

## Liberty, Security, Flexibility

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**Sociologist Bénédicte Zimmermann’s empirical studies of employer groups and participative management reveals how the tension that exists between the individual and the collective is being reshaped in today’s flexible organizations. “Flexicurity” is not a mere word. And freedom at work is not just a matter of autonomy.**

**Reviewed:** Bénédicte Zimmermann, *Ce que travailler veut dire. Sociologie des capacités et des parcours professionnels*, Paris, Economica, coll. Études sociologiques, 2011, 233 p.

If the pediment of modern-day companies had to be decorated with a single motto, like that of town halls, what would it be? After reading Bénédicte Zimmermann’s book, one might well consider the phrase “liberty, security, flexibility” to be a strong candidate. Like its republican cousin, it outlines an ideal (seldom achieved) by immediately raising the question of the interaction between its three terms: how can these be held together? Can the development of one be given priority to the detriment of that of the other two? Under which criteria? And with what repercussions? Bénédicte Zimmermann sets out to analyse precisely that “complex equation” (p. 209), inviting us to “rethink the relationships between work and politics, both inside and outside the company” (p. 212). From this perspective, the company constitutes the preferred level of analysis, but the invitation to monitor these relationships *inside* the company is swiftly followed by a caveat: entering it does not mean becoming locked in. Where the sociology of work has, since the 1990s, lifted French sociology of work out of the company in order to situate it in the area of job markets in particular, the author willingly pushes *work* and *company* into the spotlight.<sup>1</sup> However, in her eyes, understanding “what working means” necessarily requires focusing on the interaction between the sphere of

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that B. Zimmermann has contributed to the development of the sociology of employment through her numerous books on “the constitution of unemployment in Germany” (Zimmermann, 2001).

work and the other spheres of social life, one's private life and family life above all—on this point she echoes many of the recent studies on atypical forms of employment, working schedules and relationships between gender and work. The point of her approach is to apply this twofold precept to the study of a subject—flexibility—that is all too often considered upstream of employment (in terms of employment policies and job markets) or else downstream (through its impacts, chiefly negative, on people's personal life).<sup>2</sup>

### **Giving expression to “the experience of flexible work”**

In this context, the recurrence of discourse on the need for flexibility in contemporary productive organizations and the job security that should come with it form the starting point for Bénédicte Zimmermann's reflection. She observes its deployment both in the sphere of public action and in that of managerial positions or trade union demands.<sup>3</sup> For the author, it is less a question of breaking *a priori* with this discourse than about taking it seriously, in order to subject it to the test of the reality of the workplace, where men and women experience it on a daily basis. The aim of the book is to investigate “the experience of flexible work”, proposing a sociology of flexibility that cannot be reduced to the socio-economics of flexible employment or to a sociology of precariousness.

Her analysis is based on two series of surveys conducted between 2002 and 2006. These make up the two parts of the work, which contain a general introduction and a brief but enlightening conclusion. These two series, each of which stands alone and is presented individually, are nonetheless part of the same reflection (on careers) and the same approach (discourse-focused).

The study of professional careers represents the book's unifying thread. The interest of this analysis lies firstly in its critical and theoretical examination of the notion. It aims to make good its “deficit of sociological conceptualization” (p. 82) by comparison with the more fully developed notions of “trajectory” or “career.” In parallel, it remains faithful to the empirical roots to which it lays claim, by reconstructing the career paths of several of the employees surveyed (chapters 4 and 9 in particular). A socio-historical analysis aiming to

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<sup>2</sup> “Internal” flexibility was certainly the subject of a great many studies in the 1990s and 2000s, but this was mostly carried out through analyses of work organization and the flexibilization of time rules, in the context of policies aimed at reducing and relaxing working hours (annualization, modulation).

<sup>3</sup> As her aim is not, in fact, to analyse that deployment, the author sometimes tends to homogenize a discourse that nevertheless shows variants and perceptible changes from one sphere to the other, and also within the same sphere, as shown by the case of the trade union world (Grimault, 2008).

trace the origin and circulation of the notion in the order of institutional and public discourses therefore usefully completes this “sociology of professional careers,” in order to show how the “career path” has become, as the author herself underlines, “the paragon of reforms in social policies and employment” (p. 82).

In terms of method, the study of career paths is reflected in the privileged use of biographical interviews and sociological portraits. In this sense, Bénédicte Zimmermann puts forward a sociology of flexibility in acts but also, even more so, in words: she places the discourse of employees at the heart of the book. This focus does not, of course, exclude other sources, starting with the words of employers and human resources directors, who are surveyed in both areas. In that respect, although Ms. Zimmermann’s work and another recent book by Alexandra Bidet (2011) on commitment at work share a number of lines of questioning (on the activity of work, its purposes and the meaning given to it by workers), as well as theoretical references (to J. Dewey for the most part, and more broadly to the pragmatic tradition), they differ in their understanding of this “experience of work:” where the former primarily has recourse to biographical discourses (which are, it must be stressed, systematically compared with an analysis of institutional and organisational contexts), the latter gives more room to gesture, in the context of a strict ethnography.

Careers and discourses therefore bring the two parts of the book together. A third common point might have been found in the theoretical framework borrowed by the author, whose “sociology of professional careers” purports to be a “sociology of capability” as well. However, the author’s use of Amartya Sen’s work is more evident in the second part than the first, where it is only given a brief mention. From that point of view, the unprepared reader will no doubt regret the fact that the author, who has in-depth knowledge of the work of the 1998 Economic Sciences Nobel laureate (De Munck, Zimmermann, 2008), does not make a more explicit analysis of the originality and limitations of a capability approach in this book.<sup>4</sup>

The reader will, on the other hand, welcome the fact that the original experiences analysed in both parts of the book specifically reveal the conditions and methods required for operationalizing “flexicurity” policies, thereby refuting, or at least qualifying, the common

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<sup>4</sup> The book is based on work and analysis carried out by the author in the context of two European research programmes (Eurocap and Capright). Following the tradition of Amartya Sens, these focus on the promotion of individual and collective capabilities in the spheres of labour markets, employment and welfare regimes.

idea that these policies struggle to free themselves from mere theoretical debate and move beyond the borders of the Nordic countries where they originated.

### **The employment world through the prism of “increased work”**

The lively analysis put forward by Bénédicte Zimmermann in the first part of the book guides the reader through the little-known world of employer groups, those particular institutional structures in which employers form associations in order to employ workers under a permanent contract; these then become employees of the group and are required to share their working time among several companies that belong to the association. Two patterns of “shared time” are outlined: the least qualified workers alternate their activity by *season*; the most qualified divide their working *week* into different activities in order to respond to the expertise needed by companies that are unable to provide the workers with full-time employment. In both cases, the terms of the job-share are established at the start of the year, thereby offering the salaried workers the predictability and security that temporary work or back-to-back temporary contracts do not. The aim of establishing employer groups (although the system remains limited) was precisely to strike a new balance between job security for the worker and flexibility for the company.<sup>5</sup> There may, however, be a significant gap between that aim and people’s actual experiences, as Bénédicte Zimmermann shows over the course of the five chapters that make up the first part.

The reason for this stems firstly from the varying interpretations that are made of the resulting flexibility by the directors of employer groups and the employees who belong to them. The sharp contrast that arises from a comparison between the orientations of the two employer groups studied (an approach based on professional development for companies *and* workers in one case, and on territorial expansion favouring companies in the other) and a lexical analysis of employers’ discourse (chapter 2) demonstrate this well. However, it is also due to the fact that shared time equals “increased work,” an expression the author uses rightly to point out that multiplying one’s activity (usually twofold or threefold) often means increasing one’s places of work, responsibilities, colleagues, even stress, in such a way that this kind of measure has far more implications for the workers involved than merely managing their work schedule: they have varying levels of success when it comes to taking

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<sup>5</sup> B. Zimmermann states that in 2006, the French Federation of Employer Groups estimated the number of groups at 400, outside of agriculture and employment integration, totalling only around 8000 workers.

advantage of the opportunities for professional and personal development that are offered by this type of scheme.

This initial excursion into “flexible terrain” gives Bénédicte Zimmermann a chance to make a welcome detour to reflect on key ideas such as “experience” (chapter 3) and “career” (chapter 5). The scope of her work therefore goes beyond the atypical case of employer groups and will interest any reader seeking to understand the world of work. As the pages go on, employer groups begin to appear as if they were an enormous prism magnifying the tensions that affect the world of work: they force a delinking between work and employment, which, with particular acuteness, raises cross-disciplinary questions on career-building, the link between professional and family life, and even gender inequality.

### **“Human policy:” investigations and surveys**

The surveys carried out by Bénédicte Zimmermann in almost 11 companies in the Pays de la Loire and Île de France regions, in collaboration with Delphine Corteel, form the framework of the second part of the book. By examining human resources policies, professional training programmes and, more broadly, the organization and working conditions of those companies, the sociologist goes in search of a “human policy,” which she believes is not deployed in nearly enough companies. Endeavouring to identify and understand professional career paths, she focuses on two key stages: recruitment and mobility (mainly internal), paying particularly close attention to the “changes in direction and breakdowns” that reveal the “choices” that employees are able or unable to make (Bessin, Bidart, Grossetti, 2010). The notion of choice occupies a key position in the line of argument in this second part, introducing the notion of freedom into the heart of the tension that exists between flexibility and security at work. Just because it refers to “people’s control over their destiny” (p. 203), freedom does not merely consist of the issue of autonomy, with which sociologists of work are more familiar; rather, it questions employees’ ability to define the means *and* the end of their “professional development,” another key term here, by observing the opportunities that present themselves and the choices those workers make.

Bénédicte Zimmermann then devotes three out of the five chapters in this part to the French website of a Swedish company that assembles heavy goods vehicles, the only one in the sample to come close to this ideal, where the management does not consider the employees as mere “human capital” but actually invests in their “human development.”

Following in the tradition of research carried out in the economics of convention, she highlights the intricate link between quality of work, product and worker, which guarantees the latter's good reputation throughout the entire labour pool. By combining empirical research, theoretical reflection and critical discussion (for this exemplary case also has its downside), this monograph also provides an opportunity to make a stimulating analysis of the conditions of possibility and success of the participative management model put forward by the company. Here, it echoes the contemporary debates that, at international level, drive the field of analysis of professional relations and trade unionism, identifying the challenges that human resources practices and participative management in particular present for employees and their representatives (Bamber, Lansbury, Wailes, 2010). The author is, however, a little quick to combine the deliberative and cognitive dimensions with the practices of participative management alone, in order to pit them against trade union action and collective negotiation. It largely ignores the role of other representative staff bodies, starting with the workers' committee, with which a comparison would no doubt have been more suitable for confronting and fully assessing the "empowering" effect of these respective practices (Didry, 2008).

However, this measured analysis of participative management and its effects, as well as the investigation the author carries out in the first part of the book into the differential construction of the professional careers in employer groups, results in a fundamental, cross-disciplinary reflection on the way in which the tension between the individual and the collective is being reshaped in today's flexible organizations. In contrast with the discourses and practices that promote solely the individualization of careers, responsibility and performance, in the guise of an entrepreneurial rhetoric that usually ignores the collective dimension of any entrepreneurial activity (Zalio, 2009), Bénédicte Zimmermann sees inclusion in collectives, which remain partly to be reinvented, as the key to solving the initial equation that brings together liberty, security and flexibility.

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**Further reading:**

Capright European research programme : <http://www.capright.eu/>

Human Development and Capability Association (association established by A. Sen in 2004):  
<http://www.capabilityapproach.com/>

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