

Marx, Keynes and the future of working time

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This paper re-examines the different visions of the future of working time offered by Marx and Keynes. While Marx and Keynes differed radically on some fundamental matters, they agreed that society would benefit from reducing work time. The idea of society using technology to curtail work hours was a central aspect of their respective visions of a better future. The paper compares Marx's and Keynes's visions. It also considers the fate of their visions as well as their relevance for modern debates on the future of work. The conclusion is that a critical political economy can learn from the different ideas of Marx and Keynes in supporting the case for reducing work hours in the present.

Key words: Marx, Keynes, Working time, Shorter work hours, Future of work
JEL classifications: E11, E12, J22

1. Introduction

Marx and Keynes clashed on some fundamental matters. Marx was a revolutionary and used his economic analysis to show how the struggle between the capitalist and working class would culminate in the demise of capitalism. Keynes, by contrast, was a reformer and used his economic ideas as a way to transform and improve society. While holding some socialist views (Fuller, 2019), Keynes remained, at heart, an anti-Marxist.¹

But the two authors did reach similar conclusions on at least one topic. They accepted that society would be improved by working less. The escape from work and the pursuit of more non-work time were key to the political visions they outlined. Admittedly, they saw the mechanisms to realise these visions very differently, but they both agreed that society must—and should—aim to harness technology to reduce work hours. A better future would be achieved by creating more time for people to pursue and realise their talents beyond work.²

Manuscript received 29 September 2021; final version received 23 May 2023

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^{*}Leeds University Business School, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK. I am grateful for the comments of three anonymous referees on previous versions of the paper. Remaining errors are my responsibility. This work was supported by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (grant number ES/S012523/1), as part of the Digital Futures at Work Research Centre, which is based at the Universities of Leeds and Sussex.

¹ Keynes ([1926] 1963, p. 341) declared that: 'The Republic of my imagination lies on the extreme left of the celestial space'. But this did not lead him to accept Marx's ideas. Rather, as Robinson (1972, p. vi) put it, he remained 'allergic to Marx's writings'. For Keynes, the doctrines of Marx were not to be taken seriously but cast aside and replaced with alternative ideas (Fuller, 2019, p. 1667: see also below). Yet, as the following paper will show, their visions of the future overlapped.

² On the comparison of Marx and Keynes, see Dillard (1984) and Jensen (1989).

This paper re-examines the contributions of Marx and Keynes to the understanding of the future of working time. The visions of both authors are examined separately, showing how each emphasised the scope and need to reduce work time. Their visions are then compared with draw out the similarities between them. This is followed by an examination of the fate of these visions—in spite of their predictions, work hours have remained stubbornly high in capitalist economies and indeed, via factors such as the increased employment of women, have even grown in aggregate terms. The relevance of Marx's and Keynes's visions for modern debates on the future of work is also addressed. The paper argues that Marx and Keynes offer key insights into both the barriers to, and opportunities for, reducing work time and that these insights can be used to inform a critical political economy aimed at achieving shorter work hours in the present. The visions of Marx and Keynes, while highly distinctive in analytical and political terms, can still inspire thinking on ways to reduce work time and on the possibilities for creating a different society—beyond the present one—where people's ability to live well is enhanced.

2. Marx: from wage labour to an expanded 'realm of freedom'

Marx's analysis of work time was rooted in an understanding of the transformation of work under capitalism. He showed how capitalist employers had sought to increase absolute surplus value production by lengthening working time. Their focus, in this instance, was on increasing surplus labour time where surplus value was produced. This attempt to exploit workers, however, had met with opposition and led to changes in production. Notably, capitalist employers had embraced technology in order to increase relative surplus value production. By curtailing the necessary labour time required to meet the subsistence requirements of workers, capitalist employers had raised the proportion of total labour time accounted for by surplus labour time. Limits to working time—encouraged by worker militancy and imposed by factory legislation—had been countered and exploitation increased via the greater use of technology in production.³

Marx stressed the crucial role of class struggle in determining the length of working time. While capitalist employers would continually strive to increase work time, workers would aim to reduce it. For Marx, the dispute over working time was a central dynamic of capitalism and one that shaped the wider class conflict in capitalist society. While some progressive employers might embrace shorter work hours to maintain the health and productivity of workers (Nyland, 1986), decisive progress in curtailing work time across the economy as a whole would depend on workers organising collectively via unions.

In Marx's view, the collective struggle of workers would remain a constant threat to capitalism. This struggle would evolve from conflict over working time to a wider quest to remove capitalism itself. Marx predicted that a revolution led by the working class would bring down capitalism. Socialism would ultimately replace capitalism, and in the future, workers (and the rest of society) could look forward to living and working

³ Marx wrote extensively about the struggle over the length of the working day in Chapter 10 of Volume 1 of *Capital* (Marx, 1976). His account of the human costs of long work hours drew from contemporary factory reports and other relevant factual material. It demonstrated the range of Marx's thought and his concern to root his economic enquiry in historical analysis.

under very different economic and social circumstances. Importantly, these would entail less work for people to do.

Marx's vision of a better future was not laid out in any detailed way: there was no blueprint for socialism. The details on what socialism would be like would have to be worked out 'after the revolution'. Only by transcending capitalism could society gain the collective wisdom to remould work and life. This fact means that ideas about socialism have been developed by followers of Marx and have required interpretation of what Marx said.

One of the clearest statements from Marx on the possibilities for socialism can be found in a passage in Volume 3 of *Capital*. In it, he wrote that socialism would allow for a reduction in the 'realm of necessity' and an expansion in the 'realm of freedom' (Marx, 1992, p. 959). Necessary work time (i.e. time spent meeting the material requirements of society) would be shortened. This would be achieved in two ways. First, production would be focussed on the fulfilment of needs, not the creation of more profits. This would mean less production and fewer work hours—work would only be carried out where it met real needs and working time would be minimised as far as possible. Second, technology—freed from the profit imperative—would be used to extend workers' freedom from drudgery. Maintaining work for the sake of creating surplus value would end and would be replaced with the pursuit of more 'free time' (Marx, 1973, p. 708).

Marx also emphasised how socialism would offer the basis for a transformation in the nature of work itself. With an expanded 'realm of freedom' and work reduced to needs fulfilment, workers would gain the ability to find meaning and enjoyment in work. Changes in ownership would allow for an improvement in the quality of work. Under socialism, workers would work as 'associated producers' and would gain 'collective control' over work (Marx, 1992, p. 959). Work would be accomplished by workers 'with the least expenditure of energy and in conditions most worthy and appropriate to their human nature' (Marx, 1992). Freedom would become a part of the 'realm of necessity' and work would be turned into a free, creative activity.

Elsewhere, Marx showed how work time reduction under socialism would help to change the character of work and increase workers' motivation to work:

It is self-evident that if labour-time is reduced to a normal length and, furthermore, labour is no longer performed for someone else, but for myself, and, at the same time, the social contradictions between master and men, etc., being abolished, it acquires a quite different, a free character, it becomes real social labour, and finally the basis of *disposable time*—the *labour* of a man who has also disposable time, must be of a much higher quality than that of the beast of burden. (Marx, 1972, p. 257; emphasis in original)

With class distinctions 'abolished', work would acquire a 'free character'—it would not be imposed but instead would be performed for the benefit of society and in the interests of those performing it. In a socialist society, the increase of 'disposable time' would be a priority and would offer the basis for work that is 'higher quality'.

People's freedom under socialism, in short, would be realised in a dual sense. First, they would gain the freedom to pursue activities beyond work. Free time would be extended and would be used to undertake creative activities that had been denied or suppressed under capitalism. Second, people would gain the freedom to work well and with meaning. Marx believed that work was an important activity in its own right and that pursuing more free time could be realised at the same time as elevating the

quality of work (James, 2017). Working less, for him, did not mean eliminating work but making work into an activity that people could embrace in the same way as leisure (Sayers, 2005). As we shall see below, while taking a radically different economic and political perspective, Keynes adopted the view—in common with Marx—that progress in society entailed reducing working time; however, he rejected the idea that work could be improved in qualitative terms.

3. Keynes: from full employment to a leisured future

Keynes was, at root, a macroeconomist. He was concerned with how the capitalist system would operate to deny full employment and how it would reproduce involuntary unemployment. The lack of full employment reflected on certain features of the system itself, including the nature and uses of money. The achievement and maintenance of full employment would require the state to intervene in the economy and manage aggregate demand in ways that could support the available work force in employment.

Yet, beyond his contribution to macroeconomics, Keynes offered a bold vision of the future that challenged the goal of full employment. Indeed, he favoured a future where the human input into work was reduced and more time was given over to leisure.

This vision was set out in his Keynes ([1930] 1963) essay, ‘Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren’. In the essay, Keynes predicted that if capital accumulation continued to grow productivity advances would enable work hours to fall continuously. His optimism drew support from the downward trend in work hours witnessed under capitalism from the late nineteenth century to Keynes ([1930] 1963). This trend could be expected to continue. Keynes assumed that, in the future, capitalist employers would pass on the proceeds of productivity growth to workers in the form of both higher wages and shorter work hours. Workers would continue to demand shorter work hours. They would be less concerned with higher consumption than with reducing work hours—Keynes believed that wants were limited and that the need to consume more would wane over time.⁴ The desire of workers to work less (linked to the assumed disutility of work) would mean that capitalist employers would face constant pressure to cut work hours. This demand could be met, in turn, through higher productivity growth arising from higher capital investment.

Keynes made the eye-catching prediction—one repeatedly quoted by subsequent commentators—that the working week would fall to just 15 hours by 2030. The grandchildren of those born in the 1930s could look forward to working fewer hours. The future promised more leisure time and the opportunity for people to achieve well-being with a reduced work commitment.

Keynes’s prediction was consistent with his support for the realisation of full employment. By eliminating unemployment, policy-makers could create the conditions for fast capital accumulation and accelerate the move to shorter work hours. Keynes argued that rises in consumption and investment could help to boost employment and restore full employment. But full employment was also to be achieved as a way

⁴ Keynes ([1930] 1963, p. 365) assumed that workers had ‘absolute needs’. Once these needs were achieved, workers would look to demand fewer hours of work. ‘Relative needs’ linked to the ‘desire for superiority’ were regarded as insignificant. As discussed below, critics have argued that Keynes underestimated the importance of the growth in ‘relative needs’ and how this growth has prevented the fall in work hours.

should be reduced. The normative commitment to see work hours fall and leisure time extended represents a shared element in the visions of Marx and Keynes.

Second, they both highlighted the cost of work—their support for reducing work time drew inspiration from a negative view of work. On this issue, however, their views diverged. For Marx, work was alienating—its lack of freedom and creativity under capitalism led to resistance among workers. He referred to how wage labourers shunned paid work ‘like the plague’ (Marx, 1977, p. 66). An important part of the case for shorter work hours was to liberate workers from the specific deprivations of alienated labour.

Keynes did not develop any theory of alienation—indeed, he avoided direct consideration of the suffering faced by workers in work. Rather, drawing on marginalist ideas, he defined the disutility of work in universal terms. Following most mainstream economists, he assumed that people were naturally averse to work and that happiness came from spending time as leisure.⁸ This assumption ran counter to Marx’s idea of alienation since it did not recognise how the capitalist labour process led to work resistance and how meaning might be restored to work by transcending capitalism.

Third, Marx and Keynes stressed the intrinsic benefits of time spent away from work. These benefits were not to be associated with the pursuit of idleness but rather were to be linked to the participation in all manner of creative activities, from painting to composing. The hope of humanity spending more time freely and creatively inspired both Marx’s and Keynes’s visions of a better future.

Marx argued that socialism would help to win the freedom for people to do different activities during their lives. Famously, he described a future socialist society as one where people would ‘do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, ... without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic’ (Marx and Engels, 1976, p. 53). People would not be inserted into a strict division of labour but instead would be free to spend their time in varied and satisfying activities within as well as beyond work.⁹

Keynes—without endorsing socialism directly—presented a similar vision. He favoured the increase in leisure hours because it would enable people ‘to live wisely and agreeably and well’ (Keynes, [1930] 1963, p. 367). Like Marx, he wished people to gain the freedom to develop as creative beings. As commented on above, Keynes did not distinguish between alternative uses of non-work time and overlooked the potential drudgery of domestic labour. Whether and how established gender roles in the allocation of work—paid and unpaid—would be altered in the future was not something addressed by either Marx or Keynes.¹⁰

⁸ Keynes stated repeatedly in the *General Theory* how work or labour constituted a disutility and stressed the income-value of work activities—see, for example, Keynes ([1936] 1973, pp. 5–6, 28, 128). Full employment was to be achieved not to provide workers with the intrinsic benefits of work but to give them the opportunity to earn and spend money. The material rewards of work would offset the disutility of work. Keynes’s thinking on the cost of work followed that of conventional neoclassical economics and offered no link to Marx’s concept of alienation.

⁹ The above quote has invited some confusion. It implies, for example, that Marx wanted to see a return to a pre-capitalist age with people working on the land to meet their needs. It seems to contradict with his vision of socialism as a progressive system. The quote is indeed ambiguous. Nonetheless, it signals Marx’s desire for a future where variety in work would predominate and where people would be able to develop themselves and their talents in whatever tasks they pursue. The bucolic imagery was perhaps a mistake but beneath it was a more serious point about overcoming the detailed division of labour that features under capitalism.

¹⁰ Marx did recognise that the social reproduction of labour (including the use and application of household production) would be an influence on wages. To this extent, his economic analysis of work was not gender blind (see Cammack, 2020).

overlooked¹²—or referred disparagingly to¹³—the writings of Marx. Nonetheless, they show how both writers shared concerns about the capacity of capitalism to meet the needs of people and how they saw the need to build a fundamentally different society. In the better society they envisaged, people would be able to live fulfilling lives with more freedom and less toil. While they adhered to different views on economics and politics, they subscribed to remarkably similar visions of the future of society.

5. The fate of Marx's and Keynes's visions

The visions of Marx and Keynes—though inspiring in their own ways—have not been realised. The revolution that Marx predicted has not occurred in capitalist economies. Where revolutions have occurred, they have not resulted in great reductions in working hours. China, for example, still has much longer work hours than rich capitalist economies. Furthermore, while weekly work hours have declined under capitalism, they have not fallen by as much as Keynes predicted. In fact, in countries like the USA and UK, the average working week has stagnated since the 1970s (Schor, 1992; Pencavel, 2018). The typical full-time worker in the USA and UK can still expect to work in excess of 40 hours per week (the same number of hours as in the early 1980s). To be sure, there are variations in work hours across countries—some EU countries (e.g. Germany) tend to work the shortest hours per week; however, these variations cannot mask a stagnation in weekly work hours in recent decades. Certainly, in all countries, there looks to be zero prospect of realising Keynes's prediction of a 15 hour work week by 2030.

The increase in the participation of women in the labour market has also seen total working time rise. Hours of paid work per household have risen under capitalism (Hermann, 2015). Women have continued to do the bulk of unpaid work in the household, meaning that their greater participation in the labour market has created a double burden of work at home and in the workplace. The increase in employment rates generally has pushed up the total volume of paid working time in capitalist economies, thwarting any dream of working less.

The reasons for the persistence of work and lack of decline in weekly work hours (in contrast to Keynes's prediction) have been widely debated in both mainstream (Huberman and Minns, 2007; Pecchi and Piga, 2008; Friedman, 2017) and heterodox

¹² Keynes referred to Marx on just three occasions in the *General Theory*. The first reference was to acknowledge Marx as the founder of the term 'classical economics' (Keynes, [1936] 1973, p. 3n). The second showed how the idea of deficient effective demand as a barrier to full employment had been removed from economic thought by the rise to dominance of Ricardian economics: 'It could only live on furtively, below the surface, in the underworlds of Karl Marx, Silvio Gesell or Major Douglas' (Keynes, [1936] 1973, p. 32). The third heaped praise on the writings of Gesell, arguing that the latter had provided 'the answer to Marxism'. Keynes asserted 'that the future will learn more from the spirit of Gesell than from that of Marx' (Keynes, [1936] 1973, p. 355). This final word conveyed concisely and effectively Keynes's own antipathy towards Marx's writings.

¹³ Keynes ([1925A] 1963, p. 300) wrote in 1925 that Marx's work (and Marxism more generally) offered a false theory and politics: 'How can I accept a doctrine which sets up as its bible, above and beyond criticism, an obsolete textbook which I know not only to be scientifically erroneous but without interest or application to the modern world? How can I adopt a creed which, preferring the mud to the fish, exalts the boorish proletariat above the bourgeoisie and the intelligentsia, who with whatever faults, are the quality in life and surely carry the seeds of all human achievement? Even if we need a religion, how can we find it in the turbid rubbish of the Red bookshop? It is hard for an educated, decent, intelligent son of Western Europe to find his ideals here, unless he has first suffered some strange and horrid process of conversion which has changed all his value'. Again, Keynes's rejection of Marx and Marxism could not be clearer (see also Dostaler, 2007, pp. 93–4).

economics (Schor, 1992; Figart and Golden, 1998; Altman, 1999; Golden, 2009). Two key explanations are usually focussed upon. First, there is the argument that workers have lacked the bargaining power to translate gains in productivity into shorter work hours. Historically, workers have secured cuts in work hours through labour disputes (Pencavel, 2018). Recent decades, however, have seen the collective power of workers decline (e.g. due to falling union membership). This fact explains why workers are not working fewer hours. It also explains the mal-distribution of work in society. While some workers face overwork and burnout, others confront underemployment and the inability to access full-time employment (Bell and Blanchflower, 2021). The lack of choice faced by workers over work hours reflects a labour market that is skewed in favour of the interests of capital owners.

Second, attention is given to changes in working and consumption patterns together with the effects of consumerism. The expansion in total employment has meant that more activities previously performed in the home have become commodified. Additional paid work has been created in supporting more people in work. Examples here include work in the care sector and in the manufacture and delivery of convenience food. Work time increases at the household level have fuelled increases in work time across the economy as a whole. These increases have been only partially offset by longer years of schooling and earlier retirement that have reduced work time within households. From a consumer perspective, the existence of strong consumption norms has also underpinned a long work hours culture. The increase in scale and sophistication of advertising, in particular, has cultivated a demand among workers for higher consumption, and in turn, extended hours of work (George, 1997; Cowling, 2006).

The above two explanations are interlinked to the extent that power matters in both of them. In the first, losses in workers' bargaining power explain why work time reduction has slowed under capitalism. In the second, the power of firms—particularly via marketing and advertising—to limit leisure time to the consumption of goods and services accounts for why workers are working longer rather than shorter hours. Shifts in capitalism, prompted by the profit motive, have curtailed the freedom of workers to work less.

Both explanations can be reconciled with the ideas of Marx and Keynes. The first explanation captures directly the argument made by Marx on the power imbalance between capital and labour. Workers have to struggle for shorter work hours, and in the context of hostile bargaining conditions, they have to settle for work hours that are determined in the interests of capitalist employers. Evidence pointing to workers' work time preferences not being met simply confirms their lack of power (Reynolds and Aletraris, 2006).

This explanation also fits with the argument of Keynes. As argued above, Keynes believed that full employment was an important precondition in securing shorter work hours. The state needed to target—and achieve—the goal of full employment. Keynes also implied that full employment would coincide with lower inequality—workers would use their strong bargaining power to push capitalist employers to use productivity growth to cut work hours and raise wages. The period since the 1970s, however, has seen a move away from state support for the goal of full employment (low inflation has taken its place). Higher unemployment has joined with higher inequality (Tridico, 2018) and has prevented the reduction in work hours along with the increase in wages. Keynes might not have anticipated the regressive turn in capitalism but his explanation

of the conditions required for shorter work hours can accommodate this turn and highlight it as a barrier to work time reduction.

The second explanation relating to how work and consumption have evolved may seem distant from the writings of Marx and Keynes but again it can be reconciled with them. Marx was well aware of how capitalism would draw more workers into the labour market and how processes of commodification would accelerate with capitalist expansion. Modern trends linked to the increase in work hours per household and its associated positive impact on work time in the wider economy are consistent with Marx's ideas. Some Marxist authors like Andre Gorz have also shown how a consumer culture has been actively encouraged by capitalism and how this culture—supported by mass advertising and constant product innovation—has lengthened work time, to the detriment of workers' well-being and ecological sustainability (Gorz, 1989). A Marxist argument, in short, can be developed to explain the direct impact of consumerism on work hours.

Keynes certainly underestimated the capacity of the capitalist economy to extend the labour market and increase employment. He seemed to assume a production-centred economy that would be curtailed as productivity advanced. The mass expansion of the service sector was not foreseen by Keynes. The fact that it has increased has held back productivity growth and made it more difficult to realise the shorter working week that Keynes predicted.

Keynes can also be criticised for missing the insatiability of wants. He believed that wants would become sated and that this would lead workers to demand shorter work hours. His 'mistake' was not to see how wants would grow under capitalism and create a constant need and desire for more work (Skidelsky and Skidelsky, 2012, pp. 41–2). This is true—he failed to capture the importance of forms of conspicuous consumption in driving a preference among workers for longer hours of work. At the same time, however, Keynes wanted to see a situation created where the satisfaction of consumer wants equated with working less. His vision was consistent with creating the time for people to live without the pressure to work. 'Enoughness', in Keynes's terms, meant channelling economic surpluses towards more leisure time and moving beyond the treadmill of more work and consumption. He may have overlooked the influence of consumerism in sustaining work under capitalism but his vision of a better future stands as a sharp rebuke to the system that exists now and a reminder of how society might be organised differently.

A final point to note is the continued separation between mainstream economics and the kind of visionary thinking developed by Marx and Keynes. Both authors may have differed, as stated previously, on how society might be transformed; however, they stressed the need to use economics as a way to imagine a different future—one where work would be lessened and the ability of people to live as they wanted would be expanded. This way of thinking has been marginalised by the formal turn in economics where technical precision and exactitude have taken the place of the quest to reimagine the economy. Marx and Keynes—as visionary thinkers—find no place in the somewhat sterile and conventional debates of modern mainstream economics. In particular, there is little room in these debates for serious consideration of the benefit and imperative for shortening work hours. Below, the relationship of Marx and Keynes to contemporary discourse on digital automation and the future of work is addressed. This further highlights the marginalisation of Marx and Keynes in modern economics debates.

made towards the achievement of lighter work, where shorter work hours combine with more meaningful work.¹⁴ The contribution of Marx is particularly insightful in showing how—beyond post-work ideas—there is a requirement to change work into something that is human and life enhancing. In conclusion, the critical (and complementary) visions of Marx and Keynes have lots to teach us about how work and leisure might be (and should be) carried out differently in the future.

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¹⁴ [Spencer \(2022\)](#) offers a fuller account of how work might be lightened in society.

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