



## **Working Time and the Social Reproduction of Labor Power: A New Politics of Sustainability?**

Wolfgang Streeck

A Symposium on the Challenges for Capitalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,  
Nijmegen, June 21, 2013

Max Planck Institute  
for the Study of Societies





## The Political Economy of Working Time

- > Working time is a classical case for a politics of sustainability; see Marx, Capital, Vol. I, Ch. 8, The Working Day
- > Working time (labor power) is not an ideal commodity; its supply can be increased to match demand only within (movable but not removable, and always contested) limits
- > Extension of working time beyond its (movable) limit interferes with the reproduction of labor power and ultimately diminishes its supply
- > For Marx working time was a promising subject for reformist political regulation and class compromise as its limitation in defiance of market pressures may become a shared interest of workers and capitalists, as well as of the state



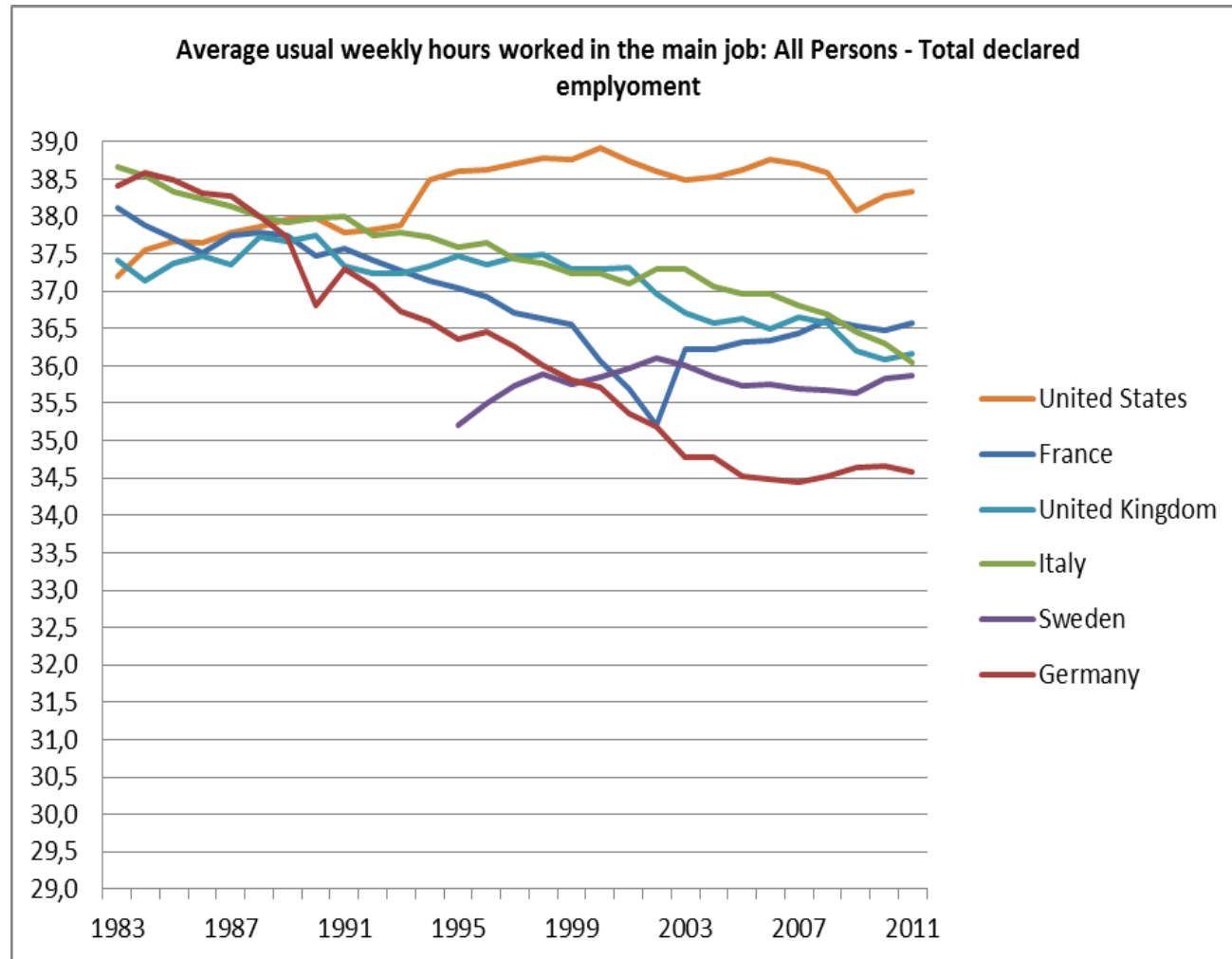
## The Politics of Working Time Reduction

- > In Germany the last attempt at a general reduction of working time was in the mid-1980s, in an effort to ration employment and use productivity growth to increase free time rather than income
- > After a six week strike in 1984 IG Metall won a reduction of working time to 35 hrs but had to make a broad range of concessions to employers on flexibility. Other industrial sectors followed
- > Flexibility was used by employers to increase productivity, making it unnecessary to increase employment in spite of shorter hours



## The Challenge

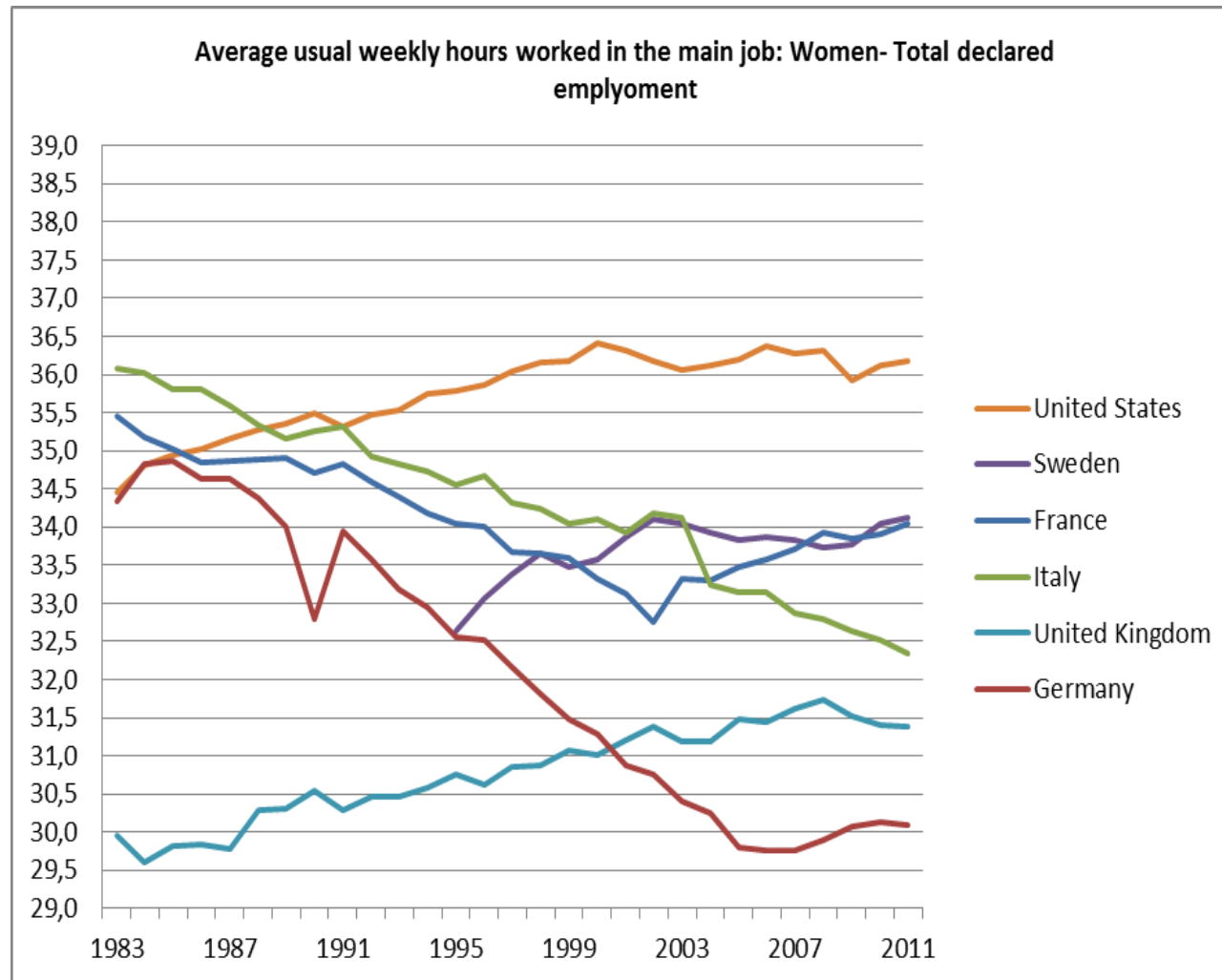
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- > Female employment has further increased; so have, recently, female weekly working hours; and both the effective and the legal retirement age have been moved back in a variety of countries
- > There is a broad but as yet inconclusive discussion on growing work stress and overwork and related symptoms of exhaustion and burnout, accompanied by calls for *Entschleunigung* (deceleration) and a popular literature on the benefits of leisure
- > A challenge for capitalism in the twenty-first century: Will societies be able to organize (restrict) the use of labor power in a way that ensures its (and their) reproduction?





## Explaining the Failure of Collective Working Time Reduction I

- > Until a short time ago, high unemployment
- > Low wages at the bottom of the labor market (rising inequality) forcing workers to make up by working longer hours (inverse supply curve)
- > Growing international competition increases power of employers at the workplace
- > De-unionization
- > Competitive consumerism
- > In services, more individualized work schedules and decentralized workplaces frustrate enforcement of general working time regulations



## Explaining the Failure of Collective Working Time Reduction II

- > Workplaces as sites of social integration; erosion of traditional forms of socialization
- > In “knowledge society”, individualized competition for income and advancement
- > With new IT (smartphones, home offices), blurred borders between working time and leisure
- > Privately paid-for human capital must be amortized as long as it is still fresh
- > Identification with work: neo-Protestantism



## Low Fertility: An Opening for a Sustainable Working Time Policy?

- > Rich countries are in a low fertility equilibrium, with birth rates below replacement level, even in Scandinavia
- > Wide recognition of work-family conflict as a cause of low fertility
- > Families pressed for time in the “rush hour of life”; strong ethnographic evidence, especially in the United States where working hours are particularly long
- > Mothers often seek part-time work while fathers increase working hours to maintain family income
- > In Germany: 38 percent of survey respondents favor 30-hour-week for mothers and fathers, so work and parenting can be equally shared (a 60 hrs working week for a couple)
- > IGM women in 1984! SPD in 2013!



## Part-time Workers, in Percent of All Workers, 2011 and 2001

		All	Men	Women
UK	2011	24.1	10.5	38.1
	2001	22.8	7.8	39.5
Germany	2011	22.5	8.1	38.3
	2001	18.7	4.8	35.3
Italy	2011	17.9	6.2	32.6
	2001	13.6	5.4	25.5
France	2011	14.0	5.7	22.4
	2001	14.4	5.3	24.9
Sweden	2011	13.2	8.6	17.8
	2001	13.9	6.8	20.8
U.S.	2011	12.6	8.4	17.1
	2001	12.8	8.0	18.0





## Hours Gap, All Workers, 2011

	Men	Women	Gap
UK	40.8	31.4	9.4
U.S.	40.3	36.2	4.1
France	39.1	34.0	5.1
Italy	39.0	32.3	6.7
Germany	38.7	30.1	8.6
Sweden	37.6	34.1	3.5





## Conflicting Objectives

- > Does the need for physical reproduction (for higher birth rates) force a more sustainable use of human labor power and working time, if only for (prospective) parents?
- > In all countries, women with lower-than-standard working time have more children: housewives, part-time workers, the unemployed, women on welfare
- > But at least equally important as a higher birthrate as an objective of public policy is fulltime labor market participation of women, including (single) mothers
  - employers want to maximize labor supply
  - trade unions need social security contributions
  - government needs income taxes
- > Public policy combines pressures and incentives for women to work fulltime with various forms of support for women with children, without much success as far as fertility is concerned



## Carrots and Sticks

- > Employers and governments design time relief for women with children in such a way that women do not use it for too long and do not find shorter hours generally preferable
- > Pressures:
  - Discrimination of part-time workers: wages, work assignment, advancement
  - Social contempt (low cultural respect) for “non-working” mothers
- > Incentives:
  - Re-educating fathers to participate equally in domestic labor, on top of their fulltime job
  - Providing public daycare – which must cost less than the additional taxes paid by women working fulltime rather than part-time
  - Enabling affordable private daycare by allowing for large-scale immigration and high under-employment (the United States solution)



## Not Exactly a Success Story

- > Combining “work and family” has up to now not been very successful and is increasingly seen as having undesirable wide-effects
  - Birth rates remain low (less than replacement)
  - Many women still cut their working hours, to work less than fulltime
  - Unfavorable mix of children: too few “quality children” and too many “problem children” (with low “human capital”), due to birth rates being higher among immigrants, the unemployed and those with little formal education





## Exceptions of Sort: The Rise of Market-driven Sustainable Working Time Regimes

- > Two examples:
  - The internal labor markets for “high potentials” in leading large firms
  - A new generation of doctors as traveling craftsmen
- > Another source of new market-produced inequalities!



## A Less Exclusive Alternative?

- > A general policy of *Humanisierung der Arbeit*: redesigning work, work organization and reward systems
  - Flatter hierarchies
  - Less competition for advancement
  - Flatter payment regimes...
- > ... to make it possible for parents to cut their working hours to part-time or almost part-time without being penalized...
- > ... combined with enforceable rights to leave and return



## The Path Likely to Be Taken

- > Public childcare under pressure from private competition, to cut costs and allow for premium services for the middle class working fulltime
- > Immigrant labor to depress wages in low-skill services
- > Immigrant children to replace indigenous children, due to correlation between poverty (labor market exclusion) and birth rates
- > Cutting social assistance to “welfare mothers”, to control the number of undesirable children
- > A higher wage spread to accommodate immigrants and their children (to the extent that education fails them), and to enable the voting middle classes to pay for domestic labor and family services of all sorts



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