



The Christie Phenomenon

Stephen Parliament

review of:

Cynthia L. Negrey (2012) *Work Time: Conflict, Control, and Change*. Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA, USA: Polity Press. (PB, pp. 200, £15.99, ISBN 978-0745654263)

“Aunt Betsey,” announces Christie as she prepares to leave home as a young lady in her late teens, “there’s going to be a new Declaration of Independence.” She means a declaration of her own independence as she decides that she is coming of age and is, “...going to take care of myself,” thereafter finding employment as a servant, actress, governess, companion (in the old fashioned sense), and seamstress, pursuing a feminist search for survival and fulfillment that symbolically is still going on. Louisa May Alcott’s surrogate in self-discovery, Christie, is the central character in her fictitious though highly autobiographical novel, *Work: A Story of Experience*, (Alcott 1873, 1994) which describes the search for the boundary-less life of work and personal satisfaction. She has yet to arrive, as Cynthia Negrey reveals and as many of us know from personal experience..

Cynthia L. Negrey’s new book, bluntly entitled *Work Time: Conflict, Control, and Change*, was written as if responding to observations posed by the editors of *ephemera* last February, in the issue “Free work” (*ephemera*, 13:1, 2/13). “The relationship between freedom and work is a complex one,” as Armin Beverungen and others pose in the introductory editorial. “For some, they are considered opposites: ‘true’ freedom is possible only once the necessity of work is removed, and a life of luxury attained. For others, work itself provides an opportunity to achieve a sense of freedom and authenticity.” Prof. Negrey documents the

struggle between these conflicting views of work with methodical diligence and an extraordinary massing of information.

This review will use her foundation in the sociology of work to ask the questions: if and how academic sociology can be utilized to frame a revolutionary new “becoming” and assist in worker inquiry as to the next steps for revolutionary social transformation. Negrey’s call for a new political economy of work time is responsive to the question, if raised in the right setting.

Taking control of our time

Reading Cynthia Negrey’s exquisitely detailed new book on our aversion to, and desperate need for, work, entitled *Work Time: Conflict, Control, and Change*, makes me want to get up from my desk, plow the back forty, and build a new house. This is not the message of the book, but spending all this time just thinking about the number of hours in our life and how we spend them makes me realize how I manage to waste them. So stop reading this review and go do something, or better yet, to be fully informed, read Cynthia’s book, then go do something. And fully informed you will be. In less than 200 pages plus notes and an excellent Reference section, you will know how our desire to be productively employed is changing, not just in the last decade, but since man first hunted and woman cooked on fire; and you will be provided with an extensive look at the impact of women on the workforce.

If we accept that value is derived from labor, the history of the world is determined by the struggle to mobilize and control workers, and the response of those workers who want to balance survival with personal satisfaction. After years of fighting for workers’ rights, a reasonable work week, fair wages, and safe working conditions, new needs are entering the calculation. More women in the workforce are making employers pay attention to the need for flexible hours during the day, fewer days of work during the week, and wages reflecting level of responsibility and skill rather than gender and seniority. But the attention that employers are paying is not sympathetic but rather strategic: whatever workers want, management will use that as a means of barter and control. The underlying theme is power over the terms of work, and thereby, over the benefits derived from production.

On second thought, don’t get up and plow the back forty. Read the book. And then go organize your colleagues at work, if you have not already done so.

As of this writing in mid-2014, the average length of the work week has dropped to 34.4 hours, while approximately 635,000 jobs have been added to the

employment base in the months of February, March and April. Those two numbers connote a dramatic increase in part-time employment in the U.S., so dramatic that we now have 278,000 part-time employees seeking full-time work, and still 11.7 million available workers are unemployed, or 4.4 million more than six months ago.

Prof. Negrey saw it coming. “This trend,” she observes, “was setting up a structural condition whereby there would not be enough full-time jobs for everyone who wanted them.” (3) The complicating factor is that not everyone wants full time employment. As she explains, “...some workers, especially women, want part-time jobs to integrate employment and family care.” Some workplace reforms have mitigated the desire of women for more flexible hours such as job sharing, compressing the work week into fewer days, and flexible hours during the day. Management resists, even if they know that these adjustment to the terms of work would have a positive effect on morale: hence, management retains control and can use these terms to bargain over wages.

Earlier labor battles with management resulted in the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 that reduces required hours to 40 per week with higher pay for overtime. Management wanted to squeeze more hours out of every worker. The response from industrial labor unions was to fight for reasonable hours per day and days per week. The working class either organized at the workplace, if possible, or progressive legislation tried to protect workers from abusive time requirements.

These class struggles of the mid-1900s are now being supplanted by a new class of politics: the “product of women’s activism in the labor movement.” What you will get from this book is a broad examination of the changing dynamic of work time and reform activism.

The breadth of her approach is evident at the start. We don’t begin with the normal discussion of work as it evolved during the Industrial Revolution. Prof. Negrey begins with work and time among hunter-gatherers and nomads, who moved according to the seasons, sunrises and sunsets, and a pattern of natural time during the day. She writes with elegance and sincerity about family, food and leisure. Having worked with nomadic Cashmere goat and camel herders in the southern Gobi Desert of Mongolia, this writer knows the connection that nomads make between staggering changes in the seasonal environment and the work requirements. Work and time in nomadic life is measured in two long and painful seasons of extreme cold with almost no snow, and brutally hot summers in an endless search for water and grass. This life still exists in many parts of Mongolia and Central Asia, in Saharan Africa, and parts of the Arctic Circle.

Work and time becomes a philosophical schema of animal, plant and human life in a balance so delicate that the idea of money almost has no place. Yet this schema is being violently upset by extraordinarily wealthy mining interests backed by Rio Tinto, an international mining investment firm in the UK. In the spirit of Weberian comparative sociology, Prof. Negrey expands her analysis of work time conditions in the U.S. to a comparison of the situation in other industrial and developing countries.

Some members of society do not have to work because they live off the work of others. Such a position in society is not dignified to anyone except themselves. Others are not able to work for a variety of reasons. For those of us who can work, it is a privilege and an honor to help support those who cannot, with the constant threat of unemployment hovering in our opaque awareness.

For those of us who are able to work, and want to, the constant challenge is to find work that provides a living wage within a time frame that leaves room for family and leisure. Our goal is to earn the highest possible wage per hour worked and to be occupied for just the right amount of time that provides the total number of hours in a year that aggregate to the annual wage that we want. To accomplish this balance, we make choices about occupation, salary level, part-time or full-time positions, and doing something that pays what we need but is less satisfying personally. These choices are made available to us by those who control the industries for which the society in which we live retain a comparative advantage over other countries that are trying to provide the same service or product.

The dynamic that workers face in making choices about time, wage and occupation, and the way those choices are structured or imposed is the subject of Ms. Negrey's book on *Work Time*. She agilely describes the chess game of management and employees over time in as the needs of industry and of workers changes: industry forcing employees to work long hours, then legislatures limiting work hours for children and women, then unions wanting to leave hours the results of collective bargaining agreements instead of being imposed by law, then the slowly merging realization of management that having many more people each working fewer hours as part-time employees actually has its advantages, such as the avoidance of benefits and the absence of union representation.

The method of presentation is full emersion in the anthropology of time and labor. As you might guess, hunter-gatherers were not concerned with hourly wage rates. Nomadic cultures organized time first by season and then by sunlight. The advent of capitalism brought the wage-labor exchange as the

dynamic governing work time. As we invent new forms of production and cooperative enterprise, we may replace the wage-for-labor exchange with the project-for-fulfillment exchange, but that will come later in this review.

Early in the book, the adjective ‘work’ as a modifier of ‘time’ merges into a new noun, which is what the writer wants us to realize from the start: ‘work-time’ a concept distinguishing it from free time and family time? Work-time is an idea, a construct of modern capitalist society, a schema around which we organize our society and which the managers of cost-conscious organizations manipulate the options available to workers. As the average number of hours a week has declined over the last few decades from 48 hours per week to the current 34, a gender split has emerged distinguishing the desires of women from male workers.

We now have a mismatch between real hours available and the number of hours desired. Male workers generally want more hours per week, but employers are not providing them; and women want fewer hours per week, but prefer that the reduction in work-time is accomplished by working fewer hours per day. Employers are taking advantage of the conflicts over work and time by being able to reduce wages and remove benefits as part-time work increases: men will take what they can get, and women are looking for fewer hours. Managers are in control.

Prof. Negrey discusses a number of reforms in the workplace that will alleviate this imbalance between workers and employers in the wage-labor exchange. Give women the hours per week they need but reduce the hours per day; increase vacation time to provide for family needs; increase the availability of child care; and complete the move to universal health care. These are the liberal reformist approaches that challenge budgets and are rejected by conservative politicians, but the argument must be framed as family values trumping market values as a strategy to reach conservatives. The research agenda needs to look at the intersection of work and leisure, work and community engagement, and other lifestyle issues. Negrey thinks that an especially significant research subject is how workers can maintain a boundary between work and non-work time, with the crux of the matter in controlling the difference between salaried time and hourly wages. Given the number of ways that employers can manipulate hourly work patterns, a salaried job is subject to greater time abuse.

The most common approach to time flexibility is part-time employment, which so far has provided greater manipulative advantages to employers than to workers.

The New Political Economy of Work Time: flexibility and degendering work: experiences in the United States and Western Europe

Negrey's book opens with this distinction between work and personal time, and what are the customs, norms, and rules that govern the distinction. She observes that productivity is comparable between the U.S. and Europe, but the European work week is shorter due partly to more vacation and paid holidays in Europe, indicating the Europeans are willing to sacrifice paid work time for more leisure time. Using good comparable data of developed economies from 2007 to 2009, only 6 of 33 countries had an increase in average annual work time. For both the US and the UK annual work hours declined; but all OECD countries worked fewer hours in 2009 than the US average; and the UK had 23.9% of its work force at a part-time rate compared to 14.1% for the US.

Some of the explanation for the difference between the US and European countries in hours worked is the degree of regulation in the EU, with little to no regulation in the US. The consequences are most severe on working women in the US compared to women in Europe where leaves are paid and of longer duration.

Many suggestions new policies and programs that would help workers are listed, with a main conclusion being that the distinction between paid time and unpaid household work is actually a gender-based distinction. A masculine orientation would call for a shorter work week; while a female approach would reduce the number of hours worked during the day to provide for daily family responsibilities. Policies that come closest to a broader political strategy include a post-industrial New Deal through self-management of time; sharing work and valued care responsibilities; and early childhood education to help dissolve paid gender specialization. Looking at models in European countries, the author refers to some delightful jargon, such as "high-road flexibilization" which means degendering part-time work and giving employees the authority to set their own schedule. The conclusion that collective action through labor organization combined with state intervention in current labor laws are "...at their social limits." These solutions are not part of an emergent political economy that the author foresees in restructuring work-time. In thinking about the new political economy, the author asks the pregnant question leading to the strategic discussion below: "what role will you play in shaping it?" (193).

Can *Work Time* be both a legislative agenda and the basis for workers to design a more political movement to take control of the workplace?

The fundamental worker inquiry: what role can workers play in moving from legislative lists to taking control?

The options for reform are detailed, documented, and explained as a blueprint for legislative action, but underlying the discussion is the pervasive and unaddressed issue of control and a strategy of deployment.

Amit Rai confronts academic sociology with the observation that, “The focus on the struggles in the knowledge-based sectors of the economy results in an overall neglect of class struggles.” (Rai 2013). He notes that autonomous living labour is qualitatively different from the entrepreneur’s mode of capturing or accumulating cognitive capital, and has political value political value, “...in its unceasing lines of flight that create conjunctions between radical practices of communisation—potentializing, anomalous, and experimental forms of life that are no longer subsumable within capital’s relations of measure.” (Rai). In a concluding statement, Rai summarizes his writing and that of other contributors to the same issue:

This is precisely where many of the contributors note that the neo-liberal educational institutions become sites of struggle over measure and value and a veritable laboratory for autonomy itself... At stake is the relationship between the time of capital accumulation and the time of politics...But we shouldn’t subsume the time of autonomy within a presentist temporal disposition. We would do well to recall here a key passage from Deleuze (a constant point of reference throughout this volume) who urged a practice of duration in the interests of a time to come:

Rai’s reference to Deleuze captures the transition that must occur between studying the past and informing the future. “Becoming isn’t part of history; history amounts [to] only the set of preconditions, however recent, that one leaves behind in order to “become,” that is, to create something new.” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). The historical past is the study of how revolutions turn out; re-configuring the future involves “people’s revolutionary becoming.” The uses of the past constitute preconditions for the future transformation and are left behind only in the sense that social transformation requires a new set of relationships among workers and production, mindful of the previous relationships that must be deconstructed.

The classroom as a laboratory of autonomous living labour is a deep thread in the connection between future workers and the neo-liberal educational institutions that think they are preparing students for conventional occupations, but, if infiltrated correctly, can be the experimental site for autonomist re-configuration.

Rai's call for the classroom to be a laboratory for autonomy is fundamental to avoiding Marx' second type of alienation from corporate society, "alienation from others." (Meszaros 1970). The Jungian educator and therapist Clifford Mayes proposes a pedagogy that directly addresses formation of a laboratory for democratic process as a means of removing Marx's second form of alienation in which, "Objectification and excessive competition (can) destroy the heroic educational ideal of a vibrant community of mutually respectful dialogue in the classroom...The classroom should be a laboratory for democracy." (Mayes 2010).

If we have an extensive description of possible programs and policies that would de-gender and flexibilize work, how can we start talking about it with young or even potential new workers? Where does the initiative for a re-configuration of work come from? Rai's phraseology above is a good starting point: the classroom as a laboratory of autonomous living labour; Mayes' classroom as a laboratory of removing our alienation from others; Paulo Freire's lifetime commitment to education as politics (Freire 2005; and Judith Suissa's concern for, "...the status of the connection between anarchist ideology and non-coercive pedagogy is one which still demands careful theoretical treatment." (Suissa 2010, 149).

Taking an agenda of workers controlling their own time, environment and production into a classroom that is comprised of potential new workers is one of many places to start. This is a personal strategy for this writer, as much as an expansion on the review of Prof. Negrey's book. This is a personal aside, but I think relevant to the discussion. My life's work is in building cooperatives, from housing for low income families, food stores, day care centers, health care clinics, and community development organizations, all of which create a mechanism for workers and consumers to own the means through which they derive essential goods and services. Now I teach: as a Teaching Fellow with Oakland Unified Schools District, as the licensed teacher of severely disabled special education students who did not, and mostly never will, obtain a high school degree. I was their instructor, or more accurately, their guide in moving from school to life on the streets of Oakland. Rough territory. All they really wanted was to learn how to navigate the city in safety and to find and hold a job; as a current instructor in a two-year technical college system in northern Wisconsin where my students want to learn to navigate life, find and hold a job that they enjoy; and at the University of Wisconsin River Falls in the graduate professional and educational school, working with students who want to safely navigate the world, teach English as a second language overseas, explore, and find and hold a job that they enjoy. You notice that, regardless of mental capacity and educational level, they all want the same thing; and the vehicle, I believe, is the classroom laboratory of living labour.

If we better understand how employers use the divisions of gender and race to keep workers fighting among ourselves, we can submerge the issue of class into oblivion, to the advantage of employers and owners, who are solely interested in cheap labor. The classroom, through field work, observation, and organizing, can reveal these imposed distinctions that are so prevalent. As Steven Peter Vallas citing other research, in his recent study of work that is more theoretically sociological and anthropological than Negrey's, though perfectly compatible with it, "...these two axes of inequality and subordination are commonly conjoined in highly complex ways that defy any efforts to study them separately." (Vallas 2013).

The broad agenda now is to place race and gender in the employer's perspective, for all new workers to understand that employers will use any divisions available to turn workers against one another, to keep them begging for suitable work conditions that will never be fully granted so as to retain power over them, and to work with lackey legislators to guarantee less than full employment so that the cost of labor is permanently cheap. Those are sociological issues that can be researched and explained.

Then the classroom in special education, tech college and teacher training at the university level must be aimed at building cooperative structures in which workers own their own means of providing goods and services. It is not utopian; it is practical; it is done; and can be done for the entire society if we build it into our pedagogy of autonomous livelihood.

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