

BookReview: Work, Life and Time

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Book Reviews

WORK, LIFE AND TIME

Diane Perrons, Colette Fagan, Kath Ray, Linda McDowell and Kevin Ward, eds
Gender Divisions and Working Time in the New Economy: Changing Patterns of Work, Care and Public Policy in Europe and North America
Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2006, xvi + 319 pp., ISBN 13: 978 1 84542 020 8

The themes core to Diane Perrons et al.'s sizeable volume surely resonate for us all: new forms of working; new working times; the feminization of labour; and gender divisions in the organization of paid work and caring. This impressive edited collection asks about one of our most fundamental concerns: how work patterns are changing and how these changes shape the ways in which individuals and their families – in different nation-states – live their lives from one day to the next.

A notable feature of the book is the conviction that the comparative approach is an effective way to address these concerns. A comparative approach is indeed invaluable, either via explicitly cross-national comparative research or, as here, via largely national studies that are located within a comparative framework. The comparative approach has shaped the formation of some of the most pertinent questions in the study of gender and work time, including those obtained from 'most/least gender equal' societal analyses as well as those emerging from debates over convergence/divergence of societies. The authors here use the comparative approach to highlight well the different regulatory frameworks within which people make work–life decisions.

A second noticeable feature of the collection is that the editors and contributing authors come from a range of academic disciplines (including sociology, geography, social policy, anthropology, media), as well as one contribution from non-academic research/policy-making. Given the diversity of its contributors, the book is in an excellent position to achieve its aim of extending our 'temporal and spatial analysis' of work. A result of the contributors' diversity is a mix of quantitative and qualitative studies, alongside policy analyses, and this has facilitated a welcome balance of approaches to gender and work time in one volume. What also emerged from this combination of writers is a refreshing consensus that, alongside the material impact of diversity in work–life balancing, the psychosocial impact of work–life balancing is a vital area for research too.

In its aim to address the substantial topic of its main title, gender divisions and working time in the new economy, the book employs a number of country case studies. These include commonly used but nonetheless revealing examples. Sweden and Norway are incorporated as representatives of the Nordic welfare regimes; France as a corporatist regime; and the US and UK as neoliberal economies. In addition, one or two papers – those that focus on policy developments in the main – offer a wider comparative analysis, as indeed do the editors.

The book is substantial at 16 chapters, and it is not possible to do justice to all here. They are separated into five main parts looking at: (1) social and spatial dimensions of work–life management; (2) the (rather similar to 1) work, time and work–life balance; (3) household-level analyses that draw on class, geographical context and state policy; (4) new technology and urban time policies; and (5) equality policies. Each main section is introduced well by the editors. In addition, and a real strength, the book is framed with an invaluable introductory chapter and a useful concluding chapter. The introduction outlines the following chapters as one might expect but also expertly pulls out the core issues and structures that stimulated the book, and the ESRC seminar series that fed into it, including the themes of new economy, state policies, gender divisions in caring and paid work, care deficit and comparative analyses.

Looking across the volume in terms of its sections, Part 2 pulls together contributions on France, Norway and the UK, as three useful country case studies representing different contexts for work–life balancing/articulation. Jeanne Fagnani and Marie Therese Letablier update their analysis of the gender impact of the 35-hour week in France; Anita Nyberg offers an analysis of Swedish policies for dual earner/dual carers; and Rosemary Crompton and Michaela Brockmann discuss the importance of class as well as gender for work–life articulation in Britain; their analysis is helpfully embedded within a comparative framework and offers a critique of work–life ‘balancing’ debates too. The fundamental importance of class follows on in Part 3 on work, life and household. Simon Duncan takes his influential work forward, developing how ‘gendered moral rationalities’ shape what it means to be a good mother and considering the ways in which good mothering is classed and varies geographically (here, within the UK). Berit Brande and Elin Kvande follow nicely after this, with their welcome focus on fathers (in Norway), raising fascinating questions about work–life, masculinity and good fathering. Section 4 on work time and urban services includes a chapter in which Jean-Yves Boulin discusses his fascinating work on local time policies. Here, he looks outside the main countries on which the volume focuses, identifying innovations from Italy for example, and providing a welcome theoretical approach to understanding ‘temporal well-being’. The next chapter by Jo Morris and Jane Pillinger follows on well, since it reviews some local time experiments in Britain, concentrating particularly on the role of trade unions in developing ‘positive flexibility’. The two chapters in the final section are on equality policies, at the EU level of gender mainstreaming and at the level of a university, asking about the rhetoric and reality of equality policies.

For this reader, a main attraction of the volume was that it pulled together in one place an impressive range of experts who write on these different aspects of working time, from a range of different societies. One disappointment was that a

number of the pieces were already familiar to me, either because similar versions had already been published or because two chapters were reprints. However, although my initial excitement at the prospect of a new chapter by an author was rather flattened in these instances, on balance it is useful to have these pieces brought together in one volume. And for readers new to the topic, the collection showcases the research and ideas of some of the most influential national experts on the topic of gender divisions and work time.

A second issue concerns the country case studies that featured. Though very interesting and representing a range of regime types, the selection seems rather restricted. This is especially so given the title's implied broad focus on 'North America and Europe'. Few of the chapters draw on cross-national comparative data (Burchell does so nicely, even though his title and main focus is the UK), though a few offer a more comprehensive review of policy approaches. But, within Europe, southern and eastern European countries are largely underrepresented in the book, and so it misses out on a valuable opportunity to explore work time developments in post-socialist countries or to draw in Mediterranean work time regimes. On North America, it was disappointing that there were only two dedicated chapters, and both of these were reprints. Having said that, one reprint is a chapter by Harriet B. Presser. Her research on the impact on families of non-standard working is highly influential. Here, she offers a review of quantitative and qualitative studies into how families cope when parents work non-standard schedules, identifies implications for low-income families and ends with a useful list of suggestions for future research. Her chapter sits neatly next to the UK contribution from Brendan Burchell since both writers are known for highlighting the psychosocial impact of work time and work intensification (in Europe and the US) and for showing diversity by class.

Given that the main title of the collection is 'gender divisions and working time in the new economy', I felt that some of the chapters were a little too loosely linked to the book's core theme. Chapters on women's networks on Wall Street, on e-government projects in the UK and on equal opportunities policies and pay differences were all interesting, but the authors touched only indirectly or briefly on the main topic of working time. Finally, at 16 chapters already, it seems churlish to ask that this one volume provide the reader with even more, especially when I have already asked to see more countries represented. But it would have been good to see a chapter or two that tackled issues of 'race', gender and work time, in addition to those that helpfully included class. In the UK, for example, work time patterns for individuals and for families can differ markedly by ethnic group. The ramifications for material and psychosocial dimensions of work-life articulation by ethnic group remain underresearched.

Notwithstanding these reservations, the edited collection is an impressive volume. If readers are interested in debates about how people make decisions about their working lives; how work-life balancing decisions are shaped; what is balanced (work, care, time, moralities, identities?) and by whom; the ramifications of these decisions for individuals and families; and indeed whether balancing is the best concept to use, then this book stands out as essential reading.

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