CHAPTER 1

The history of worktime thought

The development of capitalism has been accompanied by major changes to the length of time the direct producers normally spend at their place of employment. Through the two centuries 1500 to 1700, for example, British worktimes tended to increase. Since this period these times have progressively contracted with sporadic reductions in time standards tending to characterise the labour market overall (Bienefeld 1972: 9). As traditional worktime patterns began to change in the fourteenth century, a debate arose as to why the time workers normally labour should tend to be subject to widespread and sustained variation. The debate has continued to the present day. This work will begin by examining the major theoretical contributions that have been put forward to explain this phenomenon. Because of the leading role formerly held by British economic theorists, the survey will primarily utilise the experiences of that nation.

Prior to the middle years of the eighteenth century those individuals who wrote on economic topics, with very few exceptions, took it as given that the direct producers were innately slothful. They invariably insisted that working people would not labour longer or harder than was necessary to satisfy those minimal wants to which they aspired, unless they were forced to by hunger or terror. The essence of their belief is encapsulated in Arthur Young’s maxim that “everyone but an idiot knows that the lower classes must be kept poor or they will never be industrious.” The claim that workers would reduce their supply of labour power if its price was increased was irrational in terms of the supply-and-demand analysis economic writers tended to find attractive even before the rise of classical economics. For the overwhelming majority of economic observers, however, this irrationality caused little disquiet as long as market forces remained inadequate, by themselves, to ensure that employers’ needs for labour power were satisfied.

For over two centuries mercantilist scholars simply ignored
2 Reduced worktime and the management of production

the problem of irrationality and openly endorsed the interests of the employers vis-à-vis their employees. They argued that where the former could not find adequate supplies of labour power at the subsistence price they were willing to pay, the state should adopt policies that would enable this situation to be remedied. This was justified on the grounds that the nation must have a positive balance of trade. If working people restricted their work effort, costs would rise and the competitiveness of the nation’s industries would be undermined. Workers, consequently, must not be allowed to freely choose the extent to which they laboured. Where such individuals showed any marked preference for leisure over income, it was insisted, the state had a duty to take steps to ensure that direct producers were made to work. The prescriptions the economists put forward to attain this objective included the state fixation of wages, the expansion of inward migration, enclosure of common land to eliminate economic independence and manipulation of the supply of food in order to drive up its price. In essence all these proposals aimed to lower the standard of living of the working people in order to compel them to work harder and longer. If high incomes lowered the willingness of the labourers to work, it was reasoned, low incomes should have the opposite effect.

The assertion that it was necessary to maintain the income of the working population at subsistence level in order to increase normal worktimes went largely unchallenged until the early years of the eighteenth century. From this period, however, an increasing number of observers began to voice some doubt as to the validity of this claim. It became increasingly common for economic writers to concede that not all workers were idle and dissolve and that whereas it was true that many still were, this was often for reasons beyond their control. These questioners of mercantilist orthodoxy also argued that depressing the working people’s living standards might even be counterproductive. High wages, it was suggested, could act as an inducement that would encourage workers to undertake a greater expenditure of effort. David Hume (cited by Coats 1958: 40), for example, emphasised the need to provide incentives in all areas of economic activity: “It is a violent method and in most cases impractical, to oblige the labourer to toil, in order to raise from the land more than what subsists himself and family. Furnish him with the manufactures and commodities and he will do it of himself.”
The history of worktime thought

Prior to 1750 those writers who were sympathetic to this perspective were few in number. In the third quarter of the century, however, it gained much more support, the culmination of which was to prove a major transition occurring in 1776 with Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*. Smith argued that nature had imbued human beings with a desire to improve their lot and that for most people this innate drive was sufficiently strong to more than offset their “natural sloth.”

Some workmen, indeed, when they can earn in four days what will maintain them through the week, will be idle the other three. This, however, is by no means the case with the greater part. Workmen, on the contrary, when they are liberally paid by the piece, are very apt to over-work themselves, and to ruin their health and constitution in a few years. (Smith 1964: Vol. 1, 73)

Smith’s belief that most people would strive to improve their lot led him to reject the economists’ traditional approach to worktime. He also opposed their support for state manipulation of the labour market, arguing that individuals must be given the freedom to buy and sell labour power in an unrestrained market. Given the desire of most human beings to improve their condition, he argued, it was not necessary to coerce them to increase their work effort. Provide them with sufficient economic inducement and they would do this of their own accord.

The belief that an acquisitive and hedonistic spirit was innate in human beings and that workers would increase their labour effort if offered the chance to increase their income was to become part of the orthodoxy of classical economics. Pollard (1978: 97) has argued that it was the humanism of the classical economists that led them to abandon the mercantilists’ labour policies. His interpretation of this major change in economic thinking, however, must surely be considered overly generous. To begin with, the changed perspective was not applied to all workers, for it certainly did not include the Irish. The latter continued to be considered so dissolute there was no choice but to compel them to work. Pollard’s assessment also fails to consider a point he has well made elsewhere, namely that in the four centuries prior to 1750 the working people of Britain were subjected to an unprecedented remoulding as the working class was being “made.” The enormity of this change cannot be overstated, for it involved the transformation of the very nature of
4 Reduced worktime and the management of production

the labouring population: “Men who were non-accumulative, non-acquisitive, accustomed to work for subsistence, not for maximisation of income, had to be made obedient to the cash stimulus and obedient in such a way as to react precisely to the stimuli provided” (Pollard 1965: 160–161).

By the second half of the nineteenth century, Thompson (1967) has suggested, capitalist wage incentives were becoming widely effective. This is not to argue that the transition was complete by this period. Simply getting the workers to show up regularly for work remained a problem for employers well into the nineteenth century. Skilled workers, who managed to retain a high degree of bargaining power throughout the industrial revolution, created particularly severe difficulties for employers in this regard. Nevertheless, it is the case that the attitudes of working people did change and changed to a form that was more acceptable to the employers and to the economists. It is this change in the material world, rather than any newfound humanism on the part of economists, that surely better explains this major shift in their thinking. Finally, Pollard’s kind interpretation also fails to consider a further point he has correctly stressed elsewhere. Through the eighteenth century population growth and the development of the enclosure movement greatly increased the number of workers seeking employment within the British labour market. There was, moreover, an increase in the rate of population growth around 1740, and a second burst of acceleration in the 1780s. The vastly increased number of workers this development flooded onto the labour market from 1750 onwards greatly enhanced the employers’ ability to determine conditions of employment in many trades. Many workers and particularly those in the newly emerging textile factories were driven to labour at a daily rate which all but totally ignored their long-term interests, with worktimes often being brutally extended and intensified.

It is in the context of this major shift in bargaining power in the employers’ favour that one needs to assess both the economists’ newfound belief that workers would respond positively to the chance to gain greater income and their insistence that the state should allow the labour market to operate freely. The first factor enabled them to explain, in a manner favourable to the employer, why workers were increasing their work effort. When buyers and sellers of labour power entered the market, it
The history of worktime thought

was argued, they did so as free agents each seeking, in their partnership, to improve their lot. Where workers increased the amount of work they undertook, this was clearly a manifestation of a free decision on their part to take advantage of the opportunity offered to them by the employers to satisfy their desire for greater income. In other words, the workers were increasing their work effort because of their innate desire to improve their lot, not because they had no real choice in the matter. The second factor in the economists’ argument was equally an exercise in apologetics. To argue that the state should adopt a noninterventionist economic policy, treating the buyer and seller of labour power as equals, when the market is skewed heavily in favour of one side or the other, is clearly to favour the stronger protagonist. Such an argument, however, had the advantage that it enabled the economists not only to continue actively promoting the employers’ interests but to do so while maintaining the pose that they were unbiased scientists.

The classical economists, then, remained as assuredly committed to the interests of the employers as the mercantilists had been. It was not their humanism that led these individuals to revise orthodox theory. Rather, it was the fact that the labouring population had changed and that they were provided the opportunity to obscure, even from themselves, both the class nature of the relationship between capital and labour and their own class bias under the facade of market freedom.

To argue that Smith’s support for an unrestricted labour market was in fact a defence of employer interests is not to claim that this scholar made no objective and substantive contribution to worktime theory. His insistence that humans will strive to improve their material wellbeing remains a central tenet within modern economic theory. He also made a most important contribution when he attempted to explain why workers often chose to limit the length of time they were willing to labour. The explanation for this phenomenon, he argued, lay in the fact that worktime has both an intensive and a temporal dimension and that these two elements are closely interrelated. Because of this interrelationship workers often chose to reduce the length of time they spent at work, even when they had a desire for greater income, because the intensity of effort demanded during the time they did labour was so high that they were physically or mentally exhausted.
6 Reduced worktime and the management of production

Excessive application during four days of the week is frequently the real cause of the idleness of the other three, so much and so loudly complained of. Great labour, either of mind or body, continued for several days together, is in most men naturally followed by a great desire of relaxation, which, if not restrained by force or by some strong necessity, is almost irresistible. It is the call of nature, which requires to be relieved by some indulgence, sometimes of ease only, but sometimes, too, of dissipation and diversion. (Smith 1964: Vol. 1, 73)

If employers ignored human limits, and Smith suggested they frequently did, the health of the workers would be seriously undermined and many would be worked to an early grave. Smith’s recognition of the material limitations of human beings led him to point out that there was an inverse relationship between the intensive and temporal aspects of worktime and that, consequently, an optimum time schedule which balanced these two elements must exist in any given situation. He advised employers to pay heed to the existence of these optima and refrain from driving their employees at too great a pace if they wished to minimise their costs.

The factory movement

In the first years of the nineteenth century the employers’ continuing attempts to compel their employees to increase their work effort gave rise to a movement demanding that the state enact legislation to limit the length of the working day. This campaign drew the bulk of its active support from the textile workers in the North of England. Over the period 1800–1860 these workers waged an ongoing struggle to attain some degree of legal protection from the demands of the employers. In their campaign the workers managed to attract support from progressive reformers within the intelligentsia. They also received assistance from Tory landowners who were hostile to the manufacturers and even received valuable aid from those factory owners who, for one reason or another, were able to curtail the worktimes of their enterprises at little cost to themselves. They did not, however, gain assistance from the economists.

In the early days of the factory movement few economic theoreticians displayed much interest in the conditions under which factory workers were compelled to labour. As the campaign for a legal maximum to the workday became more influ-
The history of worktime thought

ential, however, these scholars abandoned their indifference. The worktime issue was taken up with an increasing degree of enthusiasm, becoming by the early 1830s a highly contentious theoretical question. In their initial contribution to the debate the economists did not attempt to explain why hedonistic beings should en masse choose to reduce the length of time they wished to work. Rather, they confined their discussion to the market rights of the individual. As free agents, it was insisted, individuals should be allowed to sell their labour power as they wished. If they chose to exchange this commodity in excessively large units this was their right. State regulation of worktime would clearly infringe this freedom and was thus morally wrong and had, as such, to be opposed. There was little disagreement over these propositions. What was disputed was the definition of what constituted a free agent. Children, it was generally acknowledged, were not capable of exercising sufficient independent judgement to freely enter into a contract. Was it right, therefore, for the state to regulate the sale of their labour power? Blaug (1958: 212) reports that during the 1830s there was a wide variety of opinion on this question. This diversity, however, gradually abated as it became clear that the legislation of 1833, which limited the worktimes of children, was not causing great difficulty for employers. The economists, as a consequence, generally came to agree that worktime laws for children were admissible. They insisted, though, that such legislation should be limited to that already adopted, for its extension would necessarily involve limiting the length of time adults could work. Legislation of this nature would constitute a “gross infringement” of the rights of the individual and thus could not possibly be accepted.

The economists utilised the concept of the free individual to justify their opposition to state protection of the adult working class throughout the 1830s. This was despite the fact that it was patently apparent that the individual worker had almost no bargaining-power within the market place. Towards the end of the 1830s, however, the economists became increasingly reluctant to use this argument and by the 1840s they had all but totally laid it aside. They did not take this step, though, because of any newly developed humanity. Rather, the argument was abandoned because the economists were soon made aware that in the face of a demand from the great majority of workers for a legal limit to the workday, its utilisation was a serious embar-
Reduced worktime and the management of production

rassment for the employers. In short, it came to be realised that whereas the claim that it was individual sellers of labour power who determined standard worktimes was useful as a tool to justify the extension of time schedules, the argument became double edged if a majority of the working class made it clear that they wanted to reduce the length of time they had to labour. Through the 1830s, rallies of up to 150,000 workers were held in the North of England in support of a legal 10-hour maximum to the working day.

The overwhelming nature of the working classes’ endorsement of such a law caused a great deal of confusion amongst the economists. If, as they insisted, individuals should be allowed to freely determine their own arrangements, because it was only individuals who knew their own best interest, how could one justify opposition to the legislative regulation of worktime when the enactment of such a law was clearly desired by the great majority of the individuals concerned (Mill 1859: 963–965)? While initially some economists attempted to avoid this dilemma by denying there was majority support for a 10-hour law amongst the workers, most eventually were forced to concede that this was the case. Their response to this realisation, however, was not to join the workers in demanding a legal restriction on the employers’ right to determine the length of the working day. Rather, they insisted that the workers did not understand the true ramifications of what they were demanding and that consequently it was necessary for more informed individuals to ensure that the unwise policies they advocated were not adopted. In 1846 The Economist attempted to explain this point to those who foolishly insisted that the individual-rights argument might still be relevant to the worktime debate.

It is quite contrary to our principles to restrict the factory operatives, or any other class, in the pursuit of their own interest or happiness, or for one moment to pretend that they do not understand what is good for themselves equally as well as other men; but as all classes, when they legislate, meaning only to provide for their own welfare, do affect, by multiple ramifications, of which they dream not, the whole community, and do fail even to promote their own interests ... we may without presumption suppose it to be, at least, possible that even the factory operatives mistake their own interest, and the interest of the community, in demanding that labour in factories be limited to ten hours by Act of Parliament. If we thought that such an Act would benefit them ... it would find no warmer advocates than ourselves. (Cited by Robson 1985: 231–232)
The history of worktime thought

The growing strength and radicalism of the factory movement made the promotion of the argument that the workers did not know their own best interests extremely difficult. It was for this reason that the question of the individual's rights was quietly laid aside and the economists began justifying their support for the employers on the grounds that a 10-hour law would raise production costs. Nassau Senior opened this new line of defence in 1837, in his Letters on the Factory Act. Senior argued that the increasing ratio of fixed to circulating capital that tended to develop as industry mechanised made long hours of work necessary. This fact had been carefully explained to him, Senior (1837: 14) reported, by a Manchester employer. "When a labourer", said Mr. Ashworth to me, 'lays down his spade, he renders useless, for that period, a capital worth eighteen pence. When one of our people leaves the mill, he renders useless a capital that has cost 100/.'" Senior insisted that, given the cost structure of modern industry, any reduction in the length of the working day would tend to raise unit costs. The openly biased nature of the argument he utilised to justify his claims, at a time when bias needed to be hidden, made it unacceptable to most of his fellow economists. His basic point that worktime reductions would raise prices and hence undermine the competitiveness of British industry, however, was generally accepted to be valid. It was, consequently, this production-based argument that the economists brought to the fore when opposing the Factory Acts during the 1840s. Regulation of worktime had to be resisted because it would have a deleterious effect on trade, and this made opposition to the 10-hour law morally just because the workers clearly stood to lose if the economy declined.

Confronted with this new strategy for countering their demands, the workers and their allies also began to emphasise the issue of production costs in their literature. Robert Owen (1815) had called for the introduction of a legal 10-hour limit to the working day and had successfully adopted this schedule at New Lanark early in the century. When doing so he had argued that, in any well-managed enterprise, it was possible to produce as cheaply with the shorter schedule as it was with the longer because the workers were less fatigued and hence were able to labour more intensively. As those opposing the extension of the Factory Acts began to emphasise the issue of production costs, supporters of reform responded by placing increasing emphasis on this argument. This trend was
Reduced worktime and the management of production

accentuated by the publicity given to a number of worktime experiments that were begun in Preston in 1844. The factory inspector Leonard Horner reported on the most significant of these studies in his 1845 report to Parliament. This was a textile mill in which the workday had been reduced from 12 to 11 hours. When Horner visited the mill the experiment had been in progress for twelve months. He reported that despite the worktime curtailment and the fact that there had been no increase in capital outlay, the temporal reduction had not resulted in any decrease in output or increase in unit costs.

The declaration made is, that the same quantity of produce, and at the same cost, has been obtained by the master; and that all the workers, day hands as well as those who are paid by piece-work, earn the same amount of wages in the 11 hours as was done before by the labour of 12 hours. (Horner 1845: 449)

Horner went on to report that he had always assumed that employers would strive to ensure that they operated their plants with the greatest possible efficiency and that employees, when paid by piece work, would exert themselves to the utmost. These assumptions led him, in turn, to assume that any curtailment in the working times of a well-managed factory would necessarily result in a reduction of output. His experience at Preston convinced him that this last assumption was invalid. It also made him realise that the reason he had been in error was that he had not considered an important element, “viz., the extent to which vigilance and attention on the part of the workman can influence the amount of production” (p. 450). In short, a reduced workday could increase the efficiency of the employees’ labour time by enabling them to labour more effectively.

In his report to Parliament Horner also reported that he had discussed the Preston experiments with numerous other factory owners. Some of these individuals had conceded that the results were impressive and acknowledged that it might be possible to offset worktime reductions, to some extent, by improving efficiency. Most, however, refused to even consider the idea, insisting that it was ridiculous to claim that it was possible to produce as much in a 66-hour week as could be produced in 72 hours.

The tendency for the majority of employers to dismiss the efficiency evidence out of hand was replicated by the econo-