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Time Autonomy and Regulatory Pluralism: Theorising Work from the Margins

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ABSTRACT

This article develops a theoretical framework for analysing time autonomy among marginalised workers by extending Jean-Daniel Reynaud's social regulation theory in dialogue with Southern theory, epistemologies of the South and critical border studies. It argues that time autonomy is the temporal dimension of regulatory pluralism: when workers exercise autonomous regulation over working time, they pluralise the temporal order. Drawing on 140 interviews with Portuguese posted workers, Chinese factory workers, Malaysian office workers and French teleworkers (2011-2024), the analysis shows how marginalised groups create autonomous regulatory systems that operate alongside, against or outside institutional frameworks. Three concepts emerge: the subsistence-continuity-projection complex, which integrates survival imperatives, intergenerational continuity and future aspirations; regulatory microenvironments, where multiple normative orders coexist without any single order achieving dominance; and adaptive hybridisation, through which imported workplace models are transformed rather than simply implemented. Together, these concepts extend labour sociology by surfacing collective and relational dimensions of time autonomy that Northern frameworks tend to obscure.

KEYWORDS

time autonomy, regulatory pluralism, Global South, Southern theory, informal labour

1. Introduction: Theorising from the Margins

Labour sociology's foundational categories emerged from Northern industrial experience: the employment contract, the bounded working day, and the separation of work and non-work. These categories have been productively extended by critical scholarship documenting precarity, temporal fragmentation and the erosion of standard employment. Yet when applied to marginalised workers whose arrangements operate alongside, against or outside institutional frameworks, further extension is required. Portuguese posted workers maintain a "packed suitcase behind the door," ready to depart within 24 hours. Chinese factory workers integrate family members into home-based piecework. Malaysian office workers navigate hybrid arrangements shaped by cultural frameworks distinct from their Northern origins. French telework underwent twelve amendments, as companies restricted arrangements despite employee preferences.

These empirical realities call for theoretical development. Building on Northern critical scholarship on precarity and informality, this article develops concepts from marginalised workers'

practices to extend labour sociology's analytical vocabulary. With 140 interviews across China, Malaysia, Portugal and France (2011-2024), it proposes three theoretical concepts and six principles for analysing time autonomy within regulatory pluralism.

Southern Theory shows that mainstream social science has often treated the majority world as a source of empirical material for testing theories developed elsewhere, rather than as a site of theoretical production (Connell, 2007). This article responds to that challenge by developing theoretical concepts from the practices of marginalised workers, not to produce exotic case studies for Northern consumption, but to extend labour sociology's analytical repertoire. Work arrangements are not inevitable technological outcomes but socially negotiated realities (Howcroft and Taylor, 2023).

The framework developed here integrates multiple theoretical traditions that have challenged Eurocentric social science. The concept of "epistemologies of the South" provides grounding (Santos, 2014), recognising that marginalised populations possess knowledge systems that dominant theories have systematically suppressed. The analysis of the "coloniality of power" (Quijano, 2000) illustrates how colonial classifications became constitutive of global capitalism, structuring the very categories through which labour is organised and valued. Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson's (2013) concept of the "multiplication of labour" reveals how border regimes produce differentiated legal statuses that correspond to positions in labour markets. Research on postcolonial thought (Go, 2016) and on modernity (Bhambra, 2007) shows how sociological knowledge production has been structured by imperial power relations. Together, these theoretical resources enable an extension of labour sociology's analytical frameworks through engagement with marginalised workers' practices.

The paper first establishes the core conceptual vocabulary, situates the project within Southern theory and decolonial scholarship, and outlines its empirical base. It then extends Reynaud's social regulation theory, presents four cases (Portugal, China, Malaysia, France), synthesises six principles of time autonomy within regulatory pluralism, and draws out theoretical and policy implications. The argument advances from an empirical puzzle to a theoretical reformulation, with concepts emerging from the cases rather than being imposed upon them. Throughout, autonomous regulation is treated as a survival strategy within exclusionary systems rather than a free choice, and informal regulatory forms are neither celebrated as inherently fair nor dismissed as the absence of regulation.

1.1. Core concepts: time autonomy and regulatory pluralism

This paper develops a theoretical framework centred on two interlocking concepts that directly challenge universalism. First, time autonomy represents the collective, relational, processual and partial capacity of marginalised groups to shape their temporal arrangements despite structural constraints. Building on Reynaud's theory (Reynaud, 1988; Reynaud and Richebé, 2009), time autonomy emerges through ongoing negotiation between controlling regulation and autonomous regulation. Time autonomy is exercised by extended families, transnational networks, work groups and collectives rather than atomised workers. Time autonomy differs from "time sovereignty", which evokes individualised temporal control and implies a fuller freedom from constraint than marginalised workers usually possess.

This collective register requires elaboration. Collective time autonomy is not the aggregate of individual sovereignties but a distinct emergent capacity of households, crews, teams and kin networks to coordinate temporal rhythms across multiple actors with competing demands. What often appears as individual time sovereignty is itself a local effect of underlying collective coordination, visible once one asks who absorbs the coordination cost. Reynaud formulates

autonomous regulation as explicitly collective; the individual-sovereignty register is a subsequent (and largely Northern, middle-class) inflection that may obscure Reynaud's own framing. Time sovereignty may thus best be read as one possible settlement of the collective-individual relation, not as its conceptual ground.

Second, regulatory pluralism describes the coexistence of multiple, overlapping rule systems with different logics. Formal laws, collective agreements, corporate policies, oral promises, tacit understandings and emergent practices together constitute the actual governance of work. This framework moves beyond the formal/informal binary that has characterised much labour sociology, recognising that supposedly "informal" arrangements often constitute autonomous regulatory systems with their own internal coherence, enforcement mechanisms and adaptive capacities. Legal pluralism scholarship has long challenged the equation of law with state law. As research on transnational governance indicates, multiple regulatory authorities operate above, below and alongside states. Legal institutions can develop through engagement with constituents rather than imposition from above (Nonet and Selznick, 2017). For labour regulation in contexts where the state is absent, hostile or predatory, bottom-up legitimacy becomes not merely preferable but necessary.

Empirical support for this argument emerges from Breman's (2010) fieldwork, conducted in dialogue with the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector, which documents widespread informal employment among India's circulating labour force. The analysis of the "precariat" (Standing, 2011) traces how unstable labour, unpredictable incomes and eroded citizenship rights have become defining features of work across the world system, visible not only in the South but also in marginalised Northern populations. Where arrangements long classified as "informal" or "precarious" characterise the majority of workers worldwide, sociological theory may usefully treat informalisation not as a deviation from a Northern norm but as a central organising feature of contemporary capitalism, acknowledging at the same time that protected, formalised employment persists in parts of the South, and that informalised, precarious work runs through the North.

Across the four cases analysed in Section 3, time autonomy and regulatory pluralism appear less as parallel concepts than as analytically continuous ones. Time autonomy may best be understood as the temporal dimension of regulatory pluralism: when workers exercise autonomous regulation over their working time, they produce rules that coexist with other normative orders, thereby pluralising the temporal order. Each case instantiates this interlock at a different scale: Portuguese double accounting across jurisdictions; the Chinese subsistence-continuity-projection complex across household time; Malaysian regulatory microenvironments across the corporate-domestic interface; and French restrictive collective agreements through the unequal distribution of temporal autonomy itself. The interlock becomes theoretically productive when approached from marginalised workers' standpoints, since Northern labour sociology has tended to treat time autonomy as a question of individual capacity and regulatory pluralism as a domain reserved for legal anthropology. The article argues that articulating the two as analytically continuous, rather than as parallel concepts, is its central conceptual contribution.

1.2. The Global South as metaphor, method and epistemology

We understand the "Global South" not primarily as a geographic designation but as both a metaphor for marginalisation within global capitalism and a relational epistemological standpoint that generates analytical insights obscured by the study of privileged populations. "The Global South cannot be defined, a priori, in substantive terms. The label bespeaks a relation, not a thing in or for itself. It is a labile signifier whose content is determined by everyday material and political

processes” (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012: 127). This article pursues both paths that theorising from the Global South enables: it critiques theoretical frameworks that have dominated labour sociology, and it develops concepts from the practices of marginalised workers whose regulatory and temporal arrangements have been dismissed as informal, precarious or deficient. This positioning reveals the cracks and contradictions of universalism. The Global South is not a place but a set of practices that emerge from systemic marginalisation, revealing problems the Global North has not yet recognised as such.

These theoretical resources provide an epistemological warrant for the research design, explaining why theorising from marginalised positions generates concepts less visible from privileged vantage points. The framework developed here extends rather than replaces Northern critical scholarship’s substantial contributions to understanding precarity, informal labour and non-standard employment. The goal is a collaborative extension of the analytical vocabulary, not the displacement of existing theories.

For labour sociology, this Southern positioning reframes what counts as theoretically central. Categories such as the employment contract, the working day and workplace regulation carry universalistic assumptions (Go, 2016) about state capacity, legal infrastructure and economic organisation that do not hold in most contexts. What “cognitive justice” (Santos, 2014) names in this context is not the recovery of exotic alternatives but the recognition that arrangements often dismissed as residual or deficient may carry their own regulatory coherence. The paper’s contribution is to demonstrate that coherence empirically rather than only assert it programmatically.

This positioning has its own limits, which the analysis should mark rather than dissolve. The article speaks in the language and through the venues of Western labour sociology, not from within Southern academic institutions, and its theoretical apparatus inevitably refracts the workers’ own articulations as it translates them across epistemes (Santos, 2014). The “South as metaphor” framing carries a real risk of instrumentalising concrete Southern contexts for Northern theoretical purposes, exactly the move Bhambra (2007) and Go (2016) caution against. The reformulations that open each empirical section in Section 3 partially mitigate this risk by foregrounding the workers’ own theoretical vocabulary at the moment of analytical formulation, but partial mitigation is not resolution, and the asymmetry of voice and venue persists throughout the article.

1.3. Central argument and theoretical interventions

Northern labour sociology has challenged assumptions about employment stability and work-life balance. Critical scholars have documented precarity, temporal fragmentation and the collapse of boundaries between work and non-work. This article engages with that tradition while identifying the analytical dimensions that marginalised workers’ practices reveal. Marginalised workers across diverse contexts, shaped by migration regimes, global supply chain positioning, postcolonial model imposition or corporate exclusion from flexibility, create autonomous temporal and regulatory systems that contribute three analytical dimensions to debates within labour sociology.

First, the formal/informal binary requires reconsideration. Dominant frameworks treat formal regulation as the norm and “informal” arrangements as deficiencies awaiting formalisation (Bremar, 1976; Steiler, 2025). The argument here is that the binary is itself a regulatory artefact: it presupposes the separation of productive, reproductive and social time that formal employment institutionalises as universal, while its hierarchical ordering presents one historically particular arrangement as the standard against which all others appear residual. Reframing “informal” practices as autonomous regulatory systems with their own coherence, enforcement mechanisms, and adaptive capacities does not imply that they are inherently fair or protective. Non-state

regulation can itself produce exploitation, coercion and exclusion; the point is not to valorise informality but to stop treating it as the constitutive absence of regulation. Portuguese posted workers' double accounting, for example, creates binding social rules through oral agreements that often prove more consequential than written contracts, operating as what Reynaud (1988) calls "autonomous regulation" alongside formalised frameworks. Research on Peruvian platform work similarly shows how formality itself becomes an object of continuous negotiation among state institutions, platforms and workers, each emphasising different regulatory dimensions, from consumer safety to fiscal compliance to labour protection, resulting in a normative mosaic (Manky et al., 2024).

Second, institutional stability should not be treated as a prerequisite for regulation. Northern theories often assume effective regulation requires stable, written, legally enforceable rules backed by state enforcement. Yet marginalised workers create functional regulations characterised by fragility, provisionality and constant renegotiation. For example, trading places in Kinshasa's central market are formally regulated, yet official rules serve mainly as starting points for negotiation rather than as fixed standards for market function (Mesa, 2024). Various deviations from formal law deliver public services while simultaneously serving powerful interests; some practical norms allow vendors to negotiate favourable positions, while others deepen exclusion among the most vulnerable. In Kinshasa's market, structural precarity (here, persistent vulnerability produced by institutional arrangements such as labour markets, citizenship regimes and social-protection gaps rather than by individual employment relations alone) does not simply undermine order; it transforms fragility itself into a regulatory resource that enables survival for some, even as it deepens vulnerability for others.

Third, dominant theories rely on universalised time configurations. Theories of work-life balance, leisure and time autonomy assume linear temporality, individualised life courses and categorical separation between production and reproduction. These assumptions naturalise clock time as a universal medium rather than as a particular human artefact (Adam, 1990). Working time becomes the central boundary of social life (Naville, 1972), and Thompson (1967) shows how the fusion of Puritanism with industrial capitalism instilled temporal valuations equating time with money. Mercure (1995) further argues that the discontinuity of social times characterises advanced industrial societies. "Social times" here refers to the plurality of temporal rhythms organising collective life beyond paid labour (familial, festive, intergenerational, ecological) and their partial irreducibility to work time alone. When examined from contexts where activities themselves serve as temporal reference points rather than abstract systems, these frameworks may appear less universal and more partial. Section 2.2 develops the critique of Northern temporal theory more fully; the contribution here is that marginalised workers' temporal practices may exceed and reorganise the analytical vocabulary that has dominated time-use scholarship.

1.4. Coloniality, borders and the multiplication of labour

The decolonial turn in social theory provides resources for understanding why regulatory pluralism and time autonomy take the forms they do among marginalised workers. Colonial classifications, particularly the racial ordering of populations, became constitutive of global capitalism (Quijano, 2000). The racial classification of the world population emerged from colonial experience and continues to shape central dimensions of world power. For labour sociology, the coloniality of power reveals that the opposition between formal and informal labour is not merely descriptive but normative and hierarchical. Formal employment relations presuppose particular forms of citizenship, legal personality and state recognition that were historically denied to colonised populations. The informal worker appears as deficient precisely because the standards of adequacy

derive from metropolitan arrangements unavailable to most of the world's population.

Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) further show how state regulatory systems produce and depend on marginalised labour. The combination of labour regulation, border regimes and visa systems produces the coercion experienced by migrant workers, whose vulnerability disciplines the workforce more broadly. Borders are not isolated at the margins of social space but run through it, producing the conditions under which autonomous regulation emerges not as preference but as a survival strategy within a system built on exclusion. Where workers engage in autonomous regulatory practices, they do so largely because formal systems deny them entry, recognition or protection rather than because they reject those systems; the agency that appears is exercised within exclusion rather than choice beyond it. Companies in turn exploit the regulatory gaps these exclusions open, parallel to the exploitation of border regimes (Rahman and Thelen, 2019).

Labour process theory offers complementary resources (Thompson and Smith, 2009). Capital's struggle to convert purchased labour capacity into productive effort means control strategies vary across contexts and emerge through ongoing interaction with worker agency. Burawoy (1985) showed that understanding factory regimes requires attention to both the labour process and the political and ideological apparatuses securing consent. Section 2.1 develops this strand alongside Reynaud's framework; here it suffices to note that workers' autonomous regulation may be read as a response to capital's control strategies, enabling survival, resistance or both.

1.5 Theoretical development through empirical engagement

The theoretical framework developed in this article draws on empirical engagement across multiple national contexts, conducted collaboratively with Chinese, Malaysian, Portuguese and French colleagues for over a decade. An "ecology of knowledges" shaped the research design (Santos, 2014): a commitment to treating workers' practical knowledge as a legitimate source of concept formation rather than as mere data awaiting interpretation through pre-established Northern categories. Initial research questions, shaped by European debates on working time flexibility and work-life balance, underwent substantial reformulation through encounters with time arrangements and worker strategies that exceeded available conceptual vocabulary.

The case method provides methodological orientation (Burawoy, 2009): intensive engagement with particular sites generates theoretical refinement through attention to anomalies, contradictions and processes invisible to extensive survey methods. Ethnographic depth allows identification of the specific strategies through which workers exercise regulatory autonomy and temporal control. Micro-level practices are often invisible to workers themselves as "regulation" and are certainly invisible to compliance-focused institutional analysis.

The empirical base comprises four distinct configurations: French telework negotiations examining post-pandemic remote work across seven companies; Chinese production networks studying temporal arrangements in home-based piecework in Sichuan and Fujian provinces; Malaysian hybrid work adaptations across ten organisations; and Portuguese posted workers, examining transnational construction labour circulation. Methodological procedures are detailed in separate publications for each empirical site. The theoretical propositions advanced here emerged from empirical challenges that established theories could not adequately address.

Sampling and Data Collection. Participants were recruited through union contacts and academic networks. Interviews lasted 60-120 minutes and were conducted in local languages.

Table 1. Case summary

Case	Years	n	Key Temporal Pattern	Marginalisation Mechanism
Portugal (posted workers)	2011-2015	45	Double accounting, perpetual readiness, circulatory territory	Transnational mobility regime, border-mediated precarity
China (factory workers)	2018-2020	25	Subsistence-continuity-projection complex, social time continuity	Global supply chain positioning, subsistence imperatives
Malaysia (office workers)	2023-2024	10	Adaptive hybridisation, regulatory microenvironments	Postcolonial model imposition, high power-distance adaptation
France (teleworkers)	2021-2023	60	Corporate restriction vs. worker resistance, presence bias	Corporate exclusion from flexibility, occupational identity defence

The four cases were not assembled prospectively as a single long-term programme but accrued across separately funded projects between 2011 and 2024, each with distinct funding arrangements and institutional hosts rather than a unifying grant. The comparative design is reconstructed rather than designed *ex ante*. Each case is retained typologically because it surfaces a different axis of regulatory pluralism (the transnational-jurisdictional axis of double accounting in the Portuguese case; the domestic axis of subsistence-continuity-projection in the Chinese case; the workplace axis of regulatory microenvironments and adaptive hybridisation in the Malaysian case; the intra-institutional axis of segmented access in the French case). Methods were broadly comparable (semi-structured interviews supplemented by documentary analysis and observations), though fieldwork protocols adapted to each context's linguistic and institutional specificities.

The multi-site research design follows the logic of theoretical sampling rather than statistical representation. Cases were selected to maximise variation on key theoretical dimensions, including marginalisation mechanisms, institutional context and temporal configuration, enabling conceptual elaboration rather than empirical generalisation. The Malaysian sample (n=10), while numerically modest, provides analytical purchase because it occupies an intermediate position between the more extensively documented Chinese and French cases, representing a middle-income postcolonial context where Northern workplace models encounter strong cultural frameworks, making adaptive hybridisation most visible.

2. Theoretical Framework: Extending Time and Regulatory Theory

2.1. Social regulation theory: core principles and extensions

Social regulation theory (de Terssac, 2012; Reynaud, 1988; Reynaud and Richebé, 2009) provides the foundational framework for this analysis, though it requires extension through postcolonial and decolonial critique. Reynaud argues that organisational rules emerge through negotiation between two forms of regulation: controlling regulation imposed by management and autonomous regulation developed by workers. Neither form operates in isolation; rather, their interaction produces social regulation, negotiated rules that both parties recognise as binding even if contested. This framework challenges both managerialist assumptions that managers alone create rules and

structural determinist accounts that see only domination.

For Reynaud, regulation is processual, emerging through ongoing negotiation. Rules are both constraining and enabling. Autonomous regulation refers to workers' collective capacity to create, interpret, and enforce rules governing their activity, sometimes complementing, sometimes conflicting with controlling regulation.

However, Reynaud's framework emerged originally from the analysis of industrial relations (Reynaud, 1979) and requires an extension to address marginalised populations operating outside formal collective bargaining institutions. Three theoretical moves accomplish this extension. First, controlling regulation emanates not only from management but also from states, global supply chains, platform algorithms and migration regimes (Rosenblat, 2018; Vallas and Schor, 2020; Nair, 2022). Second, autonomous regulation operates at multiple scales, across households, kinship networks, migrant communities and workplaces, as well as through engagement with global governance frameworks (Meardi and Marginson, 2014). Third, regulatory pluralism characterises not only workplace governance but the entire field of social reproduction (Bhattacharyya, 2018), as workers navigate formal employment law, customary norms, kinship obligations and survival imperatives simultaneously.

These extensions still leave open the question of how autonomous regulation operates as a process of contestation under capitalist domination. Labour process theory offers part of the answer: the labour process is itself a contested terrain in which workers' tacit knowledge, informal coordination and discretionary judgement shape production outcomes that managerial control cannot fully script (Thompson and Smith, 2009). Workers' autonomy in this account is not the residue of incomplete control; it appears as constitutive of the labour process itself. Read alongside Reynaud, labour process theory may help underscore that autonomous regulation operates within, not outside, capitalist relations of production, and that its contested character is structural rather than incidental.

Katz (2004) offers a complementary distinction, parsing marginalised populations' responses to economic restructuring into three registers of agency: resilience; reworking; and resistance. Much of what marginalised workers do sits within the resilience and reworking registers rather than rising to open confrontation, yet it remains regulatory work.

2.2. Challenging Northern temporal theory: from linear time to temporal multiplicity

Northern theories of working time rest on several problematic assumptions that become visible when centring on marginalised populations. Thompson's (1967) analysis of "time discipline" traced the transition from "task orientation" to "time measurement" under industrial capitalism, establishing a narrative of linear temporal development from "traditional" to "modern" time consciousness. While Thompson recognised this transition as contested and violent, his framework reproduced several limitations that scholars have since challenged.

First, the framework assumes a universal trajectory from task-oriented to clock-measured time, treating deviations as residual traditionalism rather than alternative temporal logics (Pickering, 2004). Second, it privileges paid employment as the primary site of temporal regulation, marginalising social reproduction and care work where populations spend disproportionate time (Federici, 2012). Third, it conceptualises time as linear and directional, obscuring cyclical, layered and non-linear temporalities that structure life in many contexts (Mignolo, 2011). Fourth, it assumes individual life courses as the natural unit of temporal analysis, missing collective and intergenerational temporal configurations (Blossfeld and Blossfeld, 2015).

Grossin's (1969) scholarship on "social times" recognises temporal multiplicity, the coexistence of different temporal logics operating simultaneously (Gurvitch, 1961; Poli, 2017).

Rather than a single time (clock time) structuring all social life, multiple times coexist: biological time, biographical time, institutional time, social time, historical time. Adam's "timescales" concept acknowledges that multiple dimensions of time may be present simultaneously, including timing, tempo, duration, sequence and temporal modalities of past, present and future (Adam, 1998).

Decolonial and indigenous scholars push this critique further, exposing how Northern temporal theory reproduces violence through temporal governance. Pickering (2004) shows how indigenous time orientations, emphasising cyclical time, intergenerational responsibility and land-based rhythms, resist colonial linear time while enabling cultural survival.

These insights demand reconceptualising time autonomy not as an individual capacity to allocate linear time but as a collective capacity to navigate and negotiate multiple, often contradictory temporal demands while maintaining liveable arrangements. Time autonomy, from this perspective, involves establishing patterns that enable subsistence, maintain social and intergenerational continuity and project futures worth living. The axis that matters here runs less between "Northern" and "Southern" or "modern" and "alternative" temporalities than between time integrated into capitalist accumulation and time oriented toward the sustenance of life; both logics coexist within any given geography, and marginalised workers in Northern and Southern contexts alike generate practices organised around the sustenance of life.

2.3. Regulatory pluralism: beyond the formal/informal binary

The formal/informal binary has structured labour sociology, positioning formal employment as normative and informal work as deviant (Bremar, 1976; Chakrabarti and Thakur, 2010). However, this binary obscures regulatory dynamics in contexts where the majority of workers operate outside formal employment or where supposedly formal arrangements coexist with informal practices.

Legal pluralism scholars show that, even in Northern contexts, multiple normative orders govern social life, including state law, religious law, customary law, organisational rules, and professional norms, none of which enjoys automatic supremacy (Griffiths, 1986; Von Benda-Beckmann, 2002). Research on transnational governance shows that globalisation has multiplied regulatory authorities operating above, below and alongside states.

Similarly, recent ethnographies of platform work, gig work and informal employment across diverse contexts reveal sophisticated regulatory systems, often invisible to formal frameworks, including resistance strategies and autonomous regulation in delivery work (Cant, 2020). "Formalisation" requires worker control if it is to improve living conditions. Rosaldo (2024) distinguishes between "top-down formalisation" (state-led efforts to bring informal workers under legal regulation) and "bottom-up formalisation" (workers' own efforts to establish binding rules and protections). He shows that bottom-up processes create more effective regulation than top-down initiatives because they emerge from workers' actual needs and power dynamics. Peruvian platform workers similarly develop selective criteria for what counts as formal. Simultaneously, 70% were negative or ambivalent about formal employee status, preferring to manage precarity individually rather than accept state-mediated formalisation they distrust (Manky et al., 2024). Workers in global value chains use digital tools to strengthen their power resources in structurally and politically repressive environments (Helmerich et al., 2021).

These examples underscore a fundamental reconceptualisation: regulation is not synonymous with state intervention, nor does its absence signal regulatory vacuum. The formal/informal binary thus obscures more than it reveals.

Regulatory pluralism offers a more productive framework. Rather than asking whether work is formal or informal, it examines which normative orders govern arrangements, how they interact, and what enables effective functioning. This framework attends to how multiple, partial and

contested rule systems overlap within the same context.

3. Empirical Analysis: Time Autonomy and Regulatory Pluralism in Practice

3.1. Portuguese posted workers: the autonomous system of mobility and double accounting

Portuguese posted workers in France appeared to be a case of undeclared cash payments shadowing formal posting contracts. Fieldwork showed instead that workers kept two intact sets of books: one aligned with the Portuguese minimum wage declared on the posting paperwork, and one recording what was orally negotiated and received. Workers moved between them as between two functioning regulatory orders rather than between a rule and its breach. This pattern forced us to theorise it as a “double accounting” within regulatory pluralism rather than as informality haunting formality.

The case of Portuguese workers in the French construction sector illustrates a profound shift from traditional migration to a paradigm of “mobility,” creating a specific set of transnational rules distinct from standard industrial relations. Unlike previous migrant generations who navigated a dual French-Portuguese identity, contemporary posting operates within a “circulatory territory” where workers are moved rapidly between locations. This territory allows economic activity to capitalise on intra-European movements to link professional elites and migrant workers in a shared space of mobility (Tarrius, 1992; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013).

Portuguese construction workers exemplify regulatory pluralism across jurisdictions and show how autonomous regulation emerges through migration experience. Posted workers navigate at least three regulatory orders simultaneously: Portuguese labour law governing their employment contracts, French labour law nominally protecting their working conditions and European Union directives establishing posting frameworks. Rather than experiencing confusion or anomie, workers participate in double accounting systems maintaining parallel records of hours worked, wages earned and obligations fulfilled according to different regulatory logics. What appears as “official” working time for French labour inspections differs from calculations for Portuguese social security, which differs again from workers’ own assessments of effort expended and compensation deserved.

Time constraints and autonomy manifest in what one worker describes as the “packed suitcase behind the door”: a perpetual readiness for departure that constitutes not merely precarity but a regulatory resource. Workers can exit unsatisfactory arrangements, using mobility itself as bargaining power. Transnational networks coordinate information about employers, working conditions, and pay rates across borders, creating autonomous regulatory capacity that operates outside the national framework. Such arrangements effectively bring offshore labour conditions onshore, but workers’ autonomous regulation partially counters the exploitation this enables (Lillie, 2010).

The Portuguese case shows that regulatory pluralism intensifies under conditions of transnational mobility and that workers’ autonomous regulation operates precisely through navigation between incompatible frameworks rather than despite regulatory complexity (Thoemmes, 2022).

3.2. Chinese factory workers: the subsistence-continuity-projection complex

We entered the Fujian shoe-factory fieldwork expecting to find individual time autonomy at the

piecework machine. Instead, we found that a woman's apparent freedom to leave early for childcare rested on a form of coordination for which we had no vocabulary: migrating husbands absent, elderly parents holding household subsistence together, and children stitching shoes at home through the mother's workday. Autonomy dissolved as an individual attribute and had to be re-theorised as a household capacity holding together subsistence, continuity across generations, and projection into children's futures.

The "subsistence-continuity-projection complex" designates a non-Western temporal configuration in which time arrangements prioritise immediate subsistence needs, intergenerational continuity through extended family networks, and the projection of future aspirations onto children's lives, rather than individual work-life balance, leisure or career development. This concept challenges the universality of Western temporal frameworks that assume a categorical separation between production and reproduction, and between work time and free time.

Twenty-five worker interviews revealed temporal orientations that fundamentally challenge Western work-life balance discourse. Workers articulated what can be called the subsistence-continuity-projection complex through consistent emphasis on three interconnected temporal orientations. First, subsistence: time arrangements respond primarily to immediate survival needs, with schedules organised around production quotas, material availability and payment cycles rather than clock time or contractual hours. Second, continuity: extended family networks constitute the primary unit of temporal organisation, with grandparents, parents and children coordinating activities across generations. Third, projection: workers consistently described investments in children's education as their primary temporal orientation, framing current labour as building futures that will be realised in the next generation.

The integration of family members, including children, into home-based production initially appeared as exploitation and required critical scrutiny. Yet workers rejected this framing, describing integration as enabling family continuity and maintaining a collective presence that would be impossible under factory employment, requiring parental absence. "Social time continuity," a concept emerging from interviews rather than imposed by researchers, describes time arrangements in which productive labour, care work, community obligations, and household maintenance interpenetrate without the bounded separation that European working time regulation presupposes. This manufacturing of consent regarding long working hours aligns with Burawoy's (1985) analysis of factory regimes, where workers accept specific conditions to ensure economic survival within the context of global supply chains (Anner, 2019). "Working time," "free time," and "work-life balance" carry assumptions about temporal organisation that do not travel unproblematically across contexts. The absence of formal temporal boundaries need not indicate exploitation or temporal precarity; workers exercised genuine regulatory autonomy through practices invisible to institutional metrics focused on hours, contracts, and compliance.

The time autonomy generated in these households is inseparable from its gendered architecture. Women bore the coordinating load: aligning piecework pace with school pickups, meal preparation and elder care; accepting extended piecework hours at the household-scale rhythm required; and drawing children into home-based production when hiring additional labour was beyond reach. Husbands migrating to distant cities under hukou restrictions were structurally absent from the continuity work; grandparents filled reproductive gaps; daughters more than sons absorbed early exposure to the piecework machine. What presents, at the individual level, as a mother's "flexibility" to adjust her own hours operates, at the household level, as a gendered division of subsistence labour on which the entire subsistence-continuity-projection complex depends (Zhao and Thoemmes, 2020).

3.3. Malaysian hybrid work: regulatory microenvironments and adaptive hybridisation

We approached Malaysian hybrid work through the standard policy vocabulary of home-versus-office arrangements framed as a managerial design problem. Yet healthcare and consulting workers were reshaping the formula itself: folding laundry between meetings, compensating with a Friday off and tuning on-site days to when they could “feel it” to come in. These moves cut below policy into negotiated orders no formal rule had authorised. That pushed the vocabulary toward “regulatory microenvironments” and “adaptive hybridisation”, concepts that capture the finer grain of worker-driven reconfiguration that existing hybrid-work concepts could not register.

“Regulatory microenvironments” designate localised spaces where multiple normative orders, including state law, corporate policy, community norms, family expectations and transnational frameworks, coexist and interact without any single order achieving dominance. Regulatory microenvironments are not merely contexts within which workers act but are actively produced through workers’ navigational practices. The double accounting systems of posted workers, the hybrid arrangements negotiated by Malaysian professionals and the integration strategies of Chinese households all constitute regulatory microenvironments where autonomous regulation emerges through engagement with multiple controlling regulations.

Closely linked, “adaptive hybridisation” designates the process through which ostensibly universal workplace models, flexibility, hybrid work, telework, and work-life balance are transformed, not merely implemented, when they encounter local cultural values, power relations and institutional contexts. Distinct from simple adaptation, which preserves the original model’s logic, and from resistance, which entails rejection, adaptive hybridisation produces genuinely new arrangements that cannot be reduced to either the imported model or the local tradition. Malaysian professionals navigate reduced direct supervision while working remotely. They develop individual strategies to integrate relational obligations with spatial flexibility, creating hybrid arrangements that neither fully replicate office hierarchies nor abandon them entirely.

The Malaysian case illustrates both regulatory microenvironments and adaptive hybridisation, as Northern workplace models encounter local institutional and cultural contexts. Hybrid work in Malaysia manifests through varying approaches to control and autonomy, creating segmented spheres that differ significantly by sector and function rather than adhering to uniform policies. In healthcare, regulatory autonomy is granted based on operational requirements and role functions. In retail, regulation emerges through individualised negotiations rather than standardised policies. Malaysia’s cultural framework, characterised by a high power distance and an emphasis on relationship maintenance, shapes a process of adaptive hybridisation that reconciles traditional hierarchical values with distributed work autonomy.

Digital tools enable flexibility while introducing informal monitoring and intensified self-discipline. Workers develop boundary-setting strategies to prevent work from colonising personal time as a form of individual digital activism (Kellogg et al., 2020). Sandy, a human resources business partner with young children and dependent parents, described organising her hybrid work around a rolling negotiation rather than a fixed schedule. When care needs shifted, she coordinated with her husband about which of them would be home: “If I need to take care of the kids, I might stay at home. But if I discuss it with my husband, if I need to go back to the office tomorrow because something comes up, we will cooperate.” Her home days ran in disciplined windows, focused work from nine to eleven and two to five, with coffee and laundry slotted into the gaps and an afternoon walk to break screen fatigue, a household-scale regulatory order no company policy prescribed.

Jane, a university lecturer, described a regulatory microenvironment generated not by company design but by the absence of one: “we’ve lost the office ... I don’t have an office anymore.

Why I'm not coming to the office is because I don't have an office anymore.” The post-pandemic move to shared co-working space had removed her dedicated room, so she clustered teaching, student meetings and administrative tasks into two or three condensed on-site days and wrote from home the rest of the week. Equity surfaced as a subsidiary observation: managers had kept their offices, teaching academics had not.

Skyler, a senior sales assistant at a small art shop who also works as a practising fine artist, works seven days a week under an ad hoc arrangement with his employer. From Friday to Sunday he staffs the shop across its opening hours; Monday to Thursday he works “remotely”, though remote for him is rarely stationary: when his cats and cooking pull him out of focus at home, he migrates to a café and runs work conversations over its Wi-Fi. When his employer granted permission for him to join a four- to five-month mural project during scheduled shop days, the hybrid formula was improvised anew rather than drawn from any formal policy.

The Malaysian case shows that hybrid work regulation involves complex negotiation between formal policies, technological mediation and cultural imperatives, not linear adoption of Western flexibility models (Thoemmes and Li, 2025).

3.4. French telework: regulatory pluralism in institutional contexts

French telework was initially understood as a canonical Northern case of professional workers negotiating flexible autonomy within well-resourced employment, but the collective agreements we examined revealed a restrictive pattern that screened access by seniority and contract type, offered minimal material support to workers who qualified, and barred Monday or Friday telework to preclude extended weekends. Telework worked as a segmentation mechanism, reserving presence and surveillance for more precarious workers while distributing temporal autonomy to already secure workers. This pushed us away from reading France as a canonical Northern case and toward the axis of capitalist accumulation versus life sustenance, a “South within North” pattern the literature had located elsewhere.

The French case indicates that regulatory pluralism operates even within strong institutional environments, extending the framework’s applicability beyond contexts of severe marginalisation. French teleworkers experience different constraints than posted workers or home-based pieceworkers, yet their temporal arrangements similarly emerge through negotiation between formal regulation and autonomous practices. Two forms of marginalisation operate within this ostensibly privileged Northern context.

First, structural exclusion: by late 2021, 42% of French employees worked for organisations that did not authorise telework (Dares, 2021). The prevalence of full-time telework declined sharply to only 8% of employees, while 51% worked in firms that authorised telework but restricted it to a limited number of days. Classifications of workers as “non-teleworkable” reflect occupational hierarchies and managerial preferences rather than task requirements. Production workers, service employees, part-time workers and those in organisations with traditional management cultures find themselves excluded from the flexibility that knowledge workers increasingly treat as standard. Second, corporate restrictions and worker resistance: companies frequently limited telework arrangements to one day per week despite employee preferences for more, with some agreements undergoing twelve amendments within a single year as management sought to restore pre-pandemic presence norms. Yet not all workers opposed these restrictions. Some actively resisted telework expansion, defending occupational identities built around workplace presence, collective solidarity and clear boundaries between professional and domestic spheres. The intrusion of professional responsibilities into the domestic space was perceived as “invasion” rather than liberation (Tremblay et al., 2006; Vayre, 2019). Union representatives, exhibiting “presence bias,”

expressed concern that remote work would detach workers from the workplace's social fabric and undermine collective mobilisation capacity, leading unions to sometimes align with management in favouring office returns. Workers exercised time autonomy within this contested regulatory field through practices that challenge celebratory flexibility narratives. The French case shows regulatory pluralism operating within supposedly stable institutional environments: despite strong labour law and extensive collective agreements, actual telework arrangements emerged through ongoing negotiation between company policies, team norms and individual accommodations. This case shows that time autonomy theory must accommodate diversity and paradoxes (Mazmanian et al., 2013) rather than assuming a universal desire for flexibility. What counts as autonomy depends on workers' values, identities and circumstances. Some workers' defence of temporal stability against imposed flexibility does not signal rejection of a homogeneous Northern norm, but cuts against a celebratory flexibility discourse often universalised from managerial and professional-class vantage points within Northern economies (Thoemmes, 2024).

4. Synthesising Insights: Six Principles of Time Autonomy

Building on the empirical and theoretical analysis, this section proposes six principles characterising time autonomy within regulatory pluralism. These principles aim to capture patterns evident across diverse contexts while avoiding false universalisation. They constitute analytical tools rather than empirical generalisations, requiring specification when applied to particular cases.

Principle 1: Collective Rather Than Individual. Time autonomy is exercised by extended families, transnational networks, work groups, representatives and communities rather than atomised individuals. Portuguese workers rotate home visits within crew schedules; Chinese families coordinate production and reproduction across generations; Malaysian workers negotiate flexibility through individual boundary-setting that remains attentive to relational obligations. This collective form is gendered: the integration of productive and reproductive labour on which household-scale time autonomy rests is typically shouldered by women, a coordination cost that the language of "collective autonomy" can obscure if unattended.

Principle 2: Relational Rather Than Absolute. Time autonomy exists only against heteronomy; workers negotiate partial control within power asymmetries, never achieving pure autonomy or suffering pure subordination.

Principle 3: Processual Rather Than Achieved. Time autonomy requires continuous negotiation, maintenance and defence against encroachment. It is never secured permanently but must be constantly reasserted against competing demands. Telework agreements require ongoing renegotiation; posted workers continuously adjust schedules; Chinese families constantly rebalance production and reproduction.

Principle 4: Multiple Rather Than Singular. Workers navigate multiple temporal regimes simultaneously: employment schedules, household rhythms, family obligations, community rhythms, and state regulations.

Principle 5: Partial Rather Than Complete. Time autonomy is always compromised by structural constraints, poverty, legal precarity, forms of exclusion and gendered obligations. Workers create liveable arrangements rather than ideal conditions. This partiality should not obscure genuine agency: partial autonomy enables survival, maintains dignity and sometimes creates conditions for expanded autonomy.

Principle 6: Context-Dependent Rather Than Universal. Time autonomy manifests differently depending on institutional contexts, cultural values, and power relations, requiring analytical

attention to specificity.

5. Implications for Theory, Policy and Future Research

5.1. Theoretical implications: extending labour sociology

This analysis shows how centring marginalised workers' practices extends labour sociology's analytical capacity. The formal/informal binary, the institutional stability assumption and universal temporal frameworks are not merely incomplete; they actively obscure the regulatory activities of marginalised workers. By analysing Portuguese posted workers, Chinese factory workers, Malaysian professionals and French teleworkers from a Global South epistemological standpoint, we have identified patterns invisible to frameworks developed from and for privileged populations in metropolitan centres. The three concepts developed here, the subsistence-continuity-projection complex, regulatory microenvironments and adaptive hybridisation, provide analytical tools that Northern theory often lacks.

First, regarding the formal/informal binary: Portuguese workers' double accounting, Chinese piecework arrangements and Malaysian flexibility all show that supposedly "informal" practices constitute coherent regulatory systems rather than deficiencies requiring correction. This insight aligns with growing recognition that "informal" work dominates global employment and requires analysis on its own terms rather than as a deviation from Northern formal norms.

Second, the subsistence-continuity-projection complex challenges temporal theory's universalist assumptions. Chinese workers' time orientations, prioritising subsistence over leisure, maintaining intergenerational continuity and projecting futures onto children, differ markedly from the work-life balance discourse that prevails in managerial and professional-class segments of Northern economies, a discourse itself better understood as a middle-class universalisation than as a property of the North as such. Comparable subsistence-oriented temporalities appear in marginalised Northern populations, and work-life balance talk circulates among Southern middle classes; what the Chinese case reveals is less a bounded cultural alterity than an alternative axis along which temporal life can be organised, oriented toward the sustenance of life with its own rationality and coherence.

Third, negotiated fragility challenges institutionalist assumptions privileging stability. Portuguese workers' constant readiness for relocation, Chinese households' provisional arrangements, Malaysian workers' negotiated flexibility all show regulation operating through fragility rather than despite it.

These insights support broader calls for extending social science. A strong strand of critical scholarship has argued that dominant theoretical traditions generalise from particular Northern historical experiences as if they were universal patterns, dismissing alternatives as traditional, informal or deviant (Quijano, 2000; Bhambra, 2007; Connell, 2007; Santos, 2014; Go, 2016). The concern here is not to substitute one totalising contrast for another. Northern scholarship is heterogeneous, and much of the labour sociology this paper addresses is explicitly critical of universalism. What marginalised workers' practices indicate is that the dominant framings need to be recognised as historically particular.

5.2. Policy implications: recognising regulatory diversity

The framework has policy implications, though these require caution against romanticising

precarity. First, formalisation initiatives should recognise that workers sometimes resist formalisation when it threatens autonomous arrangements serving their interests. Portuguese workers' double accounting creates income levels impossible through Portuguese wages alone; Chinese piecework enables work-life integration unavailable through factory employment. Policy must address the complex, layered nature of work regulation (Aloisi and De Stefano, 2022). Second, work-life balance policies should accommodate diverse temporal configurations rather than imposing a singular model. The subsistence-continuity-projection complex, collective presence preferences, and occupational identity concerns all suggest that "balance" means different things in different contexts. Third, flexibility initiatives should recognise multiple forms of time marginalisation: exclusion from desired flexibility, flexibility as intensified self-exploitation and imposed flexibility threatening valued stability. The goal remains to support rather than suppress workers' autonomous practices.

5.3. Future research directions

This analysis has limitations that future research should address. The Malaysian sample (n=10) provides exploratory rather than generalisable findings, though the theoretical sampling logic justifies this scope for concept development. The French case, while drawing on sixty interviews, examined only seven companies and cannot represent the full diversity of telework arrangements. The theoretical framework's emphasis on marginalisation may understate workers' agency in some contexts while potentially romanticising precarity in others. The multi-country design enables pattern identification across contexts but sacrifices depth for breadth; sustained ethnographic engagement with single sites would complement these findings.

This analysis suggests several research directions. First, time autonomy analysis should be extended to other marginalised populations, including domestic workers, platform workers, agricultural labourers, refugees, and undocumented migrants, to examine how these groups create autonomous temporal arrangements within severe constraints.

Second, comparative analysis of marginalisation mechanisms across contexts warrants systematic investigation. This analysis identified country exclusion (Portugal), subsistence imperatives (China), postcolonial model imposition (Malaysia) and corporate exclusion (France) as distinct marginalisation mechanisms producing different forms of time autonomy. Future research should examine how these mechanisms interact, whether additional mechanisms operate in other contexts and how workers navigate multiple marginalisation forms simultaneously.

Third, future research should analyse the time dimensions of climate change and ecological crisis. As climate disruption intensifies, how will marginalised populations adapt time arrangements to environmental volatility? How do indigenous time orientations toward land and seasons provide resources for ecological adaptation?

Fourth, future research should develop participatory research methods that treat workers as co-theorists rather than research subjects. How might collaborative research partnerships with worker organisations generate theories more adequate to marginalised experiences?

Fifth, future research should examine how digital platforms and artificial intelligence transform time regulation (Wood et al., 2019). How do algorithmic management systems constrain or enable time autonomy? How do platform workers develop autonomous regulatory practices within digital frameworks?

6. Conclusion

This article has developed time autonomy and regulatory pluralism as theoretical concepts enabling the analysis of work arrangements among marginalised populations across diverse contexts. By centring Portuguese posted workers, Chinese factory workers, Malaysian professionals and French teleworkers from a Global South epistemological standpoint, we have sought to show how marginalised workers create autonomous regulatory systems that challenge Northern assumptions about formality, stability and universal temporal configurations.

These insights extend labour sociology by showing how influential framings have generalised from particular historical experiences, while marginalised workers' practices return those framings to their particularity. The framework clarifies how colonial legacies, border regimes and global capitalism shape the conditions under which autonomous regulation emerges.

The framework's six principles identify time autonomy as collective, relational, processual, multiple, partial and context-dependent. They provide analytical tools for understanding temporal arrangements without imposing Northern assumptions. These principles enable comparative analysis across contexts while remaining attentive to specificity, avoiding both cultural essentialism and false universalisation. This framework complements rather than replaces existing approaches, offering additional analytical tools for contexts where standard categories require extension.

Ultimately, this analysis implies that work regulation is plural, contested and emerges from the margins rather than being imposed by institutional centres. French workers resist flexibility, while corporations resist autonomy. Together, the cases show that regulatory pluralism and time autonomy are not merely descriptive categories but analytical tools revealing sophisticated practices invisible to frameworks developed from privileged positions.

The task is not to eliminate regulatory pluralism through formalisation but to recognise workers' autonomous regulation as both a survival strategy and a theoretical contribution. Workers at the margins have developed capabilities for navigating volatile, plural regulatory environments that dominant theory has dismissed as deficiencies requiring correction. Recognising these capabilities transforms labour sociology's relationship to its objects of study, treating marginalised workers not as data sources for Northern theory-testing but as theorists whose practices generate insights that metropolitan social science requires.

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