Do the new forms of work revolutionize the centrality of working time?

Introduction

A question ensues from the substantial rise of precarious or zero-hours-contracts workers in Europe: is working time still fundamental to labour contracts and collective agreements? This contribution aims to discuss this question with a case study based on the restructuring of grocery stores in Switzerland, by confronting its results with French-speaking academicals debates on this issue. The rise of a new economy based on the decline of traditional manufacturing, the growth of the services sector and the transformation of the some labour processes toward a less material dimension lead some sociologists to consider that any distinction between working time and time off makes no longer sense. This means that “talking of working time or social times is finally the same thing, but with another paradigm, which opens the way for a thought process” (Tremblay & De Terssac, 2000, p. 13). In this perspective, the sociology of work was for a long time blinded by the overestimation of the centrality of a work “which has as object the transformation of nature having as purpose the manufacturing of goods or services that have to be sold on the market” (ibid, p. 14) and of the emblematic figure of “a productive, industrial and male job” (ibid, p. 14).

In order to discuss this thesis with our empirical data, we are going to proceed in the following way. At first, we have to give a short definition of working time in a capitalist society. We suggest the adoption of the notions of abstract and concrete labour, both based on the labour theory of value founded by the political economy, for studying working time patterns. In the second section, we discuss how this theory is disputed from some authors in the French-speaking academies. Subsequently, in the third section, we suggest our own theoretical framework for studying working time, focusing on its intrinsic (duration, intensity and organisation) and extrinsic (separation and synchronisation) characteristics. Yet, this paper focuses the purpose on the first one. Empirical data illustrated in the fourth section show that working time still remains central in retail because of long hours per working day. Finally, we argue in the fifth section that rather than revolutionize the centrality of working time, the new forms of work are more likely to put forward two new challenges which are related to the intensity of work and synchronization between time at work and time off.

This contribution is based on a Ph.D. focused on new working time patterns in the retail sector in Switzerland. It includes 78 semi-structured interviews with managers, employees and union activists in nine different stores in Geneva of the two major companies. This study is carried out within the framework of a project financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF).

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2 The author of this paper has translated all quotations that are available only in French.
3 The research focused on four forms of flexibility (salary, working time, polyvalence and workforce) in the manufacturing and retail sectors in Switzerland. We carried out this research with Morgane Kuehni, Aris Martinelli et Frédéric Widmer under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Jean-Michel Bonvin (University of Geneva).
A definition of working time according to the labour theory of value

The rise of the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century changes greatly the role of time in European and North American continents. Traditional societies were based on task-oriented labour in which intense efforts alternated with periods of relaxation. E.P. Thompson notice that a task-oriented labour are based on the following three characteristics: it is more comprehensible rather than a time-based organization, it implies that work and social life are not strongly separated by time and space, it does that such concepts like “waste of time” are senseless (Thompson, 1967, p. 38). The Industrial Revolution gives rise to an industrial time-oriented labour, which “arrange, prioritize and measure all tasks. [This time] is always and everywhere that one of the clocks. Its characteristics are to being regular, homogeneous, continue and accountable. This time dominates the effort and rules it without sharing out. It swallows up the others times which the worker try to introduce in the intervals, related to himself and for having an own way to intervene [in the job]” (Grossin, 1969, p. 29). How far this social transformation is still current today in the so-called new economy?

A part of the founders of the French sociology of work (Friedmann & Naville, 1965) base the roots of their conception of work in the labour theory of value founded by the political economy. Its origins are related to one important theoretical issue developed in the economic writing of Karl Marx from the Grundrisse der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie (1858) to the Capital (1867). In a few words, Marx argues that the role of working time in the organization of the social and economic life is subordinated to the production of value. This means that work in the capitalist society has a specific function compared to the old ones. According to Simon Mohun, « for Marx, the value of a commodity expresses the particular historical form that the social character of labour has under capitalism, as the expenditure of social labour power. Value is not a technical relation but a social relation between people, which assumes a particular material form under capitalism, and hence appears as a property of that form » (1991, p. 564).

Considering that the value expresses the social character of labour, it implies that all goods are exchangeable each other through money as an intermediary, in the same way that all workforces used in the labour process have to be due to the qualifications, in which the length of time plays a key role (Naville, 2012; Rolle, 1997). If Marx adopts the idea that each commodity contains labour (or working time) discovered by the founders of the political economy (Adam Smith, David Ricardo), he critics at the same time that school of thought for not having been able to explain this key question: “why work and working time do not appear directly in their row forms, but need to represent themselves under the form of value” (Tran, 2003, p. 18). In other words, what has to be explained is why the aim of the labour process is to produce value and not the working time that is the object of the production and the exchange of commodities. In this purpose, Marx introduces two fundamental concepts for the sociology of work: abstract labour and concrete labour.

The starting point is that only labour is a source of value in the production of a commodity. In the labour process, when labour is confronted to capital in the production, the value of labour (represented by the direct or indirect salary⁴) has to be lower than the value it brings to the

⁴ The indirect salary consists in a decommodification of labour and takes the form of welfare state benefits like free health services, retirement, unemployment insurance, free access to libraries, etc. (Alaluf, 2014b).
commodity. This difference is precisely the origins of surplus-value, which means that a part of the value is not paid to the worker, but is taken over by the capitalist. In this context, labour has a twofold existence both as abstract and concrete labour. On one hand, labour exists as a time and a capacity (both constitute a labour power) borrowed from the capitalist in exchange for a salary in order to increase the value of capital. This process, known as the accumulation of capital through abstract labour, is unconcerned about the phenomenological form of either the labour process or the quality of the commodity. On the other hand, the labour power borrowed by the capitalist exists on a materialistic form, so called concrete labour, which implies a technique, the employment of workers as human beings, the production of commodities that are socially useful, etc.

It is important to understand that both abstract labour and concrete labour are two sides of the same coin. This means that they point out the same reality but from two different points of view. As Marx explains in the Capital, “on the one hand all labour is, speaking physiologically, an expenditure of human labour-power, and in its character of identical abstract human labour, it creates and forms the value of commodities. On the other hand, all labour is the expenditure of human labour-power in a special form and with a definite aim, and in this, its character of concrete useful labour, it produces use values” (1975, p. 61). Tran Hai Hac suggests, by the way, to use the only concept of “abstract-concrete labour” in order to underline the contradictory unity between those two forms of labour (2003).

The debate around the rise of a “new economy”

Three articles show in our opinion in which different ways the labour theory of value is currently disputed. In the first one, François Vatin is the more radical because he refuses the foundations of the political economy. He argues that abstract labour does not exist because “work is always singular... it is never ‘simple consumption of a force’ since human being are not used as an energetic tool” (Vatin, 2014, p. 67). Although he admits that working time still remains a key issue in each labour contract or agreement, he claims the adoption of a new theoretical perspective which “does not reduce working time to a chronometric aspect” (ibid, p. 68) because jobs tend to be “less energetic and more cognitive” (ibid, p. 68). Therefore, he believes that we should think about work in its “multiple dimensions” as well as the “social construction” of its measures.

In the second paper, Monique Haicault argues that an industrial working time still continues to exist, but that it is currently losing its domination among the other temporalities of the social life. “With the end of the Thirty glorious period [1945-1975] and the new reconstitution of the economic dominant system at the global level, the industrial time which still exists is losing nevertheless its centrality, because of the rise of other times that were invisible in the past. All those times mix each other up [se téléscopent] and enter in a contradiction with the rigid referential that the social time had in the past” (2000, pp. 84–85). She puts forward the rise of the services sector to the detriment of traditional manufacturing and the growth of leisure and consciousness about the plurality of social times in order to argue for a paradigm shift. “The productive labour and the industrial time are progressively losing their hegemony, because now we quit the company for being interested in new forms of jobs: at the services sector, at other kind

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5 Source of the English translations of the Capital: https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm#S1
of companies, at the urban spaces, at the housing and at other social activities that are not professional, but linked to the consumption” (idem, p. 89). In sum, the sociology of work would not have been able to grab the rise of new temporalities off work and the people’s claims related to that.

Finally, in the last paper, Pierre Veltz is more careful in drawing conclusions too quick. Instead of rejecting the labour theory of value, he claims that it is knowing a crisis with the rise of a new economy. Therefore, he believes that although the value continues to be a foundation of the economy, it seems to be disconnected by the real companies’ function. “What is disputed here is not the structural role of time (that is the multiple and complex temporalities) in the efficiency which characterizes the labour [dans l’efficacité productive], but the relevance of a specific economic model that has been built in the political economics (since Smith and Marx) and in the ‘micro-economics’ linked more or less explicitly at engineers and organizers...” (2000, p. 109)

This new situation creates a “progressive obsolescence of the tayloristic working time standard which is not without links to the rise of new network organizational forms and in particular with the increase of tasks outsourcing” (idem, p. 116).

All those three authors argue, although with different standpoints, that the rise of a new economy disputes the validity of the labour theory of value. They handle such structural trends like the growth of the services sectors or the decline of traditional manufacturing as they revolutionize the whole society to such an extent to shake its foundations. Our disagreement with this statement is that it does not allow us not understand why in both old and new economic sectors jobs still implies long working days. In other words, if the distinction between abstract labour and concrete labour runs out, it is no longer possible to identify which human activity is subordinated, or not, and in which way, directly or indirectly, at the constraints of the valorisation of capital. Tran Hai Hac argues in that perspective that “as an objective expression of a specific form of social character of labour – the abstract labour –, the value is the product not of any work, but of the social conditions of the labour process: they are the social relations of the capitalist mode of production that transform labour in value” (Tran, 2003, p. 65).

But that is not all. The concepts of abstract labour and concrete labour have huge consequences on the analysis of the labour process. Jean-Marie Vincent explains that “in the production and the reproduction of capitalism [production et reproduction du rapport social], concrete labour tends not only have a secondary importance but tends to have only a residual or derivate existence” (1977, p. 4). We already said that in the labour process does not really matter which concrete (phenomenological) form has abstract labour. But now more than ever capital tries to dissociate as far as possible abstract from concrete labour by producing immaterial goods, as much as this permits to diminish the mobilization of fixed capital in the labour process. This is why in an increased number of jobs workers tend to be taken away from the handling of physical and material objects.

On the other hand, in the labour process the material dimension can never completely disappear. Some constraints will exist forever in the concrete transformation of abstract labour in value. This is why some “material processes which complexity is very high” (ibid, p. 5) will continue to exist. Therefore, we consider that rather than disappearing, the traditional manufacturing labour process knows instead a universalization process by spreading the new principles of scientific
management, such as lead production, at the services sector (Durand, 2004). The big difference between manufacturing and services is more related to the fact that in the latter “the customer service implies, unlikely to the manufacturing, that the client is actively involved in the production of the commodity” (Lallement, 2007, p. 279).

In sum, the origins of the new economy are not split, but strongly related to the developments linked to the labour theory of value by the increase of the division of labour, the growth of new commodities for new social needs, a higher capital concentration at the global level and more difficulties to realize surplus-value in the traditional manufacturing sector (Mandel, 1997, p. 304). If this theoretical perspective lead us to consider that working time is still subordinated at the constraints of the valorisation of capital, we still need a whole theoretical framework that allows us to explain the evolution of new working time patterns in both qualitative (as we are going to do for the retail sector) and quantitative standpoints (i.e. the centrality of working time in society).

**A theoretical framework for studying working time**

Working time is straightaway a complex reality: it is related to its distribution between ages, generations and gender, can be productive or unproductive of surplus-value, some is related to the worker’s qualification and it has huge consequences for the people’s well-being. In order to be able to take in account the contradictory unity between abstract labour and concrete labour, the sociology of work has to long for a “science of relations”, that is to “handle more with the relation between labour and capital [les relations de travail qui définissent le travailleur] than the intrinsic quality that seems to define the nature of a job” (Alaluf, 2014a, p. 214). As William Grossin suggests in his early study on the French 1960’s manufacturing, working time can be broken up into its multiple component parts (1969). He suggests taking in account the duration, the concentration, the speed, the rhythm and the schedule.

Yet, we hold back for our purpose more simple categories but which allow an understanding of working as a whole. Those three put forward by Mike Noon, Paul Blyton and Kevin Morel seem to meet this requirement: duration, intensity and organisation of working time (2013, p. 78). However, Pierre Naville reminds us that the “price” of the free use of time “is possible, in actual fact, only by exerting a constraint on a part of this [free] time – by working – that also has a price, but differently” (1972, p. 112). In other words, working time cannot be studied without considering as well its relations with the other temporalities of the social life. Thus, we should include to our analysis the extrinsic characteristic of working time, for which we consider the separation and the synchronisation between working time and time off.

This approach holds the interest to reflecting the evolution of labour standards defined by the historical and complex relationship between social classes, gender and ethnicity (Bihr, 2012; Pfefferkorn, 2012). A labour standard implies “a normative, positive and legitimate dimension, it is linked to values and ideals that mobilize individuals. A norm imposes itself as central only if it is accepted by the majority, is visible in labour law and collective agreements and legitimated among all actors who have to implement it.” (Bouffartigue, 2012, p. 77) The identification of its historical evolution, following those three steps, lead us to better understand the challenges that working time is facing today.

In the **capitalist competition** period (1850–1930), the labour force is considered a commodity that can be replaced after its complete use by capital in the labour process. As Karl Marx noticed
in the Capital, “the capitalistic mode of production (essentially the production of surplus-value, the absorption of surplus-labour), produces thus, with the extension of the working-day, not only the deterioration of human labour-power by robbing it of its normal, moral and physical, conditions of development and function. It produces also the premature exhaustion and death of this labour-power itself. It extends the labourer’s time of production during a given period by shortening his actual lifetime” (Marx, 1975, p. 230). The labour movement claims a reduction of working time that leads to its progressive compulsory limitation by the law.

During the monopolist regulation or Fordist period (1930-1970), the employment relation became more regulated by law, collective agreements and welfare state protections. An international workers’ insurgency, a political reformist network and a strong increase of the productivity during the World War I lead to a strong decrease of working hours with the adoption of an eight-hour day (Cross, 1989). The reduction of daily and weekly working time is nevertheless compensated by a longer working life (late retirement due to a longer life expectancy) and a huge intensification of work (Naville, 1961).

The debate is still open about the challenges posed by the new economy, post-Fordist or late capitalism period (1970-today). Paul Bouffartigue argues for instance that two new time standards are appearing today: the first one, called “autonomous”, linked to middle and executive managers, involves organisational autonomy and salary compensations, but implies a reduced control over the workload; the second one, called “heteronomous”, linked to the rank-and-file workers, is characterized by lesser regularity and predictability of temporalities. However, he observes that the “Fordist norm resists, in particular because it presents itself as the only one positive and legitimate reference, used by a mass of workers to defend themselves” (2012, p. 98).

The Exhibit 1. shows that although in Switzerland the duration of working time tends to diminish (suddenly only after World War I), the volume of working hours has almost doubled between 1890 and 1990, as we can see in the Exhibit 2. This means that far from having disappeared, new working time patterns are more likely to shift key issues on collective bargaining from its duration to its intensification and organization (i.e. synchronization and separation) since workers have to be more flexible in the just-in-time production. But how do workers are facing those challenges in their everyday life? We are going to discuss this question in the next two sections.
Exhibit 1. Weekly duration of working time in Switzerland in the 20th century


Exhibit 2. Volume of working hours per year in Switzerland in the 20th century

Source: Historical statistics of Switzerland online\(^6\), www.fsw.uzh.ch/histstat, 3.3.2016

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\(^6\) Those data take in account two serials: the official one (BFS-OCDE) and that one calculated by the historians of the Historical statistics of Switzerland online (HSSO). We don’t know on which base is there a difference between them.
The centrality of working time in the Swiss retail sector

The Swiss retail sector is historically highly concentrated within two companies. The first one, Migros, is the second biggest employer in the Canton of Geneva with 3251 workers in 2012. Its annual turnover fell down by 12.5% between 2008 and 2012. In 2011, the company started a deep restructuring of work with the aim to reduce the wage bill and to optimize the just-in-time principle in all its grocery stores. The second one, Coop, employs 1739 workers in the same year. Its annual turnover grows by 8.8% during the same period, but those date are related at the French speaking part of Switzerland. The company already engaged a huge work restructuring since 2001, when the executive management decides to centralise the company’s structure at the national level. In the Canton of Geneva, shops are not allowed to open their stores after 7 pm on ordinary weekdays (Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday), 9 pm. on Thursday and 6 pm on Saturday; they are completely closed on Sunday.

Collective agreements and Labour law outset strong rules on working time for shop workers. Both companies limited the duration of working time at 41 hours a week for a full-time job (which still involves 80% of the workforce) and introduced the obligation to posting schedules, at least, two weeks in advance; finally, Migros limits at 20.5 hours (for a full-time job) the accumulation of overwork hours. Those 41 hours-week collective labour agreements imply a theoretical mean of eight hours and twenty minutes per day. The Exhibit 3. shows that in the retail sector, the reduction of working time has been reflected by collective labour agreements that diminished the duration on a weekly basis, mainly during the 1955-1975 years.

Exhibit 3. Duration of working time (maximum and minimum) per week in retail for Coop and Migros in Geneva (Switzerland)

Source: Collective Labour Agreements, Swiss Social Archives, Zurich, Switzerland.
Yet, our empirical data show that in practice the working day is far from being fixed to eight hours and twenty minutes. Indeed, its duration on a day-basis is strongly related to the shop’s opening hours. This is the case at least for full-time jobs. What does this mean? A cashier explained for instance that on a normal day she stays in the shop fifteen minutes longer than the shop’s opening hours from 8 am to 7.30 pm.

– You say that those hours are difficult for yourself.

Yes, indeed. They are difficult because we stay all day at the shop. Take for instance the currently day. I started at 8 am and I am finishing at 7.45 pm. All day!

– But the shop closes its doors at 7.30 pm, doesn’t it?

It should be like that, but there are customers who enter the shop just one minute before the closing and we have to serve them too.

In this case, the presence on the shop is eleven hours and forty-five minutes long. We should add to this around forty minutes which are needed for going from the place of residence to the job and conversely. All this implies an available time for job equivalent of twelve hours and twenty-five minutes per day. This notion has been put forward by Mateo Alaluf when he says that “the employment relation [le salariat] seems to be perhaps more explicitly that it has ever been a remuneration of the availability of time” (Alaluf, 2000, p. 221). The author suggested using this concept including the time related to unemployment because it shows, by the negative, the centrality of the salaried working time in society. The Sociography of the Marienthal Unemployed Community is still a good example for illustrate that reality (Lazarsfeld, Jahoda, & Zeisel, 1981). The interest for our purpose is related to what concrete labour means for the worker in his life, that include not only the time which is directly related to the exchange between labour and capital, i.e. abstract labour. Thus, the worker’s availability of time has not to be confused with the salaried time. In order to be able to calculate working time as objet of the exchange between labour and capital, we have to deduct every non-paid break (thirty minutes) or rest time (one hour) and the transport time (forty minutes). This means that the cashier is paid only for ten hours and fifteen minutes although her available time for the job is twelve hours and twenty-five minutes. Our results show that working time is even longer for grocery management staff.

All grocery stores employ a flexible workforce whose hours vary on a day-basis (alternation between long hours and days off) and a season-basis (long hours, for instance, two months before Christmas, or few hours in summer, etc.). The grocery management staff is charged to schedule those fluctuations. An appoint to a grocery manager explained to us:

– The Collective Labour Agreement fixed the duration of working time at 41 hours a week, but the activity varies a lot during the year. How do you deal in order to have a wiggle room?

In order to have more available workforces in December, I try to diminish the number of hours during the rest of the year. This allows employing more people and longer hours during the rush period when the amount of work is higher. If I would not apply this measure, the job can become very tough for the workers.
It is important to stress that by organizing the duration of work in this way, mostly overwork hours are not recognized. Workers can accumulate minus or plus hours during the year without any additional compensation for long working days. Moreover, there is a lack of protection against long day-basis hours. Swiss Labour Law provides following protections for workers: (a) Maximum of 45 hours (like in industry and retail) or 50 hours per week; (b) Maximum of 4 hours overwork in addition to the usual 45 or 50 hours; (c) Maximum of 2 hours overwork per day in addition to the 4 hours weekly overwork. All those exceptions allow a maximum of 64 hours overwork per week! Swiss Labour Law provides also a specific protection on a day-basis: (d) A compulsory rest time of fifteen minutes if the working time is long at least five hours and a half; thirty minutes if it is long at least seven hours; one hour if it is long at least of nine hours; (e) At least eleven hours rest after a working day, but that can be reduced exceptionally, once a week, to eight hours. A special compensation (thirty minutes paid rest and additional 15 CHF for buying a meal) is provided by Collective Labour Agreements for workers who are employed in late shift when shops close later to 9 pm.

**What does the restructuring of grocery stores mean for working time?**

The previous section shows that far from having disappeared, working time still remains a main issue for workers, at least in the retail sector. But what is going on in a qualitative perspective? Both companies are currently restructuring the organization of work in their grocery stores, although we already specified that there is a difference in its implementation between Migros and Coop. Yet, in both companies the restructuring of work aims to reduce as far as possible the wage bill of the company. At the time when we collected our data, the automatizing of work is still less, without automatic cash register, and limited to the logistic. Therefore, the wage bill represents 80% of all company’s costs. An execute manager explained this what this means for business:

> *We have to reconcile the irreconcilable. 80% of all general expenses are due to the wage bill. According to the little room of manoeuvre that I dispose, those are our four main of for our roadmap: (a) The wage policy has to be at the minimum level in the next years without cut salaries; (b) A better use of the workforce is needed by a better distribution of working hours and by not replacing all departures; (c) Can we cut the workers’ social benefits? When we followed this way, by deleting a benefit for families, the company has been able to save 1m CHF; (d) Some specific social charges has to be renegotiated in collective labour agreements. We did that by finding a new deal with the insurance that protects workers against a salary loss. Yet, we have to be aware that the key issue is still our workforce. The question is how far can we go with this roadmap without deteriorating the quality of the customer service and without touching the engagement and the attendance of our workforce. This is why we are active, at the same time, in the struggle against absenteeism.*

This manager believes that an increase of the productivity should be possible by cutting down the workforce and by salaries reductions. We find here a traditional topic of labour process studies in the intensification of work, but related to retail that an emblematic sector of the so-called new economy. Indeed, as Harry Braverman already stretched in his time, « in purchasing labour power that can do much, [the capitalist] is at the same time purchasing indefinite quality and
quantity. What he buys is infinite in potential, but in its realization it is limited by the subjective state of workers, by their previous history, by the general social conditions under which they work as well as the particular conditions of the enterprise, and by technical setting of their labour» (Braverman, 1998, p. 39) In order to fulfil “a better use of the workforce... by a better distribution of working hours and by not replacing all departures”, the companies reorganize the work following the “just-in-time” principle, which aims to reduce all kind of stocks in the grocery stores, to fluidity the circulation of goods and custumers, to increase the worker’s productivity and to hunt all slack periods.

This reorganization of work is based on the introduction of the following measures in the labour process:

- In each grocery store, the workforce has to be proportional to the annual turnover. This means that the local managers are no longer allowed to automatically replace the workers who leave their positions (turn-over due to retirement, resignations, etc.). At the same time, the Human Resources Department (HRD) supervises all hiring decisions – except for part-time students whose contracts allow them to work only between 12 and 20 hours a week. The local managers negotiate every year the goals fixed by the executive management.

- The workforce has to be more flexible and adaptable according to the customers’ flow, which fluctuates throughout the day and the year. This measure requires a global shifting of the employees’ time rate. Today, as we said, almost 80% of workers are employed full-time. This is going to change. All local managers have to hire preferentially more part-time and flexible workers.

- The workforce has to become more polyvalent in all departments. The division of work has already been traditional for a long time in small grocery stores. A strong specialisation among the departments has now to be implemented in all middle to big sized grocery stores. This means that workers have to share more tasks and responsibilities in their own teamwork, in order to be able to replace all temporary absences due to illnesses or holidays.

The restructuring of grocery stores has, therefore, two consequences for working time. First, its duration tends to become irregular. This is due to the six-day opening of the stores and to a late closure once a week (9 pm instead of 7 pm) in some stores. By receiving their schedules, at least, two weeks in advance, workers have not a lot of space to organize themselves in their private life. Two consecutive days off in a week are still exceptional. Only workers who have children can claim a preferential schedule to care for them when schools are closed. Moreover, as we explained in the previous section, most workers have to deal with long hours per working day.

Second, most workers believe that their work knows an intensification process. They feel that they have to work faster compared to the past. They link its origin with the global reduction of the workforce and the consequence introduction of the polyvalence. Moreover, rank-and-file workers cannot always do any additional hours when there are not planned. This makes them to work faster in order to end all tasks before the time is gone. On the contrary, there are no formal limits for local managers. They do often overtime without recording their working time because their work constantly under high pressure, particularly in small grocery stores.
Finally, we noticed that the separation between working time and private life still remains a characteristic in the retail sector. This traditional pattern ever since the Industrial Revolution doesn’t seem to be challenged today. Any overlapping of private life by work, and the contrary, is hardly the case for all workers. Yet, the main tension can be found in the synchronization between the working time and private life due to irregular schedule and long hours a day for most workers. Moreover, some local managers and part-time students may be called to work “on demand” if there is understaffing.

Conclusion

In this paper, we tried to explain that the concepts of abstract and concrete labour, based on the labour theory of value, are still valid for studying actual working time patterns in the so-called new economy. In the sociological debate, the claim that economic and social transformations are revolutionizing the whole society to such an extent to shake its foundations has not been confirmed by our empirical data. Considering that the social character that labour has under capitalism is still valid, we are not really surprised that working time still remains an important issue in working life with long, irregular and intense working hours in the retail sector. An obvious reason is that worker still needs jobs in order to be able to support themselves and their household – regardless of whether or how far working time is guaranteed in labour contracts – and that capital needs labour in order to produce surplus value. Therefore, we should consider that beyond all appearances the so-called new economy is operating within the old one: “There are new jobs, new workers, and new work designs, and there are changing some of the ways work is performed, by whom, and the returns received. But many of the features introduced by the old economy remain. These “old” features are not simply vestiges destined to eventually die out; they are thriving and many be permanent features of the new economy that will continue to develop during the twenty-first century” (Sweet & Meiksins, 2016, p. 2). Far from having disappeared, the “old” economy continues to exist, but in “new” forms that embrace the labour process as well.

Retail didn’t exist as a mass production sector until the second half of the 20th century. Yet, its actual organization of work is still based on manual tasks and on clear delimited of spaces and times, as does the traditional manufacturing sector. Braverman anticipated this reality when he wrote that a “revolution is now prepared which will make retail workers, by and large, something closer to factory operatives than anyone had ever imagined possible. In retail food trading, for example, the demand for the all-around grocery clerk, fruiterer and vegetable dealer, dairymen, butcher, and so forth has long ago been replaced by a labour configuration in the supermarkets which calls for truck unloaders, shelf stockers, checkout clerks, meat wrappers, and meat cutters; only the last retain any semblance of skill, and none require any general knowledge of retail trade.” (1998, pp. 256–257)

There is obviously no lack of challenges for both workers and employers in the new economy, but some are more traditional (duration and intensity of work), whereas others are more likely to the new ones (organization of working time and synchronization between temporalities). The concepts of abstract and concrete labour should allow us to better understand those challenges. As we explained previously, as an example, concrete labour means for the worker much more than the working time related to the labour contract, because it includes not only the time which is directly related to the exchange between labour and capital, i.e. abstract labour.
Bibliography


