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Ruud Muffels (Ed.): Flexibility and Employment Security in Europe. Labour Markets in Transition

Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2008. 407 pp.

This volume brings together a selection of papers that were written within the context of a project funded by

an EU Network. The core questions raised and discussed by the book are: (i) can high levels of labour market and social integration be combined with high levels of labour market flexibility? and (ii) what role do institutions and policies play in shaping the nexus between flexibility and employment security? In the introductory chapter, addressing the first question, the editor, Ruud Muffels, offers two competing views on the relationship between labour market flexibility and employment security. On the one hand, there is the 'trade-off' thesis, stating that higher levels of flexibility lead to lower levels of employment security, making the options 'higher flexibility' and 'higher employment security' parts of a zero-sum game. From this view, the increased flexibility needs of European labour markets have been met by introducing or expanding non-standard employment relations, such as temporary work and part-time employment, which have lowered employment and income security for the workers employed in these kinds of working arrangements. On the other hand, there is the 'flexicurity' thesis, according to which flexibility and security do not necessarily represent mutually exclusive goals. Rather, in this perspective, it is assumed that flexibility can be increased without lowering the levels of employment and income security. An important issue for both of these viewpoints is the second core question of the book, which concerns the impact of institutions and policies on the nexus between flexibility and security. Here, the various chapters provide a rather incoherent approach: while some of them refer to welfare regimes (and use Esping-Andersen's typology), others either examine differences between a number of countries without referring to any typology, or they present evidence for single countries. As a result of this mixed approach, the book is unable to provide a solid answer to the second question. Though some conclusions are drawn at the end, the volume as a whole would certainly have benefitted from providing more well-matched analyses within a coherent theoretical and methodological framework regarding the influence institutional settings exert on the flexibility–security relationship.

The book is divided into three major parts. Part I deals with labour market mobility and in-work transitions; Part II presents results on the career effects of non-standard employment relations and unemployment, respectively; while Part III is concerned with best policy practices.

Immediately following Chapter 1 (which is in fact the introductory chapter for the book as a whole, and is thus somewhat inauspiciously placed as the first

chapter of Part I), Chapter 2 by Jean-Claude Barbier discusses the notion of employment precariousness. Barbier shows that the use of this term is doomed to lead to confusion in international comparative research. Moreover, he argues that ‘inadequate statistical indicators like “temporary employment” or other proxies such as part-time jobs are bound to display decisive shortcomings’ (44), since these categories are rather heterogeneous and their meaning partly depends on national context. Against this background, he suggests that cross-national research take into account the dimension of ‘job quality’, although it remains vague just what, exactly, ‘job quality’ refers to. However, as the following chapters do not take up these ideas, this chapter turns out to be somewhat isolated from the rest of the book. Chapter 3 by Annelies Debels and Chapter 4 by Virginia Hernanz, Federica Origo, Manuela Samek Lodovici, and Luis Toharia present evidence on transition patterns of temporary workers in 11 European countries (Chapter 3) and in Italy and Spain (Chapter 4), respectively. Both studies show that temporary employment bears substantial socio-economic risks when compared to the alternative state of ‘permanent employment’, but that it might be less disadvantageous when contrasted with the alternative of ‘unemployment’. Furthermore, the effects of temporary employment vary with institutional context. Though not directly tested, the study by Debels suggests that the variation across institutional settings is only partly captured by Esping-Andersen’s typology. At the end of Part I, a study by Mieke Booghmans, Seppe van Gils, and Caroline Vermandere provides descriptive results on mobility patterns in Belgium, using administrative data. In particular, the study explores transitions of full-time workers as well as transitions of unemployed persons. The authors point out that in the Belgian labour market the ‘transition’ pattern of staying in full-time employment is still dominant, though—not surprisingly—this applies more to men than to women. At the same time, the unemployed have difficulties in finding (long-term) employment. These results suggest that the Belgian labour market is characterized by a high degree of insider–outsider segmentation.

In Part II, ‘scarring’ effects of unemployment and non-standard employment are investigated. This part begins with a study by Ruud Muffels and Ruud Luijkx on the relation between male labour market mobility (being a proxy for flexibility) and employment and income security. Using dynamic indicators for both security dimensions, their results show that the combination of high levels of labour market mobility and high levels of employment, as well as income

security (i.e. high levels of flexicurity), can be found in Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, and, to a lesser extent, in Denmark. At the same time, the findings reveal that for countries like Ireland, Portugal, Spain, and the UK high levels of flexibility come at the price of less income security. Given these results, the authors’ conclusion that ‘particularly the Anglo-Saxon and Nordic countries appear quite successful...in maintaining the precious balance between economic and social goals’ (162–163), seems to be only weakly supported by the data. In the following chapter, Markus Gangl provides empirical evidence on the scar effects of unemployment. In order to do so, he compares the impact that unemployment has on workers’ subsequent employment and earning chances in the US and in 12 European countries. After estimating the scar effects for each of the observed countries, Gangl investigates the relationship between these effects and (i) a country’s level of employment protection, as well as (ii) the generosity of a country’s unemployment insurance system. Based on his results, he concludes that these two institutions shape the career effects of unemployment in such a way that higher levels of employment protection, as well as a more generous unemployment insurance system, mitigate the negative career effects of unemployment. However, it turns out that these mitigating effects are drastically reduced if there is a combination of high levels of employment protection and a generous unemployment insurance system.

In Chapter 8, Nigel Meager presents results on scar effects of self-employment for the UK labour market. His results suggest that spells of self-employment are related to lower income chances, not so much in the short term but in the long term. However, due to the lack of a comparative perspective, it remains unclear whether or not these effects are present in other European labour markets as well. In the following chapter, Didier Fourage and Ruud Muffels look at the career effects of part-time employment and childbirth, respectively. Most of their analyses are restricted to female workers. The results indicate that women working part-time are likely to stay in part-time employment instead of moving to full-time jobs. At the same time, they face higher risks of experiencing transitions into non-employment. With respect to the effects of childbirth, Fourage and Muffels show that, after childbirth, women throughout Europe reduce the amount of time spent working. Moreover, for women, childbirth is associated with lower future income levels. For both of these effects, there is substantial variation across countries. Although Fourage and Muffels do not address this question directly, these variations do not

seem to be captured by classical typologies of welfare regime types. Part II ends with Chapter 10 by Govert Bijwaard, Bram van Dijk, and Jaap de Koning, who investigate the relationship between working time preferences, labour market transitions and job satisfaction in the Netherlands. Since this study does not address the issue of scar effects or the impact of institutions, its relevance for the central questions posed by Part II of the book remains somewhat unclear.

The third and final part of the volume, which consists of three chapters, is about 'best policy practices'. It starts with a chapter on Australia (written by Stephen Ziguras and Peter Sticker), showing that the Australian labour market is characterized by a high degree of flexibility but rather low levels of employment security. The following chapter by Axel van den Berg, Claus-H. von Restorff, Daniel Parent, and Anthony C. Masi provides a detailed overview of Canada's employment security reform. The authors show that the reform turns out to be rather 'path dependent', since it has not substantially changed Canada's traditional Anglo-Saxon way of combining high rates of labour market flexibility and low levels of employment security. While the first two chapters of Part III can thus be read as presenting counter-examples for best policy practices, the last chapter on the Danish model of flexicurity offers some insights into the 'golden triangle' of a flexible labour market, a generous welfare system, and active labour market policy. However, as the author (Per Kongshøj Madsen) points out, this model of flexicurity was developed in the course of a long historical process and presents an example 'of the Danish version of the negotiated economy' (360). Therefore, it should not be seen as a scheme that is easily transferable to other countries.

The book concludes with a chapter summarizing the major findings of the previous chapters, which are partly connected to results of other studies. One of the main conclusions is that, unsurprisingly, institutional

settings have an impact on the nexus between labour market flexibility and employment security. In particular, the strictness of employment protection legislation as well as the structure of the welfare system are seen as key elements shaping this nexus. However, since the editor has ended up compiling a fairly heterogeneous set of studies, this conclusion is left with much less empirical support than claimed, and certainly less than it could have had, if the book had been based on a more compelling analytical and empirical framework. For example, the only studies that really test hypotheses on the impact of institutions are those by Muffels, Luijkx, and Gangl, both of which are slightly modified versions of journal articles published by the same authors in 2008 and 2006, respectively. Moreover, the relatively clear conclusion drawn by the editor is not fully justified by the somewhat less clear or even contradictory results of the preceding empirical chapters.

As such, the book offers a collection of good papers by sociologists and economists, dealing with a variety of topics. But this heterogeneity, which is presumably the result of the not altogether unreasonable idea of bringing together the output of the scientific network, comes at a price. The individual chapters appear to be only loosely inter-connected, in terms of both the theoretical and the empirical background. One very obvious indication of this is the lack of a clear rationale for assigning certain papers to the specific parts of the book.

Johannes Giesecke

Social Science Research Center Berlin (Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung, WZB)
johannes.giesecke@wzb.eu

DOI:10.1093/esr/jcp059, available online at www.esr.oxfordjournals.org

Online publication 9 December 2009