

## **SOCIAL POLICY AND TIME**

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### **Abstract**

Time is crucial to the implementation, operation and effectiveness of social policies, yet the subject has often treated the meaning of time as theoretically unproblematic. It focuses more upon what policies do and less upon the contexts within which the practices and assumptions of social actors are embedded. The article offers a more sophisticated theoretical account of time upon which is based an exploration of the main temporal features of welfare capitalism. It then goes on to examine three recent and prominent research projects in order to show how and why they fail to incorporate a convincing social theory of time.

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## Introduction

This article is a response to some recent developments in social policy research that have dealt with the theme of time. Time is crucial to the implementation, operation and effectiveness of social policies, yet the subject has often treated the meaning of time as theoretically unproblematic. For instance, when Marshall (Marshall & Bottomore, 1992) laid out his famous chronology of citizenship he felt no need to question whether the development of rights was in any way related to changing conceptions and perceptions of time. This tendency is also visible in some recent, highly influential research.

So this article is motivated by a suspicion that the subject is still not getting to grips with social theories of time (Adam, 1990, 1995). It focuses more upon what policies do and less upon the contexts within which the practices and assumptions of social actors are embedded. The purpose of the article is to outline a theoretical approach to time that is relevant to the discipline of social policy. Once armed with this approach the article then proceeds to explore the main temporal features of welfare capitalism and to suggest why a radical politics is appropriate as a response to them. It then analyses three prominent research projects (*Time and Poverty in Western Welfare States* by Lutz Leisering and Stephan Leibfried, *Changing Times* by Jonathan Gershuny and *The Real Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* by Robert Goodin et al.) in order to show that they internalise those features, so offering only qualified support for a politically radical agenda. The aim of the article is to suggest that a more theoretically sophisticated approach to time can reinforce support for a radical politics that works against the temporal grain of welfare capitalism.

## **The Right to Meaningful Time**

Let me begin by making a bold assertion. Along with the rights to life, liberty, security, well-being, recognition and respect, free speech, free association, legal representation and political participation, the right to meaningful time is a basic human right. To include time in the lexicon of fundamental principles is not unprecedented. For instance, Rawls (1993: 181-2) was persuaded to include leisure as one of the primary goods of a well-ordered society. The implication is that a society's claim to be free is diminished whenever time is not at or near the top of its list of priorities, for without adequate temporal space to act, interact, speak and think all of the other rights listed above are correspondingly weakened. Yet just as the intellectual content and practical implications of those other rights requires unpacking, so does that of time. Does this right imply nothing more than the minimal time to restore the labour needed for social reproduction, or does it imply lots of time to enjoy only the minimal benefits left by an absence of labour and productive effort? In short, like any right the right to time is immediately problematic and contestable. Confronting this simple fact is why I have referred not to time but the right to *meaningful* time as a means of identifying where the political controversies and debates actually rage. Does time possess whatever meaning the individual experiencing that time chooses to confer upon it, or does time possess social meanings that, in various ways, shape the range of meanings that can be conferred by individuals in the first place?

To illustrate why meaningfulness is important let us look more closely at Rawls. Rawls (1993: 15-22; 2001: 61-79) affirms that the difference principle is a principle of reciprocity such that distribution is dependent upon people contributing to the good

of others. Rawls (2001: 179) uses the example of a person who chooses to surf all day and so does not share the “burdens of social life”. Is this person one of the ‘least advantaged’? Rawls claims not. For if we include 16 hours of daily leisure time within the index of primary goods then the surfer gains an extra 8 hours of leisure per day compared to those who work a standard day. As the surfer has chosen 8 hours of leisure rather than the equivalent income from a standard working day then he cannot claim membership of the least advantaged and must support himself. Now, Rawls’s formulation can be challenged on a number of grounds (van Parijs, 1995: 92-102), one of which is that, without justification, Rawls is treating existing work standards as *the* source of social value and obligation. If the figure were reduced to 7 or 5 or 3 hours, or whatever, then the case against the surfer looks less certain.

However, my point is not to adjudicate here upon Rawls’s conclusion but to observe that we cannot avoid such difficult decisions when debating time. Should our criteria reflect existing social assumptions or those that would prevail in an alternative social order? Since basing ourselves solely upon existing assumptions risks injecting existing social injustices into our theoretical discussion I propose that we cannot avoid the kind of normative debate that, here at least, Rawls sets to one side. Therefore, the meaningfulness of time is crucial as are the social determinants of meaning. For example, the meaning and duration of leisure time will vary depending upon the social and cultural resources to which people have access: those who are comfortably affluent will experience leisure as something different to those who are deprived. The meaningfulness of time is therefore dependent not only upon what individuals choose but upon the social contexts within which choice occurs, and so not only upon the *existing* social contexts but also upon what they *might become* in an alternative social reality. This does not imply that individuals are the passive bearers of social meaning,

but it does draw attention, in good sociological fashion, to the social and structural processes that both enable and constrain individual decisions. As such, a ‘social’ perspective can more easily encompass an ‘individual’ perspective than an individual perspective can encompass a social one.

So my intention is to develop a set of temporal categories that allow us to distinguish between two different forms of politics (those that are broadly satisfied with existing capitalist society and those that are broadly dissatisfied) and so to understand what is really at stake when we apply the concept of time to contemporary social policy debates.

### **Absolute vs. Relational Time**

The categories of time I am going to use derive from Harvey’s (1973: 13-14) well known categories of space.<sup>1</sup> According to Harvey, there is an *absolute* or Newtonian space that exists independently of matter: space as a neutral container of that which it bounds. There is the *relative* space of the relationship between objects: a space with is partly object-dependent. And there is *relational* space within which space and objects are far less distinguishable as each is the condition for the other: space is always ‘objectified’ and objects are always ‘spatialised’. Now, if space can be categorised in this way then so, presumably, can time.

Absolute time can be understood in terms of the following characteristics. Firstly, it is quantitative, or divisible into basic units by which it can be measured. The fact that conceptions of these temporal atoms have developed over history does not necessarily suggest that even absolute time is a construction (Ermarth, 1998; Loy, 2001; cf.

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Adam, 1998) merely that scientific approximations are themselves historically paradigmatic. Secondly, absolute time is linear in that it follows a diachronic, unidimensional ascension whereby each unit must be in place before the next unit can follow. What linearity disallows are either gaps in the sequence or tangential loops that open up arboreal dimensions. Finally, absolute time is one-way and irreversible in that it cannot coil back on itself. Like absolute space, then, absolute time exists independently of those who are bound within it and would continue to exist in their absence, i.e. its quantitative, linear and irreversible properties are subjectless, meaning that it would be measurable even if there was no-one here to measure it. Absolute time is physical time.

What of relative time? Firstly, relative time is qualitative since here the position of the subject (the observer, actor, experiencer) begins to matter. What is known is now in some way dependent upon the episteme, the knower. So whereas absolute time resembles a sequence of particles, relative time is wavelike and irreducible to constituent parts. Secondly, therefore, the non-atomic nature of relative time means that it is rhythmic and multiple, crossing over and doubling back upon itself without a pattern that is finally determinate. The flows of perception, reflection, apperception and memory do not follow a linear logic, as Proust and Joyce once illustrated. Thirdly, relative time is interactive and performative as it is shaped by the objects and subjects that move within it. Relative time therefore eschews maps and mapping. As an embodied, intersubjective time its specific permutations multiply and evade all but the most general categorisations.

Finally, relational time can also be described in terms of some key properties. Firstly, because relational time goes further than relative time in collapsing the distinction between knower and known, it is conflictual. Here, there are no time-less

objects or object-less times. So the meaning of relational time is never completely fixed but is always destabilised because potentially subject to further struggle and contestation. Whereas with absolute time we can achieve a scientific distance, an outside looking in, with relational time there is no outside to which we can ascend: time is neither an object of study nor a medium of interaction, but society's coming to consciousness of itself. Yet, secondly, relational time is also structural because the conflicts that occur are not random and anarchic. The mental and emotional rhythms of relative time do not simply follow individual streams but the collective tributaries into and out of which those streams flow. It is this collective space that I describe as relational. So conflict runs through this collective space and so across the gradients of power and domination, the effects of individual streams running in different directions. Meaningful time is therefore a positional good, a mobile site of conflict as society 'makes itself' through the endless reconfiguration of who possesses the most control over the meaning and distribution of time. The lack of an outside means that the struggle between power and powerlessness does not follow a unitary logic, nor is the struggle guaranteed to produce a satisfactory result. Relational time is therefore political or social time, involving struggles over collective perceptions, memories and modes of reflection and self-description.

What all of this implies is that human being is distributed across three dimensions of time: we age in absolute or physical time, we live through relative or embodied time, we are relational or social time.

According to Harvey (1996), a radical politics must be rooted in the relational concept since only this expresses the collective power which objects (or, rather, actors and selves) have to shape the environment out of which they are shaped, i.e. to shape themselves through particular forms of spatial interaction. Relational space is social



because it is malleable. Therefore, we should not confuse absolute and relational spaces: to interpret social space in absolutist terms (as a container that we cannot shape) would be as facile as treating absolute space as social. And yet the trick of filling the social with absolutist contents is precisely the trick that is performed daily under capitalism, since the free desire to adapt to economic laws that are represented as immutable and universal is the engine of capitalist society.

And just as, if we follow Harvey's lead, a radical politics must be rooted in the relational space so it must also be rooted in the concept of relational time, i.e. in the struggles over the social meanings that are conferred upon time. For, as just indicated, the powerful defend themselves – the alleged naturalness and inevitability of their position – by filling social time with absolutist properties. If social time is a place where struggles over meaning occur then the powerful have an interest in representing the social as obeying law-like regularities that cannot be overturned without violating that which is natural and just. The social is therefore colonised by positivist logics that empty the social of social characteristics: the de-socialisation of society, the reification of collective action. Take capitalism, for instance, whose positivism consists of the economic dominance of civil society and the identification of humanity with *homo economicus*. What are properties by which capitalism empties the social of itself?

(Now, this is not to claim that power has to be understood, first and foremost, in terms of class and material goods since there are obviously multiple axes of privilege and control and it is difficult (reductivist, some allege) to single out one axis as the most real or the most determinate. However, although there is nothing 'necessary' about capitalism (modernity could have developed in alternative ways) and although it does not encompass each and every aspect of contemporary domination, capitalist

patterns of ownership and exchange form a major intersection linking together multiple axes of power; not one to which they can be 'reduced' but certainly one that channels and routes adjacent types of domination. In other words, the fact that capitalism is 'historical' and contingent does not make it redundant as a means of understanding justice and injustice. For radical politics, the reform of capitalist systems of production, exchange and consumption is the *sine qua non* of just relations.)

First, capitalism embodies a Newtonian conception of time (cf. Postone, 1993: 200-16). Newtonian time is distance-insensitive, that is, as 'external' to the events and meaning-creating selves which populate it. So, the subjectivities that inhabit time are thought to be temporally transparent to one another and the time of, say, the Nineteenth Century Aborigine is taken to be the same as the time of the Twenty-First Century American. Thus, Newtonian time is the philosophy of modernity, the homogenisation and secularisation of the temporal fragments that characterised the medieval. With the adoption of the Gregorian calendar and Greenwich meantime, the spread of Christianity and capitalism throughout the imperial era, and the mechanisation of time, modernity constructs across the world the universality that it takes itself to be reflecting. Consequently, other times – non-Western and pre-modern – become silenced through a form of temporal imperialism. Distance-insensitivity and silencing are the means through which the social is elided.

The time of capitalism is also commodified (Wilson, 1999). The extent to which modern societies have abstracted themselves from natural or seasonal time is well documented; this does not mean that the natural and the social have become *detached*, merely that the social reads the natural as an externalised reflection of itself (Elias, 1992). With the growth of urbanisation, industrialisation and scientific materialism,

natural time steadily declined as an organising principle in human affairs. The culmination of the process is often identified in the advent of a globalised information age which is said to be 'timeless' and 'borderless' (Castells, 1996). As the quantification and measurement of time has become more precise so we have become less the agents who embody time and more the subjects that commodified time embodies. Therefore, time becomes configured with commodity values, e.g. the reified injunction to *use time productively* so that it is not *wasted*. And as units of time shrink the pace of their passing seems to accelerate, leading to a premature decrepitude as our consciousness of time becomes senile, speeding beyond our capacity to assimilate the everyday.

The third characteristic is 'shallow time', denoting the atomistic, short-termism of Western political economies. A recent example of capitalism's inability to deal adequately with the long term is suggested by the conflicts in and around the environment. The most persuasive attempt to reconcile the short-termism of capitalist economies with the long-termism of environmental imperatives is to be found in the discourse of 'sustainable development' and 'ecological modernisation' since, here, the aim is to propose that regulative coordination, new financial incentives and technological innovation can square the circle of infinite demands and finite nature. However, whatever the good intentions of this political discourse it has done little so far to stem the dominance of profit-related criteria over other social considerations (Fitzpatrick & Cahill, 2002: Ch.1), as the controversies surrounding genetically modified foods, biodiversity and the corporate invasion of the genome indicate (Rifkin, 1998; Shiva, 2000). So here, too, the properties of absolutism (particularly the attempt to quantify nature according to financial criteria) are held to overwhelm other criteria.

Now, this is an admittedly hurried sketch of capitalism's temporal qualities – the means by which it de-socialises the social – because our concern in this article is with *welfare* capitalism and the implications for social policy. Welfare capitalism denotes the stage of capitalist development that came to characterise developed societies in the twentieth century and which left its highwater mark in the years from 1945-50 to 1980-90. It can be summarised as follows. Firstly, the state collectivisation of the means of distribution so that goods and resources can be distributed more equitably while still leaving capital largely in private hands. Secondly, some degree of nationalisation, especially of natural monopolies and key industries, as a means of economic planning and a nominal form of social ownership. Thirdly, the socialisation of national space through the construction of welfare institutions and services that express a commonality of fate. Fourthly, an equilibrium between capital and labour maintained through paternalist systems of regulation and social categories of citizenship rights. Finally, the redistribution of income and wealth through the equalisation of returns from GDP growth. In short, welfare capitalism left most of the systems of capitalism intact while steering them towards more universalist, collectivist and equitable goals that earlier stages of capitalism had neglected. How, then, do the qualities just sketched manifest themselves under the aegis of welfare capitalism?<sup>2</sup>

### **Welfare Capitalism and Radical Politics**

Welfare capitalism simultaneously empowers and disempowers. It empowers for the reasons noted above, i.e. that it pursues goals which earlier forms of capitalism had

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largely neglected. Yet people are empowered narrowly, only as welfare clients, as the recipients of bureaucratic expertise who have little direct control over the production of well-being and the control of services. Therefore, lurking within the welfare state's motto of security from cradle to grave is a Newtonian logic in which time is externalised or made separate from those who experience it, a logic by which in order to be empowered people must follow a life-course that runs according to pre-determined boundaries which are administered and surveilled by a distant, impersonal state apparatus (Rose, 1999; Dean, 2002). To be secure welfare clients must make themselves available to the administrative gaze through forms of discipline, classification and categorisation which ensures that during periods of dependency (youth and old age, illness and unemployment) services are delivered as efficiently as possible and in ways that will – whenever possible – quickly reinsert the client into the condition of independence.

So the Newtonian logic is that which orders security around the dichotomy of dependency and independence, a dichotomy that reflects profit-making criteria (Fraser, 1997: 121-50): dependence upon the state is bad because it is costly; dependence upon the labour market is good because the main costs are non-financial and so can be hidden, individualised and medicalised; dependence upon the family is acceptable so long as it is upon unpaid labour (usually of women). Newtonianism under the conditions of welfare capitalism is therefore the homogenisation and standardisation of the life-cycle around the categorical hierarchy of independence and dependency; and this standard life-cycle is held to be an inevitable expression of physical time rather than a particular and potentially revocable means of organising society.

So we can already see how welfare capitalism bears the marks of commodified time also. Commodification implies not only that which is quantifiable but that which has been quantified, a measurability that has been naturalised to the point where it is hardly recognised as artificial anymore. Therefore, commodification implies the breaking down of time into constituent units that are then filled with economic value; or, more strictly, it means that economic units are represented as the perfect articulation of temporal value. And once time has been ‘Taylorised’ in this way then exchange-value is able to dominate. Marx was perhaps the first to recognise how struggles within capitalism are also conflicts over the use, meaning and control of time. Commodified time is stratified time. Having abstracted it from nature industrial capitalism subordinates time to the rhythms of the labour market (Thompson, 1991: 352-403). Compulsion is required if the working day is to be longer than that required for subsistence; increases in productivity are required because there are physical limits to the working day’s length.

And this is where welfare capitalism enters the picture. For whereas earlier forms of moral and physical compulsion could suffice for a while, with the growth of organised labour and the maturation of liberal democracy other, more subtle forms of compulsion develop. Therefore, welfare capitalism can also be thought of as a mode of compulsion that is based upon ‘more eligibility’ (stressing the gains to be made from compliance) as well as ‘less eligibility’ (or the losses to be made from non-compliance) – so the latter by no means disappears. This can be seen clearly in the case of benefit systems where disincentives and incentives, penalties and rewards, are simultaneously inscribed within the ‘contract’ between client and state (Jones & Novak, 1999). The income levels that separate the compliant from the non-compliant stretch out even as the rhetoric of social citizenship has never escaped a punitiveness

that embraces all those outside and on the margins of the formal economy. To waste time is to disobey the injunctions that are at the heart of the welfare contract.

Welfare capitalism also reproduces the contradiction to which productivism (the meta-ideology which treats productivity as an end-in-itself) leads. For while productivity reduces the amount of necessary labour time (and so enables the average working week to shorten) it also establishes labour time as the primary source and measurement of wealth. The superfluous labour time which is thereby created in order to elide this contradiction is a site of both subordination and emancipation: subordination, because workers must feel the compulsion to work unnecessarily as a free choice (to acquire, to compete, to consume); emancipation, because it facilitates the potential recognition that free time (time available for self-organising, non-profit making activities) is inequitably distributed (Marx, 1973: 398-401). Welfare capitalism therefore satisfies material needs with some degree of success while helping to divert the non-material towards activities that, even in their non-materiality, remain acquisitive and competitive. In the education system, for instance, it seems that the more affluent we become the greater the need to saturate primary, secondary and tertiary institutions with entrepreneurial values, perpetual tests and exams, audits and inspections, transferable skills and the endless chase for positional advantage (qualifications). Therefore, an education system that might serve other, non-commodified purposes becomes less rather than more likely as the drive for affluence can no longer depend upon overcoming material deprivation and has to appeal to consumerist principles for its legitimacy.

Finally, welfare capitalism has inherited the shallowness of its predecessors. As I have argued elsewhere (Fitzpatrick, 2001a, 2001b) it has certainly embodied some notion of temporal continuity through social insurance (the collectivisation of risks

across populations and generations) and intergenerational contracts (where those of working age are expected to care for the economically vulnerable of both the immediate past and future generations). Yet by reflecting the hierarchies and imperatives of capitalist labour markets, even effective social insurance systems exemplify individualistic forms of collective provision and therefore represent only imperfect forms of social and temporal interdependency. With the measure of individual worth lying in the demonstration that you give more to the economy than you take, and with social policy usually being subordinate to economic policy, then the conceptions of worth and of economic contribution have been correspondingly narrow. With pensions, for example, even those countries with generous systems have had to combine generous replacement ratios (the ratio of employment to non-employment income) with earnings-related schemes that reflect – albeit with some redistributive efficacy – the inequalities of labour market participation (Bonoli, 2000). The idea that pensions might be used for more socially progressive ends (Blackburn, 2002) has rarely been an item for widespread public discussion.

So the welfare state's intergenerational contract has extended, at best, no more than 40 or 50 years into the future, contributing to ecologically destructive forms of growth and failing to resolve profounder intergenerational conflicts. Fitzpatrick (2001a, 2001b) calls for a theory of intergenerational justice as a way of extending the subject's time horizon.

Therefore, we can see how the specific manifestations of Newtonianism, commodification and shallowness link the era of welfare capitalism to capitalism *per se* and so to capitalism's occupation of the social with absolute time. De-socialisation therefore consists of the subtle replacement of social meaning with economic meaning, a replacement that is passed off as natural and inevitable and not something



that serves particular interests. So freedom becomes indistinguishable from, but barely identifiable as, capitalist freedom, as a willing submission to the economic laws of private exchange, as agents actively accepting their relative passivity. Social time revolves around market imperatives that are made to resemble physical absolutes.

By contrast a radical politics firstly involves a refusal of this equation, an equation between the physical universe and the 'physical market'. It opens up the possibility of struggle and so the possibility of developing future alternatives to present realities, of reinserting the social (collective control over our common fate) back into the human timeline. By reactivating memories of social difference it can impel a reaction against the claim that 'there is no alternative', that our futures must replicate the present. It suggests that time does not simply mean whatever individuals want it to mean because the meanings each of us assign are dependent upon the meanings assigned by others and so upon the structures, conventions and institutions that constitute a mode of perception and reflection. For just as freedom for the pike is death to the minnow, so meaning emerges out of interdependent relations of domination. Radical politics is therefore that which recognises the sociality of meaning (and freedom), challenges relations of privilege and domination and develops alternative modes of collective perception and reflection. It is therefore relational because it is concerned with conflict from the inside out, with the inescapability of conflict and with de-reifying the gradients of power.

The politics of radicalism as I describe it here may still appear unfamiliar. This is because traditional radicalism has not so much attempted to reverse the de-socialisation of the social as pack the social with an alternative set of absolute properties. The communist experiment, for instance, did not oppose the idea of

submission to law-like regularities but merely submission to the particular laws of the *capitalist* economy. Therefore, communist historicism was depressingly similar to capitalist historicism: a teleological evolution towards a pre-determined end. As such, radical politics has to be ever vigilant against the possibility of ossification, of fossilizing into another set of absolutist prescriptions. To ignore this is to ignore the point made earlier about the social having no outside, no God's eye view from which the social can be captured in its entirety. Therefore, while radical politics must attempt to shape social time according to particular values and goals it must always aim to fall short of any lingering utopian impulses (Fitzpatrick, 2001c: 198-9). This is why, although they may share dissatisfaction with present society, left radicalism is different from that of the far Right since the latter involves the promotion of racial and biological laws which represent another hollowing out of the social. Therefore, the radical politics described here is still a fairly recent entrant onto the political stage, one dating from the 1970s.

However, so far as time is concerned radicalism most often appears in terms of individual acts of rebellion and reclamation. Two examples.

Snider (2001) argues that although the idea of 'time theft' is rooted in the nineteenth century, it has in recent years been subject to more subtle forms of criminalisation. The practice of making time for oneself that diverges in slight but nevertheless important ways from the time schedules of employers takes a number of forms: extended lunch and tea breaks, periodic pauses for conversation, non-work related phone calls, email exchanges and Internet surfing, and what Ehrenreich (2001) describes as the attempt to look busy in order to avoid being assigned further tasks to perform. Unsurprisingly, time theft is usually represented as a crime committed by employees against employers in an economic culture where time is money. Yet as the

screw of workplace surveillance and criminalisation tightens (Green, 2001), so it may become easier to turn the concept of time theft back upon employers and upon the wider economic system: as time theft becomes a legal category so it offers a lever of counter-hegemonisation through alternative forms of legal challenge. This might mean objecting not only to the daily Taylorisation of time but also to a system where time theft ultimately consists of the difference between what the average working week currently *is* and what it *could be* if our societies were not so heavily organised around the imperatives of consumption and private profit (Schor, 1998a). So, individual resistance can potentially be mobilised as a political radicalism where the aim of liberating time consists of the attempt to reconnect embodied time with the collective control of temporal resources, to rescue relative and social times from absolutism.

The second example leads us to the domestic sphere and the way in which the home's temporal relations are structured by the gendered interaction between public and private (Breedveld, 1998; Turner & Grieco, 2000; Davies, 2001), i.e. the way in which caregiving is still largely the provenance of women. To some extent, women possess control over domestic time in the same way that they possess control over household finances: in the form of responsibility rather than direct control, where control often remains either in the hands of the male partner or the patriarchal state. This suggests an ambivalence, where women can enjoy some degree of time-sovereignty but only within socially prescribed limits. As such, increased female participation in the labour market can often appear liberating – as fulfilling what Orloff (1993: 318) calls a 'right to commodification' – even when the jobs involved are low paid and of poor quality. Therefore, the ambivalence is carried over into the formal economy rather than being dispelled: the attempt to achieve greater

sovereignty by entry into the public sphere is counteracted by the time thefts committed by employers and the economic system. So, the act of reclamation that many women perform is, as before, both enabled and constrained by the wider social structures through which absolutist meanings are assigned to social time. Radical politics must, then, be concerned not only with counter-hegemonisation of and through the workplace but counter-hegemonisation of and through the interface of public and private spheres: the interaction of class and gender (Rubery et al, 1998; Fagan, 2001).

Therefore, we have at least two paths for further reflection. The first path consists of the hypothesis that a slight revision is needed to the familiar graph of time-geography. The concept of social time implies that power cannot simply be reduced to a spatial and/or temporal frame but is deserving of an axis of its own: a third coordinate (see Figure 1).

[Insert Figure 1]

However, following through on this is beyond my area of expertise. The second path leads us towards social policy, to the ways in which contemporary developments in welfare capitalism are theorised and researched, and to the normative critiques that we bring to bear. The above analysis suggests that the discipline can either accept capitalism's colonisation of the social by absolutist qualities, or it can resist such colonisation by an agenda drawn from political radicalism. In the rest of this article I am going to examine three recent and highly prominent pieces of research that while addressing the importance of time do not, I will argue, possess the appropriate

theoretical resources. The concluding section will briefly review the methodological and normative implications of this.

### **Time in Contemporary Social Policy**

The conclusions drawn from the following analysis are intended to be constructive, the intention being to explore why these authors' approach to time and time policies is incomplete rather than drastically misguided. This implies that any alternative, relational approach would have to build upon their work rather than starting again from scratch. Therefore, our task is to reinterpret and not to dismantle.

#### *Time and Poverty*

Leisering and Leibfried (1999: 240-3) agree with Beck (1992) that we are experiencing the individualisation, biographisation and temporalisation of poverty. By individualisation is meant the declining salience of moral systems and structures to which individuals are unquestioningly willing to attach themselves, it means that individuals are now required to negotiate their way through kinship, cultural and socioeconomic forms of association, constructing their biographies *sui generis*. Additionally, most life histories periodically demonstrate some degree of poverty: poverty is not a fixed characteristic of certain disadvantaged groups but is a life event, reaching well into the middle class, that we manage using state welfare institutions. Socioeconomic structures exist but within those hierarchies can be found a diversity of biographical trajectories: "structural and individual factors are indivisibly linked" (Leisering and Leibfried, 1999: 143). Poverty transcends class boundaries and is,

instead, a temporal dynamic which ‘democratises’ the risks faced by different income groups.

Therefore, the objective duration of poverty has to be understood in terms of the subjective orientations of poor individuals, i.e. how they contextualise that experience in terms of their life histories, using public institutions as coping strategies. What this implies is that the poorest, too, are competent actors who determine the course of their lives within certain constraints and so are neither the passive victims nor the calculative dependants of, respectively, Left and Right mythology (Leisering and Leibfried, 1999: 39). Instead, they use benefits as a means of actively taking control of their lives and reconstructing their life histories. So although poverty is often short-term it is also more widespread than we have traditionally believed. In so far as it is confined to transitional periods in individuals’ lives, the trick is to devise life-course policies that use poverty strategically by constructing institutional supports that offer bridges through those periods (Leisering & Leibfried, 1999: 285-92; cf. Esping-Andersen, 1999: Ch.9). Some vertical redistribution is justifiable but, ultimately, these transitional bridges must be built upon updated forms of social insurance.

First, do the theoretical assumptions of Leisering and Leibfried embody a Newtonian conception of time? As even the above summary suggests, Leisering and Leibfried are concerned with absolute and relative conceptions (as what they call, respectively, objective and subjective times). They express the now popular idea that ‘time shapes poverty’ (Walker, 2001) but miss the corollary that *poverty shapes time*, i.e. the (unjust) distribution of resources, life-chances and access to goods, models the meaning and experience of time across the social strata. It is this corollary that is suggested by the relational concept: the notion that life histories can only be fully understood in a context of domination and struggles over power. So whereas they

conceive of *individual* liberation from the *risk* of transitional poverty, in reifying time they do not conceive of *collective* liberation from the *strategy* of poverty. Their argument is that although such risks cannot be avoided they are at least democratised across the population. But by treating time as exogenous and extra-social they miss the idea that time is patterned by the distributive hierarchies of income, status and wealth, hierarchies that are reciprocally embedded as social time in welfare capitalism. True, they acknowledge the greater risks faced by lower economic classes but strongly resist any suggestion that we live in a two-thirds society (Hutton, 1995). They do so, however, only by simplifying that thesis.

Take class as an example. When Leisering and Leibfried (1999: 245, 251-2) see social exclusion as having a time dimension *in addition* to a class one, and when they regard labour market divisions as only *one among many*, then they neglect the positional strategies launched by economic classes against one another. If time is relational then the class dimension is *inherently* temporal and class conflict consists of the powerful trying to impose their subjective times onto the powerless and the latter either surrendering to or resisting this process. Indeed, Leisering and Leibfried (1999: 33-5) themselves indicate how this might occur: through tacit controls over the life-course. Having raised this possibility, however, they never return to it. In short, they do not allow for the possibility that, under the social and economic conditions of welfare capitalism, structures are maintained *through the positional dynamics of class struggle*. They replace reference to structures and collectivities with an agent-centred methodology that regards poverty as an ontological risk rather than a hegemonic strategy aimed at maintaining hierarchies of social and temporal power. They neglect the extent to which subjective times are already saturated by hegemonic struggle and

so their concept of subjective time – divorced, as it is, from a relational perspective – offers no real alternative to the Newtonian framework of welfare capitalism.

As such, their proposals for welfare reform are, from a justice-respecting point of view, too conservative. There are undoubtedly limits to which vertical welfare state redistribution can address transitional forms of poverty, but this observation does not subvert the desirability of a more egalitarian property regime than most welfare states ever managed (or intended) to create. Ultimately, Leisering and Leibfried (1999: 260) are bound by welfare capitalism's commodification of time. Their life-course policies interpret non-employment time as carrying the burden of proof, i.e. their question is, which periods outside the labour market should be considered as legitimate, as contributing to growth and productivism? This falls short of, for instance, ecological demands to take a much less commodified view of socially meaningful time. To presume automatically in favour of employment is to take a shallow approach to intergenerational issues, since it needs to be demonstrated, rather than just assumed, that employment time is environmentally benign in the long-run or that non-employment time is environmentally damaging (Fitzpatrick, 1999: Ch. 9).

To conclude, Leisering and Leibfried work with theoretical assumptions vis-à-vis time that orbit around the three temporal dimensions of welfare capitalism that we identified earlier. This is in no way to reject the validity of their research but it is to suggest that a relational conception allows us to see why a reliance upon subjective time is incomplete without reference to struggles between collective actors over, and within, social time. Consequently, time policies should be conceived as more than bridges within the subjective biographies of individuals.



## *Changing Times*

Perhaps the most important recent analysis of time-use is that provided by Jonathan Gershuny (2000: chs 5-7; cf. Schor, 1991, 1998a, 1998b). The essential finding of Gershuny's research is that since the 1960s there have been three types of convergence in the use of time dedicated to paid work, unpaid work and leisure. First, there has been a *national* convergence, with most countries experiencing an increase in leisure; second, a *gender* convergence, with men performing more unpaid work and women performing more paid work; the final convergence is that of class or status, with those on higher incomes working more and those on lower possessing more leisure. Gershuny uses these findings to shoot down several popular and enduring assumptions about the work/leisure distribution. The first is that as societies become richer so, perversely, the harder we have been made to work, even as overall employment levels have declined. The second is that the share of unpaid work performed by men has remained stable over the last few decades. Women, especially those in full-time employment, certainly experience a 'dual burden' of paid and unpaid work, but not as much as is sometimes supposed. The third assumption is that leisure time becomes more 'harried' and therefore less enjoyable (Linder, 1970). In their place, Gershuny (2000: 134-6) argues that leisure time and work time *increase in tandem*: put simply, a growth in leisure time leads to an increased demand for services and so to an increase in jobs and therefore work time; that increase fuels a growth in skills, productivity and incomes, producing more leisure time, and so on. The implication is that far from damaging economic growth, leisure generates more growth and is a sign of a materialistic rather than a post-materialistic society.

According to Gershuny (2000: 33-44) the above convergences are not coincidental but are a product of the 'logic of progress'. This means that as a society becomes wealthier so its service economy shifts from low-value to high-value services. A high-value economy is usually associated with social democratic regimes, where the satisfaction of basic needs and preferences facilitates the emergence of more sophisticated tastes that drive a virtuous circle of high-value production and consumption. A low-value economy is associated more with liberal market regimes where, because skills tend to be lower, the services both supplied and demanded are fairly unsophisticated. Politics and state regulation is therefore important but not in terms of straightforward ideological cleavages, e.g. Germany's high-value economy has been largely presided over by conservatives. One implication of this is that whereas high-value economies are inconsistent with large degrees of income inequality, such inequalities are ultimately only reduced by raising the productivity of human capital (skills, experiences, qualifications, networks) rather than through tax-and-spend redistribution. In our new information societies public regulation must be geared towards further reductions in working hours and to other 'time-use policies' (Gershuny, 2000: 241-8). For instance, as time is freed so 'education for consumption' becomes more important for both the supply and demand of the high-value services that characterise economic modernisation.

Gershuny's research is a corrective (cf. Breedveld, 1998) to the naïve optimists who insist that employment growth must equal happiness (Reeves, 2001) and to the naïve pessimists who see little beyond the increasingly misery of an overworked society (Rifkin, 1995), yet it suffers from theoretical simplifications similar to those of Leisering and Leibfried. The logic of progress means that as economic development generates higher levels of wealth and efficiency so new forms of production and

consumption emerge, both requiring new forms of producer and consumer. Thus, high-value societies replace low-value ones. Gershuny posits this logic on the grounds that cross-national trends cannot be an empirical accident and he seems to reject alternative explanations that would focus upon collective action. For instance, he argues that upstairs-downstairs forms of class relations were replaced by a convergence in time-use patterns due to the growth in cheap consumer durables and self-servicing domestic equipment. The traditional class society is therefore replaced by one where most of us both produce and consume services of one kind or another, leading to "...multiple consumption fractions rather than simple and comprehensive consumption classes" (Gershuny, 2000: 32). Like Leisering and Leibfried, the persistence of stratification is acknowledged but not interpreted as *class* inequalities because the logic of progress is held to wipe class differences away.

What Gershuny is inviting is a Newtonian conception of time where time is externalised upon an economic logic (the logic of progress) rather than interpreted as an outcome of political struggles over social and temporal resources. His is certainly not a crude economic determinism as he recognises the crucial role of the regulatory state (Gershuny, 2000: 36-8, 104), yet he does not offer an account of the social forces that background regulatory developments. Indeed, Gershuny (2000: 38-44) offers no explanatory theory of the state, treating it almost as a self-contained institution separable from civil society, as an element of the logic of modernisation where the political is ancillary to the economic. If, instead, the regulatory state is regarded as a site of conflict then the status of the political is raised: in response to economic and technological advances, collective actors (predominantly the labour and women's movements) effect various redistributions of time in and through welfare institutions. Yet, as suggested in the previous section, these redistributions are only partially

successful due to the positional counter-strategies of traditionally dominant groups and the new structural constraints that those strategies engender. In other words, whereas dominant groups have countenanced a redistribution of time, the overall reduction of time spent in paid work has been marginal in comparison to what *would* have been possible due to post-war increases in social productivity. Therefore, class has not been *erased* but *displaced*. What Gershuny interprets as the dissolution of class, i.e. the formation of multiple consumption fractions, is itself the channelling of class relations away from the sphere of production that, by the 1950s, was characterised by a labour-capital balance. Furthermore, although time-*use* may have converged, control over time is still dependent upon the income yielded by employment. And it is by neglecting the class dimension that Gershuny (2000: 44, 248) can, like Leisering and Leibfried, regard vertical redistribution as less important than life-course redistribution subsidised through the increased productivity of 'human capital'.

Gershuny's (2000: 248) faith that a social democracy of high human capital embodies the best hope for the centre-left therefore reflects the welfare capitalist commodification of time more than anything else. His support for working-time reductions is welcome but is dependent upon a particular view of leisure, one where free time is used to consume services and therefore raise the demand for high-value service labour (Gershuny, 2000: 102, 243-6). This, in turn, requires time-use education policies geared towards education for consumption. Alternative conceptions of free time, perhaps based upon education for deliberation, where the task is to build new, discursive forms of democratic arrangement (Fitzpatrick, 2003: Ch.9), are therefore eclipsed by Gershuny's tendency to prioritise the economic above the political, i.e. that economic prosperity is the most valuable indicator of well-being.

The other possible objectives of working-time reductions, those specifically geared towards long-term sustainability, are not considered. Similarly, the insistence that investment in human capital will be more effective than vertical redistribution at addressing income inequalities reflects a shallow view of social justice, one that takes existing distributional patterns as given.

### *Post-Productivist Welfare*

Goodin et al (1999: 225-36) define 'combined resource autonomy' as having enough income to meet basic needs and having enough free time to make use of that income. An imbalance of either money or time means that, however affluent a person may be in one respect, they can never be truly autonomous. On this basis, the social democratic model of welfare is preferable to either the liberal democratic or the conservative models. Like the above authors, Goodin et al (1999: 264) insist that effecting life-course redistribution (of money and time) rather than vertical redistribution is the most appropriate role for the welfare state. Perhaps encouraging equality within the household is the most effective way of equalising money and time between individuals (Goodin et al, 2001).

Goodin (2001) pursues these ideas in an analysis of 'post-productivist' welfare (of which the Netherlands is held to be the closest exemplar). Whereas social democrats support 'welfare *and* work', post-productivism calls for 'welfare *without* work', or the notion that economic productivity does not require everyone to spend much or all of their lives in full-time employment (cf. Fitzpatrick, 2003: Chs 4-5). Post-productivists are committed to a more ambitious version of autonomy than social

democrats: not only *adequate* income and time but also *minimal conditions* on the receipt of both.

As helpful as these interventions are, however, the focus is too individualistic, stressing the importance of an absence of constraints. Autonomous time gives you the discretion to organise your life as you please and is therefore defined somewhat negatively: what you have left over from a 168 hour week once the necessities of employment, domestic labour and personal care have been attended to. Goodin would no doubt welcome the situation where many use their discretionary time to build social capital rather than go 'bowling alone' (Putnam, 2000), but he does not build such considerations into his analysis. The emphasis upon autonomy perhaps elides the social interdependencies which make the exercise of autonomy either meaningful or meaningless. Without a reorganisation of social structures (and Goodin gives no indication that he supports such reorganisation) temporal autonomy is likely to embody Newtonianism by being predicated upon a life-course ideal that is still dominated by the employment society.

Now, Goodin (1992a) may well reply that his support for the creation of a Basic Income (an income that would be provided unconditionally to all regardless of employment status) allows him to reject this accusation, since a Basic Income permits autonomy outside of the labour market, i.e. it is 'non-presumptuous'. However, as Fitzpatrick (1999) argues at length, a Basic Income is not an ideologically neutral reform proposal but one that would take different forms depending upon the political values and principles brought to bear upon it. Therefore, Basic Income is *always* presumptuous because its effect cannot be divorced from the institutional environment into which it would be introduced and which it would shape. Therefore, by adopting a highly individualistic interpretation of autonomy Goodin misses the limits to

individuality within capitalist society and so may sneak orthodox views regarding independence and dependency back into his analysis.

Goodin therefore downplays the idea that a co-operative reconstruction of social institutions and practices is a necessary condition of social justice and, to this extent, his assumptions about time remain commodified and shallow. They are commodified because of Goodin's belief that post-productivism is a natural extension of (Dutch) social democracy, i.e. what results once a 'two-thirds' labour market (where both men and women work approximately 25-30 hours per week) has been created. But as Fitzpatrick (2003) argues, post-productivism is not measurable in these terms. For what matters is not only the amount of time people spend in employment and non-employment activities but also the deeper orientation of the economy either towards or away from the 'reproductive' values of ecological and emotional labour. So, post-productivism is social democratic but social democracy is not necessarily post-productivist.

Furthermore, Goodin's individualism can also be accused of being shallow, for although he supports environmentalism his preference is for a kind of Green utilitarianism where our natural concern for unspoilt nature is factored into the utilitarian calculus (Goodin, 1992b). Unfortunately, there are three reasons why individual desires should not simply be treated as given. Firstly, because to do so collapses the distinction between what is desired and what is desirable. Secondly, because desires are never *ex nihilo* but have to be understood in terms of their social context. Individuals' concern for nature is inseparable from their desire for the cheap, disposable but environmentally destructive goods that the capitalist economy thrives upon. Finally, then, because it potentially involves wishful thinking on Goodin's part: an overestimation of the extent to which people really do care about unspoilt nature.

So, Goodin's attempt to reconcile individualism and environmentalism through the lens of utilitarianism is not one that offers much of a long-term perspective, as I have argued at greater length elsewhere (Fitzpatrick, 2001a).

In short, if we believe that temporal autonomy, as defined by Goodin and his co-authors, is the most desirable and/or feasible goal that we can aim for then we should replicate the best features of those welfare systems such as the Dutch. However, if this were to be a sufficient but not a necessary condition of temporal *justice*, and if 'quality time' requires not just quantity (time free from employment) but also control (collective power over social institutions), then our welfare reforms may have to go beyond those of combined resource autonomy and Basic Income (cf. Biesecker, 1998).

## **Conclusion**

In this article I have attempted to open up a new theoretical approach to time that is relevant to social policy. By distinguishing between absolute, relative and relational (or social) times we can see how capitalist meanings dominate by filling the social with absolutist properties that make time seem everywhere external to the people who experience it. Welfare capitalism carries these de-socialising properties in the form of Newtonianism, commodification and shallowness. In the course of arguing that three recent research projects embody these dimensions I have also suggested why alternative interpretations of their work are both possible and necessary. Such interpretations do not contradict the general thrust of their analyses but, by going beyond their emphasis upon the subjective and the individualistic, they do propose a



radical criticism in which dynamic and positional struggles over the distribution of social meaning are made more central.

Therefore, the methodological and normative implications of my argument are both modest and highly ambitious. They are modest in so far as the intention is to build upon the analytical framework already available, to understand the temporal through the subjectivities of relative time. However, I also want to propose that if we remain within the conceptual confines of relative time then our analysis will embody the capitalist tendency to collapse the subjective back into the absolute as a means of colonising the meaning of social time. Therefore, a more sophisticated analysis is also much more ambitious in that it has to recontextualise the subjective and relative in terms of the relational. But this is not simply another excuse for academic nitpicking. As the category of time becomes more central to welfare reform then we have a choice between time-use policies that in effect freeze the social inequalities and injustices that two decades of conservative hegemony have produced, and time-use policies which begin to reverse the tide. So, the relational conception not only leads us away from welfare capitalism but towards some form of temporal justice. However, a formulation of this and what it could imply for time-use policies will have to wait for (you guessed it) another time.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> I am aware of the danger of treating time and space as if they are separable (Bauman, 2000; May & Thrift, 2001) but lack of both in this article means that our ambitions have to be more modest!
- <sup>2</sup> Note that I am not concerned here with the question as to whether we still live in an era of welfare capitalism or of how changes to the basic model are geographically dispersed. This is too big a question (Jessop, 2002) and one that I have addressed elsewhere (Fitzpatrick, 2003).

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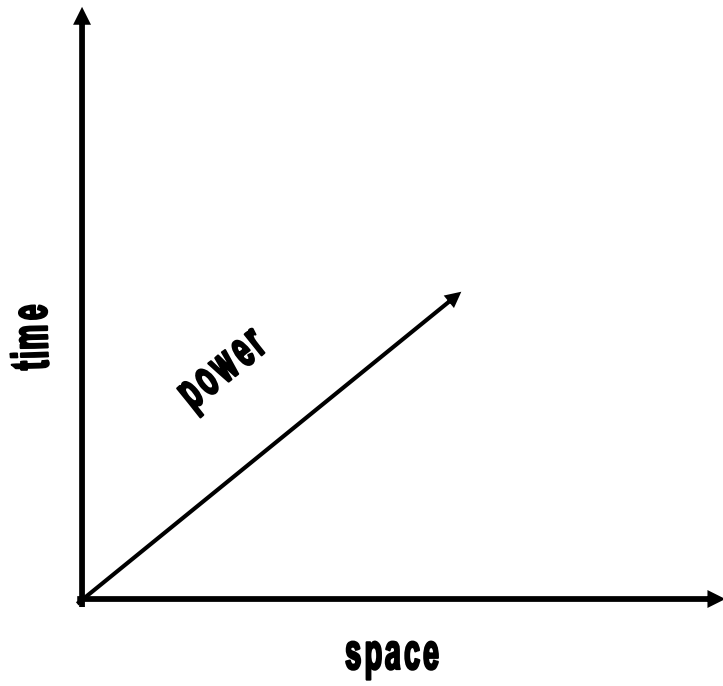
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**Figure 1: The Third Axis of Time-Geography**