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Masked staffing in the Swedish building sector

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The organisation of work in the Swedish building sector is changing due to increased subcontracting and the adoption of construction management (Harris & McCaffer, 2013). In this paper construction management refers to a specific subcontracting regime in which contractors externalise all parts of the production process and organise work through subcontractors. Echoing global trends of cost-cutting, the externalisation between Swedish contractors and subcontractors attempts to achieve organisational flexibility by reducing the number of directly employed craftspersons. Such trends have accelerated in the past two decades as a result of the expansion of the EU-single market and the inclusion of new member states from mainly Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) in 2004 and 2007.

This paper builds on theories of the sociology of work and organisation and sets out to analyse the current subcontracting regime of construction management from a labour process perspective (e.g. Thompson & Smith, 2010). Based on a case study research design with interviews and visits to construction sites, the organisation of work in two building companies is analysed with the aim to explore manifestations of organisational change visible through dis-integrated organisational structures contingent on subcontracting. The analysis shows that contractors and subcontractors engage in a variety of contractual agreements structured around a balancing of price, quality, and trustworthiness, but that the access to cheap labour in the EU-labour market incentivises firms to engage in contractual agreements based on price to a further extent than previously. A key finding is the use of *masked staffing* in the organisation of work. Masked staffing is a novel and previously not conceptualised form of subcontracting, which elaborates how subcontracting arrangements reliant on external business relations with trade-specialists builds on principles of *staffing* rather than those of actual subcontracting. Rather than the externalisation of the managerial control over labour, which is the case in different forms of subcontracting, control of the labour process in masked staffing remains directly with the general contractor. Consequently I show that rather than subcontractors, firms contracted on principles of masked staffing acts simply as unauthorised staffing agencies involved in the brokering of (cheap) labour.

Hence, access to cheap labour in the EU-labour market, together with processes of industrialisation and volatilities in product markets, motivates Swedish building companies to externalise work. Since all forms of subcontracting involve uncertainties and risks, and thereby relies also on the trustworthiness of the respective subcontractor's work organisation, I show how subcontracting arrangements are tied to one of three social control mechanisms: Opportunity control, incentive control or benevolence. As contractors and subcontractors renegotiate the trade-off between objectives of quality and profit, subcontractors' trustworthiness becomes secondary to price, and in turn stimulates subcontracting even further.

The paper shows how the current subcontracting regime of construction management restructures the organisation of work in the Swedish building sector. Such restructuring is indicative of the plethora of possibilities for contractors and subcontractors to shift both costs and responsibilities, and it reveals also tensions and contradictions in the labour process, including the changing character of construction work.

Harris, F., & McCaffer, R. (2013). *Modern construction management*: John Wiley & Sons.

Thompson, P., & Smith, C. (2010). *Working life: renewing labour process analysis*. Palgrave Macmillan.