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Patrick Fridenson and Bénédicte Reynaud, Eds., *La France et le temps de travail (1814-2004)*. Paris: Odile Jacob, 2004. 237 pp. Tables, notes, bibliography, index. 23.90 € (pb). ISBN 2-7381-1392-3.

Review by Michael Seidman, University of North Carolina-Wilmington.

This collection of six essays is timely given the debate over working hours in contemporary France. The authors have attempted to put the present discussion into historical perspective by creating the first history of working time in France that spans a period of almost two centuries. They pose intelligent questions: To what extent did workers' struggles contribute to the shortening of the workweek? How did this shortening affect unemployment rates? In what ways did the reduction of work time influence the everyday lives of men and women? Did work time diminish progressively?

The answers are not always simple or expected. For example, the workweek was not progressively or linearly diminished in France. Sunday labor was prohibited in 1814, authorized in 1880, and then forbidden in 1906. The forty-hour week of 1936 was suspended in 1938, eliminated in 1941, and then restored in 1946. The thirty-five hour week, introduced from 1998-2000, is still encountering similar ups and downs. The real working week jumped from forty hours during the mid-thirties to over forty-six hours in the mid-sixties and then descended to thirty-nine hours in 1996. Yet the percentage of (paid) working hours during an average life span has diminished over a century and a half. In 1850 they constituted 70 percent of a man's waking hours; 43 percent in 1900; and today 17 percent.

Two economists, Jérôme Bourdieu and Bénédicte Reynaud, in "Discipline d'atelier et externalités dans la réduction de la durée du travail au XIXe siècle," examine the paradox of increasing real wages and decreasing salaries in nineteenth-century France. At the beginning of the century, a consensus existed among employers that any reduction of working hours would result in a competitive disadvantage, despite the findings of "moralistes, politiques, savants et médecins" (p. 19), like Louis-René Villermé, who concluded that the working day was excessive. Indeed, the whole notion of a "working week"—as opposed to a task to accomplish—was a product of the rise of industrial wage labor. In the second half of the nineteenth century, real wages increased significantly, but the health of workers often declined when measured by height, mortality, work-related illnesses, and accidents. The only way to avoid work-related sickness was not to work, thus the nearly constant demand to reduce working hours.

Perhaps, though, the most interesting aspect of the Bourdieu and Reynaud essay is its exploration of the notion of "externality" to explain the reduction of the working day and week in the second half of the nineteenth century. They argue that factors and influences outside of the economic process and connected to the social changes altered dominant attitudes. Pressured by the state and the workers' movement, employers drifted away from a short-term perspective, which equated competitiveness with long hours, and gravitated to a long-term perspective, which demanded more productive labor from workers during a shorter work day. The implication is that discipline was tightened up, and the authority of foremen strengthened. "Scientific" authorities, such as Villermé, were especially influential. Many physicians began to advocate a reduction of working hours and other social reforms, their professional prestige enhanced by the university diploma now required to practice medicine. They argued that health of proletarians had become an issue of national survival and defense.

In chapter two, "La multiplicité des processus de réduction de la durée du travail de 1814 à 1932: négociations, luttes, textes et pratiques," Patrick Fridenson observes that, during the last two centuries,

there was not a “continuous and steady ... reduction of the workweek” (p. 55), nor did workers’ struggles play a key role in the diminution of the workweek until the twentieth century. Fridenson argues that every measure which diminished work time was a result of a multiplicity of factors. For example, religion was more important than trade-union activism in the nineteenth century. A work-free Sunday was established in 1814, and then eliminated in 1880 “because of Republican and anti-Catholic militancy” (p. 65). Before 1906, it was white-collar workers (*employés*) engaged in commercial activities who were responsible for the agitation which led to a work-free Sunday. Doctors and other reformers—hygienists, university professors, lawyers, journalists, and engineers—continued to push for reforms. Between 1864 and 1871 firms in a number of sectors took the initiative of shortening the working day without legislative coercion.

Workers’ movements dramatically entered the picture only with the massive strikes of 1906 and the even larger work stoppages of 1919 in support of the eight-hour day. The law of 1919, which established an eight-hour work day, seems to have been a turning point. It initiated a period in which the French government attempted to extend the eight-hour day to the world’s industrialized nations in order to circumscribe any unilateral competitive disadvantage. However, “Social Europe” was slow to take shape even if, during the Great Depression, the Bureau International du Travail demanded the elimination of overtime and the five-day, forty-hour week. Employers objected strongly to the forty-hour week, citing the lack of available skilled labor, even though the shortened workweek encouraged rationalization of production. Georges Clemenceau had political and diplomatic reasons to support the new law since the “Tiger” aimed to limit German and especially Bolshevik influence on the working class. The establishment of a forty-eight hour week did not satisfy the more radical workers and trade unionists, however, who engaged in an unsuccessful series of strikes in May and June 1919 fighting for the forty-four hour week. Only after the passage of the eight-hour law of 1919, the first law concerning the reduction of work time to be enforced nationally even if unevenly, did the unions adopt the argument that restrictions on overtime would help reduce unemployment.

Fridenson ends his essay in 1932, when he claims that the forty-hour week became a high priority for Europeans. This rather odd conclusion is the result of a political/organizational periodization based on the positions of the Bureau International du Travail and the Organisation International du Travail. His institutional periodization seems to contradict the essentially social methodology of the first part of essay. I would argue instead that the forty-hour week was not a European phenomenon during the 1930s, but rather a brief but highly important French exception between 1936 and 1938.

In “Débats internationaux, rupture politique et négociations sociales: le bond en avant des 40 heures, 1932-1938,” Alain Chatriot also focuses on institutional history. As the title of the essay indicates, the author asserts a fairly positive balance-sheet for the forty-hour week. It questions economic liberals, such as Edgard Allix, who had argued in the 1930s that the reduced workweek would aggravate and not alleviate unemployment. Chatriot asserts that the forty-hour week was one of the “great symbolic laws” (p. 84) and the key element of the Popular Front. Like Fridenson, he states that the choice of forty hours was not arbitrary but a reasoned, if not rational, choice by the unions and [left wing] political parties. He places its passage in historical context of June 1936 when Parliament approved the law to pacify strikers during the largest wave of work stoppages in French history. The law had the additional goals of reducing unemployment and allowing workers to benefit from expanded leisure time. Chatriot contests “the black legend” (p. 92) or the negative interpretation of the economic consequences of the forty-hour week by delving into the deliberations of the Conseil National Economique. He provides the reader with a brief but informative summary of employers’ objections to the law. However, his emphasis on state structures ignores essential social historical approaches—such as Emmanuel Chadeaux’s work on the aviation industry, Aimée Moutet’s on the miners of the Nord, and the entire English-language literature. Chatriot seems to avoid reaching a clear conclusion on the issue of whether the forty-hour

week hurt French production, but he does suggest that the legislation was ultimately not only well-intentioned but also economically benign.

In “De la guerre aux années 1970: pratiques d’entreprises, négociation collective et formation de dispositifs de gouvernement des salariés par le temps de travail,” Eric Pezet examines a period which is probably the least studied in the history of the workweek. As in preceding chapters, the author is less concerned with the agent (either workers or bosses) responsible for the reduction of work time and more with the context in which the reduction occurred. Pezet provides a brief but very useful legal history. In 1941, Vichy altered the forty-hour week law of 1936 by increasing the workweek to forty-eight hours. The Liberation’s legislation of February 1946 returned it to forty hours but facilitated overtime to increase production. Thus, even though the effective workweek declined from approximately 45 hours in 1948 to 41 hours in 1978, during this period it never descended to the “legal” limit of forty hours. The “revolutionary” year 1968, which is often seen as a break in French political, social, and cultural history, was anything but on this issue. The general decline of the workweek which began in 1962 (at approximately 46 hours) continued to the end of the century, with no noticeable change in 1968. However, in 1968, the *Centre national d’information pour la productivité des entreprises* recommended shortening the working day by eliminating “dead time” surrounding the mid-day meal by issuing *tickets restaurant* (p. 128) to allow wage earners to lunch near their workplaces. Given the *far niente* reputation of the Hexagon in today’s *Wall Street Journal* and other North American media, it may be valuable to be reminded that France was one of the last industrialized countries in which the workweek fell to forty hours. Upper and middle-level management worked even longer hours than their subordinates. The end of the *trente glorieuses* opened a new period. In the mid-1970s, unemployment increased and the reduction of the working week accelerated. The decrease in the number of hours of authorized overtime and an increase in the length of paid vacations had a similar goal of encouraging work sharing.

Jacques Freyssinet, in “La transformation des enjeux et des modes de régulation: 1978-1996,” analyzes the institutional strategies of the employers, the unions, and governments during his period. The first demanded flexibility; the second, job security; the third, job creation and competitiveness. The author claims that post-1968 negotiations had the goal of reaching the forty-hour week more by legislative *fiat* than by collective bargaining. Negotiations in France—with the important exceptions of the major crises of 1936 and 1968—were usually conducted by individual branches issue by issue, such as salaries, work time, working conditions, unemployment, etc. After 1970, leaves (*congés*) were liberalized and extended for vacations, training, parenting, civic or union business.

Freyssinet concentrates on two periods of dramatic change: 1981-1982 and 1993-1995. During the first period, what he sees as the *deuxième gauche* came into power favoring both fuller employment and greater competitiveness. In 1981, negotiations with the employer group, Conseil National du Patronat, and union confederations (with the important exception of the CGT) agreed to reduce the workweek to thirty-nine hours, as well as to a fifth week of paid vacation, and flexibility in overtime. In 1982, the government offered substantial financial advantages to firms which reduced work time and engaged in new hiring. The years 1993-1995, when the right under Edouard Balladur dominated the government, saw a renewal of collective bargaining which ultimately resulted in the *loi Robien* (1996) which again accorded financial favors to firms that reduced work time to create jobs. The author’s conclusion seems to be that these attempts to lower unemployment by reducing work time were *quasi-échecs* (p. 156).

Philippe Askenazy, Catherine Bloch-London, and Muriel Roger, in “La réduction du temps de travail: 1997-2003,” examine the modalities and results of the efforts of the *gauche plurielle* to reduce work time to lower unemployment. The authors examine in fascinating detail the Aubry laws (1998 and 2000) which reduced the workweek to thirty-five hours. Despite the opposition of the employers, regrouped in

the *Mouvement des Entreprises de France*, the thirty-five hour week was approved in 1998. Struggles ensued over what was considered work time (for instance, coffee breaks, dressing, or professional training), who counted as a worker or a *cadre*, and how to remunerate and distribute overtime. By the end of 1999, more than two million wage earners were on the thirty-five hour week schedule. Two years later, over half of those in the “competitive sectors” of the economy labored in firms which had adopted the thirty-five hour week, even though larger enterprises were more affected than smaller ones. In 1996, the workweek was almost thirty-nine hours; in 2001 it was thirty-six hours. At the same time, the Aubry laws introduced greater flexibility for businesses that could adjust employees’ schedules and provided a climate which restrained wage increases. The consequences of the Aubry legislation on job creation are difficult to calculate, but *cadres*—especially female ones—were quite satisfied with their increased number of days off. On the other hand, low-skilled workers—particularly women—were unhappy with the unpredictability and sudden changes of their work schedules. Workers generally resented the loss of regularity (and of overtime), but technicians appreciated their reinforced autonomy at the workplace. The authors conclude that the reduction of working time increased disparities between the skilled and unskilled. Yet the laws were successful, at least in the short-term, in creating 300,000 full-time positions. Thus, they are critical of the “softening” of the thirty-five hour week introduced after June 2002 by the government of Jean-Pierre Raffarin. Overtime was made easier and cheaper for employers, but “employment and the unemployed seem forgotten” (p. 186).

Several essays in this collection favor more traditional institutional history to a social historical approach. Furthermore, economic liberals will undoubtedly object to its mildly *socialisant* perspective. However, all the contributions explore one of the most consequential of the *passions françaises*. The nineteenth and twentieth-century struggle between the advocates of some form of the *droit à la paresse* and the ever-present critiques of *la France paresseuse* will certainly continue well into the new millennium.

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Michael Seidman
University of North Carolina-Wilmington
plutonian1@juno.com

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