

Time, Tea Breaks and the Frontier of Control in UK Workplaces

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Oh, the factories may be roaring
With a boom-a-lacka, zoom-a-lacka, wee
But there isn't any roar when the clock strikes four
Everything stops for tea¹

One of the by-products of the intensification and reorganization of work over the last four decades has been a squeeze and sometimes elimination of paid rest breaks for lunch, tea (or coffee), and individual 'comfort' breaks. This paper explores the history of such breaks, covering whims, fads and changes in management ideologies and practices as they apply to time discipline, as well as patterns of resistance seen through the lens of the 'frontier of control'.² More recent developments have seen a partial return to the 'paid break', running against the dominant trend of cutbacks in such breaks or conversion from paid to unpaid breaks.

For employers the squeeze on rest breaks represents a significant increase in their ability to decrease the porosity of working time. Unpaid breaks, or no breaks at all, are now increasingly common in the UK. A survey in 2008 of 800 workers in the United Kingdom (UK) by *ukactive* found that the average lunchtime break has fallen since 2012 from thirty-three to twenty-two minutes.³ A similar survey of just over 2000 workers in 2017 by *workthere* recorded that many now skip their lunch break altogether, to eat at their desk while continuing to work.⁴ World Toilet Day is on 19 November each year.⁵ The issues raised by

¹ *Everything Stops for Tea*, featured in Buchanan's 1935 comedy film, *Come Out of the Pantry* (Goodhart / Hoffman / Sigler), Jack Buchanan.

² C. Goodrich, *The Frontier of Control: A Study in British Workshop Politics*, (New York: Harcourt Brace 1920), p. 31.

³ L. Donnelly, 'Average lunch-break now last just 22 minutes, down a third on six years ago, survey reveals', *Daily Telegraph*, 21 October 2008.

⁴ <https://www.workthere.com/en-gb/news-guides/research/how-can-the-office-save-the-lunch-break/>.

its proponents and organizers are serious: lack of toilet facilities (4.5 billion people worldwide do not have access to a safe toilet), as well as time to take a toilet break. For example, in the UK, Unite the Union has reported that

staff at branches of big high-street banks being required to urinate in buckets, and construction sites failing to provide any female toilets. Bus drivers had been denied toilet breaks for up to five hours, and workers in call centres for big financial institutions were told to log in and out to take a toilet break.⁶

Unpaid work is a major issue. The British Trades Union Congress (TUC) estimates in 2018 that a total of five-million workers put in an average of 7.4 extra unpaid hours per week, missing out on an average of £6,265 pay per working year. For the UK economy, over a full year, this amounts to two-billion unpaid hours of overtime, from which employers collectively benefit to the tune of £31.2 billion of unpaid labour.⁷ According to *Unpaid Britain* this is an example of 'employer delinquency', where the search for profits through super-exploitation of the workforce outweighs the risks of being caught and fined by regulatory authorities.⁸

Compounding this 'delinquency' is the employers' offensive on temporal and contractual flexibility, whereby 'risk' within the employment relationship is shifted from employer to 'employee' through the use of part-time, short-hours and zero-hour contracts. Working remotely from home has been increasing and is now at its highest ever level since records were first collected in 1998: 13.9 % of British workers now spend at least half their time working in detached fashion at home,⁹ with an ever-increasing proportion using internet-based

⁵ <http://www.worldtoiletday.info/wtd2018/>.

⁶ G. Topham, 'Thousands of UK workers denied toilet access, says Unite', *Guardian*, 19 November 2018.

⁷ P. Sellers, 'Work Your Proper Hours Day: Tackling the Culture of Unpaid Overtime' (Trades Union Congress: 2018): <https://www.tuc.org.uk/blogs/work-your-proper-hours-day-%E2%80%93-tackling-culture-unpaid-overtime>.

⁸ N. Clark and E. Herman, *Unpaid Britain: Wage Default in the British Labour Market*, (Middlesex University 2017).

⁹ Office of National Statistics, *Characteristics of Homeworkers, 2014* (Office for National Statistics, Newport: 2014).

communication.¹⁰ By the end of the twentieth century the labour market had polarized between workers on very long hours and those, often new groups, on short hours.¹¹ Added to this trend has been a compression of time at work imposed by intensified monitoring, surveillance and control of the workforce. The range of tools available to the human resources manager in contemporary workplaces is growing from simple recording of tasks and task times by computer through to electronic tagging of workers that measures not only time but also location (by GPS and RFID), and even body movements and body language (by gyroscope). This is achieved with the use of wearable accessories or implants to create what has been described as the 'quantified self'.¹²

Rest breaks are symptomatic features of management-worker conflict within the wider arena of time discipline. Changes imposed or bargained are substantive indicators not only of management attempts to intensify or extend working time but also of deeper social forces (state policies, market relations) at work in the political economy of labour markets. To assess the significance of rest breaks as an indicator of time discipline this paper first examines theoretical aspects of time at work within the valorization process, before discussing the history of rest breaks, and contemporary employer efforts to reformulate their place within working time. Recognizing the role of workers' agency in shaping these forces, patterns of resistance by workers to the dilution of the paid break are assessed. The conclusion situates the issue of paid breaks in the light of labour process debates.

Time discipline and the 'frontier of control'

¹⁰ A. Felstead, and G. Henseke, 'Assessing the Growth of Remote Working and its Consequences for Effort, Well-being and Work-Life balance', *New Technology, Work and Employment* 32:3 (2017), pp. 195-212

¹¹ F. Green, 'It's Been a Hard Day's Night: The Concentration and Intensification of Life in late Twentieth-Century Britain', *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 39 (2001). pp. 53-80.

¹² P. V. Moore, M. Upchurch and X. Whittaker (eds), *Humans and Machines at Work: Monitoring, Surveillance and Automation in Contemporary Capitalism* (Palgrave Macmillan 2018).

Time is a central feature of the 'pay-effort' and the 'work-effort' bargain between employer and worker and its contestation.¹³ The 'pay-effort bargain' involves payment for the job, but can also embrace 'working arrangements, rules and discipline', where disputes 'involve attempts to submit managerial discretion and authority to agreed – or failing that, customary rules'.¹⁴ There is an 'indeterminacy' about the pay-effort bargain in which 'the contract to sell labour power is open-ended, subject to the direction of employers (or supervisory labour) to enforce or create through consent, a definite measure of output from workers over a definite period of time'.¹⁵ Within this rubric, an employer views time objectively as a linear construct within the day, with possibilities for time 'wasted' or mis-spent, whereas workers experience time at work subjectively, often experienced as a repetitive cycle.¹⁶ They impose 'norms' and 'rules' through custom-and-practice that challenges management power over time.

Eric Hobsbawm described how workers passed through stages of learning the 'rules of the game' in which they moved collectively from a position of subservience and subsistence payment to one in which they pressed hard for what 'the traffic would bear'.¹⁷ Such struggles over working time may also contain their own inherent tensions and contradictions. For example, the institutionalization of time discipline may be transmuted by labour into demands for overtime pay (double time, time-and-a-half) for work outside 'normal' hours. Such struggles may sit side-by-side with those that seek to limit or shorten the length of the working day. For Edward Thompson, workers 'had accepted the

¹³ W. G. Baldamus, *Efficiency and Effort: An Analysis of Industrial Administration*, (Tavistock 1961). J. Eldridge, 'A Benchmark in Industrial Sociology: W. G. Baldamus on Efficiency and Effort (1961)', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations (HSIR)* 6 (1998) pp. 133–61. T. Elger, 'The Legacy of Baldamus: A Critical Appreciation', *HSIR* 34 (2013) pp. 229–61.

¹⁴ H. A. Turner, *The Trend of Strikes* (Leeds University Press 1963) p. 18.

¹⁵ C. Smith, 'The Double Indeterminacy of Labour Power: Labour Effort and Labour Mobility', *Work, Employment and Society* 20:2 (2006), pp. 389–402.

¹⁶ M. Noon and P. Blyton, *The Realities of Work* (Palgrave, Basingstoke: 2002), p. 113.

¹⁷ E. J. Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson: 1968), p. 135.

categories of their employers and learned to fight back within them. They had learned that time is money, only too well.¹⁸

Workers' ability to restrain employer attempts to close down on work-time 'porosity' will depend on relative bargaining strength. For example 'high-flyers', those who have high skill levels and are in demand, will be more able to control their time than low-wage, low-skill workers who can more easily be replaced.¹⁹ For contemporary employers, the tension between output and workers' resistance is an added incentive to increase the degree of temporal and contract flexibility by using part-time workers or zero-hour contracts. For workers in new occupations linked to new industries in the 'gig' economy, for example, this may mean a time lapse before the 'rules of the game' are learnt to the workers' advantage.²⁰

Marx wrote of 'personified labour time', where labour power becomes homogenized and is distinguished only by the quantity of hours expended:

labour has been equalized by the subordination of man to the machine or by the extreme division of labour; that men are effaced by their labour; that the pendulum of the clock has become as accurate a measure of the relative activity of two workers as it is of the speed of two locomotives. ... Time is everything, man is nothing; he is, at the most, time's carcass.

¹⁸ E. P. Thompson 'Time, Work Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism', in *Customs in Common* (Merlin Press: 1991), pp. 352–403, at p. 390; first published, *Past and Present* 38:1 (1967), pp. 56–97.

¹⁹ See P. Thompson, and E. Bannon, *Working the System: The Shop Floor and New Technology* (Pluto Press: 1985) for a description of such differences in the Plessey factory in Liverpool between 1970 and 1984. The author also advised trade union branches of the Civil and Public Services Association (CPSA, the trade union for clerical and allied grades in the UK civil service) on how to resist and negotiate forms of clerical work measurement. Clerks had to self-record their work output in work diaries which were already matched with photograph banks of timed movements for standard clerical duties (filing, lifting biro etc.). The temptation for staff was always to record work at the greatest speed (to impress management) but the trade-union advice was to record work at slow speeds, so as not to 'normalize' the higher speed. See *Clerical Work Measurement* (CPSA: 1985) available from TUC Library collection in London.

²⁰ For the emerging organization of Deliveroo couriers see C. Cant, *Riding for Deliveroo: Resistance in the New Economy* (Polity Press, 2020)

Quality no longer matters. Quantity alone decides everything; hour for hour, day for day.²¹

As William Booth argues, the outcome is 'such a levelling of skills that the movement of the clock's pendulum, marking out its identical passing moments, are an accurate measure of the relative activity of different labour powers'.²² It is a different form of expropriation than under feudalism, where the peasant's time was divided between producing food for the family and producing for the landlord or church. In the feudal system of expropriation, time was nature bounded, either by the pulse of daylight hours, the turn of the tides, or the season of the year. 'Social intercourse and labour are intermingled – the working-day lengthens or contracts according to the task – and there is no great sense of conflict between labour and 'passing the time of day'.²³

By contrast, under capitalism, work is constructed around time within a disciplinary frame. The clock and the timesheet, together with the piece and hourly rate, determine the terms of work. Most importantly, the logic of capital accumulation and competition between capitals leads to an inescapable pressure on individual employers to lower unit costs either by reorganizing work patterns or intensifying the effort of the individual worker. The outcome of this process is not straightforward. Workers may resist intensification and conflict ensue. If so, the co-operation of the workforce needed by the employer to ensure smooth running and workplace innovation will be disrupted or halted. Tinkering with rest breaks must be seen in this light. Something which may appear trivial or slight in the overall pulse of the working day may nevertheless be symbolic of management attempts to disrupt expectations and patterns of behaviour as a precursor to more fundamental change.

In the 1970s, Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital* opened up new debates within the (Marxist) labour process tradition on the degrading

²¹ K. Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works, Vol. 6* (International Publishers, New York: 1976), pp. 124, 127.

²² W. Booth, 'Economies of Time: On the Idea of Time in Marx's Political Economy', *Political Theory* 19:1 (1991), pp. 7–27, at p. 9.

²³ Thompson, 'Time, Work–Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism', *Past and Present* p. 60
Customs in Common p. 356

effects of time discipline on workers' lives within the factory and office.²⁴ Taylorism appeared to be successful in subjugating workers to managerial authority in the use of time. With digitalization, time becomes ever more compressed, with further possibilities for multi-tasking and juggling of tasks *within* time – *temporal density*.²⁵ Increasing temporal density has the effect of 'broadening' time within allocated working hours rather than necessarily extending the working day or blurring work and non-work time. This is particularly so with the advent of computerization and digitalization at the workstation, whereby more than one task can be undertaken at one moment in time. This is because snatches of time can be used to look at mobile messages (or the computer screen) and respond to them while working on something else (such as reading a document or working a machine) at the same 'time'.²⁶ As a result, porosity of time within the working day is squeezed. Too much pressure to conform to temporal density may even lead to 'Cognitive Overflow Syndrome' (COS), a newly identifiable term to assess the resultant sense of being overwhelmed and stressed.²⁷

Thompson drew attention to the idea that time discipline was tempered by a cultural shift in attitudes, taking years to achieve through ideological and managerial coercion (with the aid of church and schooling) so that in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution, western industrial cultures were markedly more time conscious than others.²⁸ Yet precisely because time is central to the dynamic of capitalism, so too it is a source of tension and contestation between employers and workers. The 'frontier of control', described by Goodrich in 1920 in the mine, factory or office, represented a concrete expression of shifts in the balance of class forces at the point of production or service delivery. A fightback against the employers' control of time could occur when the balance of class

²⁴ H. Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capitalism: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (Monthly Review Press, New York: 1974).

²⁵ J. Wajcman, *Pressed for Time* (University of Chicago Press: 2016), p. 78,

²⁶ K. Mullan and J. Wajcman, 'Have Mobile Devices Changed Working Patterns in the 21st Century? A Time-diary Analysis of Work Extension in the UK', *Work, Employment and Society* 3:1 (2019). pp. 3–20.

²⁷ CMS Legal, 'Switching on to Switching Off: Disconnecting Employees in Europe?' (2018): <https://www.lexology.com/library/detail.aspx?g=2f2f48c4-9e5b-4a1f-b166-a2b0fec80ce5>.

²⁸ Thompson, 'Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism', *Past and Present* pp. 90 - 93

forces tipped towards the powers wielded by workers collectively. Goodrich cited 'the case of the Scottish miners who refuse to work while the overman is in their stall, [and] of the Clyde blacksmiths who would not let their managing director watch their fires'.²⁹ Formal paid breaks also included a subversive element, as workers were given the space within the working day to talk to each other free from management interference, providing a social space for potential collective organization against the same.

Paternalism, the frontier of control and workers' playtime

Struggles over many decades have been central to the growth and development of trade-union campaigns for the eight-hour day, the weekend, and paid holidays. This created a chemistry of trade-union agitation, social reform and government legislation. The movement for the eight-hour working day proved especially significant. As Sydney Webb and Harold Cox observed, the 'Eight Hours dream has certainly been in the minds of Trade Unionists in England ever since the repeal of the Combination Laws in 1824, and has recurred at every season of reviving industrial prosperity since that Time'.³⁰ Indeed, as early as 1817 the social reformer and paternalist employer, Robert Owen, had proposed an eight-hour working day, and after much agitation the Ten Hour Act 1847 imposed a ten-hour working day for women and children. The 1848 revolutionary movements across the European continent also raised a widespread demand for a shorter working day, leading to the introduction of the twelve-hour day in France.³¹ The workers' movement embodied in Marx's First International (International Workingmen's Association) in 1864 included the demand for an eight-hour day in its programme adopted at its 1866 Congress in Vienna, while the demand gathered additional pace in Britain with the growth of the Chartist movement. It found a new voice with the creation of the Eight Hour

²⁹ C. Goodrich, *The Frontier of Control: A Study in British Workshop Politics* (Harcourt Brace, New York: 1920), p. 31.

³⁰ S. Webb and H. Cox, *The Eight Hours Day* (Walter Scott: 1891), p. 15: <https://ia802908.us.archive.org/5/items/eighthoursday84webb/eighthoursday84webb.pdf>.

³¹ K. Marx, *Capital: The Process of Capitalist Production* (C. H. Kerr: 1915), p. 328.

League which in 1886 published an influential pamphlet.³² The TUC adopted the demand. A long strike by workers at the Beckton gas works in east London in 1889 ended with a union-negotiated agreement: three shifts of eight hours over a twenty-four-hour period as an alternative to management proposals to introduce compulsory eighteen-hour shifts (itself an increase from twelve-hour shifts). The Gas Workers and General Labourers Union emerged from the strike.³³

The revolutionary years of 1917–18 brought with them a rash of workers' victories in forcing implementation of the eight-hour day. It was introduced formally in Russia by decree in 1917, Germany in 1918, and France and Catalonia in 1919. Furthermore, the campaign for shorter working hours gained wider legitimacy as a central feature of the first Convention of the International Labour Organisation in 1919.³⁴ Beyond Europe, the first country to introduce the eight-hour day by legislation was Uruguay in 1915. In the USA, strikes and agitation for the eight-hour day occurred from the 1830s onwards, leading eventually to victories in the most strongly organized sections of workers.

Further reductions in the average working week appeared to be governed primarily by the pulse of trade-union agitation, and the growth and consolidation of national and sectoral collective agreements. Arrowsmith has argued that there were four major waves in which the length of the average working week was cut in Britain: first, from 1872–74, from sixty to fifty-four hours; second, during the unrest after the First World War, an 11 % cut to forty-eight hours; third, immediately after the Second World War, to forty-four hours; and fourth, again in period of heightened trade-union activity and social reform in the period from 1960 to 1966, when average hours worked fell by a further 9 % to forty hours per week.³⁵ The decade between 1980 and 1990, however, marked the beginning of a tentative reversal in some members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Thus, in the UK, average

³² T. Mann *What a Compulsory Eight Hour Means to the Workers* (Modern Press: 1886): <https://www.marxists.org/archive/mann-tom/1886/eighthours1886.htm>.

³³ H. A. Clegg, *General Union* (Blackwell, . Oxford: 1951), pp. 11–23.

³⁴ See 'C001 - Hours of Work (Industry) Convention, 1919 (No. 1), Geneva, International Labour Organisation accessible at https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C001

³⁵ J. Arrowsmith, 'The Struggle over Working Time in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Britain', *HSIR* 13 (2002), pp. 83–117, at p. 83.

hours worked per week grew, as they did in Denmark, Sweden, Australia and the United States, reflecting a shift in the balance of power towards employers and the widespread introduction of new forms of employment contracts.³⁶

The 'weekend' has a more sedate but nevertheless colourful past. Its origins are located in workers' behaviour in industrializing Britain of the late seventeenth century, when the practice of taking Monday off was an ironic version of a Saint's day holiday (in this case Saint Monday). Work time in the early factories of Britain usually finished on Saturday, when workers were paid their wages. With cash in their pockets, food could be purchased and visits could be made to the public houses. Sunday was Sabbath, so Monday became the unofficial rest day, with little that the employers could do to prevent it.³⁷ The practice of Saint Monday was not confined to Britain. Thompson notes the practice also existed in France in the nineteenth century, whereby 'Monday was the day set aside for marketing and personal business'.³⁸ During the nineteenth century, in many workplaces the end of the working week gradually shifted to the mid-day on Saturday; this legitimized leisure time and paved the way for the more substantial 'weekend' of Saturday afternoon and Sunday to become embedded.³⁹ The consolidation of the principle of workers' rest on Sunday was promoted by such bodies as the Pleasant Sunday Afternoon Movement, which organized one-hour Sunday afternoon sessions for the working man (*sic*), with religious songs and a sermon as an alternative to the longer and more dismal ceremonies of the established churches.⁴⁰ As for holidays, these were based on the traditions of fairs and saints' days (although many were eliminated by the rise of Protestantism), converting later in Britain to 'official' bank holidays and extended beyond by collective agreements and national legislation in 1938 to

³⁶ M. Huberman and C. Minns, 'The Times They Are Not Chargin': Days and hours of Work in Old and New Worlds, 1870–2000', *Explorations in Economic History* 44 (2007), pp. 538–67.

³⁷ T. Wright, *Some Habits and Customs of the Working Classes* (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1867)

³⁸ Thompson, 'Time, Work–Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism' *Past and Present* p. 74

³⁹ D. Reid, 'The Decline of Saint Monday, 1766–1876', in P. Thane and A. Sutcliffe (eds), *Essays in Social History, Vol. 2*, (Clarendon Press, Oxford: 1986), pp. 98–125.

⁴⁰ D. Killingray, 'The Pleasant Sunday Afternoon Movement: Revival in the West Midlands 1875–90?', *Revival and Resurgence in Christian History, Vol. 44* (2008), pp. 262–74.

include paid holiday breaks.⁴¹ The Holidays with Pay Act (1938) provided for one weeks paid holiday per year for workers whose minimum rates of wages were fixed by trade boards. The TUC had called for two weeks' holiday for all workers and expressed disappointment at the outcome of the government inquiry leading to the legislation.⁴²

Workers also fought also for time off *within* the working day. Old traditions of the rest break for tea, beer, bread and the 'piece' (in Scotland) from agricultural times were carried over into the factory.⁴³ In the late eighteenth century, as the factory system boomed, employers began giving workers sugary tea. Replacing 'small' or watered-down beer as a refreshment (water was often polluted and too dangerous to drink), this was meant to revive the workforce from their gruelling tasks, so as to work ever harder. As the nineteenth century progressed, rest breaks were consolidated within the factory in part by the emergence of a more benevolent approach to workers' welfare constructed around a paternalist business model, sometimes inspired by religious values.⁴⁴ While not a dominant practice, this was designed as an alternative to the predominant drudgery of the Victorian workplace and sought to create a spirit of collaboration rather than conflict between employer and employee that went outside the normal boundaries of employment relations.⁴⁵ In its 'sophisticated' form the model adopted a unitary ideology to integrate the workforce and obstruct independent, collective worker organization. For example, a lack of any formal procedures (grievance, discipline) frustrated the development of a 'them and us' consciousness between worker and employer. This approach was manifest in a strong element of authoritarianism in the model, described by

⁴¹ In France the link with social unrest, trade-union agitation and reform was strongest during the Popular Front period which in 1936 led to the Matignon agreements that included the first legislation for a two-week paid holiday. See A. Rossiter, 'Popular Front economic policy and the Matignon negotiations.' *Historical Journal* 30:3: (1987), pp. 663-84.

⁴² See <https://blogs.londonmet.ac.uk/tuc-library/2015/07/03/holidays-with-pay/>.

⁴³ Many local words described the substance of the snack or meal taken into the workplace, harbouring back to work in the fields. In Hertfordshire and in neighbouring Bedfordshire it was a 'clanger', both made from suet with an internal filling. Cornwall, of course, is famous for its pasty (*aka* tatty oggy or knob end).

⁴⁴ P. Ackers, 'On Paternalism: Seven Observations on the Uses and Abuses of the Concept in Industrial Relations, Past and Present.' *HSIR* 5 (1998), pp. 173-93.

⁴⁵ D. Wray, 'Paternalism and its discontents: A Case Study', *Work, Employment and Society* 10:4 (1996), pp. 701-15.

Roderick Martin and Robert Fryer as 'authoritarianism tempered with generosity' and 'deference , tinged with resentment, on the part of the employed', and by Bendix as a continuation of the traditional master-servant relationship tinged with benevolent despotism.⁴⁶

Labour militancy gathered pace in Britain from 1910 onwards, continuing throughout the First World War. Within the workplace, the maintenance and defence of 'custom-and-practice' was driven by rank-and-file workers and embraced new waves of workers in war production. For example, in 1917 women workers at Armstrong-Whitworth in Newcastle struck for the 'tea break'; this escalated to become a strike for wider representation of female workers.⁴⁷ Goodrich's research in British industry took place in this period of rank-and-file struggle. The new militancy became identified with the shop stewards' movement, Red Clydeside and demands for workers' control of industry in the immediate post-war years.⁴⁸ The struggles of the period included the creation of a defensive Triple Alliance embracing one and a half million workers between the miners', transport workers', and rail workers' unions.

Trade unions and workplace organization retreated in the aftermath of the 1921 recession and the General Strike, May 1926. Taylorist and Fordist methods of technocratic management – the assembly line, strict division of labour to discrete tasks, and time and motion study – began to take hold. The nineteenth-century paternalist model was marginalized as employers either victimized activists or began to look to alternative forms of 'negotiated control', seeking to contain trade unions within new institutional practices agreed with union leaders. In many cases, however, rather than abandon paternalism completely, employers sought to 'sweeten the pill' of Taylorism and Fordism by maintaining aspects of welfarism in their employee-relations strategies. As Arthur McIvor and Christopher Wright (2005) record

The Singer Corporation ... introduced a range of welfarist schemes, including sports facilities and a social club, in the decade after the 1911

⁴⁶ R. Martin and R. H. Fryer, *Redundancy and Paternalist Capitalism* (Allen and Unwin: 1973), p. 26; R. Bendix, *Work and Authority in Industry* (Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick: 2001 [1956]), pp. 48–50.

⁴⁷ D. Thom, *Nice Girls and Rude Girls: Women Workers in World War 1* (I. B. Tauris: 2000), p. 39.

⁴⁸ J. Hinton, *The First Shop Stewards' Movement* (Allen and Unwin: 1973).

strike in an attempt to divert workers from the attractions of industrial unionism. Similarly, ICI sweetened the pill of scientific management by an extensive programme of welfare benefits between the wars.⁴⁹

From the other direction, the Quaker-owned companies of Cadbury and Rowntree added Taylorist aspects of scientific management to their paternalistic practices.⁵⁰ It is also the case that the introduction of scientific management in British workplaces was tempered and restrained by a mixture of employer concerns at delegating power over industrial relations to the workshop, workers' resistance, and variegated product markets impervious to standardization.⁵¹ Despite these caveats it was through the processes of negotiated agreement and welfarism that rest breaks, where they occurred, became embedded (at least for the better organized workers). They often formed part of collective agreements struck between employers and unions at national or sectoral level covering the whole range of pay and conditions at work.

Labour militancy in Britain did not begin to recover until the late 1930s, most notably in the newly emerging light-engineering aerospace and automobile sectors.⁵² The recovery was aided by arms production, as well as a renewed rank-and-file combativity (which included women and apprentices) often inspired by Communist Party activists.⁵³ Strike action in key war-production sectors became a challenge. During the Second World War, this was countered by the Coalition government through a mixture of carrot and stick. Labour's Ernest Bevin, Minister for Labour and National Service (supported by the future Labour Prime Minister, Clement Attlee) sought to restrict and avoid industrial unrest through issuing Order 1305 in 1940 and enacting a 'Procedure for the Avoidance of Disputes'.⁵⁴ This was both a carrot and a stick as it extended recognized terms (collective agreements) to similar industries and strikes were declared illegal,

⁴⁹ A. J. McIvor and C. Wright, 'Managing Labour: UK and Australian Employers in Comparative Perspective, 1900–50', *Labour History Review* 88 (2005), pp. 45–62.

⁵⁰ M. Rowlinson, 'Quaker Employers', *HSIR* 6 (1998), pp. 163–98.

⁵¹ See I. Clark, 'The Productivity Race: British Manufacturing in Historical Perspective, 1850–1990', *HSIR* 9 (2000), pp. 133–46.

⁵² See H. A. Clegg, *A History of British Trade Unions since 1889: Vol. 2, 1911–1933* (Clarendon Press: Oxford: 1988).

⁵³ R. Croucher, *Engineers at War* (Merlin: 1982).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, ch. 2. Order 1305 was not rescinded until 1951.

but even here there were few prosecutions.⁵⁵ Indeed, Geoffrey Field has suggested that rather than workers becoming bound to a 'national interest' during the period of war-time government measures the net effect was instead to 're-make' and solidify 'class' interests.⁵⁶

This goal of 'managed' industrial co-operation between employee and workers was the context in 1941 for Bevin to launch an hour-long BBC programme, *Workers Playtime*, which was broadcast from factories and offices during lunch hour to boost worker and domestic morale. The Ministry of Labour even chose the factories and offices from where the programme would be broadcast 'somewhere in Britain'.⁵⁷ Running for three days each week (until 1964), it included among its guests such icons of British entertainment as Tony Hancock, Elsie and Doris Waters (Gert and Daisy), Eric Morecambe and Ernie Wise, Peter Sellers, and Julie Andrews. The lunch 'hour', most often taken in the works canteen at a set time (although with different levels of table service and seating area according to rank), became embedded in working practice, alongside the tea break. The hour-long break was long enough for workers living close by to go home for lunch if they so wished.

In the post-war boom of the 1950s and through to the 1960s, this structured regime of work, rest and play morphed into a partial revival of the paternalistic business practices where many large enterprises would host a range of clubs and societies (for example, drama and sports) for 'their' workers. Such initiatives were validated by the new-found enthusiasm for the 'human relations' school of management theory, originating in inter-war America. This took cognisance of workers' needs and desires for social relationships and self-esteem at the workplace, linking these to prospects for increased individual productivity.⁵⁸ No doubt inspired by fears of workplace union organization, human relations attempted to ameliorate aspects of the alienating nature of

⁵⁵ See N. Fishman, 'A Vital Element in British Industrial Relations': A Reassessment of Order 1305, 1940-51', *HSIR* 8 (1999), pp. 43-86.

⁵⁶ G. F. Field, *Blood, Sweat and Toil: Remaking the British Working Class 1939-1945* (Oxford University Press: 2014).

⁵⁷ See <http://andywalmsley.blogspot.com/2015/08/on-light-part-7-from-factory-somewhere.html>.

⁵⁸ G. E. Mayo, *The Human Problems of an Industrial Civilization* (Routledge [1933] 2003).

Taylorism but this time through socio-psychological means.⁵⁹ Efforts by employers to incorporate the everyday life of their employees into the corporation seemed almost absolute in some cases. For example, the large ladies' lingerie manufacturer, Kayser Bondor, in Baldock, Hertfordshire, went so far as to provide a swimming pool, tennis courts and a ballroom for staff.⁶⁰

The ensuing combination of Taylorist mass production and management theories of motivation allowed the space for new techniques of job 'enrichment', such as job rotation and job enlargement to take hold, and for rest breaks to be sanctified in workplace practice and culture.⁶¹ Many workplaces were subject to job evaluation and work measurement to establish output 'norms' around which a rate for the job would be agreed and paid. However, the 'scientific' methods employed by such studies were always capable of being undermined or manipulated by workers able to utilize sufficient bargaining strength to their advantage, sometimes by halting work, taking 'leisure time' in work, or even going home once their agreed targets for the week had been met.⁶² Tea breaks took their part, centre stage, often with the 'tea lady' doing the rounds with the trolley twice a day, at set times in the office or factory. As automatic vending machines became more widespread, the tea 'lady' began to disappear, but tea and coffee, and the custom-and-practice of taking a break while drinking persisted, often because vending machines (and later the microwave oven) were located in the works or office canteen. Within schools, colleges and universities its equivalent was time in the common room or playground, as the school bell sounded in rhythm with the factory hooter.

⁵⁹ K. Bruce and C. Nyland, 'Elton Mayo and the Deification of Human Relations', *Organization Studies* 32:3 (2011), pp. 383–405,

⁶⁰ C. Rose, 'Bondor in Baldock: A Brief history of an Iconic Building', in *The Annual Guide to Baldock and Ashwell* (3rd edn, 2014):

[https://www.hertsmemories.org.uk/content/herts-history/towns-and-](https://www.hertsmemories.org.uk/content/herts-history/towns-and-villages/baldock/bondor_in_baldock)

[villages/baldock/bondor_in_baldock](https://www.hertsmemories.org.uk/content/herts-history/towns-and-villages/baldock/bondor_in_baldock). An earlier example of such lavish staff facilities was the Quaker-owned Fry's chocolate factory in Greenbank, Bristol, which in the 1920s had a swimming pool, tennis courts and bowling green attached to the factory. See J. Penny, *A Short History of the Greenbank Chocolate Factory* (undated):

https://web.archive.org/web/20160303184920/http://www.chocolatememories.org/greenbank_history.pdf.

⁶¹ T. Nichols and H. Beynon, *Living with Capitalism: Class Relations and the Modern Factory* (Routledge and Kegan Paul: 1977).

⁶² Thompson and Bannon, ch. 3.

The employers' offensive against rest breaks

Beginning in the late 1960s, intensified global competition and falling rates of profitability ushered in a new regime of capital accumulation (otherwise labelled the neoliberal era of capitalism) which expanded both labour and product markets from the global North to the global South.⁶³ By the 1980s, labour could be 'sourced' beyond the nation-state in a globalizing economy. Employers in the UK sought to abolish the agreed 'rate for the job' designed to standardize reward for skills in national labour markets and consequently eschewed long held national collective agreements in a manner which John Purcell described apocalyptically in his article as 'The End of Institutional Industrial Relations'.⁶⁴ The decline of collective bargaining in the UK was indeed significant, and the associated decline in workers' bargaining power 'after the long boom' is recorded by Huw Beynon as he revisits the workplace scenarios of his case study of class relations in the British workplace written with Theo Nichols more than four decades ago.⁶⁵ Between 1984 and 2004 the percentage of all workplaces covered by collective bargaining in the workplace fell from two thirds to one third. The decline was most severe in the private (and trading) sector where coverage fell from 47 % to just 16 %.⁶⁶

While struggles over the length of the working day or week have been recorded and celebrated, struggles over time within the working day have been less so, mostly restricted to case-study analyses or ethnographies of the frontier of control in the mine, factory or office. Some classic studies in British industrial relations were conducted through participant observation when the authors worked the 'line' themselves. Workers were studied as subjects rather than

⁶³ B. Harrison, *Lean and Mean: The Changing Landscape of Corporate Power in the Age of Flexibility* (Basic Books, New York: 1994); R. Brenner, 'The Economics of Global Turbulence: A Special Report on the World economy, 1950–98.', *New Left Review* 229 (1998)

⁶⁴ J. Purcell, 'The End of Institutional Industrial Relations', *Political Quarterly* 64 (1): (1993), pp. 6–23.

⁶⁵ T. Nichols and H. Beynon, *Living with Capitalism: Class Relations and the Modern Factory* (Routledge and Kegan Paul: 1977), and H. Beynon 'After the Long Boom: Living with Capitalism in the Twenty-First Century', *HSIR* 40 (2019), pp. 187–221.

⁶⁶ W. Brown, A. Bryson and J. Forth, 'Competition and the Retreat from Collective Bargaining', *NIESR Discussion Paper No. 318* (National Institute of Economic and Social Research: 2008), p. 5

objects. Such studies, towards the end of a 'high point' of trade-union advance in the UK in the 1970s and early 1980s, illustrated the skirmishes over the 'frontier of control' in which the locus of power could swing from employer to collectively organized workers and back again.

Workers' autonomy within the labour process raises important issues. Braverman focused on the degree to which workers subject to scientific management became habituated to new ways of working through processes of manipulation and coercion by employers. He suggested that while workers are habituated by external forces to the degenerated work they experience, hostility persists as a 'subterranean stream' that may emerge if employers overstep the 'bounds of physical or mental capacity' or if employment conditions permit.⁶⁷ The degree to which hostility and resistance exists and persists, according to Tony Elger among others, may have been underplayed by Braverman due to his particular focus on the 'monopoly' aspects of contemporary capitalism and his lack of attention to wider political forces, workers' agency and class consciousness.⁶⁸

Case studies from the 1970s assessed the limits of managerial omnipotence within the context of the Braverman debates. Goodrich's original study was supplemented by Huw Beynon's *Working for Ford* which depicted life in the factory and the struggle between shop-floor worker, the foreman and the boss. Anna Pollert's *Girls, Wives, Factory Lives* (1981) studied female tobacco workers in Bristol and explored their struggle in maintaining life both inside and outside paid work.⁶⁹ Miriam Glucksmann's (Ruth Cavendish) participant-observation study, *Women on the Line*, described the travails of women in a London car-components factory, and gave an account of struggles over the use of time.⁷⁰ Her personal experience of time discipline within the factory was so intense that she reflected, 'For many years afterwards I would always seek the quickest route between *a* and *b*, attempting to eliminate unnecessary movements in completing a task, even if this was in the kitchen, between fridge

⁶⁷ Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, p. 151.

⁶⁸ See T. Elger, 'Valorisation and 'deskilling': a critique of Braverman', *Capital and Class* 3:1 (1979), pp. 59–99.

⁶⁹ H. Beynon, *Working for Ford* (Allen Lane: 1973); A. Pollert, *Girls, Wives, Factory Lives* (Macmillan, 1981).

⁷⁰ M. Glucksmann [R. Cavendish], *Women on the Line* (Routledge, 1982/2009).

and cooker. It was if I'd internalised time and motion study!⁷¹ In a popular account the journalist Madeleine Bunting recorded evidence from a female worker of the shift in management policy in the 'Saltfillas' (not its real name) factory in the Midlands in 2003:

When I first started we'd go on a line and after a couple of hours, we'd stop the line and all go off for a toilet break. Then we'd be back to work for a while before it was another break, and then the same thing happened in the afternoons. Between 8 and 4.35 we'd stop the line two or three times on top of the two breaks we were allowed. Sometime in the early eighties, they offered us a bribe – a pay rise in return for stopping that.⁷²

There have been ingenious ways in which workers have wrested partial control over time, often by processes of time 'fiddling' or 'making out' whereby work schedules are manipulated in the workers' favour,⁷³ by accumulating time 'off' by over-recording time necessary to complete the job,⁷⁴ or even by sabotaging machinery to stop the line.⁷⁵ In one example, from the struggle for workers' control in the Italian 'hot autumn' of 1969 of a Fiat worker, Pasquale di Stefano, defiantly challenged existing norms:

I decided to get out of my subordinate condition. To make this clear to everyone, every morning, around eight o' clock, I would stop working for about twenty minutes and eat a sandwich. This may sound silly, but no

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. xxi.

⁷² M. Bunting, *Willing Slaves: How the Overwork Culture Is Ruling Our Lives* (Harper Collins: 2004), p. 34.

⁷³ M. Burawoy, *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labour Process under Monopoly Capitalism* (University of Chicago Press: 1979); P. K. Edwards and C. Whitson, 'Workers Are Working Harder: Effort and Shop Floor Relations in the 1980s', *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 29:4 (1991). pp. 593–601.

⁷⁴ G. Mars, *Cheats at Work: An Anthology of Workplace Crime* (Allen and Unwin: 1982).

⁷⁵ L. Taylor and P. Walton, 'Industrial Sabotage: Motives and Meanings', in S. Cohen (ed.), *Images of Deviance* (Penguin, Harmondsworth: 1971), pp. 219–44.

one had ever done it before, certainly no one had done it so openly, right before the supervisors.⁷⁶

Breaks in working time obstruct employers' control of time at the workplace. Employers began to pursue new avenues to raising productivity as a supplement to, or a replacement for, their 'human relations', socio-psychological obsession. Rest breaks fell foul of a new rubric of productivity deals constructed to lower unit-labour costs by intensifying work and attacking 'porosities' within the working day.⁷⁷ For the tea break, at least, the consequent managerial 'solipsism' ensured its decline.⁷⁸

During the initial skirmishes in the 1970s and 1980s, in the better organized union workplaces, workers opposed the creeping encroachment of management authority. This was the case in the car industry where unions had established a base in the late 1950s and 1960s period of mass production; workers often expressed their power by unofficial strikes and unconstitutional action outside procedural agreements. Symbolic struggles set the scene for change. In 1977 Michael Edwardes was appointed as head of British Leyland to restructure the company. His management methods challenged workplace union organization, and in 1979 he confronted the power of the shop stewards at the companies' plants by sacking Derek Robinson, a Communist Party member and the unions' convenor at the Austin factory, Longbridge, Birmingham. A long dispute followed, which finally ended in February 1980 when Robinson's dismissal was confirmed. The remainder of the year saw an offensive against the employees as jobs were shed wholesale. Edwardes also introduced a plan to reduce the companies 'relaxation allowances', part of which was to shorten and stagger across the day the twice daily tea breaks. In response, one hundred paint sprayers struck at Longbridge, bringing production of the Mini and Allegro cars to a halt. The tea breaks stayed but in a shortened form. The mainstream press vilified the strikes in an atmosphere where union 'bosses and barons' were

⁷⁶ Cited in R. Franzosi, *The Puzzle of Strikes: Class and State Strategies in Postwar Italy* (Cambridge University Press 1995), p. 281,

⁷⁷ For critical accounts see T. Nichols, *The British Worker Question: A New Look at Workers and Productivity in Manufacturing* (Routledge and Kegan Paul: 1986), and R. Brown (ed.), *The Changing Shape of Work* (Macmillan, Basingstoke: 1997).

⁷⁸ J. Stewart, *The Decline of the Tea Lady: Management for Dissidents* (Wakefield Press, Kent Town: Australia 2004).

blamed for Britain's economic problems in the new era of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister.⁷⁹

Employers' attempts to restrict and reduce rest breaks of all kinds peaked as the rise of new and more aggressive management techniques gathered pace. The piece-rate system of payment had allowed space for workers to negotiate top-up payments and for localized 'wage drift' to take place. Employers reacted by forcing through programmes of measured-day work, wresting back control of time and payment. By the end of the 1980s, new working methods such as lean production, just-in-time, total quality management, and team working – 'Japanization' – replaced just-in-case and the culture of the stockroom. Within both manufacturing and services new forms of work organization emphasized team-working, which had the effect of deconstructing the custom-and-practice of rest allowances established by shop stewards at enterprise level into more fractured and dissipated forms of labour processes. Andrew Danford, Anthony Richardson and Martin Upchurch, in their study of establishments in south-west England, record the changes voiced by a union steward:

It's made a hell of a difference to how we influence working practices. Whereas before, the management always used to come to the works committee to discuss issues, changes in hours, changes in practices, labour deployment and those types of issues. Now they don't. Now they try to get it through the back door by enticing one or two teams into accepting certain changes without involving the union at all.⁸⁰

For Peter Titherington, the former convener of Vauxhall Ellesmere Port, the result of this shift was that 'Under the piece-rate system we directly sold the fruits of our labour. Under Measured Day Work we sold our time. Under lean, management determine our labour input and time with a vengeance'.⁸¹

Tensions over tea breaks within the motor industry resurfaced again in 2012 when workers on the Mini's production line at Cowley, Oxford (by then

⁷⁹ T. Claydon, 'Tales of Disorder: The Press and the Narrative Construction of Industrial Relations in the British Motor Industry, 1950–79', *HSIR* 9 (2000), pp. 1–36.

⁸⁰ Danford *et al*, p. 55.

⁸¹ P. Stewart, K. Murphy, A. Danford, T. Richardson, M. Richardson and V. Wass, *We Sell Our Time No More: Workers' Struggles against Lean Production in the British Car Industry* (Pluto: 2010).

owned by BMW), voted by 97 % to reject a pay deal which would have also trimmed the tea break time by eleven minutes per day, and time away from the assembly line would be reduced to just forty-two minutes in an eleven-hour shift, plus an unpaid lunch break (in contrast, BMW workers in Germany had fifty minutes every eight hours).⁸² Cutting payment for tea breaks or financing pay rises by cuts occurred sporadically across other areas of manufacturing and services. A report commissioned by the Scottish Trades Union Congress cited the example of a merger between Royal Bank of Scotland and Halifax Bank of Scotland (HBOS), which led to the abolition of tea breaks. One national union officer recalled how it had been common practice in Bank of Scotland branches prior to the merger that brought HBOS into being for staff to have coffee and scones at 10 am every morning. When she visited branches she would be invited to these sessions, which enabled her to talk to staff and thus play an important role in employee–manager communications. After the merger, such breaks became a thing of the past.⁸³

During the 2000s other discrete disputes over tea breaks broke out. Examples include a series of one-day strikes at Raven Manufacturing near Burnley in 2002, a strike by both manual and white-collar workers at Falkirk Council in 2007, and a strike ballot by catering and cleaning staff at Addenbrooke Hospital in Cambridge in 2012.⁸⁴ In an unusual inversion of the repertoire of industrial action, refuse collectors in Birmingham in dispute against changes in working practices in 2017 voted to work-to-rule by returning to their depots each day for tea breaks, thus enforcing an effective ‘strike’ by other means.⁸⁵

In summary, it can be argued that neoliberalism as the ideology and practice of free markets in a globalizing economy provided the space to tip the balance of social forces to the employer. ‘New right’ values were promoted, characterized in Britain after 1979 by an ‘ongoing reform project to remodel society’ with a ‘particular focus on the deregulation of capital and the re-

⁸² S. Hawkes, ‘Mini workers threaten strike over tea break’. *Sun*, 12 April, 2019.

⁸³ P. Taylor, *Performance Management and the New Workplace Tyranny: A Report for the Scottish Trades Union Congress* (undated).

⁸⁴ See reports at

<https://www.google.com/search?q=tea+breaks&sitesearch=socialistworker.co.uk>.

⁸⁵ N. Elkes, ‘Birmingham bin strike extended through till September after talks break down’, *Birmingham Mail*, 18 July 2017.

regulation of labour'.⁸⁶ Collective bargaining and collective agreements at the workplace in many instances became a casualty, replaced by individual performance measurement and supplemented by a new target culture, aided and abetted by new technical forms of monitoring, surveillance and control. Downtime within work and the associated 'porosity' of the working day contracted as a result of this process. The evidence of such processes are clear. Paul Blyton in 1992 recorded the increase in employer use of *temporal flexibility*, especially in the manufacturing sector, between 1983 and 1991. The period was marked by the Engineering Employers' Federation (EEF) withdrawal from national collective agreements after a long-running dispute with Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions (CSEU) over working hours: 'in October 1989 the CSEU set in motion a year-long campaign of selective strike ballots and strike action, backed by a national strike levy, to achieve an improved offer. *En route* this action precipitated the EEF to abandon its long-established role as industry negotiator on all substantive issues'.⁸⁷ The withdrawal of the EEF appeared to be a result of its diminished role from the 1960s as a national negotiator in the face of increasing tendencies for factory level negotiations.⁸⁸ A survey by Industrial Relations Services found that in the ensuing disputes: 'References to cuts in, or elimination of, tea breaks were made in 18 of the 50 settlements, cuts/elimination of washing time in 13 cases and the introduction of 'bell to bell' working practices in ten cases'.⁸⁹

Temporal density meets temporal flexibility

Regulation on working hours and holidays in the UK has traditionally been left to collective bargaining or, in the absence of trade unions, employer unilateral

⁸⁶ P. Smith, 'Labour under the Law: A New Law of Combination, and Master and Servant, in 21st-century Britain?', *Industrial Relations Journal (IRJ)* 46:5-6 (2015), pp. 345-64, at p. 351. See also W. Brown and D. Marsden, 'Individualization and Growing Diversity of Employment relationships', in D. Marsden (ed.), *Employment in the Lean Years: Policy and Prospects for the Next Decade* (Oxford University Press: 2011).

⁸⁷ P. Blyton, 'Flexible Times? Developments in Recent Flexibility', *IRJ* 23:1 (1992), pp. 26-36, at p. 31.

⁸⁸ A. Mckinlay, 'The Paradoxes of British Employer Organization, c. 1897-2000', *HSIR* 31/32 (2011), pp. 89-113.

⁸⁹ Blyton, 'Flexible Times?', p. 33.

regulation. Since 1993, however, workplaces in the UK have been governed by EU Working Time Regulations, stipulating a rest break where the working day is six hours or longer, but the nature, form and content of such rest breaks is ambiguous and 'escape options' from the regulations are built in.⁹⁰ The ambiguities came to prominence in 2009 as part of the unofficial strikes at an oil refinery at Lindsey, north Lincolnshire, where the company awarded the work, the Italy-based IREM, had proposed shift patterns that did not include paid tea breaks, giving it a small but cumulatively significant cost advantage. In contrast, British-based firms bidding for the work had included paid tea breaks in the costing. EU Regulations were complied with as the minimum, legally required rest periods were specified in the proposed contract. The contested issue remained the abolition of the 'custom and practice' paid tea break, strongly defended by the workers. The dispute spread to the nuclear site at Sellafield and other oil refineries in the UK. An inquiry by the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) supported IREM's interpretation of the legislation.⁹¹ Derek Simpson, Unite the Union's then joint general secretary, responded tartly: 'The law wasn't broken – the law was wrong. Unless European governments start to put working people first with protective legislation that applies across the whole of the EU, then protests like the ones we have seen in the construction industry will go on until they do'.⁹²

The ambiguity of paid as opposed to unpaid breaks was exploited by the supermarket, Sainsbury, in 2018, when it offered an above-inflation pay rise financed partly by the removal both of a half-hour paid break every eight-hour shift and also a fifteen-minute paid break for seven-hour shifts. After negative reaction from unions and some Members of Parliament, Sainsbury revised the offer, but paid breaks remained abolished.⁹³ ASDA in 2019 proposed a new agreement which would remove payment for lunch breaks in return for a new

⁹⁰ D. Goss and D. Adam-Smith, 'Pragmatism and Compliance: Employer Responses to the Working Time Regulations', *IRJ* 32:3 (2003), pp. 195–208.

⁹¹ ACAS, *Report of an Inquiry into the Circumstances surrounding the Lindsey Oil Refinery Dispute* (ACAS: 2009).

⁹² Cited in D. Henke, 'Tea breaks helped lose British workers jobs at Lindsey, report finds', *Guardian*, 16 February 2009.

⁹³ S. Butler, 'Sainsbury's increases staff pay, but axes paid breaks and bonuses', *Guardian*, 6 March 2018.

pay deal.⁹⁴ Despite opposition by the GMB, it successfully imposed the change on an individual basis (via a new contract of employment).⁹⁵

South Asian female workers in Southall, west London, producing in-flight meals for British Airways, had also fallen victim to outsourcing in 2005 when their employment contracts were transferred to Gate Gourmet. The new employer sought to cut back on rest breaks, reducing the lunch break from thirty to fifteen minutes and the tea break to ten minutes. One of the women workers records:

they were trying to squeeze work out of us, like you squeeze blood out of meat. They wanted to change the conditions at work. Like the breaks. It was just a 10-minute break, not even enough to drink a cup of tea properly. Just enough time to go to the toilet, relax for a few minutes. Look at the women today, so many of them have arthritis and pain in their joints and back. That's what you needed the break for, to stretch yourself, ease your aching muscles.⁹⁶

In response the women went on unofficial strike; baggage handlers struck in solidarity, closing Heathrow airport for forty-eight hours. This action contravened Conservative government legislation restricting immunities to unions taking strike action (Employment Acts of 1980 and 1990). The Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU), after initially supporting the action, distanced itself and then withdrew support and sought financial compensation for the 700 workers who had been dismissed.⁹⁷

Within public services, private contractors have undercut the pay and working conditions of workers transferred from National Health Service (NHS) and local government care services in a variety of ways. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the case of home-care workers. A study by Sian Moore and

⁹⁴ See GMB website at <https://www.gmb-southern.org.uk/news/gmb-mass-demonstration-asda-leeds>.

⁹⁵ <https://www.thegrocer.co.uk/asda/asda-contract-row-we-wont-ask-people-to-do-shifts-they-cant-do/599188.article>

⁹⁶ <https://www.striking-women.org/module/striking-out/gate-gourmet-dispute>.

⁹⁷ J. Hendy and G. Gall, 'British Trade Union Rights Today and the Trade Union Freedom Bill', in K. D. Ewing (ed.), *The Right to Strike: From the Trade Disputes Act 1906 to a Trade Union Freedom Bill* (Institute of Employment Rights, Liverpool: 2006), pp. 247-77.

Lydia Hayes in 2018 tracked the process whereby workers' down-time and rest time was all but eliminated by electronic control mechanisms (through mobile phones). A rest break could often only be achieved by cutting visits to clients short, thus reducing the quality of service: 'For care workers back-to-back visits ('call-cramming') and insufficient travel time between them drives them to cut visits short to ensure they get to the next service user.... travel time is not paid in order to maximise the extent of unpaid labour'.⁹⁸

In July 2017 one of the biggest strikes within the NHS took place as workers across Whipps Cross, Mile End, Royal London and St Bartholomew's hospitals in London were transferred to the private Serco corporation in a contract worth £600m. Three days after taking over the contract Serco proposed to abolish the ten-minute morning tea break. 120 staff struck immediately until the tea breaks were reinstated,⁹⁹ and a more general strike over pay and 'dignity within the workplace' followed which resulted in an agreement struck between Unite and Serco for a pay rise of 1 %, and an uplifting of all affected staff from the Minimum to the London Living Wage.¹⁰⁰

The conjuncture of time flexibility and time density is a potentially explosive mix. A recent example is in education where a teacher launched a petition over the time allowed for planning and preparation (PPA) which is now restricted to six minutes per lesson.¹⁰¹ It followed from action over other time allowances and excessive monitoring within schools, leading to a campaign by the National Education Union (NEU) against punitive regimes of workload monitoring and surveillance.¹⁰²

Managerial belligerence towards toilet breaks has been evident in the ensuing two decades with digitalization at the workplace. With contemporary applications of electronic tags and implants, employers can now time workers'

⁹⁸ S. Moore and L. Hayes, 'The Electronic Monitoring of Care Work: The Redefinition of Paid Working Time', in P. V. Moore, M. Upchurch and X. Whittaker (eds), *Humans and Machines at Work: Monitoring, Surveillance and Automation in Contemporary Capitalism* (Palgrave Macmillan: 2018), p. 114:

⁹⁹ S. Whitehead, "'Some days I feel like I'll drop dead": Britain's biggest cleaners' strike', *Guardian*, 1 August 2017.

¹⁰⁰ <https://www.nhsforale.info/private-providers/serco-new/>.

¹⁰¹ <https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/246255>.

¹⁰² M. Upchurch, P. Moore and A. Kunter, 'Marketisation, Commodification and the Implications for Teachers' Autonomy in England', *Research in Political Economy* 29 (2018), pp. 133–53. See also the NEU campaign at <https://neu.org.uk/campaigns/workload>.

toilet breaks. A Norwegian company has been reported as requiring women to wear red bracelets to 'allow' them extra time for toilet breaks.¹⁰³ New forms of resistance are beginning to emerge, based on disputes over data ownership and use or through manipulations of the peculiarities of the app in the gig economy. For example, in September 2019, cycle and motor-scooter couriers working for Deliveroo across sixteen 'zones' in various parts of the UK struck against the discipline of the app and its inbuilt non-recognition of payment for 'waiting time'.¹⁰⁴ Assembling at the prime locations for picking up new orders has provided an arena for collective organization and industrial action. In some circumstances the state may be pressured by trade unions and other agencies to introduce legislation to protect workers' health and safety in the new stress-ridden workplace or to protect data privacy.¹⁰⁵ In other cases, trade unions may act to limit exposure to emails and other forms of electronic communication outside work hours. The French trade unions, for example, were successful in gaining a new section of the Labour Code in 2016 which enforced the 'right to disconnect' from IT-devices during holidays and rest periods in companies with more than fifty employees.¹⁰⁶

Well-being, and a 'new' paternalism?

The scenario of an employer removing rest breaks through contractual or other means is not the whole picture. In a new initiative, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) has collaborated with the mental health campaigner, MIND, to promote 'wellness' and 'well-being' programmes to deal with workplace stress. The CIPD warns that 'Poor workplace wellbeing has been found to cause a decrease in productivity for 63% of employees in the UK, while 21% of workers leave their jobs because they feel that the company culture

¹⁰³ Z. Drewett, 'Employers time toilet breaks and make women wear bracelets if they are on their period', *Metro*, 13 November 2018.

¹⁰⁴ C. Cant, 'Deliveroo workers launch new strike wave', 28 September 2019: *Notes From Below* at <https://notesfrombelow.org/article/deliveroo-workers-launch-new-strike-wave>.

¹⁰⁵ See Moore *et al*, *Humans and Machines at Work*, ch. 2.

¹⁰⁶ CMS, *Legal Switching on to Switching Off: Disconnecting Employees in Europe?*, (2018): <https://www.lexology.com/library/detail.aspx?g=2f2f48c4-9e5b-4a1f-b166-a2b0fec80ce5>.

does not align with their personal values.¹⁰⁷ However, the 'solution' proffered by the CIPD and other agencies does not focus on the benefits of breaks, rest and recuperation. Rather, 'wellness' and 'well-being' programmes prepared by management consultants are considered the way forward, emphasizing the need for worker 'resilience'.¹⁰⁸ Thus the responsibility for the symptoms of stress is placed on the individual.¹⁰⁹ 'Wellness' and mindfulness programmes are focused at the point of production and, to relieve stress, include such activities as 'desk massage' and 'desk yoga'.¹¹⁰ Not all mental health charities take the same view. The Mental Health Foundation, for example, continues to offer the advice that employees should 'Take proper breaks at work, for example by taking at least half an hour for lunch and getting out of the workplace if you can.'¹¹¹

New forms of work organization are now promoted by employers, reviving a form of paternalism but without the *formal* tea or lunch break. For example, the 'gig' corporations, otherwise known as the FANGs (Facebook, Amazon, Netflix and Google), are at the forefront of increasing temporal density. They take the 'resilience' approach one stage further in their prestige head offices, in ways that are reminiscent of the old paternalism, while at the same time exercising extreme temporal flexibility in their outsourced service operations such as Amazon Mechanical Turk.¹¹² At Google's headquarters, Mountain View, California, employees are never 150 feet away from a micro-kitchen. There is free transport to work where you find an on-site massage parlour, games room, swings, and ball pits where staff may take their laptops to work, a micro-

¹⁰⁷ CIPD/MIND 2019 details

¹⁰⁸ Nicole Aschoff writes that these new techniques are manifest whereby the super-rich, such as Oprah Winfrey and Melinda Gates, suggest we must examine our inner self or promote charity to alleviate poverty and inequality: N. Aschoff, *The New Prophets of Capital* (Verso: 2015). **See discussion of book accessible at <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/blog/oprah-is-not-your-friend-a-qa-with-nicole-aschoff>**

¹⁰⁹ See R. Purcer, *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality* (Repeater Books: 2019).

¹¹⁰ Stress Management Society *Corporate Wellbeing Solutions* (undated): <http://www.stressmanagementsociety.com/Corporate-Wellbeing-Solutions.html>.

¹¹¹ See <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/w/work-life-balance>.

¹¹² K. Hara, A. Adams, K. Milland, S. Savage, C. Callison-Burch and J. Bigham, 'A Data-Driven Analysis of Workers' Earnings on Amazon Mechanical Turk', *Paper to the 2018 ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, Montreal, Canada; A. Semuels, 'The Internet Is Enabling a New Kind of Poorly Paid Hell', *Next Economy*, *The Atlantic*, 23 January 2018.

swimming pool which flows the water in the opposite direction to your strokes so you get the impression of swimming a lap, and the right to take your dog to work (cats are not allowed as it would be too 'stressful' for them). Employees who wish to avoid walking down the stairs can slide down a chute instead. Induction of new employees consists of a 'New Employee Orientation and Arranged Virginity-Loss Night.'¹¹³ Facebook's engineering headquarters in London, with 1000 employees, has sleep pods if you wish to snooze, artistic workshops with a resident artist, games room (billiards, table tennis, football tables), micro-kitchens, and a canteen with free food to which you can bring friends and family.¹¹⁴

This new high-tech or cloud version of paternalism shares with the old paternalism an employer strategy that assumes that spending money on staff benefits will buy employee loyalty (and help to keep workers' collective organization at bay). It also repeats the practice of allowing creative and highly skilled workers a degree of 'responsible autonomy' identified in the 1970s as a managerial strategy fit for purpose within large-scale, monopoly capitalism. In this model 'managerial authority' is maintained 'by getting workers to identify with the competitive aims of the enterprise so that they will act "responsibly" without supervision'.¹¹⁵ This blurring of work and non-work life may partly be related to an effect of the internet (email) and mobile phones, as well as new flexible working arrangements.¹¹⁶ The FANG approach appears to *embrace* non-working-life aspirations by incorporating them into the working day. The modern sophisticated paternalist employer socially constructs the workplace so that life becomes work and work becomes life. It uses fun, games and good food in its attempt to bind the company 'associate' to corporate objectives.¹¹⁷ However,

¹¹³ LetsIntern.com. Inside Google Office | 15 coolest things you get as a Google Employee (2014): <http://www.letsintern.com/blog/inside-google-office/>

¹¹⁴ Business Insider Presents:

<https://www.facebook.com/BusinessInsiderPresents/videos/2472109936151736/UzpfSTU4MTY4NDE4NTpWSzoXMDE2MTM1NzQ1Mjk5NTIyOA>.

¹¹⁵ A. Friedman, 'Responsible Autonomy versus Direct Control over the Labour Process', *Capital and Class* 1:1 (1977), pp. 43–57, at p. 48.

¹¹⁶ N. Chesley, 'Blurring Boundaries? Linking Technology Use, Spillover, Individual Distress, and Family Satisfaction', *Journal of Marriage and Family* 67:5 (2005) pp. 1237–48.

¹¹⁷ A further example is perhaps the new headquarters of Huawei in China, which is designed to look like a European fairy-tale capital see

even this world of digital artisans, self-conscious, super-rich and creative entrepreneurs is not immune from resistance as 'colleagues' within the high-tech, high-profile FANGs begin to self-identify as 'workers', rejecting the corporate goals of the giant companies and even making common cause 'with the cleaners and baristas that serve them'.¹¹⁸ There are also limits to the phenomenon of acting without supervision. Yahoo! (now part of Google) announced in 2013 its intention to stop working from home because, as Jackie Reses, human resources director, explained 'Speed and quality are often sacrificed when we work from home ... We need to be one Yahoo!, and that starts with physically being together'.¹¹⁹

Outside the FANGs, new forms of paternalism are less common, but employers' efforts to overcome the deleterious effects of work-related stress are in evidence. Some employers are utilizing the mantra and practice of temporal flexibility in new ways in order to combat the stress caused by temporal density. Most notable is the emerging practice of allowing employees to schedule their own hours to complete set tasks, which may involve working a four-day week, or working remotely more often from home. The accountancy firm PwC now offers employees contracts lasting a set number of days to complete specific tasks, rather than contracts which have the expectation of a 9–5 job.¹²⁰ In recognition of the positive correlations between rest, recuperation and productivity the Wellcome Trust agreed to trial a four-day working week, only to abandon the idea as 'too operationally complex to implement'.¹²¹ Smaller companies, mostly in the creative and design sector, are now offering the same, hoping to overcome, it seems, the negative effect of 'Friday fatigue'.¹²² Perhaps most revealing of all is a new trend to introduce 'Swedish-style' *fika* coffee breaks into the modern British workplace. In promoting the idea of fixed breaks away from

<https://www.facebook.com/scmp/videos/276037576661244/UzpfSTU4MTY4NDE4NTpWSzoxMDE2MTUwOTk3NTYxMDIyOA/>.

¹¹⁸ H. O'Brien, 'How Silicon Valley is being reshaped by trade unions', *New Statesman*, 13 March 2019

¹¹⁹ H. McRae, 'When even Yahoo!'s Marissa Mayer wants workers in the office, is the homeworking revolution over?', *Independent*, 26 February 2013

¹²⁰ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-45353786>.

¹²¹ <https://wellcome.ac.uk/press-release/statement-decision-trial-four-day-week>

¹²² R. Booth and M. Holmes 'String of British firms switch over to four-day working week', *Guardian* 12th March, 2019

the desk to drink coffee with workmates, Karen Adams from the Public Relations agency, Hattrick commented:

We introduced fika as a way of having a moment to relax and talk to your workmates. If people were having external problems, or just stress, someone might pick that up ... With fika, you can have a break, come back refreshed and look at things from a different perspective. ... Work talk is prohibited in fika. It forces you away from our work so you can re-evaluate things and prioritise tasks when you do return.¹²³

This example of the return of the coffee/tea break, while rare, is not unprecedented. The *New York Times* reported in 2014 the cases of the Bank of America call-centre and a pharmaceutical centre: the former introduced a fifteen-minute coffee break while the latter replaced coffee-makers with a larger café area.¹²⁴ The newspaper records: 'The result? Increased sales and less turnover'.¹²⁵ As Winfred Poster remarks, in the case of the call-centre, the employers had noticed that 'workers who communicate more closely when off the desk, are more effective when they return.'¹²⁶

Conclusion: the degradation of work

This paper has examined tensions over rest breaks and the control of work time as they have been experienced over many decades. It has argued that breaks – for the weekend, and for tea (coffee), lunch, and to visit the toilet while at work – have always been a contentious issue, from the Industrial Revolution to the contemporary factory, office and shop. The tension is a product of the desire of employers to reduce the porosity of working time and the concomitant resistance of workers to the degradation of work and dispossession of dignity.

¹²³ R. Monks, 'Fika: why more companies are introducing Swedish-style coffee breaks', *I News*, 30 January 2017.

¹²⁴ Coffee companies are particularly keen to promote coffee breaks, often claiming that the caffeine in coffee will help boost productivity.

¹²⁵ S. Lohr, 'Unblinking eyes rack Employees' *New York Times*, 24 June 2014

¹²⁶ W. R. Poster, 'Socially Benevolent Workplace Surveillance?', *Work in Progress* blog, 30 April 2015.

Debates within labour process theory flourished in the 1970s, initiated by Braverman's study of scientific management and the subordination of workers it described. Braverman has been criticized for paying too little attention to wider political forces and workers' conscious resistance, and such a perspective aids an analysis of employer offensives against rest breaks and increased temporal flexibility and density.

In the political context, the space for workers to contest and subvert the time-discipline imposed by employers has become more restricted because the intensification of global competition has led them to seek ever greater transparency of the value-added by individual employees and the marginalization of collective bargaining and the 'rate for the job'. Temporal flexibility has marched hand-in-hand with wage flexibility, disrupting collective workers' organization in the process. In the UK at least, the ability of trade unions to organize has also been restricted by the state as legislation took effect under governments of the 'new right'. The tightening of time discipline has been aided by new forms of monitoring, surveillance and control which have not only promoted the intensification of work, but also created the phenomenon of increased time density. In a minority of cases, mostly in the 'creative' and high-tech industries, it appears the limits of mental capacity (at least) may have been reached, as employers (ever conscious of the need to raise productivity) return to sophisticated paternalist strategies of ensuring worker commitment to the job by fun and games, mindfulness and resilience training.¹²⁷

For the pressure on time at work to be released on a permanent basis a conscious collective response by workers is required. This would be necessary to overcome Braverman's pessimistic prognosis of 'habituation' to a new normal. There are many examples where this has happened, from the struggles focused in the automobile and engineering industries in the 1970s and 1980s, through to skirmishes in the public sector and the newly emerging 'gig' economy in the twenty-first century. It is not the case, however, that workers instinctively dispute time to move to establish forms and dimensions of workers' control over the means of production. Consciousness is complex, and sometimes contradictory, and will vary from across locations as workers develop cultures of solidarity and different propensities for strikes and control within the

¹²⁷ Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, p 151, referred to the 'bounds of physical and mental capacity' as a reason for employers to relax time discipline.

workplace.¹²⁸ There is a scale of demands focused on time discipline. Struggles over the 'frontier of control' will break out wherever workers are located, as employers intensify pressure to increase both temporal flexibility and density. Such skirmishes can be part of a wider struggle. As a minimum, the struggle by workers to control time at and within work reflects a demand for dignity and respect. As Goodrich observed, 'all this is merely a negative resentment against control and not specifically a demand for control. ... The desire to be let alone, to be free from the irksomeness of control by others, is not identical with the desire to co-operate actively in the work of controlling.'¹²⁹ We can appreciate how something so seemingly trivial as toilet and tea breaks are symbolic of a potentially wider struggle.

¹²⁸ See R. Hyman, *Strikes* (Fontana 1972), ch. 3; R. Fantasia, *Cultures of Solidarity: Consciousness, Action and Contemporary American Workers* (University of California Press, Oakland: 1989).

¹²⁹ Goodrich, *Frontier of Control*, p. 34.