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# Work time reduction: old ideas and new possibilities

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**ABSTRACT**

I address the goal of work time reduction from two distinct angles. Firstly, I review some old ideas (linked to the writings of Marx, J.S. Mill and Keynes) that imagine a better society where constant work is replaced with abundant leisure. I show how these ideas offer different views on the barriers preventing work time reduction and on the mechanisms required to achieve it. Secondly, I consider new possibilities for reducing working time in the future. There is now renewed confidence that work time reduction can and will be achieved: this confidence reflects predictions of work automation driven by new technology and the increase in business-led trials of a four-day working week. I argue that achieving work time reduction will face obstacles (it will not occur smoothly via technological progress, nor will it be achieved spontaneously by business-led reform), but that its pursuit remains vital and essential in advancing human well-being. Old ideas, therefore, can still fire our imaginations. At the same time, they remind us of the barriers to reform and the battle still to be fought in achieving a future where we all work less. Winning this battle will ultimately require us to strive for futures beyond capitalism.

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## 1. Introduction

The goal of work time reduction has inspired thinkers for many years. Indeed, this goal has given rise to grand visions of futures where work is replaced with leisure and toil with meaningful activity. Work time reduction has been a key aspiration of progressive voices intent on transforming work and life under (and also beyond) capitalism (Frayne 2015; Granter 2009; Spencer 2022). At the same time, however, there has been continuing frustration that working hours have remained long and visionary thinking about the future has been dashed (this in spite of constant progress in technology and productivity) (Schor 1992). For many people of working age under capitalism, working less has remained a distant hope or even fantasy: its lack of achievement has encouraged the view, though untrue, that the persistence of long hours of work is inevitable and unavoidable.

With this background in mind, I aim to combine two elements in the following paper. Firstly, I reflect on the history of ideas on work time reduction – what have key thinkers (specifically Marx, J.S. Mill and Keynes) regarded as the benefits of a society where working

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time is reduced, what barriers have they seen as preventing these benefits from being realised and what mechanisms have they viewed as important in achieving work time reduction?

Secondly, I consider the possibilities for working time to fall in the future. There is now renewed confidence that shorter working hours can and will be achieved in capitalist economies, if not immediately, then in coming years – this confidence stems from different sources: one relates to the acceleration of technology (particularly artificial intelligence (AI)) and the scope for work automation on a grand scale (Susskind 2020), another concerns the embrace by a growing number of businesses of a four-day working week (Schor 2025). I assess the obstacles to as well as opportunities for reform.

My argument is both pessimistic and optimistic. On the one hand, capitalist economies remain a long way from achieving shorter working hours. Old ideas of transformative change through work time reduction continue to be thwarted by economic, cultural and political factors. Working time will not reduce smoothly through technological progress, nor will it be reduced spontaneously by business-led reform. Rather, work time reduction will continue to face resistance, including from business and the state.

Yet, on the other hand, I assert the case for reform. There is still much to be gained from shortening working hours. The idea and vision of working less must inspire the push for change. Though in promoting this idea and vision, we have to keep in mind the challenge it poses to the status quo. Achieving less work requires us to think differently about how technology should be harnessed in society – in particular, it demands that we see its value and use in curbing the hours we work and in creating a different economy beyond the present work-based one. It also demands that we see how business practice needs to be overhauled more radically if the economy is to accommodate more leisure time. In these different aspects, we are pushed back to the old ideas outlined in the paper and prompted to reapply them in thinking about possible new futures beyond the present. These old ideas also remind us of the battle still to be fought in realising less work in society. This battle will not diminish and indeed will only grow fiercer as AI technology advances and more businesses adopt a four-day working week.

As I discuss below, beyond technological progress and business-led trials, work time reduction on a significant and lasting basis will require collective action from a reforming state, unions and workers. In this way, it will test the limits of and require alternatives to current reform agendas. On this last point, critical researchers continue to have an important role to play not only in promoting the idea of work time reduction but also in joining forces with others in turning this idea into a reality. This paper is a contribution towards this collective effort for change.

## 2. The case for working less

At least two key arguments have been given for working less. The first relates to productivity and the scope for achieving greater output in shorter working hours. This economic argument suggests that shorter working hours can be both an outcome and cause of higher productivity. Some economists have argued, on efficiency grounds, for work time reduction – they have seen scope to raise productivity from cutting working hours below current levels (Chapman 1909; Hicks 1968). Still others have expected that growth in the capitalist economy would ease the burden of work and lead to more leisure

time. Formal models of labour supply presented in economics textbook anticipate that workers will 'buy' more leisure time as their incomes rise (Pencavel 2016). These models assume that technological progress will give workers the option of working less in the future (whether they take this option or not is seen to depend on their own individual preferences).

In reality, working hours have tended to decline with expansion in the economy, though not always on a consistent basis. For example, working hours in some countries (notably the United States of America (U.S.A.)) have stagnated since the 1970s (Schor 1992). Recent decades have shown how technological progress and productivity growth do not guarantee shorter working hours (Hermann 2014). Rather, they have highlighted the barriers to workers achieving more time away from work.

The second argument in support of working less rests on a view of well-being and a life well lived. It holds to the idea that people would enjoy life more if they had more freedom to work less. This idea hinges on the intrinsic value of extended leisure time. By working less, people will not just escape the pain of work (something that economists have taken for granted), but also enjoy the benefits of more time for themselves and with their families and friends. According to this argument, work time reduction is a necessary step in promoting a superior way of living (Russell 1935).

The above two arguments are not necessarily mutually exclusive; rather, they can be combined and used to reinforce one another. Hence, if productivity can be accelerated by working less, this can pave the way for a more rapid reduction in working hours, improving the quality of life for all.

Here I want to outline the support given by three prominent political economists to work time reduction. These are Marx, J.S. Mill and Keynes. To compare across these writers would seem a heroic undertaking given the different and divergent economic and political positions they held. Marx – as an avowed opponent of capitalism and supporter of communism – does not sit comfortably alongside the liberal and reformist voices of Mill and Keynes. But beneath these differences, there exist commonalities between their thought. All three, as I show below, believed in a future of less work. This belief drew strength from the economic and moral arguments highlighted above – it also reflected strongly held views on the need and merit of economic transformation. To be sure, the individual writers differed significantly on the barriers to work time reduction and on the pathways to its realisation. These differences, however, should not distract from areas where their ideas and visions coincided (sometimes in remarkable and surprising ways).

Firstly, for Marx, there was a clear commitment to a future where working hours were diminished. This commitment was based on a critique of capitalism. In Marx's view, the imposition of long working hours was a peculiar outcome of the capitalist system. Wage-labourers were forced to work longer than the time required to meet their needs by the threat of poverty (life without work was not a viable option for the vast majority of workers). In practice, workers had to organise collectively – e.g. via unions – to win shorter working hours. The state could assist by regulating who was eligible to work (e.g. by limiting the age at which children could work) and through the regulation of working time for child labour, it could lay the foundations for a general reduction in the average or 'normal' length of working time. Marx showed how the Factory Acts enacted in Britain during the nineteenth century had helped to limit and reduce the working week. Capitalist employers might also acquiesce to shorter working hours (including a shorter

working week) as workers became too exhausted, or worse, worked to death, by long working hours. Their interest in getting the most 'surplus value' (or unpaid work time) from workers might lead them to see economic benefits from reducing working hours (Marx 1976, 377–81); however, in Marx's view, working hours remained fundamentally contested under capitalism. Shorter working hours had to be won by workers through their collective resistance to capitalist class power.

Marx, though, offered hope and the real possibility of change in the future. Capitalism could and would not last – rather, it would foment and ultimately succumb to a revolution led by the working class. This revolution would entail the resistance to wage-labour including its association with exploitation and the denial of freedom over working time. Marx (1992, 959), in admittedly sketchy terms, set out a post-capitalist (communist) vision of a world of fewer working hours. In the transition to communism (something Marx regarded as inevitable), production for profit would be replaced with production for need and technology would be redirected towards reducing drudgery. These changes would help to extend 'the realm of freedom' (i.e. the realm of leisure where people did not have to work, but instead could pursue their own interests and those of their wider communities). Self-governance and cooperative structures at work would also help to transform 'the realm of necessity' from a site of toil into a place of enjoyment and enrichment. Marx envisaged meaningful work coexisting with ample 'free time' in a future communist society. Notably, with alienation removed, workers could perform work more effectively even while working fewer hours, creating the basis for further cuts in working hours (Marx 1972, 257). The economic and social merits of a post-capitalist, work-less future, according to Marx, only underlined the urgent need for revolutionary change in the present.

Secondly, J.S. Mill blamed long working hours on a system that put the goal of the expansion of material wealth above that of the extension of people's freedom. While still, at heart, a liberal and a believer in individual liberty, Mill sided with other critics (including Marx) in challenging the way that capitalism eroded the quality of people's lives. Technology in capitalist society, in particular, was not abridging work (i.e. making it shorter in duration) as it should do, but instead it was adding to the misery of working people (Mill 1965, 756). Long hours of toil left workers not only tired and without energy but also incapable of enjoying leisure hours. Capitalism was set up to encourage more work over more leisure, and in this respect, it produced more harm than good.

Mill had two responses to the problem of overwork. The first was to support what he termed as a 'stationary state' of growth (Mill 1965, 756). The move to an economy of zero growth would help to curb the need for work and increase leisure time. Mill imagined a future economy that provided time and opportunity for people to develop their skills and talents beyond the realm of work. Leisure was 'good', whereas work was 'bad'. The road to fulfilment meant curtailing work and expanding leisure, and pursuing this road entailed shrinking the size and extent of the economy. Mill believed, like Marx, that the economy needed to undergo radical reform if it was to meet the creative needs of people. Unlike Marx, however, he rejected the call for revolution and instead envisaged a peaceful transition to a post-growth economy.

Mill's second response was to argue for reforms in the governance of work (Mill 1965, 792). One factor preventing work time reduction was the lack of freedom exercised by workers over the time they worked. Capitalist workplaces featured rule by order and discipline. To progress towards a state where working hours were shorter, production

needed to be democratised. This entailed giving workers direct stakes in production and making them joint owners of capital. Mill embraced a form of cooperative ownership, arguing that it could not just raise productivity by sharpening incentives to work, but also facilitate a change in the form of work itself – in the latter case, it could bring about a return of 'the dignity of labour' (792). While Mill was equivocal over the need to ditch capitalism at least immediately (207), his support for radical work reforms aligned him with those (like Marx) calling for the move to worker-owned and worker-run workplaces. Drawing on the example of the cooperative movement in Northern England (790–92), Mill envisaged a change towards economic democracy that would be driven not by the collective will of the state or unions but by workers and capitalist employers cooperating and acting in partnership. A future of less work would require radical change, but not the kind of revolution that Marx and other socialists argued for.

Thirdly and finally, there is the perspective of Keynes. He was overtly critical of the politics as well as economics of Marx. According to Keynes, Marx had nothing important to say on the nature and workings of the capitalist economy and his backing for communism was misguided and plain wrong (Keynes 1963a [1925], 300). The labour movement and Labour Party in Britain were also derided by Keynes – rather, he put his faith in the intellectual bourgeoisie in leading change and gave his support politically to the Liberal Party (Keynes, Keynes 1963b [1925], 324). Yet, Keynes agreed with Marx as well as trades unionists that progress in society meant reducing working time. While Keynes was concerned in the short-run with creating more work to resolve unemployment, he also retained a radical long-run vision (not too dissimilar to those of Marx and Mill) that entailed the move to an economy where work for pay would disappear and leisure time would be extended.

Keynes's oft-cited 1930 paper, 'Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren', set out most clearly and succinctly his long-run vision of the economy. In it, he argued that growth under capitalism was a necessary evil. It brought forth the technology and gains in productivity required by society to increase both living standards and leisure time. Keynes predicted that, if the economy kept on growing at the same rate, people would, in 2030, have to work just fifteen hour per week. The benefits of continuous growth would be measured by the reduction of necessary working time.

Unlike Mill, Keynes eschewed a 'stationary state' and instead wanted growth to accelerate – he was particularly concerned to grow the economy as a means to restore full employment. He favoured government action to stimulate growth in the short-run. Like Mill, however, he saw an end to growth – beyond the constant expansion of the economy, there was a need to secure a future where work gave way to leisure and the activities of money-making (linked to wage-labour and capitalist investment behaviour) were replaced with creative pursuits outside of work. Keynes (1963c[1930], 365) anticipated that once the 'absolute needs' of people had been met, attention would switch away from more consumption and towards more leisure. The satiation of human needs would help to win people's freedom from work and enable them to pursue and realise the benefits of leisure. Like Mill, he associated a better life with the increase in leisure time.

Keynes alluded to obstacles to a brighter future. On the one hand, there were potential barriers to growth – e.g. due to recurring recessions and economic crises. On the other hand, there were normative and psychological barriers to change. The persistence of the work ethic (or 'old Adam') meant that society might take time to adapt to, and embrace

the intrinsic merits of working less. People – having grown used to working long hours – might even suffer direct harm from reducing their working hours. Nervous breakdowns suffered by some middleclass housewives, Keynes (1963c[1930], 366–67) argued, were a warning of the costs that wider society might face in the transition to a post-work economy. But Keynes regarded these and other costs as temporary and resolvable. He was optimistic that, with the right economic and cultural conditions, people could flourish with less work. Importantly, the move to a better (work-less) future did not require the immediate ending of capitalism (again he remained a fierce opponent of Marx). Rather, capitalism would naturally fade away through its own development and evolution. Growth in the capitalist economy, in the end, would beget a post-growth and post-capitalist economy. This transition would entail society following the lead of the intellectual bourgeoisie. Keynes continued to take an elitist position when contemplating the pathway towards the realisation of a better society.

Three summary points can be made here. Firstly, the trio of Marx, Mill and Keynes endorsed the idea that the economy should deliver, not just more output, but also shorter working hours. All three embraced the goal of realising an economy that focused on reducing work. They argued for this goal based on different arguments. Marx was concerned to escape alienating work. Reducing working time meant not reducing work to zero, but eliminating the aspects of work that were degrading and dehumanising. He envisioned improvement in the quality of work coinciding with the reduction in working time. Mill and Keynes, by contrast, took a more instrumental view of work – they regarded it as mostly lacking in meaning. The main point of work time reduction was to make time for people to have meaningful lives beyond work.

Secondly, the three authors agreed, albeit for very different reasons, that there were limits to shortening working time. Marx blamed class conflict – while capitalism existed, there would be a struggle between capital and labour over the length of working time. In essence, capitalism was antithetical to a leisure society. Mill offered criticisms of capitalism, but focused more on the growth fetish and the lack of workplace democracy as reasons for the failure to curb working time. Keynes was generally optimistic that a growing economy would deliver less work (indeed, he wanted faster economic growth in the short-run, in order to accelerate the move to a future of work), but he worried at the same time that society was not yet ready for a future of ease and that it would take time to realise the benefits of this future. Progress meant society learning how to live well with less work. This learning again would be facilitated via the leadership and guidance of an intellectual elite.

Thirdly, the three authors believed in different routes to work time reduction. Marx was uncompromising – only the abolition of capitalism would bring about a significant reduction in working hours and the elimination of the alienation of work. Mill, almost as radically, argued for the suspension of growth and the move to greater worker ownership. Unlike Marx, he could not condone the sudden and imminent overthrow of capitalism. Social change meant, for Mill, the development of new cooperative associations and the transformation of work and the economy through non-violent means.

Keynes put his faith in more growth in delivering a better future. *Contra* Mill, work time reduction would require speeding up economic growth, not retarding it. But Keynes, like Mill, saw economic growth as transitory – beyond it, there existed a better leisured future. Like Marx, too, Keynes dreamed of a future utopia where people would indulge their

passions, not in waged work and capitalist money-making activities, but in cultivating great art and beauty in the world. This future would not require the move to communism nor greater worker ownership – rather, it would require society to realise through reason and good sense (once more, led by the intellectual bourgeoisie) that a better standard of life stemmed from pursuing creative leisure rather than money-making. Keynes, in common with Mill, backed a harmonious transition in society: one that nevertheless implied a dramatic reorganisation of the economy and the effective demise of capitalism. As I show below, the idea and goal of working less has resurfaced in modern debates, though its revival has created some new problems, not least over the continuing glaring gap between the notion of positive change and the reality of stasis or slow progress in actual working hours.

## 3. Modern debates: are we all about to work less?

The ideas of Marx, Mill and Keynes have faced the continuing challenge of an economy that resists less work. To be sure, in capitalist economies, hours of work for many workers have fallen over the long-run (Huberman and Minns 2007). With the increase of paid leave and longer spells in education and retirement, working hours across the year and across the life course have decreased. Yet, against these trends, the working week has become stuck at five days – there has been no break from the norm of a five-day working week since the early twentieth-century. The rise in the participation of women in the labour market – a good thing in itself – and the increase in the employment rate, have also meant that total paid working time at the household level has increased (Hermann 2014). Capitalism may have brought about great advances in production and consumption, but it has not yet ushered in an era of mass leisure time. To the contrary, with a working week seemingly fixed in length and working for a living still the norm, most workers can expect to spend many years of their lives at work. The hope of ease has continued to be thwarted by a reality of constant work.

Nonetheless, there is now renewed optimism that things will (or are about to) change. Two particular sources of optimism can be highlighted. Firstly, there is the idea of change linked to the rise of new technology. A coming AI revolution – sweeping away the need for human labour across jobs – could usher in a new age of leisure (Susskind 2020). At least, it could if society manages it properly. Secondly, there is rising interest among some businesses (backed by successful trials) in the move to a four-day working week (Coote et al. 2020; Schor 2025). This interest – if it can be maintained and provided it sparks major reform in business practice – could lead to a permanently shorter working week across the economy.

I want to question the grounds for optimism in both of the above two cases. Importantly, this does not reflect any deep pessimism about the scope for change – in fact, my view is that change is needed and possible. Rather, I argue that perspectives stressing technological solutions or business-led reform are somewhat naïve and misleading on the possibilities for change. Understanding their limits leads us back to the ideas of the three authors examined in the previous section.

On AI and an automated route to work time reduction, two points of concern can be raised. The first relates to the scope for AI to preserve work rather than reduce it. While AI is often linked to automation, in practice, it may leave many

jobs intact (jobs in the care sector, for example, may be mostly unaffected). It may also lead to new forms of work – the emergence of the gig-economy, underpinned by AI, has shown how advances in technology can create new jobs. In addition, there is the scope for AI to expand opportunities for marketing and thereby to fuel higher consumption (and with it, more work, including for human workers). To date, there are few signs that the wider use of AI is diminishing work – rather, with continually high employment rates and the continuation of a five-day working week, work looks set to continue, despite and indeed because of developments in AI.

But let's say that AI does impact the volume of employment in the future. Say it reduces the number of available jobs through automaton. The risk in this case is that rising unemployment leads to a decline in wages, making, from a firm perspective, labour relatively more attractive to technology. A reduction in wages would blunt incentives for firms to invest in technology and could lead to the hiring of more labour. Hand-carwashes and fruit-picking by human hands persist in the present in spite of automated alternatives because low waged workers are easy to hire and exploit. If the use of AI for automation creates a cheaper and more disposable workforce in coming years, it may end up boosting the demand for labour.

The above highlights another point, namely that the threat of AI may be felt more in the content of work than in its volume – its use for monitoring, for instance, may cause workers to work faster and with less autonomy (Fleming 2019). Because AI is not neutral but rather is shaped by the motives of capitalist investors and owners, its development and use is more likely to lead to outcomes such as high work intensity and long work hours that are detrimental to workers' health and well-being (Ranganathan and Ye 2026). Certainly, there is no guarantee that AI will allow workers to work less – indeed, the danger is that, if left unchecked, it will mean many of them keep working the same or even longer hours, perhaps for lower pay and under worse conditions.

The second concern is around the response to AI. For some prominent mainstream economists, the appropriate response is to support more work. Acemoglu and Johnson (2023) back this response, arguing that it is required not only to give workers the income they need to live but also to provide workers with the meaning that work can bring. The concern is that, if work is automated by the wider use of AI, people will lose not just income but also meaning in their lives. An AI-led automation must be resisted, in short, to protect people's quality of life.

The problem with this approach is that it overlooks the goal of reducing working time. Instead, there is a stress on keeping workers working. This is understandable given the direct association between automation and unemployment. But it is problematic when seen in relation to the opportunity for work time reduction. The focus on 'saving' work from automation – the position taken by Acemoglu and Johnson and other mainstream economists – misses how AI might be harnessed to curtail working hours (Spencer 2025). This criticism is based on the idea that not all work is good – some of it, indeed, may be a barrier to well-being (Graeber 2018). It also relates to the idea that even where work adds positively to well-being, it should not dominate over life. We can celebrate automation if it enables us to gain more meaningful non-work lives, just as we can celebrate it if it reduces our exposure to drudgery and allows us to enjoy more pleasant work lives. Reducing working time remains a desirable goal for the use of AI in workplaces and

while this goal is missed by economists and others, we will have a limited view of the potential for AI to transform work.

What might have Marx, Mill and Keynes made of the rise of AI? For Marx, it would have been seen as of limited benefit because of its development under capitalism. This fact would mean that it would be biased in its effects, serving the interests of capitalists over those of workers. AI could never be a force for lighter work while it remained bounded by capitalist motives and imperatives – indeed, the risk was that it would increase the burden of work both directly by creating more production and consumption and indirectly by eroding the quality of work. Its use for positive ends would require its reuse beyond capitalism. In Marx's case, the key question would be over how workers should mobilise to resist AI in the short-run and then reshape its use in the long-run.

In the case of Mill, the concern would be more around the capacity of AI to fuel higher economic growth. It could not liberate people from work if it was used mainly to grow the economy. Mill would have no doubt stressed the re-harnessing of AI under more democratic conditions – that way, it could serve the interests of people more directly (these interests could be seen to include the reduction of working time). Though the question for Mill would be over how workers would gain the power to shape the nature and direction of AI. How would workers secure the ability to direct AI when it is owned and controlled by capital?

Finally, Keynes would have argued that AI must be used directly and intentionally for work time reduction. He would have advised its use in accelerating growth, not for its own sake, but for the purposes of reducing working time. He would have doubtless wanted us to learn quickly how automation is not a threat to our well-being but rather a way for us to live better lives. The question for Keynes would be around how society would change course and realise the conditions where productivity gains are translated into shorter working hours. Similar to Mill, the issue would be over how AI should be directed to the benefit of society.

The second idea suggesting that working time might fall in the future relates to the move by a growing number of businesses to adopt a four-day working week (Schor 2025). This idea is made independently of any change in technology – rather, it builds from the argument that, by reducing the working week by a day, businesses can add to productivity at the same time as improving the well-being of workers. A four-day working week is seen as 'good' for business and 'good' for the economy (Gomes 2021). Its successful trialling in different businesses around the world is seen to justify a wider push for reform across all businesses.

Problems present themselves, however. While some (a small minority) of businesses are willing to experiment and adopt a four-day working week, the vast majority remain resistant to change. This is for different reasons. These include the costs entailed in reducing the working week, from potentially hiring more staff to the loss of revenue from idle premises and machinery. Reducing the working week, in addition, has often been seen as a concession to workers and while this view remains, business owners and managers will resist its implementation. Historically, workers have won shorter working hours either by industrial action or by lobbying the state for work time regulations – the reason why working hours have stalled over recent years can be explained partly by the demise of workers' collective power (Scalmer 2025). To imagine now that businesses will adjust voluntarily to a four-day

working week is to ignore the different economic and political factors leading businesses to retain a five-day working week. Here Marx's writings are useful in showing us how business reform may be lacking, even in the context of evidence highlighting the success of a four-day working week. Simply put, most businesses will continue to see a four-day working week as a non-viable or even dangerous option.

There is also the issue of some workers fearing a four-day working week, not because they do not know how to use their leisure time (as Keynes implied), but because they rely on working a five-day week to pay their bills. Take workers paid by the hour. They depend on securing the maximum number of hours they can get. A four-day working week for these workers would be a threat rather than an opportunity – it may represent a twenty per cent cut in pay. This is not to say that workers would not gain, in non-monetary terms, from a four-day working week – rather, it is to show some of the economic barriers (from a worker's perspective) that stand in its way.

Another factor is the continuing strength of high consumption norms that drive workers to keep working. Marx implied that capitalist employers would want to encourage more consumption over less leisure as this would help them to realise higher profits – consumerist sentiments, manufactured by capitalist employers, would act as a barrier to workers demanding and achieving shorter working hours (Philp 2001). Mill thought that people would enjoy life more by relinquishing the competitive culture of capitalism – in this sense, he underestimated how people might continue to be gripped by this culture and find it difficult to escape from it.

Keynes, in his account, saw workers as coming to have enough of consumption and instead turning to leisure pursuits for pleasure. He ignored how consumerism would go on affecting behaviour and prevent workers from demanding less work – 'relative needs' linked to the 'desire for superiority' (Keynes 1963c [1930], 365), in contrast to what he anticipated, have grown and prevented workers from working less. The key lesson here is that while the desire for consumption remains high, there will be a lack of pressure from the side of workers for a shorter working week. Work time reduction may be hindered, therefore, not just by the power of bosses to dictate working time, but also by the force of consumerism in influencing what workers desire to spend their wages on.

Beyond consumer goods, there are basic goods like housing, health, education, energy and transport. The prices of these goods have not reduced but rather increased over recent times. In countries like the United Kingdom (UK), where privatisation has occurred and the housing market has inflated significantly, the costs of basic services have risen. The resulting squeeze on real incomes has added to the pressure on workers to keep working the same or longer hours (Bangham 2020). In other countries like the U.S.A., the high cost of health insurance has imposed an added burden on workers to maintain or extend working hours.

Mill and Keynes implied workers sharing in the rewards of growth and by extension suggested that the costs of basic goods would tend to decline over time, resulting in more time for workers to indulge their passions in leisure. Neither anticipated how a cost of living crisis would erode the real incomes of workers and oblige them to sustain or increase working hours. In the present, moves to a four-day working week – an outcome both Mill and Keynes would have supported and would have expected to be achieved by now – will be impeded while workers are faced with higher costs of living. From the

perspective of Marx, the failure of capitalism to deliver a shorter working week due to limits on workers' real incomes can be seen to confirm the incompatibility between capitalism and the goal of working less. It shows how class conflict remains the key barrier to workers enjoying shorter working hours.

Finally, there is the role of state. To what extent are governments in support of the objective of a four-day working week? How likely are they to implement reforms to aid its realisation? The answer to these questions is a negative one. Rather, all governments remain focused on growing the economy. This focus is viewed as inconsistent with moving to a four-day working week – indeed, it is seen to require the same or even longer working week. Note how the Labour government in the UK has actively resisted trials of a four-day working week in the public sector, despite evidence of their success (Grierson 2025). Note too how governments in Greece and Germany have equated growth with working more, including extending the working week (Boutelet 2025; Smith 2024). Economic policy debates fail to accommodate the ideas of Mill and Keynes that progress requires reducing working time and attaining a future beyond growth. Politicians and policymakers seem stuck in a Keynes-like short-run wanting to boost growth, while at the same time overlooking Keynes's long-run vision of a post-growth economy of leisure. Their views, like Marx anticipated, betray a bias towards continuing paid work on a seemingly indefinite basis. Needless to say, this bias reflects and reinforces the interests of the capitalist class.

The summary is that even with AI accelerating and growing numbers of businesses adopting a four-day working week, movement towards a future of less work may remain stymied. The best we might hope for is AI reducing working hours incrementally and more (though by no means all) businesses moving slowly to a four-day working week. Such change may still entail long hours of work (per week and across the year) for most workers, for a long time to come. It may also create a sense of resignation to a future where work persists and dispel hopes (again) of extending people's freedom to live, act and create beyond work. The ideas of Marx, Mill and Keynes may suffer marginalisation, not because they are wrong, but because reality will and cannot support them. As I show below, maintaining these ideas and the goal of shorter working hours requires us to reflect back on the research we do as social scientists and the vision of the future we look to uphold and seek to realise.

## 4. Facing the future: lessons for research and reform

I want to make two arguments in this section. Firstly, I want to stress that work time reduction must be viewed as a radical demand, not something thrust on us by AI or to be adopted piecemeal by businesses, but part of a re-imagination of the economy. Here we can draw insight from Marx, Mill and Keynes on the framing and wider intent of the goal of working less. Secondly, I want to emphasise that the reforms required to achieve work time reduction will push us beyond the economy that we have known up to now. Indeed, it will push us towards – as anticipated by Marx, Mill and Keynes, albeit for different reasons – a future beyond capitalism.

On research, there are different dimensions to consider. The aims to be obtained from work time reduction is one. These aims are multi-dimensional. They include the possibility of raising productivity through concentrating work and workers' effort but

also encompass increasing the ability of people to meet their needs, not just material but also creative, within and without work. Modern mainstream economists focused on the effects of AI dwell on the costs of the loss of work for meaning in life, but neglect the opportunity that the reduction of working time could bring for meaningful activity in the non-work sphere. The point is that work time reduction can be justified both as a way to escape low quality work and as a means to extend opportunity for people to live well beyond work. Meaning in work also matters, but promoting work should not be at the expense of reducing time away from work – rather, it should complement and reinforce it. Marx, at least, supported the dual achievement of less and better work, whereas Mill and Keynes (seeing work as a 'disutility', in line with conventional economic theory) were keener to elevate the goal of less work on its own. Taking account of both goals (meaningful work and leisure) would seem the better approach.

There are also the obstacles to work time reduction. These include the aspect of power, including class power. A major reason why workers are not working less is due to their lack of freedom in and over work. Workers' loss of bargaining leverage – linked to the demise of unions and the election of more conservative governments – helps to explain why working hours have not fallen in line with productivity growth in capitalist economies since the 1970s (Scalmer 2025). But the above obstacles also include issues of culture and norms. The value invested in hard work – reflected in the persistence of a 'work ethic' – supports continuous working. High consumption norms – premised on mass advertising and continuous product development – also support more work (Cowling 2006). The role of culture and norms, alongside the relative weakness of labour vis-à-vis capital, must be considered when thinking about the scope (or lack thereof) for reducing working time.

In addition, there are economic barriers linked to the costs of basic goods. As discussed above, rises in the cost of living have kept workers working (often for longer than they desire). The factors contributing to the higher price inflation of basic goods – linked to processes of privatisation and commodification (Onaran 2022) – need to be understood in explaining why working hours have stayed long and why they may stay long into the future.

The role of power also matters for how technology evolves – it means that technology may progress while working hours remain unreformed. Technological progress may simply enrich capital owners and leave the rest of society working the same or longer hours. The unequal impacts and consequences of AI technology are now recognised (including by some mainstream economists) (Acemoglu and Johnson 2023), but there is a neglect of how technology might prolong working hours. Businesses (even those adopting AI) may still resist reform. Indeed, with AI, a culture of perpetual working may be cultivated. For example, the porosity of the working day may be reduced via forms of AI-assisted monitoring that track workers' performance on a real time basis. We know from the rise of the gig-economy how working time for human workers can be extended and intensified via the use of AI. We also know how the tech sector itself has a culture of long working hours (BBC 2026). In short, there is no guarantee that AI will enable society to work less – rather, there are reasons to expect it to make working hours longer and more intensive.

The barriers highlighted above are not insurmountable – rather, they can and must be challenged (and overcome). One aspect of critical research is to show how the future can

be different. But the fact remains that even allowing for the progress of AI and business-led reform, the move to work time reduction will face resistance. Research must account for this resistance in a clear and systematic way. As argued below, it must also offer a route to reform and a changed future.

Marx, for his part, recognised the structural (class-determined) limits to change imposed by capitalism. Mill was more focused on the limits due to the imperative to grow the economy as well as to the lack of democracy in workplaces – however, his awareness of these factors did not lead him to fully reject capitalism. Keynes discussed limits due to the lack of growth and due to people not knowing how to use their leisure time wisely. He hinted at the merits of a more equal distribution of income (one that would enable the working class to work less), but he failed to endorse workers organising collectively to pursue their interests. Rather, he saw change as being instigated mainly by the intellectual bourgeoisie.

The views of the three authors on limits to change were clearly different and sometimes contradictory – for example, Keynes disagreed with Marx over the capacity of capitalism to deliver a future of less work. They also made errors. Keynes underestimated the scope for long work hours to persist under capitalism, partly because he understated how consumption wants would proliferate and the power of workers to work less would decline over time. Both Mill and Keynes neglected the political obstacles preventing shorter working hours under capitalism and the need for unions and workers to take direct action to bring about change. Marx also failed to fully spell out his alternative vision of the future and hence left unanswered some key questions about its form and feasibility.

But from a research perspective, while we can see differences and gaps in the writings of Marx, Mill and Keynes, we can also take from them the idea that the achievement of work time reduction will entail significant changes in economy and society. Mill reminds us of the need to see futures beyond growth and to encourage economic democracy in achieving less work. Keynes reminds us of the consistency between work time reduction and the move beyond the money-making activities of capitalism. Marx shows us how the replacement of capitalism is a prerequisite for making work and life better. The point is that each writer challenges us to see work time reduction, not as a simple product of technological progress or an outcome of business reform, but as a goal that requires us to radically rethink how we work and live. Their vision of an alternative (work-less and thriving) future, while advocated for different reasons, can still inspire us today.

For research, the lesson is clear. Having a sharp vision of the future helps to focus and motivate research. It offers a target to aim at, but also sets a direction of travel for reform. Just as importantly, it builds hope and confidence for a better future, and shows us what might be achieved if we transformed the world we now inhabit. The need for such visionary thinking is again a key learning point from the ideas of Marx, Mill and Keynes.

On reform, the focus is less clear. At least, it is less clear in promising change. One can articulate reforms without them becoming effective. This is all the more likely if the said reforms are radical in nature. From Marx, Mill and Keynes, we learn that radical reforms are indeed necessary, but also that they will face opposition and will have no guarantee of success.

Take AI. It is unlikely by itself to achieve positive change. Channelling it towards progressive ends, including work time reduction, will require its active management and direction. This point is now widely recognised, but there also remain limits to

current reform agendas. Those advocating for upskilling as a response to AI, for example, end up arguing for the maintenance of work and overlook the need and benefit of reducing working time. Some like Acemoglu and Johnson (2023) do embrace a broader set of reforms, including challenging the power of the big tech companies, but they too neglect how AI might be used to reduce working time. In contrast, we need to be explicit that work time reduction should be a goal for the use and application of AI, and work towards its realisation. This entails not protecting work or indeed eliminating it, but seeking ways to make work higher quality as well as less dominant in life.

Where does this leave business reform? The answer is that it leaves it in need of radical rethinking. It is clear that business voluntarism will not deliver change on its own. Resistance from many business owners and managers to work time reduction – built up over many decades – is unlikely to disappear any time soon. Despite the growth of business-led trials, most businesses will still resist a four-day working week. State-led reform also seems unlikely – rather, any new regulations on business to cut working hours are likely to be rejected as 'anti-growth'.

This negative context, however, underlines the need to promote other reforms, if only to show how new thinking is needed and how a different future is possible. From Keynes, we can see the importance of reducing unemployment to aid workers in their fight to secure reduced working hours. In fact, the focus on empowering workers pushes us beyond Keynes, in that it demonstrates the importance of class relations – workers will not be able to win shorter working hours without gaining greater bargaining power. Keynes's elitist instincts led him to ignore the need for collective action by the working class.

It is difficult to envisage work time reduction occurring on a consistent and constant basis in the absence of a revival of union power and the election of political parties committed to cutting working time. Unions, for their part, need to give priority to work time reduction over higher wages and build campaigns around the goal of shortening working hours. New campaigns might themselves help to revive union membership. Some political parties (e.g. the Green Party in the UK) have backed a shorter working week. The greater the political backing for change (including wider support for challenging consumerism and tackling the cost of living crisis via higher progressive taxes and the public provisioning of basic services), the greater the possibility of society moving to a future where working hours are diminished significantly. This possibility extends to using AI to reduce working time and cultivating the conditions for business practice to be rethought in ways that cede more power and influence to workers over the hours they work.

Mill's contribution helps, in particular, in elevating the idea of reform in workplaces (in particular, the move to worker ownership). Such reform is often missed in debates on AI and business trials (it is overshadowed by efforts to encourage businesses to embrace and implement a more humane form of management); yet, it can be viewed as important in workers asserting and realising the goal of working less. The question is how we encourage worker ownership in a context where capital remains powerful. The answer here takes us beyond Mill. Specifically, it asks us to consider state action to facilitate the formation and spread of worker ownership. This could entail as a first-step more public ownership, but could progress to economic incentives for workers to form and run

cooperatives. In the final analysis, significant and sustained work time reduction will require shifts in ownership from capital to labour.

This takes us to Marx. His ideas urge us to see alternatives to capitalism not just as possible but also in need of urgent realisation. While Marx understated the capacity of capitalism to withstand revolution, his insights on the need and desirability of system-change still resonate. In particular, they show us how the reduction of working time challenges the very essence of working life under capitalism and demands that we make radical changes in the way in which technology, work and the economy are owned and governed. While Mill and Keynes made different arguments, they agreed with Marx that reducing working time and enhancing the quality of life meant transcending capitalism. We would do well to remember this area of consensus in contemplating how we might achieve work time reduction in the future.

I want to end by reflecting on the issue of the relationship between research and reform. What can researchers do to achieve real change? This question can be answered in different ways. A negative response would be that ideas (at least radical ones like those of Marx, but also to some degree, those of Mill and Keynes) face obstacles in achieving reform. Years of neoliberalism and a now rampant populism, in particular, stand in the way of these ideas becoming effective. A more positive answer is that ideas still matter. On the one hand, they can keep alive the hope and vision for change, despite economic and ideological circumstances that prevent their realisation. On the other hand, they can inspire action leading to change. Action research and more public-facing interventions can be developed and used to make academic work more impactful in the world (Scalmer 2025). Radical change will still face different barriers, material as well as ideational, but its pursuit remains an important task of research. For those of us interested in achieving work time reduction, reviving old ideas like those reviewed above and promoting them more publically, may yet provide a pathway to a leisure-filled future. The goal of a different future of less work must still influence and motivate our research and actions, even if the odds of achieving change remain low.

## 5. Conclusion

I have considered some old ideas on work time reduction from three key authors (Marx, J. S. Mill and Keynes) as well as new possibilities for reducing working time in the future. Following these three authors, I have argued that there is a compelling case for change. The reduction of working time would not just allow the economy to perform more effectively – rather, it would also add to human freedom and well-being. The dream of working less must still inspire us to demand and pursue change in the present.

I have also examined modern debates that focus on the progress of AI and business-led reform. These suggest reasons why work time reduction may be possible and feasible in the future. I have argued that barriers to work time reduction are likely to outlast the advance of AI and business-led reform. These barriers reflect on deeper and longstanding constraints on change: ones that have continued to block the vision of a better future outlined by Marx, Mill and Keynes.

Finally, I have drawn implications for research and reform. There is a need for research to capture the benefits of and barriers to achieving shorter working hours. There is also a need for research to retain some visionary insight – reimagining the future must be to

the fore in our work as critical social scientists. Reforms need to extend from the prosaic – of promoting rights to flexible working and paid time off from work – to the more radical – of rethinking the objectives and structure of the economy itself. This matches with the goal of putting vision at the heart of research.

The ideas of Marx, Mill and Keynes seem a long way from the present. They were written for very different times and with very different intentions. Yet, they retain force and impact. This reflects their joint commitment to a future world that is different to now – indeed, in comparison with the sterility of much contemporary economic and political debate, their ideas remain beacons of hope. Their privileging of work time reduction and their association of the latter with progress in human flourishing, in particular, can still inform research and a radical reform agenda in the present.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

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