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This book examines the inequalities in the Swedish labour market by illustrating ethnic and gender structures through the example of one Swedish work place; a real estate company in Sweden. The authors Kristina Boréus and Ulf Mörkenstam are researchers affiliated to the Department of Political science at Stockholm University. Through the example of the real estate company, they point to a range of organizational ‘wires’ that together could be a way to understand differences in salaries and segregated divisions of labour between women and men and between immigrated and Swedish-born employees in the Swedish society. They argue that if we do not consider the everyday practices of inequality, there is a tendency that the differences in salary and position become a question of the employees’ degree of ‘employability’, but if we instead look at the work place as a bird cage we can also observe what hinders their social mobility.

As this book is written in Swedish, I would like to start with explaining the title, which is related to the metaphor of the bird cage that was first discussed by Marilyn Frye in her book The Politics and Reality: essays in feminist theory from 1983. The title of the book reviewed here is Spjälorna i buren, which translates to: The Wires of the Cage. Originally, Frye used the metaphor of the bird cage as a way to see the underlying power dimensions in a certain context. The authors argue that if we look too closely at just one wire in the cage, we cannot see the other wires, which might imply that we will miss the reason why a bird do not just fly around the wire any time it desires to but is instead locked into the cage. They also argue that even if you inspect each wire, you could still not see why a bird would have trouble getting out. Instead, you have to see the whole cage in order to understand why it is not able to act within it, which is the point of departure for Boréus and Mörkenstam.

The book explains why it is of importance to study inequality on the Swedish labour market from a workplace perspective and states that this is lacking in the Swedish context, where studies about inequality mostly have been conducted on a macro level. The authors therefore aim to add to that knowledge by focusing on what generates and maintains inequality at work.

The book is based on a range of data, including interviews and focus group interviews with janitors, observations and statistics from the company in focus. The authors use both what they call an outsider perspective, which is the way the company describes itself to the public and to its employees, and an insider perspective, which refers to the employees’ perspective on the company.

The authors argue that the chosen company in focus could be seen as a ‘Miniature Sweden’, as it reveals similar patterns than the earlier research has shown on a national level related to gender segregation and ethnic division in the labour markets: women, for example, were over-represented in administrative positions, whereas men were over-represented in janitor tasks, and employees with immigrant backgrounds were underrepresented in higher positions. The same patterns appeared when they looked at salaries, where Swedish-born men earned more than Swedish-born women and Swedish-born persons earned more than foreign-born persons within the company.

The book uses Bourdieu’s (1977) theoretical term cultural capital to explain the patterns of inequality and segregation that are observed. The authors address how access to cultural capital, and the possibility to make their skills into something desirable for the company, were different between women and men, and between Swedish-born and immigrants at the workplace. One such interesting example of ‘capitalization’ is that the immigrants’ knowledge of other languages could not be ‘capitalized’, which, on the contrary, the Swedish language could.

One main result regards differences to influence the work place. Earlier research has shown that immigrants have a tendency to be placed in sub-ordinated positions in the Swedish labour market and that Swedish-born persons have more influence over their work situation than immigrants (e.g. Mattsson 2005). In this book, the authors show that a similar pattern appeared within the investigated company, where (Swedish-born) men had more possibility to influence the work place than both women and people with immigrant background, and that people with immigrant background more often experienced discrimination than the other groups.

Another focus of the book is the local discourse of this specific work place. The authors define discourses as the type of social practice that existed in the work place, or, in other words, formal and informal rules for how things are to be done. In doing so, they show that social constructions of what is considered masculine and feminine work tasks exist and are practiced both formally and informally. The authors argue that this can be one explanation to the company’s gender-segregated work force. Another discursive practice they found was that ‘migranthood’ was often viewed by the company as related to problems, especially when it came to
the people living in the apartments and houses that the real estate company owned. Areas with a high concentration of people with an immigrant background were thought as problematic and as demanding more resources. The authors hence argue that in a society where immigrants are often problematized, it is hard to believe that this would not affect the relationship between individuals of foreign and non-foreign background at a work place.

Another conclusion in the book refers to the birdcage metaphor, arguing that there is a discrepancy between the self-image of the work place – being based on equality between women and men and between Swedish born and immigrants – and the actual inequality that existed at the workplace. One such example could be that the janitors with immigrant background were often used as interpreters when dealing with people with immigrant background living in the apartments that the company owned, yet this skill was not capitalized or rewarded in the same way as other skills needed. Employees who had well-spoken and well-written Swedish language were premiered with higher salary or by getting higher or administrative positions at the work place.

The strength of the book is that it has an ambitious aim to add to knowledge based on what it is that generates and maintains inequality in working life in Sweden. It shows how situated knowledge is generated and maintained in a particular work place. However, the book does not convince me about what it is that shapes this situated knowledge and why it is maintained in this particular work place. The book does also have problems of convincing reader why this particular work place could or should be seen as a ‘Miniature Sweden’. I think it has something to do with that the perspective of women with immigrant backgrounds is missing. Even if this was not a deliberate sample, there were no women with immigrant background working in the estate at the time of the study. Hence, it only represents part of the ‘Miniature Sweden’.

One could of course see this result as strength (if more explicitly discussed in the book) as it shows how women with immigrant background are seemingly invisible in the Swedish labour market. Another strength of the book is that it gives researchers and students a framework for how to study an organization in order to find underlying power structures. However, the birdcage metaphor might have served a better purpose if introduced in the beginning instead of at the end. This would have given the study a clear theoretical point of departure and it would also have given the reader an early understanding of the title of the book.

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References


This volume explores the ways in which contemporary migration politics strive towards ‘disciplining’ international mobility. Not too long ago, the main objective was for states (especially affluent destination states) to control their borders. But since the 1990s, Antoine Pécoud argues in his introductory chapter, the control objective has gradually been overlaid by the ambition to discipline international mobility, and migration management has become the new catchword in migration policy debates in the post-Fortress Europe-era. However, Pécoud emphasizes, ‘This is not to say that the fixation with control has disappeared, or that immigration and border policies have fundamentally changed. Rather, it is to recognize that the objective of defending receiving states from unwanted migrants is both embedded in, and complemented by, the larger goals to organize human mobility and discipline people’s movements and behaviours’ (p. 1).

Discipline escapes simple definition, but instead denotes the broader configuration of discourses and practices that distinguish migration policy today. Among other things, disciplinary migration politics is characterized by its involvement of a broad range of actors at national, regional and international levels as states have realized that they cannot unilaterally impose order on transnational flows. It is further distinguished by its multiple methods: it does not only work through coercive measures but also through the subtle means of protection and persuasion, as well as the self-disciplining of individual migrants so that they willingly adhere to norms and rules that do therefore not need to be coercively enforced. Relative to control, discipline or migration management is presented as a more positive, humane and liberal approach to migration by its advocates. It ultimately also relies on the promotion of a particular world-view, which points to the importance for researchers to pay attention to discourses and representations.

The study of migration politics was long dominated by typical political science concerns with domestic policy process analyses and cross-national comparisons. This volume convincingly demonstrates not only that migration politics has changed towards greater complexity but also that scholars need to employ a broader set of methodological and conceptual tools to account for this new reality. It could therefore be read by scholars as well as student and interested publics. In its striving to re-orient the study of migration politics, the volume can be read as pertaining to a growing strand of scholarship that shares the same ambition (see e.g. Feldman 2011; Walters 2010) and that includes the editors’ previous volume (Geiger and Pécoud 2010).

The volume is interdisciplinary in character, with contributors from anthropology, ethnology, geography, law, political science and sociology. The chapters cover a broad range of themes: European Union policy, civil society activism, marriage migration, anti-trafficking efforts, smart surveillance, Argentinian female migration and human rights, Cameroonian consulate officers, voluntary return, asylum and the controversies regarding the treatment of Thai workers in the berry picking industry in Sweden. The scholarship is overall solid and the themes are interesting, topical and in some instances novel. I cannot do them all justice but will concentrate on a few of the contributions.

Martin Geiger’s chapter expands on the themes presented in the introduction, detailing the transformation of migration politics from control to discipline. This is an excellent contribution, which presents the ongoing paradigm change with attention to details as well as the broad picture. After an historical overview, Geiger traces how international actors and arenas have made their way into migration governance. International organizations, non-governmental organizations as well as informal arenas for discussions such as the Regional Consultative Processes have increasingly come to complement (and challenge) unilateral state action in this area. The most original part of the chapter discusses the emergence of a disciplinary, post-control-spirit and especially the invention and