

Furåker, Bengt, Kristina Håkansson & Jan Ch. Karlsson, *Flexibility and Stability in Working Life*, Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007, 239 pp., £58, ISBN 978023001364

Do we need another book on flexibility? The editorial team of *Flexibility and Stability in Working Life* uses the already abundant (scholarly) literature on ‘flexibility’ as the starting point for the logic behind a Swedish-British endeavour *vis-à-vis* this concept, about which there is ‘something rotten’ (1). What Furåker et al. refer to are the many meanings of the term ‘flexibility’ and how it is (ab)used for ideological and value-laden discourses. This calls for clarification of ‘flexibility’; a call that is answered in two chapters, by Karlsson and Jonsson respectively, in the beginning of the book. Both authors, each in their own way, refuse to take a short cut to create some order in the ‘incongruous and confusing literature’ (1) surrounding the concept of flexibility. Karlsson’s attempt to clarify ‘flexibility’ centres on the assumption that it is something desired by management, which, given the ample discussion of management literature in this chapter should not come as a surprise. The consequences of this employer desire can either be good or bad for workers. Karlsson goes back a quarter of a century to start his argument that flexibility is good for both employers and employees, to Piore and Sabel’s (1984) ‘flexible specialization’, which has proven valuable in policy prescriptions, but less so as an empirical description. Karlsson finds no evidence in the literature of flexibility that is ‘bad’ for employers. This makes sense if indeed we think of flexibility as something desired (exclusively) by employers. The chapter concludes with a current policy prescription, called ‘flexicurity’. This term, introduced to the broader research community by Wilthagen and Tros (2004), implies the simultaneous realisation of desired levels of both flexibility and security. Here, again, flexibility is tied to employers, whereas workers seek security. Jonsson’s chapter continues where Karlsson’s stops: ‘flexibility’ is juxtaposed to ‘stability’, creating a new need for clarification. The reader is left with the question of how ‘stability’, defined as ‘desired invariability’ (34) differs from ‘rigidity’ and ‘security’. The strength of this chapter lies in the fact that the author introduces and describes ‘flexibility’ as a worker desire.

The empirical focus of this book is on Sweden and the United Kingdom, which are seen as ‘opposites when it comes to flexibility and stability in working life.’ In their contributions Pollert and Engstrand describe how the concept of flexibility is treated and transformed in the socio-political arenas in the United Kingdom and Sweden respectively. Both contributions share the conclusion that markets produce flexibility and that it is up to governments to remedy the problems that flexibility poses to individual employees. Ackroyd’s analysis of the UK situation

sketches a dim picture with regard to the extent to which the British government can be expected to play an active role in addressing worker needs evolving from increased flexibility.

While flexibility is demanded by employers it has to be provided by workers. In their respective chapters, Berglund and Furåker both focus on Swedish workers and their willingness to leave their current employer. Berglund finds that nearly half of all Swedish workers have thoughts of changing their workplaces, but that nine out of ten highly value their job security. Furåker's study shows that permanent employees would lower their wage in order to keep their jobs. Both chapters suggest that Swedish firms are not likely to find flexibility among the well-protected core. Instead, as Håkansson and Isidorsson also illustrate in their contribution, firms turn to the periphery of workers on temporary contracts as well as those working through temporary agencies. In what could be seen as an attempt to jeopardise the quest for a clear understanding of the meaning of flexibility, Håkansson and Isidorsson suggest that at the end of the day flexible staffing arrangements serve to meet an employer's need for stability.

The mix of contributions potentially offers a deep analysis of the concepts of flexibility and stability. Flexibility is applied on individual firms and their employees, on work systems and on labour markets. The employment contract can be flexible, working time can be flexible, tasks can be flexible, pay can be flexible and workplaces can be flexible, as this volume illustrates. This book undeniably has interesting conceptual chapters as well as rich empirical sections. It would, however, have benefited the reader if the Swedish-British comparison had been carried out more consistently throughout the book. Ideally this could have resulted in a concluding chapter interpreting the findings of such a comparison, thus possibly confirming the need for combining the two countries in one volume. Furthermore, the broad empirical approach raises the question how the conceptual clarification called for by the editors translates in practice. This volume does convincingly make the case *why* the concept of flexibility needs to be reclaimed. The sequel to this book could tell us *how* this should be done. There will thus be at least one more book on flexibility.

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