

## The quality of work in Europe

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**The collective work edited by Duncan Gallie addresses a key issue: can the quality of employment be compared at international level? The authors narrow employment quality down to five dimensions, bringing the quantitative tools available in Europe to bear.**

Reviewed: Duncan Gallie (ed.), *Employment Regimes and the Quality of Work*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007.

Sociologist Duncan Gallie, who needs no introduction in France, has invited eight of his colleagues hailing from other European countries (Denmark, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Austria, Sweden) to engage on a comparison of “the quality of work and employment”, zooming in on five countries that epitomise the internal diversity of the European Union (Denmark, France, United Kingdom, Germany and Spain); other countries, e.g. Sweden, come and go in a random way. In his introduction, Duncan Gallie explains to his readers the purpose of the work: the object was not only to compare the given countries in terms of their employment and work practices but also to measure the validity, as to the range of such qualities, of the classical explanations for ranking countries according to types: “welfare regimes” (as in *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*) behind Gosta Esping-Andersen; or “production regimes”, in the footsteps of Peter Hall and David Soskice, who have differentiated between coordinated and liberal market economies. Duncan Gallie confronts these two main approaches with the “universalist” theories’ perspective, which he dates back to the “industrialist” studies, from the sixties (Kerr and Dunlop) to the eighties (with Doeringer and Piore’s segmentation theories). It is a measure of the leanings of the book

towards the quality of work rather than that of employment that Duncan Gallie does not take into consideration “corresponding” authors on the social protection front (such as Harold Wilensky).

We have specified in our French translation “quality of work and employment” because it seems that the dimensions the authors study pertain to both. This question has yet to be clarified in international comparison and if the debate on “flexicurity” has awkwardly attempted to grapple with it, as did the analyses impelled by the European Commission towards the end of 2001 – and today relatively marginalized – the diverse traditions of this or that country have continued to play a major part. It is therefore much to the credit of the authors that they have aimed to bring together the two “facets” of “work”, understood as an entity opposed to capital (or as a factor of production in economy), no mean task. Quality of work in the title effectively takes in five dimensions: work tasks, skill development, training, contractual statuses, the dovetailing of work with family life. A chapter is dedicated to each of these dimensions: the constraints on the present review will unfortunately not allow us to do justice to all the chapters and we shall focus essentially on two dimensions, those of work content and contractual status, before concluding on the broader lessons concerning international comparison and the interest there is in using the notion of quality of employment and work.

### **Job insecurity**

The employment statutes dimension is treated from the angle of “job insecurity”, often known in France as “*précarité de l’emploi*”, a term which does not, unlike insecurity, have universal European currency. On this point, Serge Paugam and Ying Zhou decided to work not on the basis of the commonly used indicators (such as, for example, the length of employment – tenure, or the amount of “temporary work”<sup>1</sup>) but rather by pondering the perception of insecurity as measured in two Eurobarometer surveys (in 1996 and 2001<sup>2</sup>). According to this measure, job insecurity is on the whole higher than in the post-war decades. But it is in the countries where social differences are the smallest that the feeling of insecurity is the weakest, i.e. Sweden and Denmark. However, although the authors find everywhere a correlation between work insecurity and poor quality of work (in terms of qualifications,

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<sup>1</sup> The indicator for so called “temporary” work which in fact encompasses all the employment statutes bereft of open-ended contracts is particularly inadequate – more conspicuously so in an international comparison. This indicator remains in very broad use and this without any critical distance.

<sup>2</sup> On the basis of a questionnaire devised by Serge Paugam and Duncan Gallie.

access to training, initiative / autonomy at work and possibility to “conciliate” work and home), the Scandinavian countries buck the trend as their working population are better “integrated”. Beyond this, they do not detect, across borders, any systematic links between any identifiable employee attribute and employment or job insecurity. The authors have developed a typology of “patterns of employment integration” starting from two dimensions, which are, of course, consistent with Duncan Gallie’s general definition as given in his introduction: on the one hand, job security; and on the other, work content, an approach which echoes that used by Serge Paugam in his research published in *Le Salarié de la précarité* in 2002<sup>3</sup>. According to this typology, the differences between France, the UK and Germany appear relatively small but Denmark and the Scandinavian countries in general are exceptional in view of their “inclusive” vocational integration system. Thus the explanation in terms of welfare regimes or of types of capitalism, or even the universalist explanation do not stand up to the test – the Scandinavian family excepted.

### **Vocational training and quality of work**

The chapters treating of work content have been written by Duncan Gallie (one specific chapter and a large part of the introduction – dealing with the literature from a historical standpoint are dedicated to this). Here, the author takes up the industrial sociology concept of “task discretion” (latching on to concepts of “autonomy at work”<sup>4</sup>) and its bearings, as explored in this literature, on self-development and both physical and mental health. To track down the end effects of welfare regimes or of models of capitalism, Duncan Gallie musters a broad range of data: the first are comparative and owed to the Dublin Foundation, the second, from national surveys, are disparate but much more detailed. In addition, he takes into account some institutional data regarding the proportion of unionised employees, the policies addressing working conditions, the industrial relations systems, etc. This very varied set of data cannot be discussed in detail here but it leads the author to qualify his conclusions. He dismisses the idea according to which differences in economic structures would explain variations in the level of initiative employees enjoy at work. These variations should rather, according to him, be correlated with institutional dimensions: e.g. the unionisation rate and better bargaining and working conditions in Sweden. But the close analysis shows that it is not possible to get the objectification of work quality from that angle

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<sup>3</sup> Serge Paugam, *Le Salarié de la précarité*, Paris, PUF, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Not to be confused with the notion under consideration in Gilbert de Terssac, *Autonomie dans le travail* (1992). The author associates “task discretion” with Karasek’s approaches on stress level in relation to “discretionary decision-making”.

to match narrowly this or that model of capitalism. The case of Germany is enlightening in this respect. There, the author observes both the deterioration of the quality of work for atypical workers and the relative homogeneity of the professions and social categories; it must be noted that these measurements were taken before the Hartz reforms at the turn of the century.

All in all, Duncan Gallie arrives at the conclusion that the most discriminating risk factor for polarisation among socio-professional groups<sup>5</sup> is the vocational training system at its interface with the original training system: in the countries where the acquisition of technical skills depends least on the employers, the employees are in a better position to preserve the discretionary decision-making scope of their jobs. However, all in all, European diversity will not be summarised by classification under either the production or social protection regime type: national diversity prevails<sup>6</sup>.

### **Pitfalls in approaching diversity**

In conclusion to an article too cursory for such an interesting work, it seems worth stressing two comparative issues. The first concerns the authors' option to use the concept of job quality, interpreted here as quality of work and employment. This option seems consistent with the diversity of the dimensions under review and it proves relatively robust within the objective the work aimed at: measuring the very diversified facets of current work and working conditions in Europe. The concept, through its breadth and its synthetic nature, proves much better suited to the task than that, hitherto classic in the Latin countries, of precarious work and employment – for all that it spread at the turn of this century into Germany, and most particularly for “atypical” workers whose specific fate in that country is recorded by Gallie. The second contribution the study brings to comparison exposes the limits pertaining to comparative analysis exclusively centred – as often happens with economics research – on quantitative indicators drawn from statistical surveys. Time and again, a chapter brings out the fragility and the flimsiness of these data, frequently wanting for consistency or an adequate number of suitably representative observations. At the same time, in his very clear and synthetic conclusion, Duncan Gallie sets very clearly the limits of thinking in terms of country “families” which seems to have gained the upper hand nearly everywhere in

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<sup>5</sup> The author refers to “class” when measuring potential polarisation concerning the quality of work between on the one hand the professions and the managers, and on the other hand the semi-skilled and unskilled.

<sup>6</sup> In this respect, it is worth mentioning in passing that the author gives, in our opinion, too great an importance to the Auroux laws in the French case.

comparisons. For one thing, he shows, only the Scandinavian family remains fairly homogenous under scrutiny which, even then, must not conceal the important differences noted here between Denmark and Sweden. What is more, Duncan Gallie tells us, analysis in terms of societal coherence must not be overlooked, which allows for the differentiation of national arrangements, as Marc Maurice, Jean-Jacques Sylvestre and François Sellier had shown more than 25 years ago by comparing France and Germany, also from the angle of their vocational education and training system. The two approaches complement each other, Duncan Gallie insists with engaging conviction in the last of his concluding sentences.

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