

# Time, Power and Inequalities

Written by Valerie Bryson

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VALERIE BRYSON, AUG 12 2016

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Until recently, political theorists and scientists have had little to say about the political significance or nature of time. In contrast, this chapter argues that the ways in which time is used, valued and experienced are neither inevitable nor 'natural'; rather, they reflect and sustain deep-seated patterns of power and inequality. The analysis of time is, therefore, central to the understanding of political processes and outcomes.

Written from the perspective of a British feminist political theorist, the chapter brings together some recent developments in 'malestream' political theory and international relations, critical discussion of time-use studies and feminist analyses of social reproduction. The starting point is post-industrial societies, seeing inequalities within these as intertwined with intersecting inequalities elsewhere in the world. It focuses in particular on the uneven distribution of 'free' time, the unequal value attached to different patterns of time use and the prioritisation of the 'time is money' culture of both the capitalist workplace and the global economy over other temporal rhythms and needs. The chapter argues that our current relationship with time is both unjust and damaging. It extends feminist insistence on the economic importance of informal, domestic and/or unpaid work to explore the 'time culture' involved in reproductive work; unlike more mainstream writing on the political implications of the accelerated time culture of global finance capital, it is concerned with the uneven impact of temporal changes on unequally situated groups, and the subordination of 'other', more 'natural' time cultures to capitalist imperatives.

### **'Free' Time as a Scarce and Inequitably Distributed Resource**

In his later (2001) work, the eminent political philosopher John Rawls identified leisure time as a 'primary good', something that everyone wants; it is also clearly a scarce resource, and he argued that its distribution should therefore be regulated by principles of justice. This means that those who choose leisure over work should expect to pay an economic price, so that there would be no place for either the idle rich or workshy welfare claimants in a justly organised society. Although Rawls did not make the point, free time is not simply desirable in itself, it is also a key political resource, for any political activity takes time, and those who toil without respite cannot choose to attend meetings or become involved in community campaigns, let alone stand for political office or travel abroad; any inequitable distribution of free time is therefore doubly unjust. Rawls focussed on justice within societies, but in an era of global interdependency it should logically apply also to the distribution of scarce resources *between* societies; clearly, such an extension has profound and radical implications for global justice.

Historically, unequal access to free time has frequently reflected and reinforced unequal access to economic resources, with lower status or class groups and manual workers putting in longer hours for less reward than large land or capital holders and managerial and professional employees. Today, some analysts argue that this class pattern has been reversed in many western nations, with long-hours working and lack of leisure seen as both a sign of status and a means to career success, so that the 'money rich' are now also the 'time poor' (Gershuny 2005;

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Sullivan and Gershuny 2004). Nevertheless, money can also 'buy' time, for example by taking a taxi rather than waiting for a bus, or by 'outsourcing' family responsibilities. Here, the concept of 'discretionary time', the time remaining after deducting the hours an individual *needs* to spend in paid work, unpaid work and personal care in order to keep out of poverty and meet minimal social standards, may be more useful than free or leisure time, as it helpfully highlights the choice that underlies much long-hours working in the West, whereby individuals work long hours in order to maximise their income and enjoy an affluent lifestyle (Goodin et al., 2008; Burchardt, 2013). Badly paid workers obviously have little scope for such trade-offs, their working hours are generally less flexible and they are more likely to involve anti-social working hours, while the outsourcing of their own domestic and caring work is not an option for those badly paid (usually women, often migrant) workers who provide services for wealthier groups and who may have to leave their own families or neglect their needs (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003; Litt and Zimmerman 2003; Peterson 2003, 2012; Runyan and Peterson 2014). Problems are often compounded for the growing number of part-time and/or temporary workers with unpredictable hours and pay: in 2015, an OECD report showed that 'non-standard' work now accounts for around a third of total employment in industrialised countries, and that households depending on these wages are more likely to be living in poverty (OECD 2015); some commentators now refer to those trapped in such insecure, unpredictable employment as the 'precariat'. Other issues arise for those working night shifts, who can be effectively excluded from the social and political life of their community and whose numbers are rapidly rising with the growth in international call centres; here A. Aneesh shows the global power relations involved, as Indian workers have to adjust to the time-zones of clients in the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia and their 'concrete social and personal lives are subordinated to global system imperatives' (2012: 515). Although unemployed people might appear to have more than their fair share of leisure, their ability to take advantage of this is often limited by poverty, and also by the time-consuming nature of welfare application processes and job applications and/or the debilitating psychological effects of unemployment; many unemployed people also have time-consuming caring responsibilities.

Like most male political theorists, Rawls did not explore issues of justice within the home (see Okin 1990; Baehr ed., 2004; Abbey ed. 2013), and he equated leisure time with time left over from paid employment. The view that citizens should contribute to their society primarily through paid work reflects the dominant economic and political assumptions of global capitalism, but it has been challenged in different ways by both liberal and socialist feminist political theorists (for an overview, see Bryson 2016, Chapter 14), and also by feminist scholars in Development and International Political Economy, such as Diane Elson and V. Spike Peterson. As these writers argue, the focus on 'productive' work loses sight of other forms of necessary work, not only the unpaid agricultural work central to subsistence economies, but also the domestic and caring work that is essential to the survival and wellbeing of all societies (most obviously, we all need care when we are born, and also if we become sick or frail). Because this work is often unpaid, it disappears from statistics on national production; however, an international feminist campaign succeeded in committing signatories to the *Platform for Action* that resulted from the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing to developing time-use studies to measure unpaid work and include it in national accounts.

The resulting studies have confirmed feminist claims both about the importance of unpaid work and women's disproportionate responsibility for it in all societies (Gershuny 2011), leading many to claim that men's 'domestic absenteeism' underpins the gender gaps in pay, career progression and political representation that remain in all nations (for overviews of feminist arguments, see Lister 2003; Bryson 2007). However, the related claim that women have less access to free time has been disputed by leading time-use researcher Jonathan Gershuny, who argues that in western nations women's longer domestic hours are balanced by men's longer hours of paid employment, so that 'work- and leisure-time totals ... seem generally similar between women and men in each country' (2000: 8-9). Gershuny also identifies some convergence of roles as women have increased their time in the workplace and men contribute more in the home, particularly in relation to childcare. However, Gershuny's finding on leisure time, which uses the evidence of time-use diaries in which respondents are asked to record their activities at fifteen minute intervals throughout the day and night, should be handled with caution. While they appear to provide objective information, these diaries depend on a particular view of time that sees it as unfolding in a series of discrete, measurable activities; this is often alien to the temporal experiences of providing care and it can under-record the sometimes overwhelming impact of domestic responsibilities and the extent to which these affect apparently 'free' time. Thus, some studies record only one activity during any given period, ignoring the fact that, for example, an activity such as 'going swimming' can be transformed from leisure to work if the diary keeper is responsible for young

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children; many studies have also disregarded the constraining impact of the 'passive' care of a sleeping child or an elderly relative suffering from dementia that does not appear in the diary, but that can prevent their carer from leaving their home. Gershuny's focus on *total* leisure time also ignored the frequently brief, fragmented and unpredictable nature of carers' free time, and the extent to which this leaves men with greater control over their leisure hours and more 'usable' time (for an expanded discussion of these points, see Bryson 2008).

Unequal access to free, discretionary or leisure time is politically important, for it means that those who are most time deprived are least able to gain a political voice. One effect can be the absence of those with direct experience of caring responsibilities from positions of power (and because 'successful' women are disproportionately childfree and without caring responsibilities, a rise in the number of women in decision-making positions does not necessarily mean that the voices of carers are heard). The intersection of time poverty with other forms of social and economic disadvantage means that the poorest and neediest – such as many lone mothers, the 'precariat' and migrant care workers – are particularly unlikely to be heard. Such inequalities are not inevitable, but could in principle be addressed by a range of social policies, including state support for carers, employment policies that assume that 'normal' workers have family responsibilities and welfare policies that recognise that citizens who are not engaged in paid work are not necessarily idle or irresponsible, but may be contributing to society in other ways. As discussed in later sections of this chapter, there have been moves in this direction, but the power of nation-states to plan and implement such changes has been reduced by the global drive to short-term profit and a shift to a new, accelerated relationship with time.

In low-tech societies, the time-consuming impact of household responsibilities is of course often much greater than in the West, and the political exclusion of women much greater (Runyan and Peterson 2014). However, some writers argue that in recent years the demands of grass-roots women's movements and organisations have been filtered upwards through a wide range of non-governmental organisations to be heard in global forums, feeding into a global shift in thinking about women's human rights, which has had a significant, if patchy, impact at the level of transnational political institutions and conventions (Okin 2000; Walby 2005). In practical terms, however, many apparent gains, such as moves to improve girls' and women's access to education and employment, coincide with capitalism's need for docile, trained employees; such developments leave structured inequalities intact and can look more like 'a depressing example of neo-liberal co-optation' than 'an inspiring example of feminist activism and democratic innovation' (Squires, 2007: 51); as Sylvia Federici argues, claims by the United Nations to promote women's rights 'channel[led] the politics of women's liberation within a frame compatible with the needs and plans of international capital and the developing neoliberal agenda.' (2012: 98. See also Eisenstein 2009)

### Valuing Time

While there are many exceptions, high pay and status are generally linked to time spent on non-manual work, with those who sit in offices earning more than those who get their hands dirty, and brain power and education rewarded more than physical strength. This is reflected in a global movement in manufacturing away from wealthier nations, whose workers in service sectors benefit (in the short term) from access to cheap consumer goods made in nations where cheap manual labour is readily available, while financial speculation rather than production is providing the basis for a new, global, super-rich elite. Meanwhile, 'development' and 'progress' are usually understood in terms of a shift away from subsistence activities and towards a market economy, with cash crops and economic growth prioritised over sustainability and all human values reduced to measurable, monetary transactions.

This context compounds the global patriarchal denigration of anything associated with 'the feminine' (Peterson 2012), so that domestic and caring work is often seen as a form of unskilled manual labour or some kind of natural, instinctive extension of womanhood, rather than 'real work'. Those who spend their time on it are therefore economically penalised rather than rewarded; and it often seems invisible to policy makers, who forget that not all value can be expressed in monetary terms, and that apparently 'unproductive' citizens may be making an essential contribution to society. For those who do this work for their own family, it is of course often enjoyable, often immeasurably rewarding, and often undertaken out of love. It is, however, also often physically and mentally demanding, sometimes tedious, frequently exhausting, not always freely chosen and, as discussed above, it takes a great deal of time. Efficient housework and good quality care also require practical and intellectual skills; as with

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other forms of skilled work, some of these can be learned, and some require natural ability. For example, raising good citizens requires an understanding of child development, and supporting people with dementia requires understanding of their condition; both forms of care also require personal qualities of patience, empathy and the ability to communicate well.

As discussed above, this work is disproportionately done by women, often without pay; when it is done as a form of paid employment it is usually poorly paid, reflecting the low status accorded to both manual and women's work. This low pay makes a major contribution to the global gender gap in pay. Many equal opportunity policies therefore seek to guide young women towards better-paid, traditionally male occupations such as information technology or engineering, and away from traditionally female sectors. At the same time, such policies also now often acknowledge that workplace equality requires childcare provision: for example, a recent report on gender equality by the European Commission argues that 'Europe needs to fully utilise the talents of all its women' (2015: 7) through supporting them into employment, encouraging them away from traditionally female occupation and providing childcare. Quite who is supposed to deliver this childcare if it is deemed too menial for talented and aspiring women is not addressed, but the logical (and presumably unintended) implication is that looking after children in their most formative years should be left to those deemed incapable of 'better' forms of employment or 'outsourced', along with other forms of social care, to female migrant workers, who leave their own families to look after children or frail elderly people in wealthier nations. The more radical option of raising the status and pay of childcare workers (which could have the side-effect of attracting men into the profession) is seldom on the agenda, and the global consequences are ignored.

More positively, gender equality policies today do usually acknowledge that some workers have demands on their time outside of the workplace, and there has been a general movement towards more 'family-friendly' working practices. In particular, most nations now provide some kind of support for employed parents through maternity, paternity or parental leave entitlements (although these are not always realised in practice), leaving the United States among a tiny handful of nations that provide *no* form of paid maternity or family leave for female workers (Rosen 2004). There is also now some recognition of the feminist argument that workplace equality requires that men do more in the home, and by 2013 at least 79 countries provided some kind of leave to fathers around the time of birth (International Labour Organisation 2014). In general, however, the time that citizens need to care for others outside the workplace is still seen as something to be fitted around employment, rather than the other way around, and more flexible, family-friendly forms of employment are still largely viewed as special treatment for women workers rather than the norm. As discussed in the next section, this prioritisation of the values and needs of the workplace also involves prioritising a particular perspective on the nature of time itself, linked in turn to a weakening of the power of nation states and a crisis both in care and in capitalism itself.

### Time Cultures

As many writers have now shown, the ways in which we experience and understand time are not straightforward and 'natural' but socially and culturally produced (from a wide literature, see in particular Thompson 1999 [1967]; Adam 1995). Some historians have identified a shift in western societies from a pre-capitalist, pre-industrial time culture that was oriented to the cyclical rhythms of the seasons and tasks that had to be done to the time culture of the capitalist workplace, with its sense of time as something that steadily moves in one direction and that can be owned, measured, saved, spent or wasted. Such commodified clock time can be assigned an abstract monetary value and subject to considerations of cost efficiency; its results-oriented, 'time is money' logic is the time of global capitalism, its effects now exaggerated by digital time, with its attendant notions of multi-tasking, the blurring of the distinction between work and leisure and the acceleration and compression of time, most obviously in the case of financial markets, where fortunes can be made or lost in a nanosecond.

Some writers have built on William Scheurman's (2004) claim that today's 'social acceleration' of time is having detrimental political effects, disrupting the slower temporal rhythms of liberal democracy and strengthens executive power, with its ability to respond rapidly to immediate demands and events, at the expense of the long-term planning or reflection on the past that respectively characterise legislative and judicial power. In particular, Robert Hassan argues that clock time has been superseded by a shift to digital, networked time and that this is linked to a shift in power away from nation states to abstract market and technological forces 'not under any meaningful democratic

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control anywhere in the world' (Hassan 2012:294). Wayne Hope further argues that the inescapable imperative to pursue high-speed, short-term financial profit is in conflict with longer-term strategies of capital accumulation, producing a crisis of capitalism that is effectively a 'crisis of temporalities' (2011: 194), of which the 2007-8 financial collapse was an early manifestation.

These points are important. However, what Hassan and Hope fail to see is that, while clock time ticked more slowly than digital time, an older, pre-capitalist time that cannot be rationally planned and controlled, inevitably still persists in the rhythms of the seasons and our bodies, and in the often unpredictable patterns and needs of emotional and caring relationships. Today, these older times are increasingly subject to the logic of measurable, commodified time, both clock and digital, as the relentless pursuit of short-term profit extends more vigorously into all areas of life in a world in which 'Infants, human organs, sexualised bodies, intimate caring, sensual pleasures, and spiritual salvation are all for sale' (Peterson 2003: 78). In the case of the natural world, the effects are potentially disastrous in terms of sustainable agriculture and climate change; the effects on our human relationships are also deeply damaging.

Caring for other people is an inherently relational and often open-ended activity, while the tasks it involves are often determined by need rather than by the clock (a child's nappy has to be changed when it is dirty, not because it is four o'clock). Many caring tasks are very much focussed on the here and now, and attempting to speed them up can often be counter-productive (trying to rush a child through eating breakfast may provoke a temper tantrum that makes them even later for nursery). Care is also often repetitive rather than with an identifiable end product (that nappy will soon need changing again); it can involve a jumble of simultaneous activities, emotions and processes (the child may not just be 'eating breakfast', but exploring tastes and textures and developing their speech while learning the effects of particular forms of behaviour); and it can take the form of simply 'being there' in case of risk or need. As discussed above, the impact of such responsibilities cannot be fully captured by time-use diaries, which are inherently tied to measurable clock time.

All this means that the 'temporal logic' that good care requires is fluid, relational, often cyclical, and oriented towards contextualised and often unpredictable needs; this is very different from the results-oriented logic of the workplace that seeks to maximise output while using as little time as possible. However, when unpaid family time has to be fitted in around the demands of employment, it too has to be organised and planned to an extent that can feel like the 'McDonaldisation of love' (Boyd 2002: 466, quoting Anne Manne). Meanwhile, in a neoliberal age of austerity, paid care is increasingly seen as a profit-making industry that seeks to 'process' as many clients as possible and that loses sight of less tangible processes; when this care is publicly provided it is increasingly subject to considerations of cost-effectiveness that focus on measureable outputs and value for money, but that may be counter-productive. For example, care workers supporting elderly people in their home may appear to increase their 'output' if they rush through the process of getting them up and dressed in the morning; but if they are able to make this a leisurely process, involving a chat and a shared cup of tea, they may be enabled to remain in their own home and out of residential care for longer, saving public money in the long run. As with family life, the problem is not simply that people do not have enough hours and minutes to do their caring work, although this is important, but that their activities are being forced into an inappropriate temporal straightjacket based on the logic of market capitalism – that is, an economic system based on the pursuit of profit rather than the satisfaction of human need in which reproductive labour is 'increasingly organised for *and* undermined by neoliberal globalisation' (Runyan and Peterson 2014: 200).

Because women throughout the world do more caring work than men, it is generally they who are most affected by the need to 'straddle multiple temporalities' (Everingham 2002: 338), and the extent to which the demands of the workplace are prioritised over other needs is bound up with the more general privileging of both typically male experiences and life patterns and gendered nature of social, economic and political inequalities. These gendered inequalities intersect with those of class and race within and between nations as the 'care deficit' experienced by some households, communities or nations is displaced onto others, producing a crisis in care and social reproduction that is linked to the more general temporal crisis in global capitalism identified above. In this context, as political theorist Nancy Fraser has argued, it is politically important to re-assert the values associated with reproduction, which are 'pregnant with critical-political possibility' and can provide powerful resources for anti-capitalist struggles (2014: 69. For related arguments, see Peterson 2012; Bryson 2011 and 2016).

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## Conclusions

Our relationship with time in contemporary societies is neither 'natural' nor just. On the contrary, time is used, valued and understood in ways that reflect and sustain economic, social and political inequalities. These inequalities operate at global, national, local and domestic levels to privilege some nations, classes and ethnic groups over others. In prioritising the temporal experiences and needs traditionally associated with men rather than women and generally providing men with more free time than women, today's time culture also sustains deep-seated gender inequalities in all areas of life. These inequalities and injustices are deeply damaging to the health and welfare of citizens and their families throughout the world. It is in the interests of us all to rethink our human relationship with time, and to confront the conflicting, hierarchically ordered, demands of caring, clock and digital times.

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