), *L'uomo flessibile*, Milano, Feltrinelli (original edition New York 1998).
- D. Taddéi (1986), *Des machines et des hommes. Pour l'emploi, par une meilleure utilisation des équipements*, Paris, La Documentation française.
- F. W. Taylor (1903), *Shop management*, Saratoga N.Y., American Society of Mechanical Engineers.
- E. P. Thompson (1967), "Time, work- discipline, and industrial capitalism", *Past & Present*, 38: 56-97.
- W. Woytinski (1932), *Hours of labor*, in *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, London, Macmillan, vol.7: 478-493.