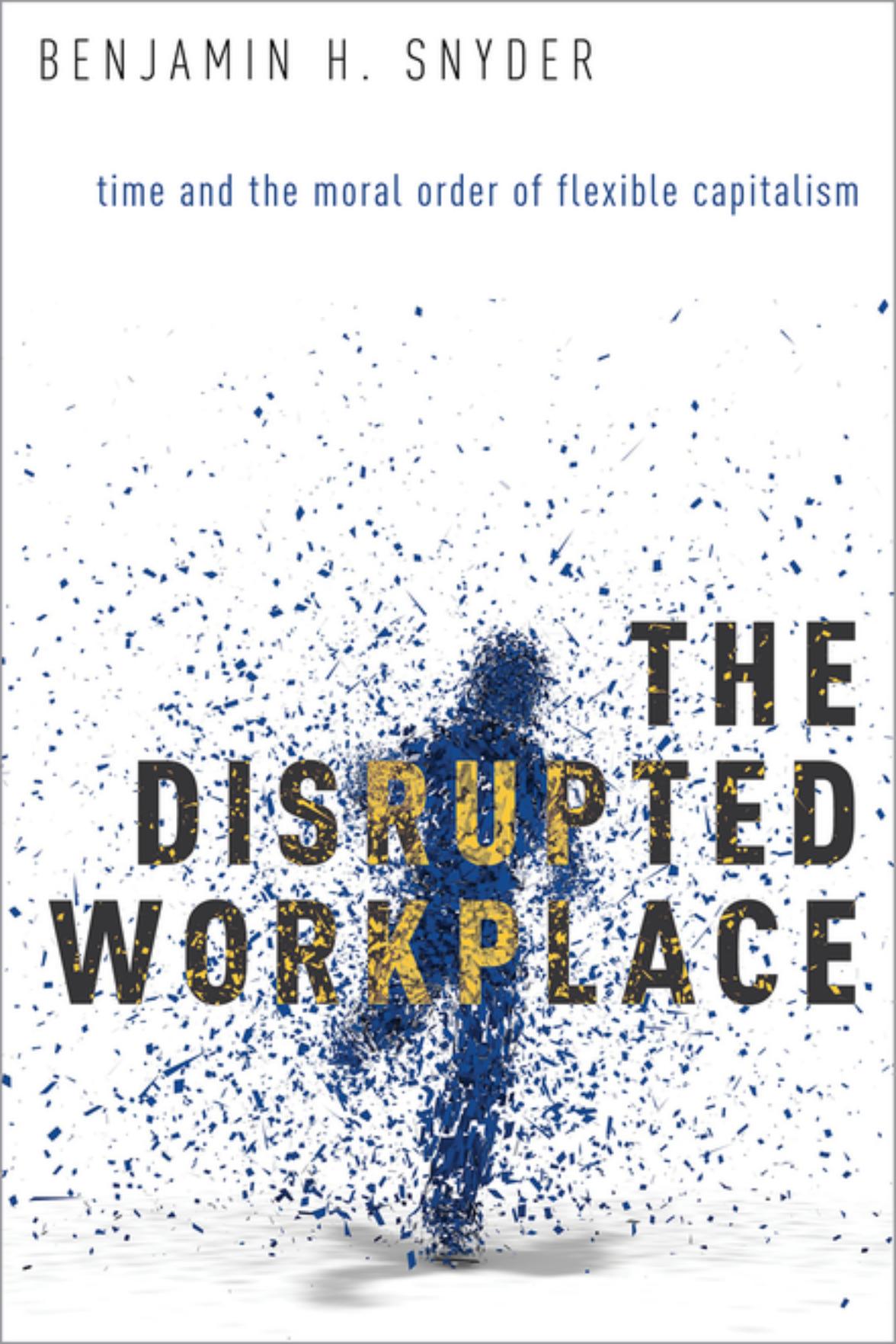


BENJAMIN H. SNYDER

time and the moral order of flexible capitalism



**THE
DISRUPTED
WORKPLACE**

The Disrupted Workplace

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WORKPLACE

*Time and the Moral Order
of Flexible Capitalism*

Benjamin H. Snyder

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All becoming irregular [*dereglement*] . . . of rhythms produces antagonistic effects. It *throws out of order* and disrupts; it is symptomatic of a disruption that is generally profound, lesional, and no longer functional. It can also produce a lacuna, a hole in time, to be filled in by an invention, a creation. That only happens, individually or socially, by passing through a *crisis*. Disruptions and crises always have origins in and effects on rhythms: those of institutions, of growth, of population, of exchanges, of work . . . (Lefebvre 2013:52–53).

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The Disrupted Workplace

CHAPTER 1

The Disruption of Work Time

Kevin and I have finally emerged from under a lingering drizzle that has hampered our travel for the last several days. I am riding high above traffic in the passenger seat of his tractor-trailer as the sun begins to warm the inside of the cab. Glad to be on the last leg of our 1400-mile, two-day delivery of fifty tons of Gatorade, we strike up a conversation again for the hundredth time to make the miles pass a little faster. We travel down Interstate 44 just south of St. Louis talking about long-haul truck driving in ways that are both romantic and tragic. Kevin loves the challenge, constancy, and speed of these long-haul runs—so different, he tells me, from the kind of hectic stop-start-stop-start runs he has in the more densely populated areas of the country. He says, “You have more time to shape your time the way you want it. You can decide when and where to stop, how fast to run.” He pauses, and then qualifies, “But then again you also have no time to slow down. It is totally constant. You are just going all the time until your hours run out. On breaks, even, you feel rushed.” Pausing again, he again tacks back, “But, you know what? I kinda like that—running my ass off. You feel like you’re getting stuff done.” I ask him if he would feel that way even if the load did not pay well—if he had to run all those miles at that kind of pace but without a big reward at the end. He thinks about my question for a second. “If I were offered to run this truck for the same money but half the miles, it would be great financially, but I’d get bored out of my mind. Because you feel like you’re not accomplishing anything. It’s not satisfying. I take pride in running this truck hard.”

I believe what Kevin has told me because the evidence is written on his body. Though he has only been working consistently in the trucking industry for two years, he tells me that he has already gained a lot of weight due

to the sedentary lifestyle and tendency to eat heavy meals—typically the only kind of food conveniently available out here on the road. I see some worrying health signs that speak to the many physical risks of working as a truck driver. He complains of an intense thirst he cannot seem to satisfy—a classic sign of diabetes. At his last visit to the doctor, he got some flack over high blood pressure and was encouraged to start taking medication. At just 27 years old, Kevin is resistant. “I’d rather do it the natural way,” he says, “through diet and exercise.” But during the weeks I have spent on the road, traveling across the eastern, southern, and central United States, I have seen precisely one truck driver exercising. The vast majority is just like Kevin—too pressed for time.

If I could tell Kevin’s story as a Greek tragedy, he would be the protagonist in a duel between the two Greek gods of time: Chronos and Kairos. Chronos is the god of pure duration, of quantitative time, the time we mark and measure with devices. In the modern era, Chronos has long overseen the predictable, machine-like workings of industrial capitalism. He has ruled over the factory floor with precise timetables and ruled over the executive boardroom with elaborate long-term business plans. In the context of truck driving, he takes the form of a rigid, federally mandated schedule of clock hours to which drivers must orient their every move. Chronos is Kevin’s constant companion. He marks each passing minute and provides Kevin with reminders of the measure of his time through the portal of Kevin’s digital logbook—a handheld electronic device that communicates a driver’s movements to the company’s dispatch headquarters via GPS technology.

Kevin’s other constant companion is Kairos. Kairos is the god of good timing, improvisation, and strategic advantage. He symbolizes a more qualitative conception of time—the time of ripeness, rhythm, and nimbleness. Kairos is the form of temporality we recognize when we entrain our attention with the rhythmic flow of phenomena within our immediate environment, see a window of opportunity open up before us, and have the instinct to immediately act upon it. Kairos rules over newer post-industrial forms of “flexible production”—the capitalism of service providers, knowledge producers, lean businesses, and global flows of financial capital. Rather than seeking to mass-produce objects with a machine-like consistency and regularity, the forms of capitalism in the post-industrial era value flexibility and fluidity in their quest to capitalize on brief moments of profit that emerge in a quickly changing and highly competitive global space. As a driver in the flexible logistics system, which prides itself on serving this economic model by delivering products “just in time,” drivers like Kevin have become increasingly responsible to Kairos. When customers’ tastes change, the

companies that scramble to meet that new demand hire people like Kevin to get their products to market with extreme temporal precision—neither too early, nor too late.

Between Chronos and Kairos sits Kevin's body. Chronos tells him to work in a regularized, clock-like pattern of shifts, but Kairos requires him to be much more nimble. This tension causes him to do all kinds of strange things to his body, like wake up at a different time each day, which requires him to set nine alarm clocks. His body is unwilling to synchronize its internal rhythm to such an erratic pattern, so it needs extra encouragement. Like a lot of younger drivers I met, Kevin finds that the toll taken on his body as it is stretched between Chronos and Kairos is easy to ignore at first. Some drivers even embrace it. As Kevin continually reminds me during our week of travel together, a rugged, hard working driver, much like a soldier in battle, must be willing to sacrifice his body for the sake of the job. As I learned from dozens of conversations with older drivers, however, eventually one must come to terms with the fact that doing well in the job is actually unsustainable for the body. As they get older, drivers become increasingly aware of the risks to their health of simultaneously serving both gods of time. It thus becomes increasingly difficult to imagine what a sustainable, rather than just profitable, future in the industry will look like. The future becomes a mysterious domain to which present experience and past habits provide little help in deciphering a path forward.

I am being dramatic, of course. Kevin's life is not a tragedy. He does not live in a stark moral universe of villains and heroes, nor do Chronos and Kairos fully capture his experience of work. Nevertheless, these rough impressions bring into deeper relief the subtle tensions between labor, temporal experience, and moral imagination that characterize the conditions of work in the contemporary post-industrial economy.

This book is about time. More specifically, it is about the human costs of the radical restructuring of work time in America over the last four decades or so under an economic regime known as flexible capitalism. As I describe below, flexible capitalism is a catchall term that imperfectly captures a variety of changes to production processes, employment arrangements, management strategies, and the like that are reshaping the conditions of work. I argue that these changes amount to a significant transformation in how workers experience "social time"—the sense of pace, rhythm, and trajectory given to people by social institutions. This restructuring of social time has important implications for workers' moral lives—the cultural narratives they use to link experiences of the past and present to a set of expectations about the future that provide a sense of goodness, rightness, direction, and ethical coherence.

The book describes three years of research I conducted with three groups of people working in the flexible economy: financial professionals, truck drivers, and unemployed job seekers. These workers experience flexible capitalism in dramatically different ways, but everyone I talked to told me that the way time is structured by their employment experiences creates perplexing moral dilemmas. They described a frustratingly staccato experience of the flow of their lives that disrupted their sleep patterns, unsettled their nerves, disordered their careers, and generally made it difficult to anticipate the future. In almost the same breath, however, they also described experiences that gave them energy, autonomy, discipline, and even occasional moments of transcendence because of the very same sources of disruption. What I ultimately took away from these observations is that the flexible economy asks these workers to make a kind of Faustian bargain with the working self. If they agree to sacrifice things like security, standardization, and predictability they are offered new “opportunities” to be more personally responsible for carving out a unique path in life. These opportunities may offer convenience, relief from boredom, gratification, individuality, or even a sense of freedom, but they often come attached to new risks and responsibilities that are extremely difficult to assess. The flexible economy affords workers a moral order full of dilemma, contradiction, and disorder.

FLEXIBLE CAPITALISM

Since the end of World War II, but especially within a crucial period of transformation between the 1970s and 1990s, economies like that of the United States have introduced new forms of production, exchange, and human resource management that have changed the structure of the workplace and the flow of employment over the life course. Many scholars refer to this set of transformations with the imperfect catchall term flexible capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005; Kalleberg 2011; Sennett 2006; Standing 2011).¹ As I discuss below, one of its central features is an

1. I chose to use the term “flexible capitalism” only toward the end of writing this book. There are myriad terms for referring to the current economic regime (a sign of just how unclear scholars are about how to describe it). It has been referred to as “post-industrial” and even “post-Fordist.” These terms point to the turn away from mass production models in developed economies, which championed the hyper-efficient labor systems pioneered at Ford, to a focus on something new. They are slightly misleading in a number of ways, however, not least of which is the fact that, if anything, efficiency and the streamlining of processes through technical control is more important to businesses now than ever before (Hirst and Zeitlin 1991; Lomba 2005; Vidal

emphasis on disruption—uprooting, dismantling, or repurposing anything in the chain of production, exchange, and consumption that is fixed, predictable, and resistant to change. Flexible capitalism is largely a product of economic elites (business owners, policymakers, management experts, economists, etc.) who have restructured production and employment practices based on certain preferences, such as improvisation over planning, fluidity over fixity, and abstraction over concreteness. As Peter Cappelli (1995, 1999) observes, in America these preferences have some roots in earlier forms of late 19th and early 20th century work organization, but were enacted on a massive scale most recently in the 1970s, filtering into the majority of large companies throughout the 1980s and 90s.

One of the central dynamics of flexible capitalism is a preference for improvisation over planning. Where older bureaucratic forms of organizing favored more centrally directed business plans that could churn out consistent products on a mass scale evenly over a long period of time, flexible capitalism favors arrangements that can respond to rapid and unpredictable change (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005; Cappelli 1995). The emphasis on nimbleness is a response by economic elites to what they perceive as rising domestic and global competition and a shift in consumer preferences toward customization and personalization. As one business strategist notes in *Forbes*, “I’ve talked to many CEOs who say that they are no longer doing Strategic Planning as such . . . with a number of them adding that they are trying to be more nimble. [. . .] Strategic planning is dead. The new king is execution and flexibility” (Conerly 2014). A concrete outcome of this emphasis has been a preference to dispense with “bloated” workforces in exchange for a “leaner” workforce, composed of a small core of permanent employees and a larger periphery of part-time, temporary, and contract workers (Cappelli 1999). Too many secure and long-term employment contracts, the argument goes, simply cannot respond quickly enough

2011). Have we actually moved beyond industrialism and Fordism in any meaningful sense? Other scholars refer to the new economic regime as “the new capitalism” and often point to the rise of financial capital as the major source of transformation (Foster 2007; Krippner 2005; Sennett 2006). But labor historians are quick to point out that many of the workplace practices associated with this “new” financialized regime—such as core/periphery models, independent contracting, and outsourcing—were actually quite common in the late 19th century in America, before the rise of Fordism and the large bureaucratic firm (Cappelli 1995, 1999). In what sense is the new capitalism really new? Perhaps it is actually a return to the status quo that reigned before the historical blip that was the mid-20th century. In the end, I settled on the imperfect term “flexible,” because it best highlights the temporal dimension of the current regime. Flexibility summons images of movement, change, and unsettledness, thereby centering the conversation on the issues that arose from my interviews and observations.

to the kinds of rapid change and targeted, short-term execution that will keep a company competitive. Organizational lifecycles are now punctuated with many more periods of restructuring and thus many more opportunities to hire and fire workers (Ho 2009). The frequent and repeated use of outsourcing, downsizing, and temporary contracting—what scholars call “external numerical flexibility”—has become a routine strategy for hedging an organization’s exposure to the risk of rapid change (Cappelli 1999; Kalleberg 2003).

This has resulted in a remarkably bifurcated landscape of employment arrangements (Kalleberg 2011). “Core” employees, made up of mostly skilled professionals, receive a lot of investment from their employers, including a great deal of decision-making power, so that they will align themselves with the goals of the company and work passionately. Putting in long hours is often seen as a sign of commitment and dedication to the job. As a result, core employees are often both overemployed and overworked. They tend to work more hours than they would like and feel rushed (Clarkberg and Moen 2001). And since many of these workers are married to another skilled professional, they are often in an overworked household (Jacobs and Gerson 2001, 2004). With the burden of “time scarcity” concentrated heavily among the most economically secure households, for the first time in history some of the most powerful individuals in American society are not part of a “leisure class” (Veblen 1994) but a “harried class” (Linder 1970). Some of these privileged workers are even given a great deal of control by their employers over when and where they work. They have “flexible workplaces” that provide high autonomy, at least on the surface. But constant deadlines, constantly changing work teams, and high performance expectations can fill these environments with stressful time pressures all the same (Blair-Loy 2003; Crowley 2012; Fraser 2001).

In contrast to core employees, more “peripheral” employees—those with less specialized skills who often work for lower wages—tend to experience a strange combination of both underemployment and overwork. As has long been the case, low-wage workers are finding it difficult to get enough hours with high enough wages to make ends meet, but they are also finding it increasingly difficult to get *regular* and *predictable* hours (Greenhouse 2008; Lambert 2012). As Harriet Presser (2003) has documented, nearly two fifths of American workers now work a non-standard schedule (something other than 9-to-5, Monday-to-Friday), and the majority of them do not do so by choice; it is a requirement of their jobs. In industries as diverse as retail, food service, and transportation, low-wage workers are asked to be constantly available—to be “on call” in case employers decide to ramp up or push down hours in order to match changes in demand (Halpin 2015).

As a result, low-wage workers are often run ragged from part-time job to part-time job and from unpredictable shift to unpredictable shift. They are economically insecure because of a lack of good paying full time jobs, but also frazzled from trying to coordinate a chaotic assemblage of irregular schedules (Golden 2015).

Flexible capitalism goes beyond an emphasis on the flexibility of schedules and contracts. It also involves flexibility in the actual stuff of work. Facilitating the goals of nimbleness and adaptability, for example, are digital technologies that have made work more abstract, quantifiable, fluid, and portable. This has made work more flexible in the sense that the actual objects and process of work—the stuff that engages workers’ mental and physical energy—are less beholden to a physical time-space. In professional workplaces, for example, workers spend most of their time sitting in front of a screen that gives them access to a virtual workspace—a non-physical space of communication and exchange that lives within but transcends the physical boundaries of the office (Bechky 2006). Communication in these spaces can happen in real time via digital representations, which may symbolize things taking place in the same room or, just as easily, on the other side of the planet. The objects of work—emails, spreadsheets, codes, reports, and so forth—flow through a slick, non-physical medium of virtual time-space. Unlike the fixed, heavy, analog labor of industrial workplaces, this labor is highly portable and “task” or “project” oriented, which means workers can more easily take work with them wherever they go, further exacerbating the impetus to overwork (Bauman 2000; Dubinskas 1988; Lee and Liebenau 2002). Despite the fact that this kind of portable digital labor is an almost taken-for-granted part of the American workplace now, it is remarkable just how little we know about what digital work requires of the mind, body, and emotions (Bechky 2006).

Among low-wage workers, digital fluidity and abstraction have also influenced how work gets done, but in different ways. Some manual labor jobs have been automated, which means they can now be conducted from behind a computer screen (Zuboff 1989), but even those manual laborers who use their physicality to work with real objects and machines are often overseen by managers using digital surveillance systems that track their productivity and remotely tweak their efficiency. Even though manual labor can still be physical, then, it is often managed from behind a computer screen and is therefore thought about (at least among managers) in the language of digital abstractions. This virtual vision is partly what allows physical work to be flexibilized. Managers can measure work rhythms in minute detail through digital surveillance and manipulate those rhythms so that workers’ effort more precisely matches demands for output. Aside

from studies that mainly focus on shop floor politics (Jamieson 2015; Levy 2015; Sewell 1998; Sewell and Wilkinson 1992; Zuboff 1989), we still know very little about how this kind of “arm’s length” control through remote micromanagement shapes moral life.

Flexible capitalism is also cultural. It is a moral order characterized by a hegemonic, legitimating discourse that tells workers how they ought to conduct themselves in order to be of value to the economy (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). The buzzword of this discourse is “disruption.” The main sentiment of disruption culture is that those who stick to a plan based on knowledge from the past will be blindsided by the inevitable changes coming over the horizon of the future from more nimble and creative competitors. Rather than wait for that inevitable crisis, the narrative goes, one should proactively dismantle what is fixed and constantly reinvent. Never get comfortable, because in comfort lies blindness to the next opportunity. As Joseph Schumpeter (1954:32), one of the foundational figures of disruption culture, presciently described it, “Every situation is being upset before it has time to work itself out. Economic progress, in capitalist society, means turmoil.” Disruption culture enjoins people to have an almost paranoid aversion to the missed opportunity and engage in an almost obsessive pursuit of good timing. Embodied in a long line of neo-liberal theorizing, from Schumpeter’s (1954) “creative destruction” theory of the business cycle to Clayton Christensen’s (1997) *The Innovator’s Dilemma*, disruption culture has produced a powerful set of narratives that have filtered out of the boardrooms of the economic elite into the language of management texts, self-help literature, and career development advice that is meant for the average worker, such as bite sized articles on the popular networking site *LinkedIn* (Chiapello and Fairclough 2002; Vallas and Prener 2012). As the historian Jill Lepore (2014) observes, “The eighteenth century embraced the idea of progress . . . Our era has disruption.”

Taken together, flexibility (with all its many meanings), digital abstraction, and the legitimating culture of disruption have opened the way for a deeply problematic downward shift of risk from employers to workers. The kinds of risks that were once born by employers in the form of regular, secure, and long-term employment, such as the problem of maintaining steady wages and appropriate levels of output during market downturns, are increasingly passed down to workers (Cappelli 1999; Kalleberg 2009; Standing 2011). But, in an era of deregulated markets and deunionized industries, and with one of the thinnest social safety nets in the developed world, American workers must typically manage these new risks without collective representation and a strong welfare system. This is having troubling consequences for workers’ health, psychology, and relationships.

People feel more work-to-family conflict and have trouble coordinating multiple temporary jobs into a steady stream of income when they cannot predict their work schedules (Golden 2015). Hyper-efficient digital labor systems have intensified work, even in many white-collar settings, leading to more complaints about overwork and stress (Crowley et al. 2010). Independent contracting, while promising more control over work, in reality often results in being at the beck and call of multiple clients and an inability to switch off (Barley and Kunda 2004). But while we now know a great deal about the sources and outcomes of this downward shift of risk, there has been remarkably little effort to examine the subjective meaning and lived experience of working in flexible times and how that experience shapes moral life (though see Ehrenreich 2001; Lane 2011; Pugh 2015; Sennett 2000, 2006, 2009; Sharone 2014; Smith 2001). What do people actually do in flexible workplaces? How do the rhythms and trajectories of engaging in flexible labor shape workers' understandings of good work and the good life?

RETHINKING WORK TIME

This book is about time and work, but not in the typical sense that those terms are discussed. Sociologists, economists, management scholars, and other labor experts typically discuss the issue of time in flexible capitalism in much the same way that scholars have long discussed work time—in the language of the clock. They focus on how workers attempt to “balance” different amounts of time, as measured by a mechanical clock. Actors' strategies for “allocating” time are typically observed with a structured interview or time-use survey that divides the flow of activities into predetermined types: paid work, non-paid work, care, leisure, and so forth. This clock time perspective has helped us understand the broad landscape of work time patterns and has revealed crucial insights into a specific range of dilemmas within modern workplaces, such as the conflicts between work and family among people in “time-hungry” professions (Blair-Loy 2003), the persistent mismatch between employees' preferred and actual work schedules (Clarkberg and Moen 2001; Reynolds and Aletraris 2006), or the pernicious “time squeeze” and decline of leisure time within dual-earner households (Jacobs and Gerson 2004; Robinson and Godbey 1997; Schor 1993).

The clock time perspective, however, has several limitations. Time diaries and some forms of structured interviewing tend to treat work time as the same *type* of thing as any other kind of time—a quantity of clock hours allocated to categories of tasks. But work time also has distinct

and historically variable qualities. The *type* of thing work time is changes through history. Why? Because clock time, indeed the entire concept of the hour, is itself an historical construct that, over the course of several hundred years, became associated with a particular form of economic production, which we call capitalist (Dohrn-van Rossum 1996; Landes 1983). If capitalism has changed so dramatically, has the nature of work time also changed? There are so many things other than the clock hour that shape the temporality of work time today—project cycles with their own clock-independent deadlines, an overwhelming stream of emails, the sense that there are no more secure and long-term organizational trajectories—yet these temporalities tend to go unnoticed by observing work time only with the clock. Seen from this perspective, then, clock time is not an objective tool with which to analyze work, but one of the objects of analysis.

One of the major theoretical tasks in this book, then, is to step back from the traditional clock time approach in order to examine work *temporality*: the subjective experience of work time. This task requires that I develop a richer palette of terms beyond the traditional language of hours, minutes, weeks, and so forth to describe work time. If clock time becomes just one object among others within a wider analysis of work temporalities, then we need some other way of talking about work time that incorporates but also goes beyond the language of hours, minutes, weeks, and so forth. As I describe in the next section, I develop a “temporality” approach to the study of work time, which theorizes not how time is objectively “spent” at work, but how it is subjectively experienced. I draw on two related theoretical traditions—processual social theory and the sociology of time—to construct this approach, using a number of concepts coined or inspired by theorists like Barbara Adam, Norbert Elias, Gary Alan Fine, Michael Flaherty, Alfred Gell, Anthony Giddens, Henri Lefebvre, George Herbert Mead, and Eviatar Zerubavel.

In addition to analyzing the problem of work time in the language of the clock, researchers have also tended to focus on the fraught boundaries between work and non-work spheres as the main source of problems—what I call a “work and” orientation to the problem of work time (Sabelis et al. 2008; Whipp, Adam, and Sabelis 2002). Researchers focus on how work time can overflow its social boundaries and begin to degrade the quality of non-work time, and vice versa. This research has been invaluable for understanding how contemporary work practices strain relationship dynamics, particularly for women, parents with young children, and married couples (e.g., Becker and Moen 1999; Bianchi, Robinson, and Milkie 2006; Blair-Loy 2003, 2009; Jacobs and Gerson 2004). Considering all the attention scholars have given to work boundaries, however, there has been

surprisingly little interest in work itself—that is, what people actually do when they engage in flexible labor (Barley and Kunda 2001; Bechky 2006). What requirements are made of workers’ bodies, minds, and emotions when they engage in, for example, irregular shift work, when they craft a detailed spreadsheet for a globally-distributed team project, or when they learn that their thirty-years of experience in a job is being traded for an online application that can do things cheaper and faster? More concerted attention to work itself is needed because without opening up the black box of flexible labor to see how people’s physical and mental energies are spent in workplaces we miss what kind of thing workers are trying to balance with their family lives in the first place, what kinds of time pressures workers experience other than shortages and excesses of clock hours, or what a preferred schedule means to workers in the context of their wider notions of a good life.²

The next section is dedicated to developing this temporality approach to work time. I first provide a very precise definition of social time, of which work time is a subtype, and then build outward to a conception of work time. I introduce an array of both borrowed and new concepts—including rhythm, timescape, and time map—in order to assemble an analytical vocabulary that is up to the task of examining work time from a new angle.

WHAT IS WORK TIME?

Work time is a specific form of social time. By social time I mean the system of rhythms and trajectories that humans create as they engage in interaction within social institutions. Social time is not the same as “natural time”—seasonal cycles, the phases of the celestial bodies, and the like—though these processes certainly affect social life in fundamental ways. Nor is social time synonymous with clock time—the abstract quantitative language of hours, minutes, and seconds—though clock time is certainly a product of modern social institutions and therefore a constitutive part of social time today (Elias 1994; Sorokin and Merton 1937). Social time is made up of three elements: rhythms, timescapes, and time maps.

2. This is not to say that focusing on the meeting points between work time and other domains of temporal experience is not important. Indeed, I hope other scholars will spend equal effort opening up the black box of, say, “family time” to see what sorts of unique temporalities are arising within new 21st century family formations. In this way, scholars can gain purchase on some of the new tensions both between work and non-work domains, as well as *within* those domains themselves, that may go undetected by a “work and” perspective.

Rhythm

Rhythm has received surprisingly little attention from social theorists, even though action (and thus movement) is a primary domain of analysis in sociology (See Abbott 2001; Collins 2004, 2012; Dewey 1934; Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Goffman 1977; Summers-Effler 2010 for important exceptions).³ Following Henri Lefebvre (2004), one of the only theorists to have deeply considered rhythm sociologically, I think of rhythm as the meeting place of change and energy. As Lefebvre (2004:15) puts it, “Everywhere there is a place, a time, and an expenditure of energy, there is rhythm.” Place means the meaningful spaces where people interact, time means change—the passage of events—and energy means the effort people muster to negotiate the changes they encounter in space. Whenever individuals engage with a social space, they must anticipate what goes on there, choose from a number of possible trajectories of action that open up before them, and project themselves into the future as they pass out of that space, thereby anticipating the next “beat” in the flow of action (Emirbayer and Mische 1998).⁴ Anticipating, choosing, and projecting all require the expenditure of mental and physical energy. The rhythm of anticipating, choosing, and projecting amid perceptions of change in our environment is the most basic building block of our experience of time.

Rhythm is fundamentally communicative (Dewey 1934; Langer 1953). Watch a group of children playing double-dutch jump rope. By moving rhythmically, they signal to others what they are about to do, and use this information to create a meaningful social encounter together. Within the context of social groups, rhythm means the expenditure of mental and physical energy in anticipation, evaluation, and projection *with others* (Young 1988; Young and Schuller 1988). As social beings, we anticipate, evaluate, and project in *coordination* with others, which requires mundane but taxing mental activities like paying attention to others’ actions, moving one’s body to coordinate with other bodies, or shifting the definition

3. As Randall Collins (2008:53) notes, “Sociological theory does not pay enough attention to the dynamics of processes over time. [. . .] But processes have shapes in time, patterns of intensity, rapid shifts, and gradual declines, which sweep people up at one moment and bring them down at another.”

4. In her philosophy of aesthetics, Susan Langer (1953:126–127) writes, the “essence of rhythm” is not repetition but “the preparation of a new event by the ending of a previous one.” “A person who moves rhythmically need not repeat a single motion exactly. His movements, however, must be complete gestures, so that one can sense a beginning, intent, and consummation, and see in the last stage of one the condition and indeed the rise of another. Rhythm is the setting-up of new tensions by the resolution of former ones.”

of the situation to be in line with others' assumptions (Goffman 1977). This rhythmic coordination of energies with other people within the same space of interaction makes up our most primitive experience of *social* time (Abbott 2001:238; Durkheim 1995). With the rise of complex societies in the modern era, much of this activity became governed by widely shared and standardized temporal practices like clocks and schedule, but even without these formal tools of coordination, all societies have some form of social time (Elias 1994; Evans-Pritchard 1939; Sorokin and Merton 1937; Zerubavel 1980).

From this perspective on time, then, to work does not mean to “allocate hours” to work tasks, though that is one useful way of looking at it, but to engage in the rhythmic coordination of energy with other people in a *workplace*. People in both paid and unpaid work expend mental and physical energy by anticipating, choosing, and projecting in coordination with others in a (real or virtual) space of work. What matters most in a temporal perspective, then, is not the type of task to which time is being allocated by individual actors, but the institutional and situational contexts in which groups experience time *together*. This basic shift in language—from the clock hour to the rhythm, from the individual allocator of time to the group as collective maker of temporality—turns our attention away from how much time workers have to spend on tasks to the *configuration of rhythms* that groups of workers negotiate in order to coordinate action.⁵

Timescapes

Timescapes, a term I borrow from Barbara Adam (1990, 1998), are the configurations of rhythms actors create within a space of interaction. They are the unique synchronizations and desynchronizations, pauses and progressions, harmonies and dissonances created when multiple rhythmic processes intersect. Think of the concentric waves created by a steady drip of water into a still pond. If I throw a small pebble into that pond, new patterns

5. I see the temporality approach to work time as highly complimentary to the clock time approach. Where the clock time approach is better suited to comparing trends in time allocation across a broad spectrum of cases, the temporality approach is better suited to examining the complex ways time is practiced and performed within specific domains of action. Where the clock time approach helps us see trends in familiar and well-established categories of temporal practice, such as the hour, the temporality approach helps us discover hidden categories of temporal practice, see how familiar forms of time interact, or how seemingly familiar categories are being used in new and unfamiliar ways.

of waves emerge as the two forces interact. This complex interplay of waves is like a timescape. Now, take a more social example. If a parent promises to read to his child every morning before he goes to work, this “beat” in the domestic rhythm of everyday life becomes a normal and expected part of his home’s timescape, which must now be coordinated with other domestic rhythms, such as the micro-sequences of making breakfast or getting dressed, and other non-domestic rhythms, such as work schedules and deadlines. These multiple rhythmic processes can come together well, creating a satisfying experience of being “on time,” or they can fall apart into a chaotic “rush” (see, e.g., Chenu and Robinson 2002; Lesnard 2009). As this example suggests, timescapes can certainly be made up of clock based rhythms, such as a nine-to-five schedule, but they are also likely made up of other non-clock based rhythms, such as the body’s sleep/wake cycles, the ineffable give-and-take of attention required to show care for a child, or the patterns of concentration required to meet a cycle of deadlines.

Many of the timescapes that people encounter on a daily basis are a function of their working lives (Zerubavel 1979). Work timescapes constrain when we are free or occupied, with whom we are able to interact at a given moment, and how much energy we have to give to different activities. They involve schedules, deadlines, and sequences of tasks, as well as spaces and machines to which we tailor our bodies, cognitive processes, and emotional expressions. They are therefore some of the most important spaces that shape the “texture” of social time (Flaherty 2010)—whether the day feels fast or slow, staccato or legato, empty and boring, or full and busy. Each work timescape features the braiding of multiple rhythms of mental and physical energy expenditure, giving the individual worker different experiences of pace, sequence, tempo, and articulation (Fine 1996).

Work timescapes, however, are not always variable and random. Following Lefebvre (2004:67–68), I suggest that there are a few ideal typical timescapes that workers regularly encounter, which give workplaces different recognizable textures. Understanding these common timescapes can give us a much richer palette of terms for describing and explaining the ways social time, and thus work time, shapes experience.⁶

Unification characterizes timescapes of perfect synchronization and total immersion. It describes that lovely experience, so rare unfortunately, when

6. Lefebvre calls these common timescapes *isorhythmia*, *eurythmia*, *arrhythmia*, and “fatal desynchronization.” I find these terms to be rather exotic and precious. This is unfortunate because they are meant to reflect common forms of experience to which most people can probably relate. For the sake of simplicity, readability, and to reflect the fact that they are not as exotic as Lefebvre’s makes them sound, I have replaced his terms with unification, synchronization, desynchronization, and crisis.