
TIME, WORK,
& CULTURE ^{IN} _{THE}
MIDDLE AGES

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LABOR TIME IN THE "CRISIS" OF THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY: FROM MEDIEVAL TIME TO MODERN TIME

*Fiorenza, dentro della cerchia antica,
ond'ella toglie ancora e terza e nona,
si stava in pace, sobria e pudica.*

Dante, *Divina Commedia*,
Paradiso, XV, 97-99

There has been a surfeit of commentaries on two passages of the *Divina Commedia*, the point of which was to try to show that they contained a description of a mechanical clock.¹ The effort seems to have been in vain. Less attention has been paid, however, to the verses of canto XV of the *Paradiso*, in which the measurement of time is portrayed in its true historical context, the context of society as a whole rather than of technique.²

Speaking through the mouth of Cacciaguida, Dante, that *laudator temporis acti*,³ makes the antique bell of the Badia above the *mura vecchie* of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries the symbol and expression of an era and a society, in its economic, social, and mental structures. These were the bells that rang Terce and None and marked the beginning and end of the working day in Florence.⁴

After 1284, however, Florence was changing, expanding within the new circle of the *mura nuove*, and the old bell, voice of a dying world, had to give way to a new voice—the clock of 1354. What changes were marked by this change of bells?

Seventy years ago in a pioneering work, Gustav Bilfinger observed that technical history by itself cannot account for the transition from medieval to modern times: "In addition to technical history, social and cultural history must be taken into consideration. For the transition is not merely a passage from the ancient to the modern hour, but also from an ecclesiastical division of time to a secular division."⁵

What segment of secular society was it that stood in need of this change, a fundamental one because it was the whole society which was changing, shedding its old temporal framework and transforming its rhythms?

Gustav Bilfinger has already given his answer: urban society. My aim is merely to make a few remarks and point out certain facts and documents, in order to draw attention to one of the major needs of fourteenth-century urban society that brought about a change in the measurement of time, which was indeed a change in time itself. The need I have in mind was that of adjusting to economic development and, more precisely, to the conditions of urban labor.

The unit of labor time in the medieval West was the day. At first, this meant the rural working day, which one finds reflected also in metrological terminology, for example, the *journal* (a French dialect word for the amount of land that can be plowed in one day, or *jour*.—Trans.). Analogously, the urban working day was defined with reference to variable natural time, from sunrise until sunset, which was marked off in an approximate way by religious time, the *horae canonicae*, borrowed from Roman antiquity.⁶

Within this basic framework, few conflicts arose over the time of work with the exception of one particular point, night labor. In this natural and rural context, night labor was a sort of urban heresy, generally prohibited and subject to fines. Despite the complexity of the problem, it was also an aspect of the Malthusian system of corporations, as Gunnar Mickwitz has clearly seen.⁷

On the whole, labor time was still the time of an economy dominated by agrarian rhythms, free of haste, careless of exactitude, unconcerned by productivity—and of a society created in the image of that economy, *sober and modest*, without enormous appetites, undemanding, and incapable of quantitative efforts.

One isolated development has perhaps been neglected. It has been observed that between the tenth and the end of the thirteenth centuries, one component of diurnal chronology underwent evolution: None, at first set at the hour corresponding to our two o'clock in the afternoon, advanced slowly and became established around noon.⁸ This change has been blamed on a sort of sleight of hand, it being said that, in monastic circles, the long wait for mealtime and rest during a day which began before dawn gave rise to increasing impatience. Thus the insidious advance of None is supposed to be indicative of monastic decadence. I do not see that this explanation is confirmed by the documents, and it seems to me gratuitous. I think that another hypothesis is more plausible, although, to my knowledge, the documents are no more helpful in confirming it. None was also the hour when the urban worker, under the jurisdiction of the

clerical time rung by the church bells, took his pause.⁹ In this connection, one can imagine a more likely form of pressure for a change in the hour of None, which led to an important subdivision of labor time: the half-day. This was to become established, moreover, during the fourteenth century.¹⁰

From the end of the thirteenth century, this system of labor time found itself under challenge and entered upon a crisis: an emphasis on night work and, most important, harshness in the definition, measurement, and use of the working day, as well as social conflicts over the duration of work—such was the form taken by the general crisis of the fourteenth century in this particular domain. Here as elsewhere, general progress went hand in hand with serious difficulties of adaptation.¹¹ Labor time was transformed along with most other social conditions; it was made more precise and efficient, but the change was not a painless one.

Curiously, it was at first the workers themselves who asked that the working day be lengthened. In fact, this was a way of increasing wages, what we would today call a demand for overtime.

An ordinance from Arras of January 1315 illustrates this case quite well. The fullers' assistants had demanded longer working days and higher wages, and their demands were satisfied by a commission composed of delegates of the masters of the cloth trade and representatives of the assistants.¹²

In this case, of course, a technical reason was given for the demand, namely, the increase in the weight and size of the fabrics. Still, it is legitimate to assume that it was the first expedient adopted by the workers to mitigate the effects of the wage crisis, which was no doubt connected with the increase in prices and the deterioration of real wages due to the first monetary mutations. Thus we see Philip the Fair authorizing night work and his ordinance subsequently invoked and reaffirmed by Gilles Haquin, provost of Paris, on 19 January 1322.¹³

Before long, however, a contrary sort of demand arose. In response to the crisis, employers sought to regulate the working day more closely and to combat workers' cheating in this area. It was at this time that the proliferation of work bells noted by Bilfinger occurred.¹⁴ It may perhaps be useful to point out a few examples of these *Werkglocken*.

In Ghent, in 1324, the abbot of Saint-Pierre authorized the fullers "to install a bell in the workhouse newly founded by them near the Hoipoorte, in the parish of Saint John."¹⁵

At Amiens, on 24 April 1335, Philip VI granted the request of the mayor and aldermen "that they might be permitted to issue an ordinance concerning the time when the workers of the said city and its

suburbs should go each morning to work, when they should eat and when return to work after eating; and also, in the evening, when they should quit work for the day; and that by the issuance of said ordinance, they might ring a bell which has been installed in the Belfry of the said city, which differs from the other bells."¹⁶

At the end of this same year of 1335, the bailiff of Amiens satisfied the aldermen's desire that "the sound of a new bell" should serve as the new means of regulating the "three crafts of the cloth trade"—as then existed in Douai, Saint-Omer, Montreuil, and Abbeville, as a study has shown—given that the old ordinances concerning working hours were "corrupt."¹⁷

In Aire-sur-la-Lys, on 15 August 1335, Jean de Picquigny, governor of the county of Artois, granted to the "mayor, aldermen, and community of the city" the right to construct a belfry with a special bell because of the "cloth trade and other trades which require several workers each day to go and come to work at certain hours."¹⁸

Our investigation has by no means been exhaustive, but it is sufficient to indicate that the problem of the duration of the working day was especially acute in the textile sector, where the crisis was most noticeable and where wages played a considerable part in production costs and employers' profits. Thus the vulnerability of this advanced sector of the medieval economy to the crisis¹⁹ made it the prime area for progress in the organization of labor.

This is made clear in the Aire text, which explains that the new bell is necessary "because the said city is governed by the cloth trade." We also have negative evidence: where cloth does not occupy a dominant position, we do not observe the appearance of the *Werkglocke*. Fagniez has rightly noted this fact in the case of Paris.²⁰

Thus, at least in the cloth manufacturing cities, the town was burdened with a new time, the time of the cloth makers. This time indicated the dominance of a social category. It was the time of the new masters.²¹ It was a time which belonged to a group hard hit by the crisis but in a period of progress for society as a whole.

The new time soon became a stake in bitter social conflicts. Worker uprisings were subsequently aimed at silencing the *Werkglocke*.

In Ghent on 6 December 1349, the aldermen issued a proclamation ordering the weavers to return to the city within a week, but thereafter allowed them to start and stop work at the hours of their choosing.²²

At Thérouanne on 16 March 1367, the dean and chapter had to promise the "workers, fullers, and other mechanics" to silence "forever the workers' bell in order that no scandal or conflict be born in city and church as a result of the ringing of a bell of this type."²³

In view of these revolts, the cloth-manufacturing bourgeoisie took

more or less draconian measures to protect the work bell. Fines were tried first. In Ghent between 1358 and 1362, shearers not obeying the injunctions of the *Werkglocken* were fined.²⁴ In Commines in 1361, "every weaver who appears after the sounding of the morning bell will pay a fine of five Parisian *solz*." Another set of penalties makes clear the stake represented by the bell. If the workers seized the bell in order to use it as a signal of revolt, they incurred the heaviest fines: sixty Parisian pounds for anyone who should ring the bell for a popular assembly and for anyone who should come armed (with *baston*, the people's weapon, and *armeures*); and the death penalty for anyone who should ring the bell to call for revolt against the king, the aldermen, or the officer in charge of the bell.²⁵

It is clear that in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, the duration of the working day rather than the salary itself was the stake in the workers' struggles.

From a celebrated set of documents, we learn about the struggles of a particularly combative category of workers,²⁶ the vineyard day laborers. This was a time when vineyards were found in urban and suburban settings. The documents tell us how these workers waged the battle against their noble, ecclesiastic, and bourgeois employers for a reduction of the working day, a battle which led to a trial before the Parlement of Paris.²⁷

Archival documents²⁸ show us that real conflicts did in fact take place, predictable with the aid of the ordinance of the provost of Paris of 12 May 1395: "Whereas . . . several men of crafts such as weavers of linen or cotton, fullers, washers, masons, carpenters, and several other kinds of workers in Paris have wanted and do want to start and stop work at certain hours while they are being paid by the day as though they were on the job the whole day long," the provost reminds them that "the working day is fixed from the hour of sunrise until the hour of sunset, with meals to be taken at reasonable times."²⁹

Documents from Auxerre and Sens, moreover, even when we allow for the fact that they concern a special category, enable us to understand the workers' goals in the struggle for mastery of their own labor time: at bottom, no doubt, was the desire for protection against the tyranny of employers in this respect, but there was also the more specific need that leisure time³⁰ be set aside along with working hours; and, in addition to regulation wage labor, they wanted time allotted for personal work or for a second job.³¹

It should be noted, however, that the influence of the agitation related to labor time in bringing about a general metamorphosis of social time was limited by certain further considerations.

In the first place, the question was a more general one of urban

time, which served needs broader than those concerning the organization of labor. Economic needs were no doubt of great importance among urban concerns; a market bell appears here, a mill bell there, and so forth.³² Defense of the city was of prime concern: witness the curfew (*ignitegium*) and watch bells. In the 1355 Aire text it is stated that the *clocquier* [bell tower] built by order of the aldermen, in which they asked that the work bell be placed, had been built in the first place "so the gate of said city could be raised at the stroke of day-break and at vespers and to warn of any danger or difficulty which might arise as a result of evildoing or otherwise."

There were also the *campana bannalis*, *campana communitatis*, and *bancloche*, which were used to call the bourgeois to the defense or administration of their city, and sometimes the oath bell (Durlach's *Eidglocke*) or council bell (*Ratsglocke*).³³

What was clearly new, however, in the contribution of the work bell or the city bell used for purposes of work was that instead of a time linked to *events*, which made itself felt only episodically and sporadically, there arose a regular, normal time. Rather than the *uncertain* clerical hours of the church bells, there were the *certain* hours spoken of by the bourgeois of Aire. Time was no longer associated with cataclysms or festivals but rather with daily life, a sort of chronological net in which urban life was caught.

In a century when quantitative elements were timidly making their way into administrative and mental structures,³⁴ the requirement that a better measure of labor be found was an important factor in the secularization process, of which the end of the monopoly of church bells in the measurement of time is an important index. Once again, however, in spite of the importance of the change, we should be careful not to make too bald a distinction between secular and religious time. At times, the two sorts of bells coexisted without confrontation or hostility. In York, for instance, between 1352 and 1370, at the work site of the cathedral itself, a work bell was installed, relieving the church bells of this function.³⁵ Nor should it be forgotten that, even in this sphere, the Church took initiatives. Monks, especially, as we shall see subsequently, were masters in the use of *schedules*. Cities, in imposing fines on councillors or aldermen who were late in answering the call of the city bell, were merely imitating the monastic communities' punishment of the tardy monk. The severe Columban punished tardiness at prayer with the singing of fifty psalms or with fifty lashes. The more indulgent Saint Benedict was content to have the guilty monk stand in the corner.³⁶

Rung by ropes, that is, by hand, the work bell was no technical innovation. Decisive progress toward "certain hours" clearly came only with the invention and spread of mechanical clocks and the

escapement system, which at last made it possible for the hour to achieve its mathematical sense, the twenty-fourth part of the day. It was undoubtedly in the fourteenth century that this essential step was taken. The principle of the invention was known by the end of the thirteenth century, and the second quarter of the fourteenth saw its application in urban clocks distributed throughout the major urbanized areas: northern Italy, Catalonia, northern France, southern England, Flanders, and Germany. With a more intensive study, it might be possible to determine whether the location of the crisis-ridden textile industry coincided more or less with the region where mechanical clocks were to be found.³⁷ From Normandy to Lombardy, the sixty-minute hour was firmly established; at the dawn of the preindustrial era, it replaced the day as the fundamental unit of labor time.³⁸

Again, it is important to avoid exaggeration. For a long while to come, a time associated with natural rhythms, agrarian activity, and religious practice remained the primary temporal framework. Whatever they may have said about it, men of the Renaissance continued to live with an uncertain time.³⁹ It was a nonunified time, still urban rather than national, and unsynchronized with the state structures then being established: a time of *urban monads*. An indication of this may be found in the diversity of the zero hours of the new clocks: sometimes noon, sometimes midnight, which is not a very serious difference, but more frequently sunrise or sunset—such was the difficulty of freeing preindustrial time from natural time. In his *Voyage en Italie*, Montaigne, like many other travelers before him in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, noted what confusion and disorder were caused by the changing origin of time from one city to the next.⁴⁰

Down to the time of Huygens, moreover, the new mechanical clocks were fragile, capricious, and irregular. There were numerous breakdowns of the new time, and the city clock was frequently out of order.⁴¹ More than just a tool of daily life, the clock was still a marvel,⁴² an ornament, a plaything of which the city was proud. It was a part of the municipal adornment, more a prestige item than a utilitarian device.

Furthermore, although the new time owed its inception primarily to the needs of a bourgeoisie of employers whose concern, in view of the crisis, was to improve the measurement of labor time—the source of their profits⁴³—it was quickly taken over by higher authorities. An instrument of domination, it was also an object of amusement as well as a symbol of power for lords and princes.⁴⁴ It might become even more. In a capital city, for instance, it could become an effective symbol of government. In 1370, Charles V ordered that all the bells of

Paris be regulated by the clock at the Palais-Royal, which tolled the hours and the quarter-hours. The new time thus became the time of the state. The royal reader of Aristotle had domesticated rationalized time.

Though the change was imperfect and limited in certain respects, the disturbance of the chronological framework in the fourteenth century was also a mental and spiritual disturbance.

Perhaps the place to look for the appearance of a new concept of time is in science itself, namely, in scientific scholasticism. Here, time as an essence was supplanted by time as a conceptual form and mental tool; the mind could make use of time according to its needs, and might divide or measure it. It was a discontinuous time. To the question "does time exist outside the mind?" Pierre Auriol responded that time was nothing but "a being in the mind (i.e., a concept)" and, furthermore, that "the parts of time, which are perceived at the same time, have no rational basis but in the mind, which perceives all the parts which are involved in the act simultaneously and in them conceives succession, priority, and posteriority." Using the Aristotelian definition not exploited by Saint Thomas, according to which "time is the number of motion," Ockham stressed that this was not a "definition according to the thing" but rather a "definition according to the name."⁴⁵ As mechanics was being revolutionized by investigations of *impetus* and modern perspective was beginning to turn the visual world upside down, a new time was taking shape in scholasticism. The century of the clock was also the century of the cannon and of depth of field. For both scholar and merchant, time and space underwent joint transformation.

Perhaps the time of the mystics, especially the great Rhenish mystics, was also the fruit of a new approach or intuition which gave a fresh temporal dimension to the life of the soul.⁴⁶ The *devotio moderna* was developed in the rhythm of Suso's *Horologium Sapientiae*.

Where a more accessible, more typical piety is concerned, the disturbance can be plainly seen. The ancient, eternal theme of time's flight was present in Christianity, where it was at once exacerbated and assuaged by transformation into fear of eternal death⁴⁷ and stimulus to prepare for salvation. "Nothing is more precious than time," Saint Bernard is supposed to have said, stating a theme which was, in any case, taken up and propagated by his disciples.⁴⁸

From the first half of the fourteenth century on, the theme became more specific and dramatic. Wasting one's time became a serious sin, a spiritual scandal. On the model of money and of the merchant who, in Italy, at least, became an accountant of time, there arose a calculating morality and miserly piety. One of the most significant exponents of the new spirituality was a preacher fashionable at the beginning of the fourteenth century, the Dominican Domenico Calva

of Pisa, who died in 1342. He devoted two chapters of his *Disciplina degli Spirituali* to the "waste of time" and to the duty to "save and take account of time."⁴⁹ Beginning with traditional considerations of idleness and using a merchant's vocabulary (wasted time was for him the lost talent of the Gospel⁵⁰—time was already money), he developed a whole spirituality of the calculated use of time. The idler who wastes his time and does not measure it was like an animal and not worthy of being considered a man: "egli si pone in tale stato che è piu vile che quello delle bestie." In this way, a humanism based on a nice computation of time was born.

The man representative of the new time was, indeed, the *humanist*, specifically the Italian humanist of the first generation of around 1400, himself a merchant or close to business circles. He introduced his business organization into everyday life and regulated his conduct according to a schedule, a significant secularization of the monastic manner of regulating the use of time. Yves Lefèvre has found one of these schedules, so characteristic of the behavior and mentality of the good Christian bourgeois humanist, at the end of a manuscript of the *Elucidarium* altered at the beginning of the fifteenth century.⁵¹ Only the morning was reserved for work—"and all this must be done in the morning." The bourgeois businessman, by contrast with the common *laborator*, worked only half a day. "After eating" came the time of rest ("rest one hour"—one new hour!), diversion, and visiting, the leisure time and social life of men of substance.

Thus the first virtue of the humanist is a sense of time and its proper use. Gianozzi Manetti's biographer, for instance, extols his sensitivity to time.⁵²

A more precisely measured time, the time of the hour and the clock, became one of man's primary tools: a Florentine humanist in the second half of the fourteenth century thought every study should have a clock in it.⁵³

"Time is a gift of God and therefore cannot be sold." The taboo of time with which the Middle Ages had confronted the merchant was lifted at the dawn of the Renaissance. The time which used to belong to God alone was thereafter the property of man. The famous text of Leon Battista Alberti is worth rereading:

GIANOZZO: There are three things which man may say properly belong to him: his fortune, his body—

LIONARDO: And what might the third be?

GIANOZZO: Ah! a very precious thing indeed! Even these hands and these eyes are not so much my own.

LIONARDO: Incredible! What is it?

GIANOZZO: Time, my dear Lionardo, time, my children.⁵⁴

What counts hereafter is the hour—the new measure of life: “never waste a single hour of time.”⁵⁵

The cardinal virtue of the humanist was temperance, which, in the new iconography⁵⁶ as early as the fourteenth century was given the clock as attribute. Henceforth, the clock was to be the measure of all things.