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# Sleep Inequality & The 24/7 Capitalist Body: A Sociological Review of Rest, Power & Time Discipline

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## ABSTRACT

*Sleep is biologically universal but profoundly socially stratified. This critical narrative review interrogates how late capitalist time regimes structurally produce, legitimize, and medicalize sleep inequality. Moving beyond biomedical individualism, the analysis integrates Marxist political economy, Foucauldian biopolitics, critical time sociology, and intersectional frameworks to position rest as a contested site of power and social reproduction. Synthesizing contemporary interdisciplinary scholarship from 2000 to 2026, the review traces how algorithmic scheduling, digital tethering, and just-in-time labor erode temporal autonomy, particularly for marginalized workers bearing intersecting structural class, race, and gender burdens. The paper introduces temporal extraction as a mid-range concept to explain how capital systematically appropriates non-work hours and circadian stability, transforming biological necessity into a depleted resource. Despite growing wellness commodification, structural determinants of sleep deprivation remain under-theorized, while resistance and collective temporal sovereignty are marginalized in extant literature. The review concludes by advocating for binding labor protections, participatory scheduling, and rest-positive institutional cultures. By reframing sleep as a cornerstone of temporal justice, this critical analysis provides sociologists and policymakers with a diagnostic lens to dismantle twenty-four-seven exploitation and reclaim rest as a fundamental democratic right.*

**Keywords:** *Sleep inequality, temporal extraction,; 24/7 capitalism, time discipline, social reproduction, temporal justice*

**S**leep is biologically universal but profoundly stratified. While the physiological need for rest transcends social boundaries, the conditions under which individuals secure sufficient, predictable, and restorative sleep are increasingly distributed along axes of class, race, gender, and occupational precarity. In contemporary late capitalism, rising sleep deficits

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and circadian disruption have not merely expanded; they have been structurally reorganized. The proliferation of algorithmic scheduling, digital tethering, and just-in-time labor has normalized chronic fatigue as a routine cost of economic participation. Rather than being framed as a collective health crisis or a symptom of temporal exploitation, sleeplessness is routinely individualized as a failure of personal discipline or lifestyle management. This disconnects between the biological necessity of rest and its unequal social distribution reveals a critical gap in sociological scholarship: sleep remains undertheorized as a site of political economy, power, and temporal governance. This review addresses that gap by interrogating how capitalist time regimes produce, legitimize, and medicalize sleep inequality, and by repositioning rest as a fundamental dimension of social reproduction and temporal justice.

To ground this inquiry, three core concepts are operationalized sociologically. Sleep inequality refers not merely to variations in sleep duration, but to the differential exposure to structural conditions that enable or disrupt restorative rest, including unpredictable work schedules, environmental stressors, unpaid care burdens, and limited temporal autonomy. The 24/7 capitalist body denotes the embodied expectation of continuous availability, cognitive optimization, and temporal flexibility demanded by neoliberal labor markets, wherein biological rhythms are colonized by productivity norms and rest is increasingly framed as a liability rather than a necessity. Time discipline encompasses the institutional, technological, and cultural mechanisms that synchronize human activity to capitalist rhythms, regulate when and how long individuals may rest, and penalize deviation from dominant waking schedules. Together, these concepts illustrate how time discipline produces the 24/7 capitalist body, which in turn systematically generates sleep inequality as a structural outcome rather than an individual deficit.

This review is guided by the following research questions:

- How do capitalist time regimes and intersecting power relations structurally produce, legitimize, and medicalize sleep inequality?
- Through what institutional and cultural mechanisms does the 24/7 capitalist body commodify rest and erode temporal autonomy?
- Which sociological frameworks most effectively capture the intersection of time discipline, embodiment, and social stratification?
- How do marginalized workers and communities resist, adapt to, or reclaim temporal sovereignty in the face of chronic sleep deprivation?

To address these questions, this review pursues the following objectives:

- Synthesize interdisciplinary scholarship across sociology, labor studies, critical public health, and science & technology studies to map the structural determinants of sleep inequality.
- Critique the dominant biomedical and individualistic narratives that privatize rest and obscure the political economy of time.
- Develop a sociological reframing that positions sleep as a site of power, social reproduction, and temporal justice.
- Identify emerging forms of resistance, policy interventions, and collective practices that challenge chrono normative exploitation.

This paper adopts a critical narrative review methodology, prioritizing theoretical synthesis, conceptual mapping, and structural critique over quantitative aggregation. Literature was sourced from Sociological Abstracts, Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and key monographs published between 2000 and 2026. Search strategies combined terms related to sleep disparities (“sleep inequality,” “sleep deprivation,” “rest justice”), temporal governance (“time discipline,” “24/7 capitalism,” “temporal autonomy,” “chrono normativity”), and structural analysis (“social stratification,” “precarious work,” “biopolitics,” “social reproduction”). Inclusion criteria prioritized peer-reviewed articles, theoretical essays, and empirical studies that explicitly engage with sociological, political economy, or critical health frameworks, while excluding purely clinical, pharmacological, or non-structural psychological studies. The analytical approach employed iterative thematic coding to trace how power, temporality, embodiment, and resistance intersect across the literature, with an intersectional lens applied throughout to account for how class, race, gender, migration status, and geographic context compound sleep disparities.

The remainder of this review is organized as follows. Section Two establishes the theoretical framework, drawing on Marxist political economy, Foucauldian biopolitics, critical time sociology, and intersectional structural analysis to situate sleep within regimes of power and temporal governance. Section Three presents a thematic synthesis of the empirical and theoretical literature, examining the

historical transformation of sleep and time discipline, the structural determinants of sleep inequality, the commodification of rest under 24/7 capitalism, and the institutional mechanisms that regulate temporal autonomy. Section Four offers a critical synthesis that intersects these themes, identifies conceptual gaps in existing scholarship, and proposes a mid-range sociological reframing of sleep as a site of temporal extraction and collective care. Section Five outlines' implications for labor policy, organizational practice, and future research, emphasizing participatory methodologies, cross-national comparative designs, and rest-positive structural interventions. The paper concludes by reiterating sleep inequality as a diagnostic lens for late capitalist temporal order and advocating for the recognition of rest as a fundamental social right and a cornerstone of temporal justice.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This review situates sleep inequality within an integrated theoretical framework that bridges political economy, biopolitics, and critical time studies. Drawing on Marxist and critical political economy, sleep is reconceptualized as a site of surplus value extraction wherein the colonization of non-work hours and the intensification of reproductive labor transform rest into a commodified resource rather than a biological right (Harvey, 2005; Federici, 2012). Complementing this, Foucauldian biopolitics elucidates how sleeplessness becomes medicalized and internalized through optimization cultures, wearable surveillance, and neoliberal self-discipline that position fatigue as personal failure rather than structural exploitation (Foucault, 1978; Han, 2015). Critical time sociology further clarifies these mechanisms by theorizing temporal inequality as a function of synchronization demands and time poverty, which systematically erode temporal autonomy and impose rigid chrono norms aligned with market rhythms (Adam, 1990; Nowotny, 1994; Wajcman, 2015). Intersectional and structural approaches reveal how class, race, gender, migration status, and geographic marginalization compound sleep disparities through chronic systemic stressors, environmental exposures, and institutional neglect (Geronimus, 1992; Collins, 2019). To synthesize these intersecting perspectives, Table 01 outlines how each theoretical lens conceptualizes sleep, identifies core mechanisms of inequality, and informs distinct analytical entry points for examining rest as a structurally stratified phenomenon.

**Table 1**

*Theoretical Lenses for Analyzing Sleep Inequality*

<b>Theoretical Framework</b>	<b>Key Concepts</b>	<b>View of Sleep</b>	<b>Mechanism of Inequality</b>
<b>Marxist Political Economy</b>	Surplus value, reproductive labor	Commodifiable resource	Colonization of non-work time for capital accumulation
<b>Foucauldian Biopolitics</b>	Medicalization, self-discipline	Site of optimization	Internalization of productivity norms; pathologization of fatigue
<b>Critical Time Sociology</b>	Chrono normativity, time poverty	Temporally regulated activity	Synchronization demands eroding temporal autonomy
<b>Intersectionality</b>	Structural racism, gendered care	Embodied, stratified experience	Compounding stressors across race, class, gender, migration status

Together, these frameworks map a structural pathway: capitalist time regimes dictate institutional scheduling practices, which materially embed sleep inequality into embodied experience, ultimately reproducing health inequities and destabilizing social reproduction. This integrated architecture demonstrates how macro-level temporal governance translates into micro-level bodily exhaustion, moving beyond individualized health models to position rest as a contested terrain of structural power, temporal sovereignty, and collective justice. By operationalizing these four lenses concurrently, the review avoids theoretical siloing and instead captures how economic extraction, disciplinary normalization, temporal coercion, and identity-based marginalization operate synergistically to produce and sustain sleep inequality.

### THEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

#### The Historical Transformation of Sleep & Time Discipline

The historical sociology of sleep reveals a profound transformation in how rest is temporally organized and socially valued. Pre-industrial societies commonly practiced segmented sleep, a biphasic rhythm

aligned with natural light cycles and communal rhythms, which was systematically disrupted by the advent of industrial capitalism and the imposition of standardized clock-time (Ekirch, 2005). The factory system, coupled with Taylorist management and the institutionalization of shift work, enforced rigid waking/working schedules that prioritized production efficiency over biological rhythms, effectively colonizing nocturnal hours for capital accumulation (Crary, 2013). In the contemporary era, digital capitalism has further dissolved temporal boundaries, replacing the discrete separation of work and leisure with a continuous, fragmented temporality. Always-on communication technologies and algorithmic management demand perpetual synchronization, transforming time discipline from external coercion to internalized responsiveness (Wajcman, 2015; Rosa, 2013). This historical trajectory demonstrates how sleep has been progressively subordinated to market logics, shifting from a shared biological rhythm to a privatized, regulated, and increasingly contested resource.

### **Structural Determinants of Sleep Inequality**

Sleep inequality is structurally produced through intersecting axes of occupational stratification, socioecological marginalization, and systemic discrimination. Precarious labor regimes-spanning gig work, logistics, care work, and service sectors-disproportionately impose irregular, unpredictable, and extended schedules that fragment circadian rhythms and limit recovery time. These occupational exposures are compounded by socioecological stressors, including housing insecurity, environmental noise and light pollution, and neighborhood violence, which collectively degrade sleep quality in marginalized communities (Hale, 2005). Racialized and gendered sleep gaps are further amplified by the weathering hypothesis, which links chronic exposure to structural racism and discrimination to accelerated physiological aging and sleep disruption (Geronimus, 1992), while women and racialized minorities bear disproportionate unpaid domestic and care burdens that encroach upon restorative time (Federici, 2012). Globally, informal economies and transnational care chains externalize sleep deprivation onto migrant and Global South workers, revealing how sleep inequality operates as a transnational mechanism of labor extraction and reproductive exploitation (Cukier et al., 2020). Together, these literatures demonstrate that sleep deficits are not randomly distributed but systematically patterned by institutional arrangements that allocate temporal vulnerability along existing lines of social stratification.

### **The 24/7 Capitalist Body & the Commodification of Rest**

Under late capitalism, the body is increasingly configured as a 24/7 productive unit, wherein digital tethering and surveillance capitalism normalize constant availability and blur the boundaries between labor and leisure (Zuboff, 2019). This temporal regime is sustained by cultural narratives that romanticize sleeplessness as a marker of ambition and moral discipline, while pathologizing fatigue as personal inadequacy (Han, 2015). In response, the sleep optimization industry has emerged to privatize rest, commodifying it through wearables, tracking apps, pharmaceutical interventions, and corporate wellness programs that shift responsibility for sleep from structural conditions to individual self-management (Wolf-Meyer, 2013). Rather than addressing the root causes of temporal exploitation, these market-driven solutions reinforce chrono normative ideals and discipline bodies into optimizing sleep for enhanced productivity rather than holistic well-being. Yet, within this landscape of commodified rest, everyday resistance persists. Workers engage in micro-rest practices, sleep hacking, and collective advocacy to reclaim temporal autonomy, signaling an emergent cultural critique of hustle ideology and a revaluation of rest as a site of embodied sovereignty rather than economic utility.

### **Power, Institutional Control & Temporal Justice**

Institutional architectures of power actively reproduce sleep inequality through scheduling practices, policy voids, and chrono normative infrastructures. Just-in-time labor systems and predictive algorithmic scheduling prioritize operational flexibility over worker predictability, systematically depriving employees of temporal autonomy and circadian stability (Koechlin et al., 2021). Despite mounting evidence of sleep deprivation as an occupational hazard, regulatory frameworks lag, with minimal legal recognition of paid rest, circadian safety standards, or enforceable right-to-disconnect legislation (Boris, 2019). Beyond the workplace, institutional time regimes in education, healthcare, and public transportation penalize non-standard sleepers, embedding chrono normativity into everyday civic life and marginalizing those whose biological or social rhythms deviate from industrial defaults (Ahmed, 2012). In response, scholars and activists are advancing frameworks of temporal justice that reframe sleep as a collective right rather than an individual luxury. Initiatives such as the Nap Ministry's rest activism, alongside academic proposals for temporal commons and decolonial sleep practices, challenge the extractive logics of 24/7 capitalism by centering care, interdependence, and the right to

unproductive time (Hersey, 2022). These emerging discourses position temporal sovereignty not merely as a workplace demand, but as a foundational pillar of social equity and human dignity.

### **CRITICAL SYNTHESIS & THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS**

The synthesis of historical, structural, and cultural literatures reveals that sleep inequality is not a passive byproduct of late capitalism but an actively produced, legitimized, and medicalized condition. Capitalist time regimes do not merely correlate with disrupted rest; they systematically manufacture it through just-in-time scheduling, digital tethering, and the erosion of temporal boundaries (Crary, 2013; Wajcman, 2015). This structural production is legitimized through cultural narratives that reframe sleep deprivation as a testament to productivity, moral fortitude, or entrepreneurial dedication, thereby obscuring the exploitative temporality embedded in contemporary labor markets (Han, 2015). Concurrently, the medicalization of sleep transforms a structural deficit into an individualized pathology. Rather than addressing the institutional architectures that fragment circadian rhythms, healthcare systems and the wellness industry pathologize fatigue, offering pharmaceutical, behavioral, and technological fixes that privatize responsibility and reinforce market logics (Wolf-Meyer, 2013). Thus, sleep inequality operates as a self-reinforcing cycle: structural time extraction generates physiological disruption, which is culturally normalized and medically individualized, ultimately absolving institutions of accountability while entrenching temporal hierarchies.

Despite these intersections, the extant literature remains constrained by three interrelated limitations. First, there is a persistent over-reliance on biomedical and psychological individualism that treats sleep as a dependent variable or behavioral outcome, isolating it from the political economy of time and reducing structural exploitation to personal lifestyle choices or circadian misalignment (Hale & Do, 2007). Second, empirical research suffers from a lack of longitudinal and intersectional temporal analysis. Most studies capture sleep duration at discrete moments rather than tracing how cumulative temporal deprivation compounds across life courses and intersects with racialized weathering, gendered care burdens, and migratory labor trajectories (Geronimus, 1992; Collins, 2019). This methodological fragmentation obscures the dynamic, recursive nature of time poverty. Third, resistance and adaptation remain severely under-theorized. While emerging work documents micro-rest practices and sleep hacking, these are frequently framed as individual coping mechanisms rather than nascent forms of collective temporal autonomy or organized labor resistance. Consequently, the literature underestimates the potential for rest-centered solidarity to challenge chrono normative exploitation and reconfigure workplace temporal governance.

To transcend these limitations, this review proposes a sociological reframing that positions sleep as a foundational site of power, temporal sovereignty, and social reproduction. Rather than treating rest as a biological residual, sleep should be theorized as a constitutive condition of labor reproduction, wherein the capacity to recover directly determines the sustainability of both human and economic systems (Federici, 2012; Bhattacharya, 2017). Building on this, I advance the mid-range concept of temporal extraction: the systematic appropriation of non-work hours and circadian stability by capital through institutional scheduling, digital surveillance, and cultural chrono norms, which converts biological necessity into a depleted resource. Temporal extraction operates as a form of structural violence when it disproportionately burdens marginalized bodies, normalizes chronic fatigue, and forecloses the possibility of intergenerational well-being (Galtung, 1969; Geronimus, 1992). By centering temporal sovereignty—the right to control one’s own rhythms, predictability, and uncommodified time—sociology can reposition sleep inequality not as a public health anomaly, but as a diagnostic marker of capitalist temporal governance and a frontline for labor and reproductive justice.

Several critical gaps and emerging tensions warrant immediate scholarly attention. First, the role of platform algorithms in shaping sleep remains empirically underexamined. Algorithmic management increasingly dictates work pacing, route optimization, and performance metrics in real time, embedding temporal extraction into digital infrastructures that penalize rest through automated deactivation or rating penalties (Rosenblat, 2018). Second, the intersection of climate change and sleep inequality introduces a pressing socioecological dimension. Rising temperatures, extreme weather events, and infrastructural neglect disproportionately disrupt sleep in low-income and racially marginalized neighborhoods, revealing how environmental injustice compounds temporal deprivation through physiological stress and habitat degradation (Harlan et al., 2006). Finally, post-pandemic remote and hybrid work arrangements have reconfigured, rather than resolved, time discipline. While flexibility has expanded for professional classes, it has simultaneously intensified temporal boundary erosion, enabling employer surveillance to extend into domestic spaces and generating a new bifurcation

between those who experience time affluence and those trapped in asynchronous, always-available labor regimes (Wajcman, 2015; Schieman et al., 2021). Addressing these tensions requires interdisciplinary methodologies that bridge digital sociology, environmental justice, and critical labor studies to map the evolving architectures of temporal control.

### **IMPLICATIONS & FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

The findings of this review carry substantive implications for labor policy, organizational practice, scholarly inquiry, and cultural transformation. At the policy level, addressing sleep inequality requires moving beyond voluntary corporate wellness initiatives toward binding regulatory frameworks. This includes legislating predictable scheduling, enacting enforceable right-to-disconnect mandates, and formally recognizing chronic sleep deprivation as a workplace safety and equity issue comparable to ergonomic or environmental hazards. Within organizational practice, institutions must dismantle individualized wellness paradigms that privatize temporal exploitation. Employers should instead cultivate structurally rest-positive cultures through circadian-aware shift design, participatory scheduling, and the co-creation of temporal policies with workers, ensuring that rest is embedded in operational logic rather than treated as a peripheral benefit.

A robust research agenda must similarly evolve to capture the complexity of contemporary temporal governance. Future scholarship should prioritize participatory and ethnographic methodologies that center they lived temporal experiences of marginalized workers, alongside cross-national and Global South comparative studies that decenter Western chrono norms and illuminate transnational labor and care regimes. Critical inquiry into the ethics of algorithmic time-tracking and digital surveillance is urgently needed to understand how automated management systems penalize rest and accelerate temporal extraction. Furthermore, intersectional longitudinal designs are essential to trace how cumulative sleep deprivation shapes social mobility, health trajectories, and intergenerational life chances. Beyond institutional and academic spheres, emerging social movements are catalyzing vital cultural shifts. Rest activism and the growing critique of hustle culture challenge the moralization of exhaustion, advocating instead for temporal commons and the radical revaluation of unproductive time. By framing rest as a site of collective care and resistance, these movements offer transformative pathways toward temporal justice, demanding that societies recognize uncommodified time as a foundational pillar of human dignity and democratic life.

### **CONCLUSION**

This review has demonstrated that sleep inequality is not an incidental health disparity but a structurally produced, temporally regulated, and politically consequential outcome of late capitalist political economy. By synthesizing Marxist political economy, Foucauldian biopolitics, critical time sociology, and intersectional structural analysis, this paper advances a sociological understanding of rest that deliberately transcends biomedical individualism. It positions sleep as a contested terrain of power, revealing how institutional time discipline systematically extracts biological recovery time, legitimizes fatigue through cultural chrono norms, and medicalizes exhaustion to preserve institutional accountability. The introduction of temporal extraction as a mid-range concept provides a diagnostic framework for tracing how macro-level scheduling regimes translate into micro-level bodily vulnerability and reproductive instability.

Ultimately, reclaiming sleep requires more than behavioral intervention; it demands a fundamental reorientation toward temporal sovereignty and collective care. Sleep must be recognized not as a private luxury but as a public right and a critical lens for diagnosing the temporal violence embedded in contemporary labor markets, digital infrastructures, and urban ecologies. Addressing this crisis necessitates sustained interdisciplinary solidarity across sociology, public health, labor studies, urban planning, and science and technology studies. Only through integrated, structurally informed scholarship and policy can societies dismantle the architectures of twenty-four-seven exploitation and cultivate temporal ecologies that honor rest as essential to human flourishing, social reproduction, and democratic equity.

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