

Extreme working hours have radically increased in many western European countries since the start of the 1990s

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The length of the working week has traditionally been a key issue for social democratic and labour movements, but how have European working patterns changed in recent decades? [Anna S. Burger](#) presents findings from a recent study on working hours. She writes that in many western European countries the frequency of individuals working 'extreme hours' of more than 50 hours per week has increased substantially, particularly among high skilled male workers. She notes that some of this may be attributable to the effects of globalisation, but that national labour regulations and welfare reforms also play a role in working hour trends.



With the recent debates over the reform of the EU's Working Time Directive, the topic of working time has received renewed interest in Europe. The academic literature defines extreme working hours as individuals' actual working hours going beyond 50 hours per week.

Using harmonised survey data from the Multinational Time Use Study and the Luxemburg Income Study, I have [analysed](#) trends in extreme working hours in sixteen western European countries, the United States and Canada between 1970 and 2010. The results suggest that extreme working hour patterns of many European countries have been converging toward the US-American pattern: an increasing ratio of European workers, particularly those with high-skills, have become overworked since the beginning of the 1990s.

Are more Europeans now working longer hours?

The legal limitation of the working day to eight hours was one of the most important demands of the early social-democratic and labour movements in Europe in the nineteenth century. The eight-hour day or 40-hour week movement was an answer to dramatically changing working conditions in the period of transformation from agricultural production to a predominantly industrial market structure.

By the first decades of the twentieth century, trade unions were organised and strict working time regulation was successfully enacted, and gradually enforced, in most advanced capitalist countries in the West. Therefore the topic seemed less relevant and received less focus in social science research throughout the middle and the second half of the twentieth century.

However, in the early 1990s, sociologists revealed that the century long declining trend had been reversed in the United States: US-Americans were spending [significantly more time](#) at paid work in the late 1980s than they had been in the late 1960s. These findings triggered a still ongoing debate on whether and why this trend is happening.

Over the course of the past decade, a series of facts have been uncovered concerning US-American working time patterns. A new macro-trend of working time bifurcation has been revealed: the number of overworked and underworked has radically increased. The prevalence of extreme weekly working hours has particularly increased among employees with college degrees. Extreme working hours have become [so prevalent](#) in the corporate and financial sectors that in the years following graduation, high-skilled women gradually leave high-powered positions to settle for other occupations where they can combine family and career responsibilities.

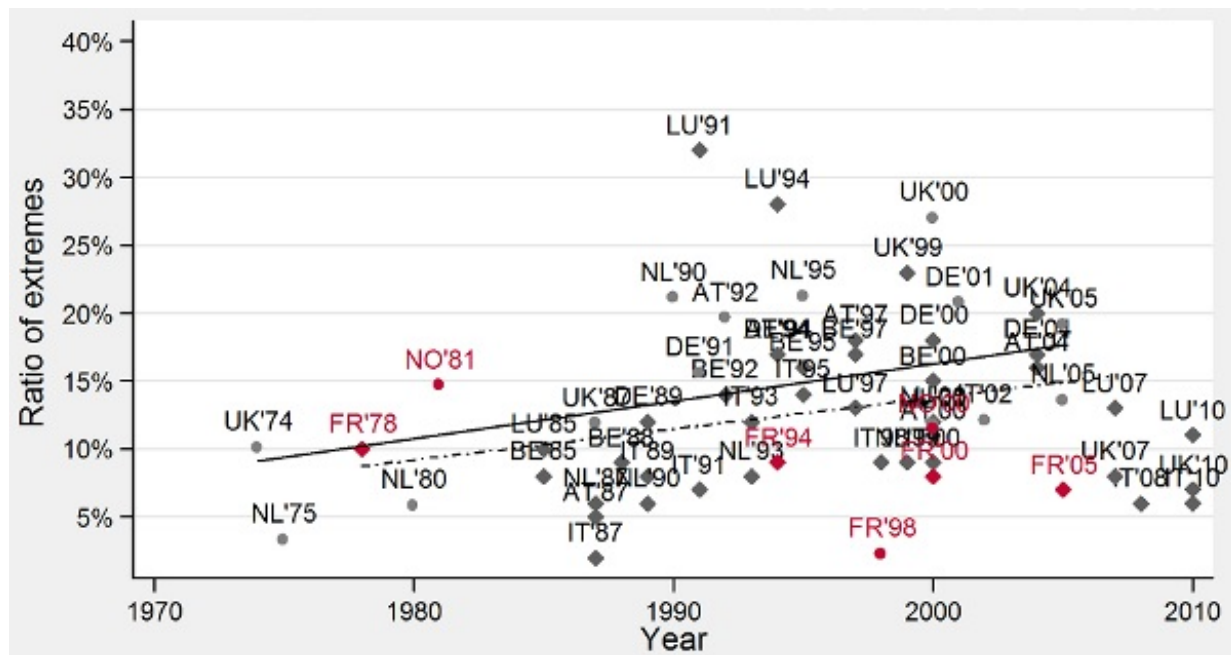
As European average working hours stagnated or declined over recent decades, scholars studying the topic have paid little attention to the analysis of extreme working hour patterns in European countries. The first complex [analysis](#) of extreme working hour patterns in western Europe shows that the US-American pattern of working time

bifurcation has been replicated in many affluent European societies since the beginning of the 1990s.

The ratio of workers with extreme working hours gradually increased in Austria, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States. At the same time, the ratio remained remarkably low in France and the Scandinavian states. The increasing trends are surprising, and at the same time disappointing, as they suggest that the fruits of technological advancements have not been used in a labour friendly way.

However, the existence of diverging trends suggests that patterns of extreme working hours are neither inevitable nor inherent to post-industrial development. Over the course of the past four decades, countries with the strongest labour regulations have been able to maintain a high level of economic efficiency and high standards of living by a less polarised working hour profile than is evident in the United States, Canada, and in many western European countries. Figure 1 illustrates the general picture, with an increasing trend in extreme working hour ratios among the high-skilled populations of western European countries between 1970 and 2010.

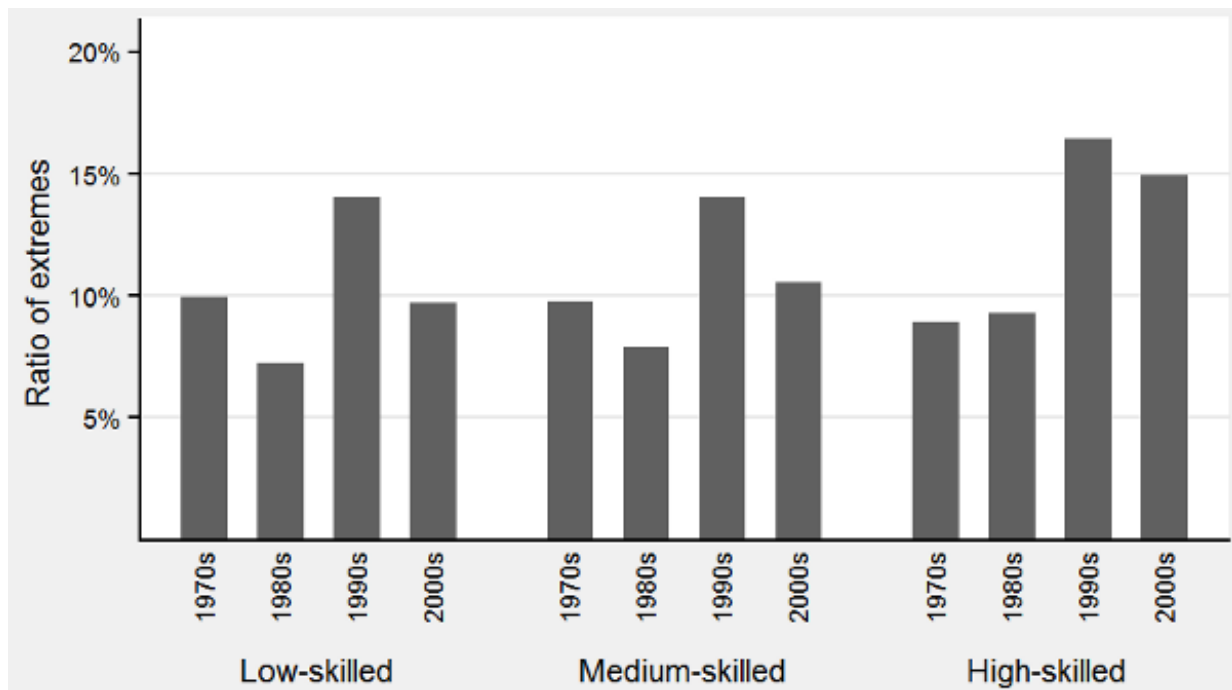
Figure 1: Extreme working hours among high-skilled full-time employees in European countries since the 1970s



Note: Source for data is author's own database on extreme working hours. Countries with at least one observation from before the 1990s are included. See the author's [longer paper](#) for more details.

Figures 2 and 3 present decade averages of country-year level observations of extreme working hour ratios in a number of socio-economic subpopulations. Figure 2 reveals a structural change in terms of skill profiles over time. While in the 1970s, long work weeks were more typical among the low and medium skilled workers, two decades later ratios of extreme working hours were highest among high-skilled employees.

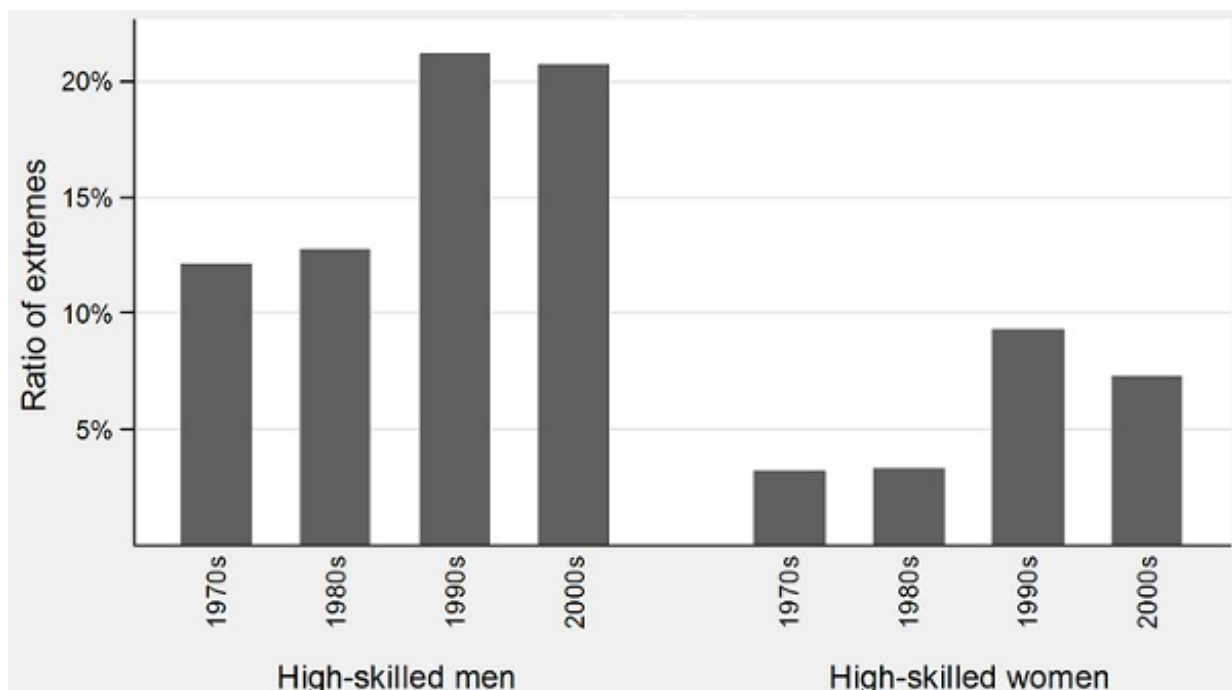
Figure 2: Extreme working hours among full-time employees by education group



Note: Source for data is author’s own database on extreme working hours. Countries with at least one observation from before the 1990s are included. The ‘2000s’ column includes the years 2000-07. See the author’s [longer paper](#) for more details.

Figure 3 points to an important aspect of the puzzle surrounding the transformation of work in post-industrialism. While we see a sharp increase in the ratio of extreme working hours among high-skilled men, long work weeks remained relatively uncommon among high-skilled women. More particularly, the figure illustrates that, in our sample, while more than one in five high-skilled men worked 50 hours per week or more after 2000, the comparable figure was only one in twelve for women. Equally striking is the fact that this two-to-threefold gender difference was about the same in the 1970s.

Figure 3: Extreme working hours among full-time employees by gender



Note: Source for data is author's own database on extreme working hours. Countries with at least one observation from before the 1990s are included. The '2000s' column includes the years 2000-07. See the author's [longer paper](#) for more details.

The extent and direction to which a welfare state has been adapted to the post-industrial environment plays a significant role in the evolution of its extreme working hour profile. It is true that changing market structures, such as economic globalisation and trade openness, do have important effects on the incidence of extreme working hours.

More particularly, the increasing effect of economic globalisation is twice as large in the high-skilled sector than it is in the lower skilled sectors. The increasing effect of trade openness is significant in the high-skilled sector but insignificant in the lower skilled sectors. However, these structural effects are not deterministic: strong welfare states have been able to counteract these structural effects in an efficient way by introducing more egalitarian labour and welfare institutions.

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Anna Sara Burger is a PhD candidate in Political economy at the Central European University in Budapest, Hungary. Her research focuses on the patterns and root causes of extreme working hours in advanced capitalist countries in Western Europe and North America.



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