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Work, Life and Time in the New Economy

An introduction

Diane Perrons, Colette Fagan, Linda McDowell,
Kath Ray and Kevin Ward

Introduction

There is little agreement over what the ‘new economy’ is: its size, in financial and employment terms; its impact on the work men and women do inside and outside of the formal labour market; or its geographical implications. And yet despite this lack of conceptual and empirical clarity the term ‘new economy’ has found its way into all manner of publications, from government press releases, white papers and more populist journalistic accounts of contemporary Britain through to high social theory.

At the same time, and in the context of concerns about equal opportunities, the desire to retain highly qualified female employees and more generally to facilitate and raise female employment rates, interest in flexible working, work–life balance, and reconciling work and family life has grown among trade unions, corporations and government. These issues are related because the growing use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), as part of the emergence of the ‘new economy’, appears to be extending the temporal and spatial boundaries of paid work, allowing people to work more flexibly and so potentially reconcile paid work with other activities, including unpaid caring. And yet, ICTs are also conducive to more intense and longer working hours, with more critical interpretations of the ‘new economy’ linking it with precarious, fragmented and insecure working patterns, all of which could make it more difficult to effect work–life balance policies and realize equal opportunities. Moreover, changes in educational attainment levels, lifestyle choices and family formation, together with the changes in working arrangements, have

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created a different context within which women and men decide how to combine paid and care work.

The articles in this special section derive from the ESRC seminar series on 'Work, Life and Time in the New Economy'[1] that set out to explore some of these issues. This series was designed to bring together researchers from across the social sciences and those policy makers concerned with investigating the impact of contemporary economic and social changes on working patterns, on how people manage their daily lives and more generally on gender equality. The series has focused on three key issues. First, the changing character of work and whether the popular perceptions of increased intensity and insecurity are matched by the empirical evidence (Doogan, this issue; Green 2003). Second, the particular difficulties experienced by working parents and, more specifically, the variety of ways in which the increasing numbers of dual earning households divide their time between paid and unpaid work (Lewis et al., 2003). In this respect, particular attention is given to how dual and lone parent households manage to coordinate the diverse range of activities necessary for social reproduction given both the spatial mismatches between workplaces, homes, schools and nurseries, and the associated tensions between the different time schedules of these activities. These spatial and temporal coordination issues become more complex as the number of children in the household increases (Jarvis, this issue; Boulin, forthcoming). The third issue that the series has considered is the implications of these developments for promoting or impeding progress towards gender equality. Here we take a wider focus than that implied by a narrow 'sameness' model of equality through similar labour market roles for men and women to models that encompass 'difference' and a wider range of criteria for defining more equitable arrangements between the genders (see Fraser, 1997: 45–8).

By drawing critically on existing theories and detailed comparative empirical research based on quantitative and qualitative data, the authors of the articles in the series have investigated the extent to which working patterns have changed and the ways in which households manage the different aspects of their lives. This empirical research raises and addresses a number of pertinent questions: are the jobs in the 'new economy' more precarious than either those in the 'old economy' or under the period of Fordism? Does the new economy in practice provide a means of securing a better work–life balance? What are the implications of these changes for gender equity? The articles in this edition of *Time & Society* bring new empirical evidence and theoretical insights to the debates over the 'new economy', in the hope of advancing our existing understandings. In this spirit, this introduction reviews some of the concepts and issues at play in the debates and introduces the articles in this special section.

New Economy: an Introduction

At the turn of the millennium, academics in a range of disciplines, as well as the press, have taken to referring to the ‘new economy’. However, there is little by way of agreement over what is meant when this term is invoked. Orthodox economists use the term narrowly to refer to the mid to late 1990s boom, which fuelled and was fuelled by the growth of dot.com companies, but in contrast to the past, wage increases were only moderate, generating a unique period of inflation-free growth (Greenspan, 1998). With the slowdown in the rates of economic growth and the collapse of the dot.com boom this interpretation has rather been discredited (Peck, 2002). Less specifically, across the social sciences and in the popular press the term has been used as a signifier for a range of changes in the organization of everyday life, from new forms of work through to alternative political practices and lifestyle choices.

In the UK the term ‘new economy’ has apparently been dropped from New Labour speak, where previously it had been seen as one of ‘the biggest opportunities for women in the twenty-first century to earn more and have more flexible working practices’ (Women’s Unit, 2000: 2). The idea of a high-technology, knowledge-based ‘new economy’ remains, however, with writers such as Manuel Castells (2001) and Diane Coyle and Danny Quah (2002) emphasizing how ICTs have revolutionized the organization of business and commerce. Promotion of ‘knowledge’ work as crucial to the success of the British economy remains a central tenet of UK government policy, and to this end the government has urged private companies to recognize the business case for promoting work–life balance policies in order to make better use of the skills of women as well as men. To advance this business case the government has initiated research and an information campaign with employers, including awarding prizes to companies who ‘champion’ work–life balance (DTI, 2003a; 2003b).[2]

More pessimistic interpretations of the new economy, however, refer to growing risk and insecurity (Beck, 2000), falling fertility (Esping-Andersen, 1999; 2002), the fragmentation of communities (Sennett, 1998), and the erosion of traditional social rhythms and practices, as the boundaries around work dissolve, raising the intensity of work as people are never ‘off line’. It is argued that these changes in the existing social order stem from growing globalization, increasing competitiveness and the widespread adoption of the neo-liberal economic and social agenda. All of these changes in the conditions under which people live and labour make it more difficult to realize equal opportunities or family-friendly policies as people feel under pressure not to exercise their entitlements to breaks, time off, or holidays. For those on non-permanent contracts, the choice is often a more straightforward one, as they often have few, if any, entitlements to exercise.

Danny Quah (1996) analytically links the positive and negative dimensions of the new economy, and argues that its emergence is associated with widening social divisions. In his analysis some of the essential characteristics of the new economy, that arise from the economic properties of knowledge goods or ‘bitstrings’, that contribute to economic growth also increase economic inequality. A knowledge good is anything that can in principle be digitized and by implication people producing these goods can be referred to as knowledge workers. Thus pop and rock singers as well as architects, to the extent that their designs can be digitized, are knowledge workers as well as those working more directly with ICTs. Knowledge goods are infinitely expansible, that is they can be replicated at very low cost, and they are non-rival; thus one person’s consumption does not prevent another’s. These properties should tend to generate greater equality. However, as Quah (1996) explains, knowledge goods are also characterized by increasing economies of scale because although they can be replicated and thus have very low marginal costs, the cost of the first product, e.g. a new computer game can be very high. Thus large firms tend to dominate the market and having done so they create a range of related products locking consumers in to their particular brand. A further property is the superstar effect, which refers to consumers’ preferences for products of greater renown even though they may be barely distinguishable from competitors. Given their weightless nature there are few constraints on market size so these producers/workers capture an increasing share of the market. As knowledge goods and knowledge workers become more important in the economy therefore, social and spatial inequalities correspondingly increase. In practice, however ethnicity, sexual orientation, class and gender typically code work. Thus rather than being random, as Quah (1996) implies the predicted widening social divisions are likely to reinforce existing structural inequalities in the labour force. This tendency is exacerbated because one of the others areas of expansion in the new economy is care work which has opposite economic properties. In particular it is highly labour intensive with limited scope for productivity gains. Given the over-representation of women in paid care work of one type or another, which has also expanded in the new economy but is characterized by low pay, these divisions also take a gendered form. This perhaps help to explain why, despite the proliferation of work–life balance policies, gender inequality in the labour market continues.[3]

Work–Life Balance and Equalities Policies

In the UK the term ‘work–life balance’ (WLB) has begun to displace terms such as ‘family-friendly’ or ‘work–family reconciliation’. The use of WLB is argued to be an acknowledgement that people without families might also have interests that are incompatible with long and inflexible working hours (DTI, 2003a). 'Balance', however, need not imply that time and energy are split equally between paid work and care but is more of a recognition that individuals have different expectations and preferences for the ways in which they organize their total workloads. People continue to have different and changing ideas about the desirable mix of work and life and different resources with which to realize their aspirations.[4] Elsewhere in the European Union and the OECD reference is still made to reconciling work and family life (European Commission, 2000; OECD, 2002; 2003) and, in practice in the UK, the meaning of work–life balance generally relates to issues of care and the division of time between paid work and caring.

Following the Beijing Platform for Action, and Beijing Plus 5, strategies for gender equality and empowering women, including policies to reconcile work and family life have become widespread in international policy making. One of the Millennium Development Goals (Goal 3) is to promote gender equality and empower women (UNDP, 2002). Likewise the European Union has implemented a Framework Strategy for Gender Equality, which pays attention to five spheres including economic and social life, within which expanding women's employment rate and reconciling work and family life are key objectives (European Commission, 2000). Furthermore, the OECD (2002; 2003) has launched a series of reports, *Babies as Bosses*, which evaluate current practices for reconciling work and family life in a range of countries. The rationale for the analysis, however, is that while 'family friendly policies are a goal in themselves, because they can increase the living standards of parents and children, they will also allow aggregate labour supply and employment to be increased' (OECD, 2002: 5). Thus work–life or family-friendly policies are perhaps as much concerned with raising employment rates and securing higher levels of economic growth as they are about promoting gender equality. Indeed with an ageing population and a declining fertility rate it has become increasingly important for each adult to contribute to their own reproduction. Thus the male breadwinner model is now considered to be the 'Achilles' heel of the welfare state' (Esping Andersen, 1999: 70 see also Lewis, 2002) rather than the ideal family form and foundation for welfare state policies. In the UK raising the female employment rate, especially among lone parents, is also seen as a means of simultaneously reducing welfare expenditure and child poverty and increasing national competitiveness (DSS, 1999).

While the number of policies addressing gender equality has increased, especially in Europe, national governments across the western world have simultaneously endorsed a neo-liberal agenda for maintaining and enhancing productivity and competitiveness. This they have done through pursuing, to varying degrees, employment deregulation and labour market flexibility, which undermines both the willingness of companies to introduce work–life balance policies and employees' sense of entitlement to use such measures (see Brannen, this issue). So although there has been a spate of employment legislation, in addition to explicit work–life balance policies, such as the EU Directives in relation to Working Time (1998), Parental Leave (1999) and Part Time Working (2000), as well as further legislation to combat discrimination on the basis of race and sexual orientation, it has become more difficult to effect this legislation in practice. The exercise of entitlements by employees often depends as much on the immediate decisions of supervisors and line managers, who are often under pressure to meet efficiency targets, as on the formal policies. Furthermore, in the UK, people are currently allowed to opt out of the working time directive. However, even in France, where working time is restricted under the 35-hour-a-week legislation (introduced to combat unemployment), the impact on work–life balance has been uneven. Jeanne Fagnani and Marie Thérèse Letablier (2002) on the basis of a representative sample of working parents with at least one child under six years, found that although 60 percent stated that reduced working hours had made it easier to combine paid work and family life, the gender division of domestic labour and childcare had not changed, partly because the 35 hours can be averaged over the year, so people still work very long days, making meeting family obligations difficult.

At the same time as dampening the effects of European directives, the UK government has continued its policy of privatizing public sector services, through the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) and the formation of public–private partnerships, the effect of which has been to increase the number of private companies running formerly public sector services. As these are predominantly labour-intensive activities the alleged 'efficiency gains' often arise from a deterioration in the pay and conditions of employees. No longer directly employed by a single public employer, for example a local authority or a hospital trust, but by one of a number of competing agencies that supply particular services, employees find it more difficult to organize and improve the conditions under which they work. Furthermore, the fragmentation of public services tends to reduce the opportunities for career progression within a single firm (see Rubery, Ward, Grimshaw and Beynon, this issue). These circumstances increasingly individualize the organization of paid work, making it more difficult for people to manage social reproduction independently. In some organizations working hours have become more flexible but also longer and in both the public and the private sectors workloads may have been intensified in the move towards 'leaner workplaces'.

The long hours culture that pervades contemporary British society stems not just from changes in the organization of work, it can become an internalized drive: people can continue to work longer hours than they actually want or prefer and generate a form of 'constrained autonomy' especially in managerial and professional working-time arrangements. Indeed as Julia Brannen (this issue) argues: ‘as we seemingly take more control over our time, so time takes control of us’ and the more control we are given over ‘organizing our time in work seems to mean that we are spending longer and longer at work’.

Turning now more directly to the articles in this special edition and the first theme: whether jobs in the new economy are more or less secure than their predecessors. Kevin Doogan (this issue) and Francis Green (2003) question the work of many high-profile contemporary theorists (see, for example Beck, 1992; 2000; and Sennett, 1998) who contend that the organization of working life has profoundly changed in the 1990s. In particular, such theorists argued that work has become more precarious or insecure because of broader processes such as globalization, technological change, especially ICTs and the growing retreat from Keynesian ideologies and institutions. In contrast to what he refers to as these ‘ahistorical social theorists’, Doogan (this issue) provides statistical evidence to show that long-term employment, as one indicator of job security, has increased. Using data from the European Labour Force Survey for the period 1992–2000 for the EU 12, Doogan finds that although there are variations between countries and between sectors, long-term employment (people in their current position for ten years or more) has increased for both women and men. Similarly, Francis Green (2003) found a statistically significant decline in the proportion of workers experiencing high job insecurity in both the UK and US, although again there were variations between sectors and occupations, with insecurity increasing among white collar and professional workers.

While Green (2003) finds the general argument that the current era is characterised by increased job insecurity, independently of unemployment, ‘distinctly unconvincing’, Doogan (this issue) finds a high level of ‘manufactured uncertainty’. This, he argues, stems from, among other things, the marketization of public services, the weakening of social protection and the opening of national markets to global competition. Thus, while a significant proportion of women and men have long-term job stability, the new economy is nevertheless characterized by a perceived (if not actual) growing uncertainty. Further insight is provided by Burchell’s (2002) argument that job insecurity is more than the objective risk or actual event of job loss; it includes the subjective fear of both job loss and the loss of valued job features through organizational and occupational restructuring and work intensification. These aspects of job insecurity may be increasing in contemporary workplaces, and they are not revealed by measures of job tenure (Burchell, Lapido and Wilkinson, 2002).

Jill Rubery et al. (this issue) consider some of the implications of the marketization of the public sector and organizational restructuring more generally in the context of their analysis of working practices. In particular, they explore how a new temporality or model of working time has developed in the UK, which differs from those of the past and from the current model in continental Europe. In this 'new temporality' working patterns are increasingly employer-led, that is organized by firms to suit their own specific ways of working, rather than on the basis of the traditional Fordist '9 to 5' model. This move to an employer-led organization of working time is justified by reference to the need for firms to remain competitive in what are increasingly global product markets. Jill Rubery and colleagues (this issue) find that the new patterns of work require employees to work harder and longer and in ways that minimize labour costs. Their article is based on six case studies of firms with high levels of unionization, but they found that the unions had not been able to resist the erosion of the collective organization of working time. They suggest that the only recourse left to workers is to try to ensure more effective implementation of EU working-time legislation. This is in contrast to the current practice of the UK government in which it subscribes to minimum adherence.

Their article also discusses the role of time in the constitution of the employment relationship. It reveals how the apparently simple exchange between labour time and wages is complicated by the ways in which the boundaries around the length of the working day can be manipulated by firms and the ways in which the intensity of the work effort required by employees varies between different regulatory and institutional frameworks. This relationship between working time and reward structure also speaks to how people should be rewarded for periods of non-work time, for example periods of leave for family purposes. The greater the commodification of labour then the lower the amount of support offered during non-work time. New working patterns and individualized reward structures therefore potentially have adverse implications for work–life balance policies in practice.

Julia Brannen's article focuses on how specific workers have experienced growing time pressures. She focuses on the use and meaning of time, and, following Helga Nowotny (1994), refers to the idea of 'the extended present'. She argues that work intensification has made life increasingly complex and rushed. This intensification stems from the adopting of individual time management policies, through which people internalize new norms and expectations. Correspondingly, people are 'driven' to achieve ever more at work, becoming so pressured by managing their day-to-day work and life that they live in an 'extended present' rarely making plans for the future. Moreover, this day-to-day pressure also contributes to individualization, undermining collective social rhythms and making the undertaking of shared activities more difficult. These ideas are elaborated and illustrated by reference to a study that explored the changing experience of work and family life, both day-to-day and over the life-course of workers and managers in the financial sector.

Helen Jarvis builds upon the idea of time pressures and develops a framework drawing on time-geography to identify and to explain how spatial constraints combine with other material, institutional and moral structures to limit the choices made by households with different resources (see also Crang, 2003). In particular, she explores how households organize their division of labour and navigate the connections between home, work and childcare facilities. Through this framework she provides a holistic understanding of managing the work–life balance in contemporary Britain. Jarvis focuses particularly on the material world of the city and illustrates her argument through short vignettes from in-depth biographies with London working families to explore all aspects of life necessary for social reproduction, or what she terms the infrastructure of everyday life, and draws a series conclusions that speak to the wider time-squeeze debate (Gershuny, 2000).

Conclusions

There is no conclusive evidence about whether work in the 'new economy' has become more or less fragmented and insecure. The findings of studies using aggregate statistics cast doubt on the idea of increasing insecurity, while qualitative research which reports on a number of interrelated workplace concerns, such as work intensification, longer hours, stress, pressure as well as job insecurity, suggests that the experience of work for most people has changed. While these differing results illustrate the influence of research methods on research findings, they perhaps also reflect a growing polarization in the workforce between people with regular and secure jobs and others with more precarious arrangements. If one also considers people with secure jobs but who are affected by changes in the wider economic and political environment, such as public sector workers who are transferred into the private sector under a PFI scheme, then the already complicated picture becomes even harder to explain. This complicated and perhaps contradictory set of findings reflects the difficulty of capturing statistically the complexity of contemporary changes. It highlights how all methods are partial in what they can reveal about the changing conditions under which we work.

Work–life balance policies are said to empower women and redress gender inequality but despite changes in occupational structures, the nature of work, and the expansion in the employment rate of women, inequalities between women and men within paid work and in the home remain. We hope that these articles shed some light on this apparent paradox and will contribute to the formulation of policies that recognize the complexities of everyday life in the 'new economy'. In particular there is an important distinction between *de jure* and de facto entitlements to work–life balance policies or between what organizations claim to provide (the policy outlined in annual reports and glossy HR documents) and actual provision (the policy as practised on a day-to-day and week-to-week basis). The implementation of government or firm policy often takes place at the departmental or sectional level, so decisions may depend on the attitudes and actions of line managers. They are likely to be highly variable, a function of the state of a manager's relationship with an employee. This often makes policies favours rather than rights, reducing an employee's sense of entitlement (see Lewis and Lewis, 1996; Crompton and Brockmann, 2003). Individuals' sense of entitlement and their ability to use what policy options are on offer also depends on what colleagues think of their behaviour. The take-up of maternity leave or holiday entitlement might be lower in those cases where workers believe that as a result of their action they will have a heavier workload on their return or that their career will suffer in the long term.

The dominant policy focus in the EU and the UK is on economic citizenship and independence through employment – increasing women's participation in paid work as a route to their autonomy and gender equality, i.e. the 'adult worker' model (Fraser, 1997; Lewis, 2002). Currently it seems as though social policy has run ahead of demands for equal representation at work by insisting on the latter while not putting the infrastructure in place to make it possible. This is a long way from the reality for women whose caring responsibilities lead them disproportionately into part-time employment, which is frequently low paid and offers little by way of long-term career prospects. Moreover, even when employed full time, continuing employment segregation and the lower pay associated with jobs in which women are over-represented, especially care work, mean that many women fail to earn a living wage. Thus, the movement towards the adult worker model could also increase the polarization between those women who maintain full time professional jobs and those who take up the caring work. Moreover, the 'adult worker' model rests on the commodification of time and care work (rational economic accounting and pricing of time-use, cost-benefit analysis, market substitutes for domestic provision) that undervalue the moral commitment many parents have to caring for their dependants. Talk of work–life balance and the 'ethics of care' are, therefore, countered by discourses of productivity, flexibility and competitiveness. Despite the UK government's best efforts to argue that increased economic productivity and performance and successful work–life balance policies are both possible (DTI, 2003a; 2003b), it is not clear just how far care work can be commodified when a large part of it is 'being there' nor to what extent it is even desirable to commodify care work.

Given the diversity of ways in which individuals and households combine the range of socially reproductive activities, it is important to examine how people speak about their work–life patterns (Glucksmann, 2000). As well as diverse strategies, the complexity, ambiguities, range of options and multiple connections between different parts of life need to be acknowledged. It is not enough for policy to continue to be built upon a simple binary distinction between 'work' and 'life'. Work is a shifting category: an activity coming under 'work' at one stage of a person's life might be part of non-work activities at some point in the future.

To conclude, we make three rather pessimistic points. First, that the potential of the technological and associated changes bound up in the emergence of the 'new economy' seem to be being developed to raise the intensity, duration and participation in paid work: this is an opportunity missed. Second, that the widespread concern with managing work–life balance, reconciling work and family life and formal strategies for gender mainstreaming owes as much to raising the female employment rate as a means to increasing competitiveness and economic growth as it does to addressing more moral and just questions of gender equity. Third, that it is likely that social and gender divisions will continue to widen until the value of care work is socially recognized and rewarded. It is important that those of us working in this area don't simply accept the current priorities and value systems embedded in contemporary neo-liberal society. Rather, we should push for the recognition of the moral and ethical value of caring activities and a set of adequate rewards for those carrying out these tasks.

Notes

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1. For further information about this seminar series see http://lse.ac.uk/worklife.
2. Interestingly, the authors of the OECD (2002) report are sceptical about the efficacy of such measures.
3. See Nolan and Slater (2002) for a discussion of occupational change and Goos and Manning (2003) for a discussion of the polarization between 'lovely and lousy' jobs in the UK. For a more detailed exposition of the processes leading to social and gendered divisions in the new economy and an explanation for the apparent paradox between the proliferation of policies to promote gender equality on the one hand and the continuing reproduction of gender inequality on the other see Perrons (2003).
4. The seminar series does not directly engage with the choice re-constraint debate, prevalent in sociology (see for example the recent exchange between McRae (2003) and Hakim (2003)) but rather on ideas about how the new economy, in its varied interpretations, has had contradictory effects for the organization of work and how people have responded to the potential and constraints in different ways in their daily lives.

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