

Taylor, Simon Peter (2019) Fordism to post Fordism in the UK. *International Journal of Housing and Human Settlement Planning*, 5 (1). pp. 23-27.

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Fordism to Post Fordism in the UK

By

Simon P Taylor

(simon_taylor@rocketmail.com)

University of Cumbria

Cumbria, England

Abstract

This article presents an overview of Fordism and Post Fordism in the UK and looks at the transition from one period to another. It looks at the roots of Fordism in the mass production techniques used by the Ford motor company in America and its application as a label to describe the political, economic and social characteristics of an era. It is associated with the Keynesian welfare state during the period 1945-70. A change in the characteristics of an era from the 1970s onwards has also been given a label to distinguish it from the Fordist period. The era after Fordism has been given the label Post Fordism. There is a period of transition from one era to another and this is an important contextual aspect that can be associated with economic and political aspects of each period. Both terms are reviewed, and the characteristics associated with each era are presented. This shows that there are differences in the economic, political and social aspects of each era which are reflective of the changes occurring in society. There is not universal agreement between academics and scholars of the exact timescales for the application of these labels but those described in the article are the periods that are generally associated with each term.

Keywords: Fordism, Post Fordism, transition, period, characteristics

Introduction

In this century, capitalism has continued to advance under a Neoliberal ideology in which new markets have been developed on a global scale. The technological advancements that have been made have impacted on economies and societies since the latter part of the last century through automation as well as the emergence of a knowledge-based economy. The Fordist debate not only involved the development of ideas concerning shifts in the economy and modes of production but also new theories of the role of the nation state in the process of regulating economies and reproducing labour power. The state took on the role as the main provider of services to the public with the creation of the welfare state after World War Two.

Fordism

Fordism is a term that derives from the industrial processes that were employed by the Ford motor company in the USA. Building on the scientific management ideas of Taylor in the early twentieth century not only did Henry Ford introduce systematic approaches to work in the factories but also to welfare and personal management [1]. In contrast to the unsystematic patterns of industrial working in the nineteenth century, Ford introduced order to his factories with an assembly line in place, an ordered system of jobs, and workers working at a consistent pace. The product was the Model T car which could be produced in increasing volume and at a decreasing cost in response to the mass consumption demands of the market. Fordism has been identified [2] with a cycle of growth whereby mass production feeds mass consumption and increasing productivity feeds higher profits, increased wages, increased standards of living, and economic investment.

Within a Fordist model the role of the state has been described as providing the infrastructure and support systems for workers who work in the factories [3]. The provision of infrastructure took place through centralised planning and the provision of a range of services that provide for the wellbeing of the population. These range from the provision of health services, education, housing and social security [4]. The link between Fordism and the

Keynesian state is highlighted by [2] through the provision of infrastructure within the country for workers and the control of aggregate demand within the economy to benefit the capital investment operation of profit-making companies. The beneficial relationship between the Fordist profit making private sector and the Keynesian state was based on the prosperity that increasing levels of production, accumulation and consumption brought to society. Under a Fordist system higher wages are important as they funded an increase in private levels of consumption [2]. He also highlighted the contribution that increased wage levels made to the government's ability to increase expenditure through higher revenue returns through the taxation system. This would include areas of expenditure such as roads, sewers, distribution systems, schools, hospitals and housing.

During the last century, the expanded public sector was distinct and separate from the private sector [5]. The role of the state increased after 1945 with the creation of the welfare state and public-sector organisations were all encompassing and performing a number of roles. These ranged from planning the delivery of services to making decisions about those services as well as providing them for the public [6]. The characteristics of public service administration during this period have been identified as being Fordist in nature [7] [8] [9]. The characteristics of the Public Administration and Fordist approaches are detailed in Table 1.

Characteristics – Public Administration	Characteristic - Fordism
Uniformity – service provision	Uniformity – mass production
Direct Control - Elected representatives make decisions / central planning	Direct Control – Authoritarian management controls processes and decision making / central planning
Vertical Accountability – Hierarchical management structures	Vertical Accountability – Hierarchical management structures

Table 1 Comparison of the characteristics of Public Administration and Fordism [7]

Post Fordism

The term Post Fordism has been given to the system that has emerged [10]. Commentators have identified several characteristics of Post Fordism including decentralisation, use of technological advances [11], flexible processes of production, autonomy in the workplace [12], devolved and performance driven management [13] and differentiation in patterns of consumption[14] [15].

Era Transition

The transition from one era to another can be seen at both an economic and a political level. At an economic level, the change was from the ‘industrial Fordism of mass production and mass consumption to post-Fordism of “flexible” work forms and of the third sector’ [16]. At the political level, the change was ‘from the national, Keynesian, intervening welfare state to the post national, neoliberal, entrepreneurial state’ [16]. The transition affected patterns of consumption of goods and services by citizens and the organisation of services, including those previously provided by the State. Aspects of Fordism and Post Fordism in local government regulation systems are shown in Table 2 which the author has adapted to show characteristics of both Fordist and Post Fordist eras [13].

Characteristic	Fordism	Post Fordism
Financial Regime	Keynesianism	Monetarism /Neoliberalism
Industrial Process	Labour intensive / Technology underdeveloped	Technology dynamic / Capital intensive
Management	Hierarchical / Centralised	Devolved / Performance - driven
Worker Relations	Regulated /Collectivised	Flexible / Individual
Consumption	Universal / Collective rights	Targeted / Individualised
Economic Goals	Full employment / Modernisation / Public Investment	Promote Private profit / Low wage, low skill flexible economy
Political Form	Corporatist	Entrepreneurial / Enabling

Table 2 Characteristics of both the Fordist and the Post Fordist periods (Adapted) [13]

In comparing the characteristics of the Fordist and the Post-Fordist periods the advances in technology have impacted on the industrial processes, organisational structures and the patterns of labour used. The homogeneity of Fordism has been replaced by the differentiation of Post Fordism. Under a Fordist system of production Labour was intensively used and was largely unskilled but under a Post-Fordist system unskilled or low skilled labour has become poorly paid and the labour force flexible to the demands of the market.

It has identified that following the crisis in Fordism in the late 1960s and early 1970s a 'principal strategy pursued by national capitalists' sought to 're-establish the profit rate' through 'the internationalization of production' [17]. The transition to a Neoliberal economic ideology has also been identified as a transition to a new form of capital accumulation [18]. The process for establishing and running this new marketplace has been enshrined in the term Globalisation and it could 'dictate' how 'corporations think and how workers are treated' including 'arbitrariness in the workplace, pervading threat of termination, an increasingly wide gap between the rich and poor, job loss and a weakening of job security' [19].

Conclusion

The labels Fordism and Post Fordism are given to periods of history. These periods do not have specific starting or ending dates and these can be viewed differently. The period of Fordism is named after the Ford motor company in the USA who developed a specific mode of industrial production. The period after the second world war between 1945 and the 1970s has been identified as the core part of the Fordist period. The Post Fordist period refers to a period after the end of the Fordist period. Both periods can be seen as eras and the transition from one era to another has also been reflected in the transition from a Keynesian economic system to one where Neoliberalism is the dominant political and economic ideology.

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