

THE POLITICS OF TIME FOR WORK

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Deeply impressed and inspired by Lennart Arvedson's Kunnskaps-utveckling for arbetstidspolitik, I have some comments on five points, all of them somewhat enlarging the broad issue, to which Arvedson addresses himself further. In this there is no critique, only an effort to bring some more dimensions into this important debate. In fact, few things could be more important than work in general, and the number of hours spent in particular, as work is the major source for satisfaction (or not) of our basic needs for survival, for well-being, for identity (e.g. with our work products and our work mates), and for freedom.

[1] A historical macro-perspective.

Since the 1930s the number of hours spent working per person per year has decreased, Arvedson shows. I think this perspective can be broadened to take a cohort born in any given year and ask how many hours they are going to work throughout their life-span, not per year. To simplify matters let us keep the life-span constant; disregarding infant and child mortality it has not changed very much the last one hundred years anyhow (in "the old days," if you made it till the age of 5, the chances of making it to 75 would be about the same as for today). People start working later. They retire earlier. The part of work referred to as education and, consequently, not counted as work, lasts (much) longer. In short, Childhood (C), Education (E) and Retirement (R) have cut considerably into Work (W). Then, in the W phase of life people work less hours per day, less days per week, potentially less weeks per month (but this cut is still rare), less months per year, and less years per working life. The pattern of "taking a year off," gradually coming in even at working class levels of society (sailing around the world in a self-made boat, for instance), is taken into account. But during the time allotted to work I am not so sure that lower levels of objective morbidity are not compensated by higher levels of subjective morbidity; people declaring themselves ill for much less reason than in earlier ages ("I simply felt awful yesterday").

Just to give an idea try to compare people born in 1850 living till they are 75, with people born in 1950 living till they are 75. The former in all likelihood worked in the primary sector, the latter in the secondary or tertiary sectors. We assume that the former spends three years on C, three on E and three on R whereas the latter spends 7, 14 and 10, respectively; that means a working life of 66 years for the former and 44 for the latter, down to 2/3, in other words. If we now assume that the former has a working week of 72 hours and the latter of 36 hours, we have another cut of 50%. The former may have worked 52 weeks a year, the latter only 39 weeks (with skillful use of bridges between holidays, built with overtime currency), and we are down again, this time to 3/4. Multiply the fractions and we get a reduction in working time per life with as much as 3/4, down to 25%. Most of

these figures can be challenged. But by and large I think this gives us the order of magnitude if we increase the time span, both in social history and in life history of the individual. An incredible revolution.

[2] How do people spend working time reduction?

If we try to answer economistically, I would immediately try to answer: in production, distribution and consumption. Production: people are preparing themselves for paid work, dressing and make-up, getting in the mood, maybe by reading, etc. more than before. Distribution: people are distributing themselves, spending more time traveling to the place of work, shifting, peddling, even between countries, than before -- or, they may be idling, waiting for components to arrive where they work, which may be at home for that matter. Consumption: much more demanding than before. To be a professional vacationer, e.g. as a tourist in faraway countries, is as demanding as to be a medium skilled worker. To consume a good theater with a meal, or a movie with a mediocre meal, may require as many hours as a working day (six, eight hours) when time for travel is counted. To complicated production patterns belong, of course, complicated consumption patterns - and a person may be as marginalized in society by being unskilled consumer as by being unskilled producer, worker. If he has no job he is called "unemployed" - but what if he has no conspicuous consumption? Consumption that is formal, something for which he pays? An unconsumer, a non-consumer?

The objection might be, and rightly so, that he could have informal consumption, tending to his stamps at home, just as he can have an informal, unpaid form of work, mending his house. He or she could refer to both as "hobby;" there being no monetary transaction involved (or very little, only some small tools). Informal production and informal consumption actually become quite similar. But the basic point in this: it is not that obvious that he has much more free time, or leisure time, given the preparation for his job not counted as working hours, and the demands placed upon him as skilled consumer. In retrospect the step from paid worker to paying consumer may not be that great, the sense of freedom no that much greater.

[3] Quality, not only quantity of working time.

One point in what has been said above is this: people are not at all keen on doing nothing, but on doing something else, maybe even preferring driving to work (more illusion, at least, of being one's master?) As a matter of fact, the common denominator in all these hypotheses about what happened to the 3/4 time gained from the working time block in the course of one century there is probably one common denominator: (at least to have the illusion of) being one's own master. Informal work or consumption is probably best in this connection, then comes formal consumption at

least permitting the choice of not consuming at all, and then preparation for work. All of which should point in one direction: what people want is not so much less working time as more control over the working time. Flexitime or flexilife point in this direction, but choosing when to work is only a part of the more comprehensive choosing how to work, deciding the conditions for work oneself.

[4] Using elite working models as models for working life.

After all, this is what Marx did when he sketched his ideal working life: hunter in the morning, shepherd in the afternoon, fisherman in the evening, and social critic at night. The model must have been some kind of landed gentry, with intellectual inclinations. So, why not choose an artist or a professor, including Lennart Arvedson himself? Certainly not a working life from 9-4 Monday till Friday, much more irregular, and probably many more hours. More opportunity to give it to moods, indulging in work when the mood is there, learning how not to force oneself when the mood is absent, doing something else instead (but the old pattern defined by clock rather than mood is often still there, making this adage easily said but hard to follow). In the freelance model there is also an element of adjusting production to consumption rather than vice versa, assuming that there is some flexibility either way. At some point this person also meets the clock: the product (painting, play, article, talk, whatever) has to be delivered - but he organizes the time between now and then. If a group is involved in the production, the group organizes itself. Why should not elite working patterns be the model when their consumption models always were, including for more elaborate food and sex?

[5] Activity time budget, not only working time budget

Under [1] above, the assumption was that human beings do four things during their life: childhood, education, work and retirement, and generally in that order (in-between there is, of course, reproductive activity, such as recreation and let us see all four as activities. The tendency is to see C as irresponsible, mere play; E as preparatory; W as the real thing; and R as somewhat similar to C, as "harking back to infancy."

Let us change that a little. We may agree that W is an input to society (in Japan, to a company) and that society (company) invests in E to get this input. The input to W should be sufficient for the family to provide C and R for the very young and the very old; if not, society (company) has to help (kindergartens, old age homes, etc.). In short, we do not have to argue the basic economics of the matter to arrive at an important conclusion: not only the fractions of total life span spent for C, E, W and R matter, but also their time order. If we now define C as informal consumption/work, W as formal work and R as formal

consumption, then we capture in a more positive way the basic ideas of these four modes of human existence, yet make them more comparable and meaningful in connection with a working time analysis. And E, real education, that is the preparation for the other three, not only for W. And that brings us to the basic point: why should not people be given the opportunity to take out their non-W years exactly when they want? Could we not imagine a society saying something like this: we give you 7 C years, 14 E years and 10 R years, on the condition that you work 44 years -- how much you work these years will be subject to negotiation and any year you live beyond 75 can be taken out as C, E, W or R. Trading among sectors and among people should also be possible. The basic point would be flexibility, the duty to put in some work, and the right to be well prepared for formal and informal work and consumption, as well as to enjoy work and consumption.

But beyond this way of thinking about life budgeting lies another goal: to make W more similar to what people seem to like even more, C, E and R. Work with meaning. Work which is fun at the same time, nobody looking at the watch except with the hope that there is still some time left. What kind of work gives that much satisfaction? Non-alienated work, no doubt - but then, what is alienation? Work which has become individuated in the sense that no substitution of worker is possible without a change in the product produced - a typical characteristic of all cultural production?

About this we certainly know much too little. Only one hint: a Soviet colleague of mine, Professor Gennadij Osipov, once told me about two findings from Soviet sociology of work: that workers are alienated, and that they like alienation as distance to work and product permit them to think of something else, plans for the evening, love and sex, girlfriends and boyfriends and what not. Nonalienated work is too absorbing and demanding, simply by being too interesting, leaving no opportunity to dream about C, E and R. The objection would be that building C, E and R into the work process itself would be a much more positive approach. And that is, probably, precisely what elite workers do whether they compose art or articles - such as, for instance, articles about work.