
BOOK REVIEWS

Harriet Presser. (2003). *Working in a 24/7 Economy: Challenges for American Families*
New York: Russell Sage Foundation 2003. 267 pages.

In his 1944 book *The Great Transformation*, Karl Polanyi argued that the consequences of unregulated market forces were fundamentally disruptive to the social fabric of societies. Although not framed within Polanyi's conceptual analysis, Harriet Presser's well researched book underscores his basic point that the social costs of markets can - and often do - outweigh their more narrow economic benefits.

Working in a 24/7 Economy is a detailed statistical analysis of the sea change in working time that has occurred in recent decades. Using data from the recent U.S. Government Current Population Survey (CPS) census surveys, she analyzes the extent to which the standard work day/work week has broken down, resulting in more and more working people being employed during non-standard hours and/or non-standard work weeks. By non-standard hours, she means working the majority of hours outside the traditional 8:00 am to 5:00 pm working day. By non-standard work schedules, she means weekends. The categories are not exclusive. Some workers are employed during the evening or night shifts and on weekends as well.

Presser, who actually coined the term "24/7 economy" in her earlier research, examines the characteristics of those who work outside standard work schedules. They are overwhelmingly found in the service sector, as we might expect. But, interestingly, given the emergence of global industries operating on a 24 hour basis around the world, the majority of workers in non-standard work perform functions that are embedded in the local service sector. The ten largest occupational groups by size are: cashiers, truck drivers, sales workers, waiters, cooks, cleaners, supervisors in sales, registered nurses, hospitality managers and nursing aides.

While non-standard work is more prevalent in the service sector, its extent varies significantly within different areas of the service sector. Presser groups industries into six major categories: extractive, transformative, distributive services, producer services, social services and personal services. (The four latter categories fall under the general heading of the services sector.) Over 35% of workers employed in personal services work non-standard hours compared with 24% in distributive services, 17% in social services and 12% in producer services. Fully 60% of personal service employees work weekends,

compared with 44% in distributive services, 24% in social services and 23% in producer services. Far from being an anomaly, non-standard work is now an integral part of the economy.

Given that working non-standard hours is generally less desirable, economic theory would suggest that employers should pay a premium to command the labour of these workers. Not so. Shift premiums and weekend premiums, when they exist at all, are tiny. On average, employees working non-standard hours or shifts are paid approximately 10% less than their standard hour/week counterparts. Only workers in unionized service areas such health care and education show the opposite pattern.

A high proportion of those working non-standard hours or weekends are unmarried individuals or women with a pre-school child. Moreover, Presser has found that the "[...] most disadvantaged segments of the US population, socially as well as economically are those most likely to work nonstandard schedules[...]."

This raises the question of why people accept non-standard schedules. Although there are some who do so because they prefer such work, for others working nights or weekends is a necessity. This is because such jobs are the only ones they can obtain or because the only way they can care for their children (in the absence of universal quality child care) is for parents to work different shifts.

In addition to identifying, statistically, the characteristics of those who work non-standard schedules, Presser examines the impact of such schedules on family relationships, divorce and child care patterns. While the pattern is complex, certain types of non-standard schedules, when combined with the characteristics of the family concerned can result in significant disruption to relationships. For example, men with children who had been married less than five years were more than six times more likely to separate or divorce, if they worked night shifts, compared to those working day shifts. Women with children working nights were more than three times more likely to separate or divorce. Women working rotating shifts were twice as likely to separate or divorce, but men working similar shifts showed no difference compared with their standard shift counterparts.

In terms of child care, non-standard working patterns result in significant challenges for one or both parents - challenges that society has largely ignored. A significant number of women with young children end up relying on relatives to bridge the gap in child care coverage. But this is often unsatisfactory because the relatives themselves may have jobs and other responsibilities that conflict with child care. Moreover, where couples arrange child care by working different shifts, so that one is always home with the child/children, this too creates problems due to the challenge of providing child care during a period when the parent needs to sleep. Single mothers who have no choice but to work rotating shifts or weekend shifts also face significant challenges in providing child care.

The preceding discussion merely samples some of the extensive data - literally dozens of tables on a wide variety of important issues - provided in this book. Presser has provided new and important research on the situation of large numbers of workers and their families in an economy that increasingly demands evening, night and weekend work - an economy that disproportionately imposes its disruptive consequences on women, the low paid, the less well-educated and minorities. As she notes "[w]ith one-fifth of all employed Americans working non-day, variable or rotating shifts and one-third working weekends, it is clear that "non-standard" work schedules are no longer that nonstandard."

Given that this emerging employment pattern is clearly not what many people desire, but rather what they are forced to accept, in light of the limited choices they have in the labour market, the social implications of the 24/7 economy are both profound and, arguably, extremely worrisome. This is especially true given the lack of public debate and the absence of public policy proposals to address its challenges.

Polanyi was right: the unregulated market results in social consequences that ordinary working people find oppressive. Presser's book outlines the dimensions of one important area confirming his analysis. And while the data is primarily US based, the analysis is clearly relevant north of the 49th parallel. This is an important book and one that should be read by everyone interested in the question of how our changing economy is restructuring the lives of a large part of the workforce and their families.

John Calvert
Adjunct Professor,
Department of Political Science,
Simon Fraser University,
British Columbia, Canada