

The minimum wage: from labour costs to living standards. Comparing France, Germany and the UK

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Most developed countries now have a minimum wage, including 22 of the 28 EU countries. France has long stood out for its relatively high minimum wage, the SMIC. But in 1999, the United Kingdom introduced a minimum wage, and the British government's goal is to raise this level to 60% of the median wage by 2020, which would bring it to the level of France's SMIC and among the highest-ranking countries in the OECD. More recently, in 2015, Germany also introduced a minimum wage.

Note that gross pay is a legal concept. What matters from an economic point of view is the cost of labour for a firm as well as the disposable income (including benefits and taxes) of a household in which employees earn the minimum wage.

In OFCE [Policy Brief no. 34](#) we present a comparison of the minimum wages in force in 2017 in these three countries, using standard cases, from the viewpoint first of the cost of labour and then with respect to employees' standard of living.

It appears that the cost of labour is slightly higher in Germany than in France, and much more so than in the United Kingdom, and that the reforms announced in France for 2019 (reducing contributions) will strengthen France's competitive advantage vis-à-vis Germany. The cost of labour at the minimum wage is therefore not particularly high in France (Table).

Table. Labour cost, gross wages and net wages for an employee paid at the statutory minimum wage in force in April 2017

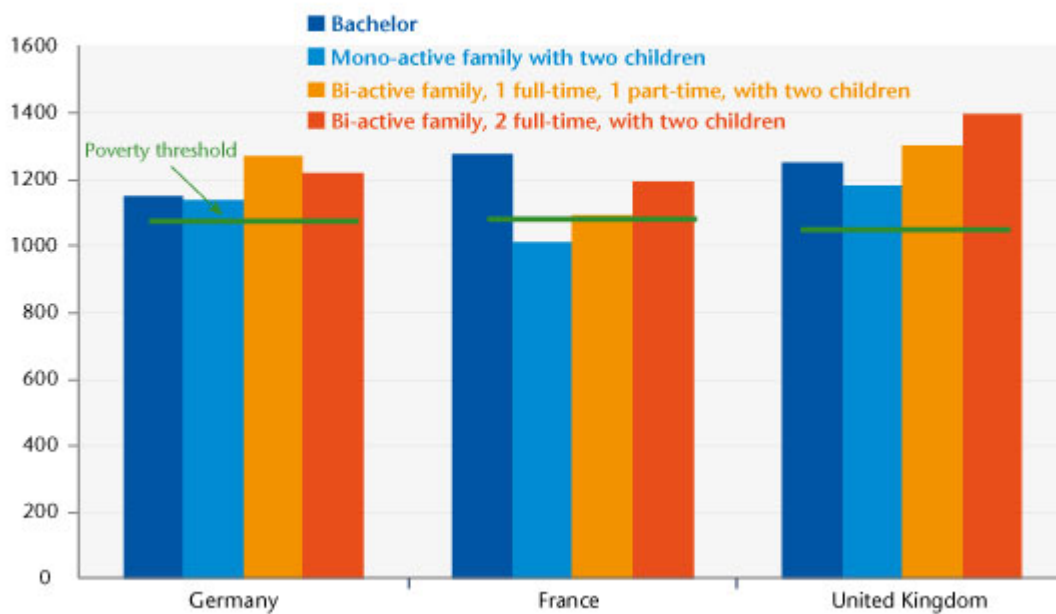
	Germany	France	United Kingdom
Hourly labour cost	10.84 €	10.68 €	9.26 €
Employer SC rate	22.7 %	9.4 %	5.54 %
Gross hourly wage	8.84 €	9.76 €	8.77 €
Employee SC rate	20.8 %	23.3 %*	4.82 %
Net hourly wage	7.01 €	7.49 €	8.35 €
Net wage / labour cost	64.7 %	70.1 %	90.2 %
Net hourly wage (PPA)	7.31 €	7.49 €	7.82 €

(SC = social charges).

Source: Authors' calculations.

With regard to disposable income, a comparison of different arrangements for working time and family situations highlights different logics in the three countries. In Germany, the underlying rationale is to protect families from poverty, regardless of the parents' working situation. In France, in contrast, a family with two children has to have two people working full-time at the SMIC to escape poverty, as the tax-benefit system seeks to encourage women's integration into the labour market. France is thus the only one of the three countries where a mono-active family with two children, one of whose parents works full-time at the minimum wage, falls below the monetary poverty line (Figure).

Figure. Living standard of a bachelor and of a couple with two children aged 7 and 9 (mono-active or bi-active), in current euros, per month, in April 2017



Source: Authors' calculations.

From the point of view of the relative position of minimum wage earners in relation to the general population, our study highlights the rather favourable situation of the United Kingdom. The living standard there is comparatively high: all the families considered in our typical cases have a standard of living above the poverty line, on the order of 30% higher for a family where both parents work full-time at the minimum wage. The gain from taking up a job is, as in France, high, while it is low in Germany in all the configurations.

Finally, our analysis is contributing to the debate about the establishment of a Europe-wide minimum wage. A policy to harmonize the minimum wage in Europe, as this is conceived by the European Federation of Trade Unions and supported by France, cannot be thought of solely in terms of labour income, but also needs to take into account the goals targeted in terms of living standards, especially for families.

The dilemmas of immaterial capitalism

By [Sarah Guillou](#)

A review of: Jonathan Haskel and Stian Westlake, *Capitalism Without Capital. The Rise of the Intangible Economy*, Princeton University Press, 2017, 288 pp.

This book is at the crossroads of the debate about the nature of current and future growth. The increasing role of intangible assets is indeed at the heart of questions about productivity gains, the jobs of tomorrow, rising inequality, corporate taxation and the source of future incomes.

This is not simply the umpteenth book on the new economy or on future technological breakthroughs, but more fundamentally a book on the rupture being made by modes of production that are less and less based on fixed, or material, capital and increasingly on intangible assets. The digressions on an immaterial society are not new; rather, the value of the book is that it gives this real economic content and synthesizes all the research showing the economic upheavals arising from the increasing role of this type of capital.

Jonathan Haskel and Stian Westlake describe the changes brought about by the growth in the share of immaterial assets in the 21st century economy, including in terms of the measurement of growth, the dynamics of inequality, and the ways in which companies are run, the economy is financed and public growth policies are set. While the authors do not set themselves the goal of building a new theory of value, they nevertheless provide evidence that it does need to be reconstructed. This is based in particular on the construction

of a database – INTAN-invest – as part of a programme financed by the European Commission and initiated by the American studies of Corrado, Hulten and Sichel (2005, 2009).

By immaterial assets is meant the immaterial elements of an economic activity that generate value over more than one period: a trademark, a patent, a copyright, a design, a mode of organization or production, a manufacturing process, a computer program or algorithm that creates information, but also a reputation or a marketing innovation, or even the quality and / or the specific features of staff training. These are assets that must positively increase a company's balance sheet; they can depreciate with time; and they result from the consumption of resources and therefore from immaterial or intangible investment. There is a broad consensus on the importance of these assets in explaining the prices of the goods and services we consume and in determining the non-price competitiveness of products. These assets are determining elements of "added value".

However, despite this consensus, the measurement of intangible assets is far from commensurate with their importance. Yet measuring assets improperly leads to many statistical distortions, with respect to: first, the measurement of growth – because investments increase GDP – second, the measurement of productivity – because capital and added value are poorly measured – and finally, to profits and perhaps also the distribution of added value if intangible capital is included in expenditure and not in investment. The authors show in particular that the increasing importance of intangible assets can explain the four arguments underpinning secular stagnation. First, the slowdown in productivity could be the result of an incorrect valuation of intangible added value. Furthermore, the gap between the profits of companies and their book value could be explained by an incomplete accounting of intangible assets that underestimates capital, in addition to the slowdown in investment despite very low

interest rates. Finally, the increase in the inequalities in productivity and profits between firms is the result of the characteristics of intangible assets, which polarize profits and are associated with significant returns to scale.

Awareness of the measurement problem is not recent. The authors recall the major events that brought the experts together to deal with the measurement of intangible assets. They cover up to the latest reform of the systems of national accounts that enriches the GFCF of R&D, including the SNA, 2008, in particular the writing of the *Frascati Manual* (1963, 2015), which lays the foundations for the accounting of R&D activity. But even today it is not possible to account for all intangible assets. This is due in part to the fact that there is still some reluctance in corporate accounting with respect to integrating intangible capital insofar as it has no market price. So while it is simple to book the purchase of a patent as an asset, it is much more difficult to value the development of an algorithm within a company or to give a value to the way it is organized or to innovative manufacturing processes, or to its internal training efforts. Only when something is traded on a market does it acquire an external value that can be recorded, unhesitatingly, on the asset side of the balance sheet.

Nevertheless, the challenge in measuring this is fundamental if we believe the rest of the book. Indeed, the increasing immateriality of capital has consequences for inequalities (Chapter 6), for institutions and infrastructure (Chapter 7), for financing the economy (Chapter 8), for private governance (Chapter 9) and for public governance (Chapter 10).

The stakes here are critical because of the specific characteristics of these immaterial assets, which are summarized in the “four S’s” (Chapter 2): “scalable, sunkedness, spillovers and synergies”. This means, first, that immaterial assets have the particularity of being able to be deployed on a large production scale without depreciating

("scalable"). Second, they are associated with irrecoverable expenses, that is, once the investment has been made it is difficult for the company to consider selling the asset on a secondary market, so there is no turning back ("sunkedness"). Next, these assets have "spillovers", or in other words, they spread beyond their owners. Finally, they combine easily by creating "synergies" that increase profitability.

These characteristics imply a modification of the functioning of capitalism, which we are all already witnessing: they give a premium to the winners, they exacerbate the differences between the holders of certain intangible assets and those who are engaged in more traditional activities, they polarize economic activity in large urban centres, and they overvalue the talents of managers capable of orchestrating synergies between immaterial assets. At the same time, the prevalence of these assets requires modified public policies. This concerns first, the protection of the property rights of these intangible assets, which are intellectual in nature and difficult to fully appropriate due to their volatility. Even though intellectual property rights have long been established, they now face two challenges: their universal character (many countries apply them only sparingly) and achieving a balance (they should not lead to creating complex barriers that render it impossible for new innovators to enter, while they should be sufficiently protective to allow the fruits of investments to be harvested). Moreover, spillover effects need to be promoted by ensuring a balance in the development of cities and the interactions between individuals, while also creating incentives to the financing of intangible investments. Bank financing, which is based on tangible guarantees, is not well suited to the new intangible economy, especially as it benefits from tax advantages by deducting interest from taxable income. It is therefore important to develop financing based on issuing shares and developing public co-financing. More generally, the public policy best suited to the intangible economy involves creating

certainty, stability and confidence, in order to deal with the intrinsic uncertainty of risky intangible investments.

What emerges from this reading is a clear awareness of the need to promote the development of investment in immaterial assets, but also a demonstration that the growing immateriality of capital is giving rise to forces driving inequality. This duality can prove problematic.

More specifically, three dilemmas are identified. The first concerns the way intangible investments are financed. The highly risky nature of intangible investments – because they are irrecoverable, collateral-free and with an uncertain return – calls for investors to take advantage of diversification and dispersal. And yet, as the authors show, what companies in this new economy need are investors who hold large, stable blocks of shares so as to be engaged in the company's project. The second dilemma concerns state support. It is justified because these have a social return that goes beyond their private return and, in the face of shortfalls in private financing, public financing is necessary. However, corporate taxation has not yet adapted to this new sources of wealth creation, and states face growing difficulties in raising taxes and identifying the taxable base. Furthermore, states are competing to attract businesses into the new economy through fiscal expenditures and subsidies. The third dilemma is undoubtedly the most fundamental. This involves the contradiction between inequalities, whether in the labour market (job polarization [\[1\]](#)), in the goods market (concentration) or geographically (geographical polarization), which are caused by the rise of intangible capital, on the one hand, and on the other hand the need for strong social cohesion, trustworthiness and human urban centres that provide favourable terrain for the development of the synergies and exchanges that nourish intangible assets. In other words, the inequalities created affect the social capital, which is detrimental to the future development of intangible assets.

It is in the resolution of these dilemmas that this new capitalism will be able to be in accord with our democracies.

[1] See Gregory Verdugo: [“The new labour inequalities. Why jobs are polarizing”](#), *OFCE blog*.

The 2018 European economy: A hymn to reform

By [Jérôme Creel](#)

The OFCE has just published the [2018 European Economy](#) [in French]. The book provides an assessment of the European Union (EU) following a period of sharp political tension but in an improving economic climate that should be conducive to reform, before the process of the UK's separation from the EU takes place.

Many economic and political issues crucial to better understanding the future of the EU are summarized in the book: the history of EU integration and the risks of disintegration; the recent improvement in its economic situation; the economic, political and financial stakes involved in Brexit; the state of labour mobility within the Union; its climate policy; the representativeness of European institutions; and the reform of EU economic governance, both budgetary and monetary.

The year 2018 is a pivotal year prior to the elections to the European Parliament in spring 2019, but also before the 20th

anniversary of the euro on 1 January 2019. The question of the euro's performance will be central. However, in 2018 gross domestic product will finally begin to increase at well above its pre-crisis level, thanks to renewed business investment and the support of monetary policy, henceforth unhindered by fiscal policy.

The year 2018 will also mark the beginning of negotiations on the future economic and financial relationship of the United Kingdom and the EU, after at end 2017 the two parties found common ground on arrangements for the UK leaving the Union. The EU's renewed growth will reduce the potential costs of the divorce with the British and could also lessen Europeans' interest in this issue.

Brexit could have served as a catalyst for reforming Europe; the fact that the mechanisms for this may now seem less crucial to the EU's future functioning should not take away from the reforms needed by the EU, as if these were superfluous. In the political and monetary fields, there is a great need to strengthen the democratic representativeness of EU institutions (parliament, central bank) and to ensure the euro's legitimacy. In the fields of fiscal and immigration policy, past experience has demonstrated the need for coordinated tools to better manage future economic and financial crises.

There is therefore an urgent need to revitalize a project that is over sixty years old, one that has managed to ensure peace and prosperity in Europe, but which lacks flexibility in the face of the unpredictable (crises), which lacks vigour in the face of the imperatives of the ecological transition, and which is singularly lacking in creativity to strengthen the convergences within it.