

## Deskilling revisited: Labour migration, neo-Taylorism and the degradation of craft work in the Norwegian construction industry<sup>1</sup>

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**Hedda Haakestad**

Centre for the Study of Professions, Oslo and Akershus University College, Norway

**Jon Horgen Friberg**

Fafo Institute for Labour and Social Research, Oslo, Norway

### Abstract

This article discusses the effects of large-scale migration on work organization within major construction companies in Norway. Based on extensive ethnographic data in combination with descriptive statistics, the study shows how large-scale labour migration has induced a shift towards more flexible employment, which in turn has changed class and authority relations, and the appreciation of manual skills in the production process. It is argued that the observed shift from 'craft-centred' to 'neo-Taylorist' management principles conforms to the classical deskilling process in several respects. First, the use of formally unskilled temporary agency workers has prompted management to intensify supervision and separate conception from execution of craft tasks. Second, more competitive subcontracting has fragmented the building process, with multiple actors operating within the jurisdiction of one trade. Although ideological and technological changes have contributed to these developments, the article argues that free movement of labour has played a vital role, and provided employers with the necessary leverage to implement new practices.

### Keywords

Construction industry, deskilling, labour migration, least-likely case, qualitative class analysis

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### Corresponding author:

Hedda Haakestad, Centre for the Study of Professions, Hogskolen i Oslo og Akershus, Postboks 4 St. Olavs plass, Oslo 0130, Norway.

Email: [hedda.haakestad@hioa.no](mailto:hedda.haakestad@hioa.no)

## Introduction

With the large intra-European East to West migration flows following the eastward enlargements of the EU in 2004 and 2007, many national labour markets have experienced an unprecedented *supply shock*, and in most countries, construction has been among the most heavily affected industries. On the one hand, large-scale migration has enabled growth at a time when native craft personnel have been in short supply. On the other hand, there is evidence that large-scale movements of labour have tilted the power balance between labour and capital, strengthening the bargaining power of employers vis-a-vis workers and their unions (e.g. Friberg and Haakestad, 2015; Krings et al., 2011; Lillie and Greer, 2007; Woolfsen et al., 2010).

The basic theme of this article is how this power shift plays out at the firm and workplace level, with respect to work organization and the distribution of authority between management and manual workers at building sites. This focus is in line with the currently prominent Varieties of Capitalism perspective, which stresses that companies, by virtue of being among the ‘the most crucial actors’ in capitalist economies, should be placed ‘at the center of analysis’ in studies of political economy (Hall and Soskice, 2001: 5). The fundamental insight in this and related perspectives is that national patterns of inequality, wage and skill formation are not only shaped by institutional constraints and opportunities set ‘from above’ – at the policy level – but also rely on forces operating ‘from below’, by the politics of work organization and authority at the level of production (Streeck, 2012: 343).

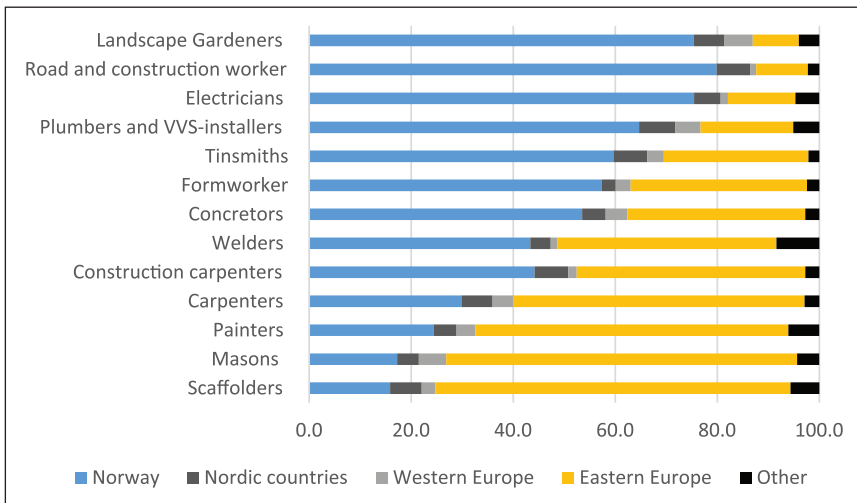
Issues relating to migration and rising inequality in the world of work are increasingly analysed in the language of dualization theories, where oppositions between good and bad jobs, core and periphery, insiders and outsiders, are the dominant analytical categories (e.g. Emmenegger et al., 2012; Kalleberg, 2009; King and Rueda, 2008). Such perspectives have been praised for disaggregating the interest of the working class, and by that highlighting intra-class conflict between categories of workers doing similar work on different conditions (e.g. Thelen, 2014: 20). Although it is undoubtedly true that dualization theory has provided valuable insight regarding inequality in increasingly flexible and internationalized labour markets, our starting point is that such perspectives alone may misguide research into focusing solely on changes happening within the manual strata. The theoretical objective of this study is therefore to link the study of dualized labour markets with more classic accounts on class and the labour process. In this literature, questions of status, skill and authority among workers in production were intimately linked to questions of managerial principles and techniques (esp. Braverman, 1974). Moreover, relations between superior and inferior at the workplace were seen as a core theme for qualitative class analysis (esp. Lockwood, 1958).

In this article, we provide an analysis of how large-scale labour migration from Central and Eastern Europe to the Norwegian construction industry has affected the social organization of work on building sites: first, by focusing on how labour migration affects norms and management principles within building firms; second, by asking how shifts in management practices have affected the class positions of craft workers in the production process.

The article proceeds as follows. After a brief account of our case selection strategy, theoretical framework and methodology, we show how labour migration has led to a shift in production regime, from one largely based on permanent employment and so-called *akkord* work, to one where temporary staffing agencies and flexible subcontractors are increasingly common. By presenting the results in an ideal typical fashion, i.e. contrasting old and new production models, we demonstrate how access to recruiting migrant workers from Eastern Europe has enabled the introduction of neo-Taylorist management principles and precarious working conditions. Our analysis suggests that changes in management ideologies and production regimes are the proximate causes of the degradation of craft work. However, we argue that the large-scale movements of labour following the eastward enlargements of the EU in 2004 and 2007 have been an important underlying factor, providing employers with the necessary leverage to impose changes in their production regime which otherwise would have been difficult to implement. We conclude that recent developments in important respects conform to the deskilling process of craft work described by Braverman. Nevertheless, we argue that ongoing mobilization within the institutionalized framework of Norwegian working life to some extent may be able to counter or even reverse current trends.

### **Situating the Norwegian building industry within the ‘two roads’ framework**

For at least two reasons, the Norwegian construction industry represents a particularly well-suited case for studying changes in class and authority relations at building sites in the context of large-scale migration. The first has to do with the particular features of the industry itself. The Norwegian construction sector has traditionally been characterized by high productivity, and high standards of expertise and skills rooted in strong traditions of craftsmanship – in compliance with the ‘highway growth path’ within the ‘two roads’ of construction described by Bosch and Philips (2003). This path is characterized by relatively high wages and secure employment, in contrast to liberal, ‘low-road’ regimes where construction work is associated with unskilled labour, insecure and unsafe working conditions and low rates of pay. The major Norwegian contractors, in particular, have been known for their high rates of unionization, together with a considerable degree of worker autonomy and influence in decision-making, in line with what is often referred to as the Nordic model of workplace cooperation (Dølvik et al., 2015; Movitz and Sandberg, 2013). The second reason has to do with the magnitude of labour immigration to the industry over the last decade. Not only has Norway – at least in relative terms – emerged as a major destination for Central and Eastern European labour migrants, the construction industry has been by far the most important sector of employment for new migrants (Friberg, 2013). Over the course of a few years, the share of resident foreign nationals in the industry’s workforce has gone from less than 10% to one in four at the national level.<sup>2</sup> In the capital city of Oslo, the increase has been even more pronounced. Within crafts with no formal training requirements like carpentry, concrete work, painting and



**Figure 1.** Country/region of birth by occupation in the Oslo construction industry 2014. (Temporary agency worker and non-resident immigrants not included).

Source: Administrative registers.

masonry, the increase has been exponential, and migrants now make up the majority of workers in these occupations (Figure 1).

Our analysis is based on extensive field and interview data from 10 building sites from seven major contracting firms. Traditionally all of these firms have been examples of ‘best practice’ when it comes to producing and maintaining high levels of skill and productivity. For instance, these firms have traditionally taken on a relatively high number of apprentices. Moreover, they are central actors in negotiating and spreading collective agreements and have actively supported measures against social dumping, such as the extension of general agreements, introduced in 2007. Last but not least, these firms stand out with particularly strong company-level unions. While the unionization rate in the Norwegian construction sector overall is 39% (Eldring et al., 2012), it is near to 100% among the in-house staff of these largest entrepreneurial firms.

In sum, the firms in our sample embody central aspects of the Nordic labour market model. Our case selection strategy thus converges with a least-likely logic, as laid out by Gerring (2008). The rationale is that cases which according to theory or prior research are highly unlikely to produce certain outcomes, make up especially strong cases in order to assess the extensiveness of a phenomenon. The underlying logic is therefore that if labour migration leads to less permanent employment and more hierarchical structures on the sites operated by best-practice firms, it is likely to do so also in firms with weaker firm unions, and where cooperative traditions and craft ideologies have not been as strong. In other words, we adopt a version of what Levy (2002) has identified as a ‘Sinatra inference’ – ‘if it can happen here it can happen anywhere’.

## **Analytical framework for studying migration and changes in the labour process**

Analysis of the class position and authority of workers in the production process in relation to management practices and business ideology has deep roots in both the Marxian and Weberian traditions within the sociology of work. For example, in his arch-Weberian account of bureaucratic and craft administration, Stinchcombe (1959) emphasized how the high status and professionalized role of craft workers within construction made a big managerial staff superfluous. Self-managed craft groups made up an alternative form of rational administration, distinct from, yet functionally equivalent to, organizational bureaucracy. Moreover, Lockwood (1958), supplemented the conceptual framework in Weberian class theory with the notion of 'work situation', and by that brought questions of division of labour and relations between superior and inferior in the workplace to the centre of qualitative class analysis (Crompton and Jones, 1984: 42). The question of work organization has been equally central to the Marxian labour process tradition. Here, the link between class on the one hand and managerial principles and practices on the other is particularly associated with the seminal work of Harry Braverman and his theory of scientific management and the 'degradation of work' (1974).

Braverman's argument was centred on processes of proletarianization of craft and white-collar work, a process often referred to as 'deskilling'. By decomposing the unit of the labour process and assigning separate tasks to different workers, Taylor's scientific management helped capitalists to 'wrestle the power over the labour process from the workers' (Form, 1987: 33). At the core of such knowledge appropriation was the divorce of conception and execution of the work process, which subsequently paved the way for automatization of production and intensified supervision. Although Braverman has been praised for providing a theoretical framework relating the content of work to wider questions of class (Wood, 1982), his thesis of a general deskilling of white- and blue-collar alike has been proven radically wrong (e.g. Attewell, 1987; Gallie, 1991; Jonsson, 1998). Nevertheless, as his hypothesis was deduced from observations of the fate of artisan-craftsmen in early industrialization, we would argue that the perspective still might be relevant in the more restricted context of the construction sector, where traditional craftsmanship is still pervasive.

In our analysis of how labour migration has influenced the social organization of work on Norwegian building sites, we combine theoretical insights offered by the Weberian and Marxian tradition of workplace studies. In order to answer our first question regarding how labour migration changes the managerial principles governing building sites, we contrast craft administration, or what we will call 'craft-centred' management with neo-Taylorism. According to Stinchcombe, the most important features of construction work are the non-standardization of products and the worker's capacity to combine broad knowledge of materials, tools and procedures with manual dexterity, which is acquired through extensive training (see also Blauner [1964] for a similar account). 'Craft administration' is therefore closely connected to the autonomy and discretion of the craft worker as well as worker involvement throughout the manufacturing process. The craft-centred mode of production is often contrasted with industrial mass production on the basis of centralization, standardization and specialization. In

Taylor's original version of 'scientific management', the stated goal was to collect the traditional craft worker's practical knowledge and break it up into a sequence of simple, specialized tasks dictated by formal procedures. By means of this approach, the actual execution of tasks could be separated from the processes of decision-making, planning and coordination. While Taylorism had its ideological heyday during the early decades of the twentieth century, it is commonly assumed that Taylor's principles are less relevant in today's knowledge-based, post-industrial society. Especially in Scandinavia, where a strong commitment to so-called cooperative leadership was maintained throughout the twentieth century (Emery and Thorsrud, 1976), and measures were taken to reduce monotonous work, enrich job content and dismantle hierarchies, Taylor's ideas never really caught on (Byrkjeflot, 2001).

However, Crowley et al. (2010) argue that since the late 1970s, new flexible approaches to staffing, reduced job security and neoliberal management ideologies have in fact facilitated the introduction of Taylor's core management principles into trades and professions previously considered immune to such standardization. The construction industry has been one of these supposedly immune industries. The uniqueness of each building project makes it ill-suited to the requirements prescribed by traditional Taylorism, and the result has been that norms, standards, traditions and management models associated with a craft-centred mode of production have remained prominent up to the present (Thiel, 2007). In Norway and elsewhere, however, increased labour migration has gone hand in hand with precisely the kind of flexibilization which, according to Crowley et al., has paved the way for neo-Taylorism's entry into other purportedly immune industries. In the first part of the empirical analysis, we describe how this contradiction between craft-centred and neo-Taylorist management principles plays out on Norwegian construction sites.

In the second part of the analysis, we show how managerial principles affect the class position of craft workers, and their role in the production process. In this section, we let Lockwood's notion of *class position* structure our analysis. Class position is an aggregated concept involving three sub-categories: *market position* refers to wages and working conditions, job security and career prospects; *work situation* refers to the social relations in which the employee is involved 'by virtue of his position in the division of labour' (1958: 19); and *status situation* can either refer to an occupation's position in status hierarchies or workers' subjective sense of professional pride. We utilize these concepts to describe the material, social and symbolic aspects of work for the ever-dwindling number of permanently employed craft workers and the continually increasing numbers of hired workers supplied by temporary employment agencies.

## Data and methods

Our analysis is based on extensive field and interview data collected in 2013 and 2014 at 10 building sites – eight in the Oslo area and two in the city of Trondheim. In addition, supplementary interviews were conducted in the spring of 2017. All sites were administered by one of the seven biggest entrepreneurs operating in the Oslo area at the time of the initial study. These firms have formed the backbone of the national market for large

construction projects for many decades, and represent a well-regulated core of a market with increasingly unregulated, illegal and semi-illegal fringes.

Traditionally these contractors have been relatively self-supplied with carpentry and concrete work, and in some cases masonry and landscape gardening. For other types of manual work they have relied on subcontracting companies with a permanent employed staff. The use of temporary employment is restricted in Norway, but the lifting of restrictions on work agencies in 2000 has de facto led to free access to temporary employment. On the building projects in our study, staffing arrangements varied from being almost entirely based on in-house permanent employment, to being entirely based on short-term hiring through temporary staffing agencies and other types of flexible subcontracting. The majority of the projects had some combination of the two, where permanent employees and agency workers worked side by side, although rarely cooperating directly.

At most of our visits, we got a guided tour at the sites, with a manager, foreman, or union representative showing and telling how work was organized, and what tasks were done by whom. During these inspections we did a lot of informal chatting with the workers, in order to establish a picture of the work process, as well as the division of labour between different categories of workers. We often timed our visits so we could sit down with the *akkord-gangs* during lunchtime.

In addition to such ethnographic observations and loosely structured conversations, our data consist of 44 semi-structured interviews with a total number of 57 people, most of them recorded and transcribed. Twenty out of the 57 were site- or HR managers, or CEOs. Thirty-five were either foremen, union representatives, *akkord-gang* leaders, or ordinary workers. Of these, nine were Polish migrant workers with long experience with staffing agencies. We used a Polish language interpreter when necessary. These interviews were supplemented by a large body of previously collected interview data with Polish migrant construction workers (Friberg, 2013).

Our analysis revolves around how different ways of organizing craft work at building sites give rise to very different managerial practices and authority structures, and how changes in the ways craft work is organized also tend to change the class position of workers in the production process. The presentation of the analysis is ideal typical in the sense that we purposely underplay nuances and untypical cases in order to underline differences between *akkord* and agency work as two separate modes of production. Our account of agency workers as being organized in teams segregated from the permanent *akkord* gangs was for instance only true for eight of the 10 sites we visited. In the other two, agency workers were to some extent included in the *akkord* teams.

Weber describes the ideal typical approach as involving a contradiction, where the researcher gets closer to her/his object by increasing the distance to it. In Weber's words, this type of analysis involves 'unrealistic concepts' that 'both abstract from reality and at the same time help to understand it' (1978: 20–21). By choosing to present our analysis in an ideal typical way, we necessarily reduce the complexity in our qualitative data material. On the other hand, we increase clarity about differences, and the consequences for craft workers' position in the production process when shifting from one organizational principle to the other. It is, however, important to note that our ideal types should be read as context and historically specific.

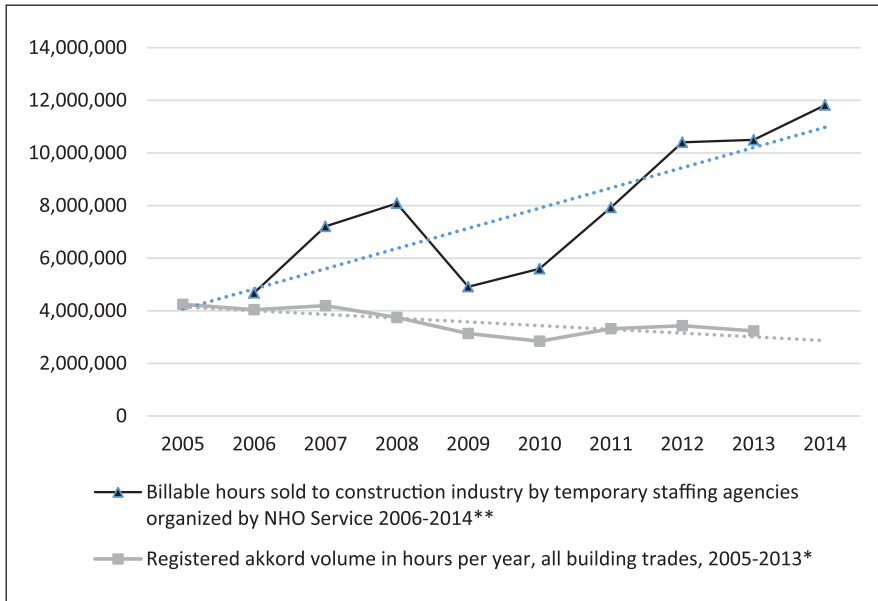
## Changing work organization: From *akkord* to temporary staffing

Our analysis is centred on two very different models for the organization of manual labour: so-called '*akkord work*' and *temporary staffing*. *Akkord* is a partly production-based wage system, where a flexible wage component based on fixed prices for specific pieces comes on top of normal hourly wages. When they were first introduced in the 1950s, national *akkord* tariffs were a typical Norwegian class compromise. Employers wanted to set a 'wage-ceiling' as postwar labour shortages gave workers an advantageous bargaining position. Craft unions, on the other hand, wanted to formalize a wage system that gave workers a share of the production surplus, and set a 'wage-floor' in order to avoid underbidding and 'schmutzkonkurrenz' (Berntsen, 1993). Until recently, the *akkord* system was the dominant formal wage system in the Norwegian building industry, and is still the prevailing wage system among many of the major contractors. Today, craft workers' unions are the strongest defenders of the system.

In contrast to the *akkord* system, temporary staffing is a relatively recent phenomenon in the Norwegian construction industry. Characterized by a triangular relationship between the agency, the worker and the client firm, being employed through a temporary work agency means that the worker's contractual employment relationship is with the agency while the client remains in charge of daily supervision (Coe et al., 2010). In so-called low-road construction regimes like the UK and Ireland, flexible employment strategies like staffing agencies, 'competitive subcontracting' (Bosch and Philips, 2003) and 'bogus self-employment' were widespread in construction long before the EU's eastern enlargements (Behling and Harvey, 2015; Harvey, 2003; Krings et al., 2011). In Norway, however, temporary staffing agencies were not common in the building industry before the mid-2000s, and the workforce of agencies catering to the construction industry is now almost exclusively made up of foreign nationals. Until 2000, temporary staffing was banned outside the so-called 'traditional office sector' in Norway. However, it was not until the EU enlargement in 2004 that the staffing industry was able to recruit significant numbers of capable and willing construction workers (Friberg, 2013, 2016). For client firms, this new opportunity to recruit Eastern European workers through agencies made it possible to differentiate between a stable internal workforce and a flexible external one. While the former could be adapted to the 'minimum requirements' of production and to fill key roles, the latter could be brought in during production peaks in order to perform less demanding tasks, in line with Atkinson's ideal typical account of the 'flexible firm' (1984). This new-found flexibility has given Norwegian construction companies far greater leeway in taking on greater commissions and in expanding into new geographic areas without the constraints associated with internal labour resources.

Large-scale recruitment of migrant workers was thus closely associated with a shift in the dominant form of employment relationship. Between 2005 and 2013, a period of sustained growth within the Norwegian construction sector, the volume of registered *akkord* work dropped by 24%. At the same time, the number of billable hours sold to the construction industry by staffing agencies within the main national industry association more than quadrupled, between 2006 and 2014 (see Figure 2). The contrast between the two thus signifies a historical shift in the dominant mode of production in the industry.





**Figure 2.** Billable hours sold to the construction industry by temporary staffing agencies 2006–2014; registered *akkord* volume in hours per year for all building trades 2005–2013.

\*Source: Fellesforbundet.

\*\* Source: The graph for temporary staffing is hours sold by agencies organized in the employer federation NHO Service. Based on numbers from Statistics Norway, NHO Service's market share of temporary staffing in construction is estimated to be 50% of the total volume (Nergaard, 2017: 14).

It should be noted that staffing agencies are just one type of flexible subcontracting proliferating within the industry, and contractor chains can often be quite long and complicated.

## Management ideologies between craft-centred traditions and neo-Taylorism

Changing power relations resulting from employers' new access to cheap and flexible labour can affect normative and institutional constraints in the construction industry in two different ways. First, the rules of the game may be renegotiated in line with the new balance of power. The trade union representatives in our material, for example, reported that since 2004 they had been forced to focus their efforts almost exclusively on preventing the most serious instances of wage dumping, and as a result they had little capacity to oppose the rising use of temporary staffing agencies. Second, an external shock may also provoke institutional counter-responses. For example, new regulations may be introduced in order to protect the existing order under the new structural conditions. This was the case when collectively agreed minimum wages were legally extended in the construction industry and elsewhere in the years after 2004 (so-called '*Allmenngjøring*').

This move, described as a form of state re-regulation of the wage setting system, was undertaken explicitly in order to secure egalitarian wages in a situation where the old system based on voluntary collectively agreed wages was no longer able to do so (Dølvik et al., 2014). What we intend to focus on here are the internal normative and institutional constraints in companies and how they relate to growing labour migration. The qualitative interviews display considerable variation, both across the different contractors and within different positions in the firms. This variation can be conceptualized as a shift from ‘*craft-centred*’ to ‘*neo-Taylorist*’ management principles outlined in the theory section above. In what follows, we describe how this ideological tension was expressed within the contracting firms in our sample.

## Craft-centred management principles

All the major contractors in our study have traditionally conducted their production on the basis of what we call craft-centred management principles. Central to these principles are an identity and a set of values associated with traditional craftsmanship and the notion that *thinking* and *execution* should be integral to working practices and procedures in the production process. The quote below comes from a personnel director in a company where this ideology still remains prominent:

If we want to be good entrepreneurs, we have to maintain a significant in-house production rate within our core trades and skills. We recruit a lot of graduate engineers, and in order to turn them into decent entrepreneurs, we have to work on their understanding of the production; they can't just do as they please and hire temporary staffing and deal with contract management. So although what we produce ourselves in-house may represent a smaller proportion of our total turnover on a project than it used to, it is still the essence of what we are doing and the engine of our activity ... and it's absolutely critical for us that we work with our core activity every day.

The attitude of this manager highlights basic aspects of the craft-centred management model as it appeared in our fieldwork: the linchpin of the company's enterprise is the in-house production performed by the company's own craft workers, and the contributions of third parties are seen mainly as accessory or supportive functions. The *core activity* is here understood as craftsmanship, not as the architect's conceptual design or management's handling of contracts, budgets or finances.

As will be demonstrated below, *akkord* teams are not only assigned typical production tasks, they are also involved in other aspects of the production process such as commenting on production plans and the architect's drawings. This relatively egalitarian distribution of authority is in line with what Stinchcombe (1959) identifies as the *decentralization of function*, which is typical in construction, and characterized by a ‘concentration of the planning of work in the manual roles’ (p. 170). In relation to more general control functions, we may also speak of a *function-centring* around skilled workers. This is partly due to the close historical ties between the *akkord* institution and the trade unions in Norway. Because the team leader or their deputy is often a union representative, *akkord* teams and skilled workers are involved in a number of general control procedures, such as ensuring compliance with health, safety and environmental regulations, and making sure that wages and

working conditions among subcontractors are in compliance with legal regulations (for which the main contractor is now liable, following new regulations). Senior executives recognize how difficult it can be to maintain control of long chains of subcontractors. In such circumstances, union representatives play a central role. As one CEO told us:

We have a very alert group of union representatives that keep an eye on things. Regulations are quite clear on matters of social dumping, and if we get any rogue firms operating on the site – they'll notify us. In terms of the Trades Unions Federation down at Youngstorget [the federation's head office], their radar is better than ours. So they actually tip us, warn us to 'steer clear of them'. But yeah, it's hard to deal with if it's leasing further down the subcontractor chain.

Even though the high productivity in *akkord* production is widely acknowledged by management, the high hourly wages can make it hard to compete in a market where many companies offer no more than the minimum wage. Nevertheless, management often saw high wages as a necessity in terms of recruitment and of long-term competitiveness:

The most important thing we can do is to take on apprentices and employ workers. If that system falls, the *akkord* tariffs will fall, and then both prices and the whole industry will be dictated solely by the market. Then companies like ours won't be able to compete. Prices will go down, and the winners will be those workers coming from abroad who accept the minimum wage. And Norwegian youth ... if they can earn better money working as a cashier in a supermarket, they won't be interested in doing hard physical labour at a building site. So that's why it is extremely important to focus on employees and apprentices. (HR manager)

Craft-centred management principles are also embodied in the different roles of each employee. The roles of skilled workers are regulated by both formal settlements and agreements as well as by informal socialization. In companies with a strong identity linked to skilled trades and craftsmanship, it appears to be an important ideological management principle to ensure that a considerable proportion within managerial ranks have experience as trained craft workers. On the shop floor, that will typically be the foreman, while many head offices will have personnel managers with experience from the production line.

## Neo-Taylorist management principles

At the opposite end of the scale are building companies run by what we call neo-Taylorist management principles. At the time of our fieldwork, one such company was in charge of one of the biggest construction projects in the Oslo area. Yet it did not have a single production worker employed within the firm. The company was an offshoot of a more traditional crafts-based business in another part of the country, but the ample supply of cheap and flexible labour had allowed it to branch out of the traditional area without building up its own staff of specialists and skilled workers. In Oslo, its business ideology and identity were very different from the more traditional building firms.

We specialize in major construction projects. We identify what we need in terms of specialists in the different areas. It's all divided into precise control areas at the building site. ... The point is to improve control ... we then know who is working where and when we need the next one

to start. It's like that all the way. We schedule differently. We have a management plan which tells us who needs to be where and at what time. It's like operating with lots of interim deadlines, lots of interim targets right through the process, which we use to plan the input of the subcontractors. (Project manager)

In this firm, corporate identity and professional pride are based on project planning and contract management. Site managers and foremen described their jobs as focused primarily on dividing up the construction process into discrete parts and coordinating contacts between the various subcontractors and hired workers, each of whom performed standardized tasks. The challenge was to achieve the greatest possible production flow while minimizing costs at each stage. This was no doubt an arduous task given the dozens of firms involved, and the fact that everything had to be done in a specific order. The type of expertise on which the company relied was engineering, law, economics and project management rather than practical trade skills. The neo-Taylorist management model thus involves centring functions within management and subsequently draining the role of production workers. While craft workers in *akkord* gangs are expected to use professional judgement in the execution of tasks, the ideal neo-Taylorist worker should only obey orders. Our interviews clearly show that such expectations are attributed to Eastern Europeans more often than Norwegians:

It's a lot easier to direct a bunch of Eastern Europeans and move them around. 'Just stop whatever you're doing. You're going over there to build.' You wouldn't get a Norwegian to do anything like that. He has to complete his work before moving over to where the new task awaits. Eastern Europeans are easier in the sense that they really don't think much about why they're doing a job. They know what they're supposed to do, and they know what the product will be. But why they perform a task there and then, they don't really care. They're just here to work. (Project manager)

The reliance on formally or de facto unskilled foreign workers in combination with intensified supervision makes it rational for these firms to steer away from customized and diversified quality production. Standardized interior and prefabricated elements are often preferred, in order to keep production costs down and diminish the need for trained personnel:

Bathroom cabins are a good example. Then there is a robot laying tiles at a factory in Lithuania. When the cabin arrives at our site it is complete with lights, mirrors, toilets, everything, the shower is finished. And a robot costs less than a mason. ... When that becomes a trend you get fewer craftsmen, you only need installers. (HR manager)

Just as a neo-Taylorist management model requires less professionalism and greater levels of subservience on the part of the craft workers, the requisite set of leadership qualities is different. By splitting up the working process into simple, quantifiable components based on standardized principles, management functions become subject to academization insofar as economics and law play an increasingly important role in the companies' clerical staff and junior managers:

You need to have a little lawyer tucked inside you if you're a foreman with a contractor who manages and supervises contracts compared to one with his own employees. He always has to

think ‘formalization’. He has to have things documented. So obviously there’s a tussle going on with everyone having to get things documented. (Project manager)

The distinction between craft-centred and neo-Taylorist management ideologies not only marks a difference between different companies, it also plays out as an ideological conflict between different groups of employees within firms. The strongest exponents of neo-Taylorist management principles were usually found within the ranks of middle managers. Having the economic responsibility for individual projects, they have an incentive to save labour costs. Equally important is to limit production periods, which for many builders is as important as keeping labour costs low. Being able to hire cheap foreign labour through agencies during peak periods has made it possible to reduce production periods significantly. Using temporary staffing agencies and external subcontractors, therefore, not only boosts the authority of middle managers, it is also associated with monetary rewards, as many companies have introduced bonuses for finishing projects within tight time frames.

However, some managers expressed they had undergone the transition from *akkord*-based production to production largely based on flexible staffing rather reluctantly, as a result of economic necessity rather than any actual shift in business ideologies. One personnel manager in a firm that at the time of our interview had recently reduced its in-house staff put it this way:

In Oslo, we currently have no apprentices. In my opinion that’s very bad. ... So the corporate social responsibility we brag so much about in our company, that’s really just cheap talk at the moment. ... we’re peeing our pants to stay warm right now. We’re doing ourselves a great disservice. There is a lot of competence disappearing. ... but one company alone cannot decide to reverse the trend with respect to apprentices and having their own employees. The authorities must restrict access to hiring temps or something like that. ... Because alone we don’t stand a chance at doing things differently. We will only go bankrupt.

Several top managers also expressed that they had ‘gone too far’ in the use of cheap and flexible labour – quality control had failed in projects with a transitory workforce, and errors and omissions had cost the firm dearly after the end of the project. Some companies had introduced internal rules to prevent short-term needs from undermining long-term strategic objectives. Such new rules would typically include minimum targets for in-house production in the core trades, a maximum ceiling on the number of external links in the production chain, or numerical targets for apprentices in each project. Although the managers of these firms believed that internal regulations improved productivity and competitiveness in the longer term, it was difficult to win bids against contractors who did not take such considerations into account. In the opinion of some informants, the construction industry is an industry ‘begging for regulations’. Not surprisingly, several new measures which have been implemented since, such as apprentice clauses in public tendering, have been well received by many employers as well as the Federation of Norwegian Construction Industries.

### **The class position of workers within traditional *akkord* gangs**

We now move on to the second subject in our analysis: how the two sets of managerial principles affect the role assigned to manual craft workers within the two modes of

production. We start by describing workers within traditional *akkord* gangs. First, we consider their *market situation* – in terms of wages, job security and career opportunities – before moving on to describe the other two aspects of their class position: work situation and status situation.

A permanent contract with a firm offering *akkord* is among the most desirable positions for manual workers in the Norwegian labour market. In 2012, the average annual salary of ‘akkorders’ in the construction industry was about €7360 higher than the average wage for crafts personnel. As permanent employees, workers within *akkord* teams are protected by general agreements and regulations covering working hours, sick pay and unemployment protection. Construction workers have traditionally had rather favourable access to internal labour markets, as apprentices were trained within firms, and lower management positions were filled by firm insiders. Skilled workers have thus been able to advance in rank and become site and project managers, often starting as foremen. This opportunity to progress from manual construction work to management has also been a bulwark for workers with injuries and disabilities after years of arduous physical labour.

In terms of work situation, one of the main features of *akkord* as a production system is that it regulates the division of authority and social relations among occupational groups within companies and on building sites. Permanent teams allow workers to build social relations and solidarity, but it is also considered an advantage in terms of productivity and competitiveness. Descriptions such as the following excerpt were common:

We work efficiently and independently. We get a plan for a larger project, and we decide for ourselves how to get the job done. We all know each other, and each other’s different strengths and weaknesses, and organize the work accordingly ... everyone’s pulling their weight. We don’t need instructions from management. We’re goal-oriented. ... Temporarily hired Polish workers who are not familiar with the building site, the equipment or each other can’t match our teams when it comes to quality and efficiency ... even if they only cost half as much in pay. (*Akkord* worker)

The *akkord* teams’ influence on the overall production processes is based on formalized professional roles, rights and obligations embedded in collective agreements. According to the general agreement operative in the sector, site management is obliged to brief and consult the team boss on production lines and plans as well as the personnel needs for each project. Management is also required to schedule regular meetings during the construction period and to ensure that the site is cleared and that necessary materials and tools are available on site before production starts. This not only regulates inter-team relations and collaboration, it is also a means of resolving conflict between workers and management. A project starts with negotiations to determine labour requirements, pricing and the tasks to be included in the *akkord*, a process known for its tugs-of-war and lively discussions. If the site management fails to reach a settlement specifying the work of the *akkord* teams, disputes and bargaining may continue throughout the project’s lifetime.

As a site manager, you are put on the spot by the good *akkord* teams, so you have to be up to date [with schedules and deadlines]. ... There’s more bickering. It’s much harder work than supervising a subcontractor. However, you create more value for money; but as a manager, you have to go the extra mile. (Site manager)

Because holding a trade certificate is a formal requirement only within technical trades in Norway, informal training on the shop floor has been an alternative route to craftsmanship, whereby workers normally could reach the status of skilled worker with respect to pay, status and tasks after three to five years. The *akkord* teams play a vital role in this type of training. At the same time, the economic incentive to maximize production speed inherent to the *akkord* system involves a risk of teams developing forms of self-governed Taylorism, which may hamper or even reverse individual skill development:

One of the first jobs I had in a carpentry team in the 70s was when they expanded the suburbs of Oslo with large areas with identical housing complexes. The guys earned real good money, but it was very specialized. I was the carrier for an older construction carpenter who only had screwed plaster for 18 years, and hadn't seen his toolbox for equally long – he only used the plaster knife and folding rule tucked in his pocket. And then the company went bankrupt, and we were transferred [to another firm] ... and a project with quite advanced roof constructions. And I remember he cried, the old chap. He had forgotten his trade, he no longer knew how to do it. ... But that's not supposed to happen. So we school our team bosses to rotate. So everyone does a bit of everything. (Union representative)

Analytically, it is common to treat material conditions and status as separate phenomena (e.g. Chan and Goldthorpe, 2007). In practice, however, the status situation of workers will often reflect their material rewards and formal authority in production (cf. Lockwood, 1958: 209). The *akkord* system enables craft workers to influence the production process, but it also imposes a number of duties. Teams must study plans and rectify construction mistakes without monetary compensation, and are collectively responsible for the final product. This entails a sense of pride in their work; indeed, in interviews skilled workers emphasized the gratification of being able to look at a residential complex or a downtown high-rise and say 'I built that' – and know that the craftsmanship is of a high quality.

However, most *akkord* workers felt that their position was under threat. Many were frustrated with managers who sought to take the most lucrative tasks out of the *akkord* agreements and delegate them to agency workers and subcontractors, reducing the teams' earnings in the process. On most building sites, *akkord* is no longer the dominant form of production, and *akkord* workers constantly come into conflict with other interests. Most interviewees in such teams expressed their solidarity with Eastern European migrant workers. Xenophobia appeared to be rare, but most native construction workers experienced considerable frustration with the situation in the industry. Most notably, workers were concerned about the dwindling appreciation of skills, as construction work is increasingly turned into low status 'immigrant work'. Most interviewees maintained that they would no longer recommend young people to choose building crafts as a career path.

### **Class position of temporary agency workers**

We now turn to the class position of Eastern European migrant workers hired through temporary work agencies – a group which make up an increasing proportion of the workforce on most construction sites. In terms of monetary earnings, most of the larger agencies follow the general minimum pay set out in the agreement with the building trades, in 2012 €19.00 per hour for workers with no seniority, which is €15.60 below the average

rate for *akkord* workers. The average annual income in 2012 for Eastern European craft workers resident in Norway and employed by staffing agencies was about 65% of the average for Norwegian skilled workers. However, in terms of differences between in-house and agency workers, the issue of job security is far more consequential than hourly pay. The standard contract recommended by the national industry association is called 'permanent employment without guaranteed pay'. This is a so-called zero-hour contract, which means that workers are only paid for the hours they put in, and the agency is not responsible for ensuring that workers actually obtain work. Actual assignments can last from a few hours to several months. The client company signs a contract with the staffing agency, not the worker, and may at any time ask to have the worker replaced. Agency workers can be asked to leave at an hour's notice. Several informants told us that it is not uncommon that workers who do not perform optimally are 'sent back'. Several managers noted how sending back sub-optimally performing temp workers had a highly disciplinary effect on the remaining workforce, and used this as an active strategy. This type of employment thus offers very little job or income security, and bouts of illness will often mean that the worker will not be offered work in the future (Nergaard et al., 2011).

In regard to career prospects, temporary staffing agencies offer few, if any, opportunities for internal job mobility, but many employees hope to land a contract with a client firm. This provides incentives for overachievement, deference and flexibility, which are not unconditionally appreciated by foremen and managers.

Considering the work situation of temporarily hired crafts workers, the often rapidly shifting working environment for agency workers will in many cases offer few opportunities to form stable relationships with co-workers. Staffing agencies often send workers an SMS on where to show up on short notice, and provisional teams are sometimes assembled on building sites on the day. Many members of such makeshift teams will have little or no Norwegian or English language skills, and in order to be able to communicate with clients and managers, the team's formal or informal leader is usually named on the basis of language proficiency, not trade skills. In some cases the result is that the youngest and least experienced workers (who learned English at school) are put in charge of older and more experienced craft workers (who learned Russian). Polish informants talked about how older and more experienced workers cringed at being bossed around by inexperienced youngsters. Not just relations between co-workers, but also those between workers and management are very different. Compared to those between in-house workers and management, relations between site management and agency workers are more clearly marked by domination and subordination. A Polish scaffolder related what, in his experience, was a typical occurrence:

I was sent to a large construction site with a high turnover of people. ... They were firing people left, right and centre and taking on new ones all the time. I was sent there because I knew a little Norwegian. People were always complaining to the staffing agency, and people were getting fired. ... Then the boss arrived. He was a young Norwegian. He treated people like objects, whistling at us like dogs.

Norwegian managers often explained how it was necessary to maintain a much more authoritarian leadership style when dealing with Eastern Europeans and agency workers:



When you want to tell a Pole what to do, you have to be very direct and make sure he understands. It's a matter of culture, they can't say 'sorry' or that they didn't understand what you said. To them, that would be to admit defeat. (Foreman)

'Management by pointing' is a frequently encountered term describing a management style used towards Eastern Europeans. When used by Norwegian managers it is usually understood as a necessary result of language problems and an authoritarian Eastern European work culture. However, from discussions with Polish workers it seems far more reasonable to ascribe such submissiveness to their highly insecure working conditions. The prospect of losing one's job at an hour's notice and on the decision of foremen or site managers fosters compliance rather than discussion. Agency workers in turn complained about what they perceived as overly detailed micro-management. Several informants told us about jokes within the Polish community about how there are two Norwegian bosses for every Pole. Although many Eastern European construction workers in Norway have vocational training and skills (Friberg and Eldring 2011), this is rarely recognized, and staffing agencies often use the same person for different jobs involving different skills.

I have to do all different kinds of things – carpenter, joiner, roofer, assembler, and so on. They [the client firm] never ask whether you can or cannot do it. If you don't manage, it is your own problem. (Temporary agency worker)

Freidson (2001: 47) has made the point that in situations like the one described here – where workers are geographically and occupationally mobile – they are less likely to develop any coherent or common identity, or sense of occupational pride. Especially Eastern European workers with formal training and long experience within a specific trade expressed frustrations about how their abilities were not being appreciated or rewarded by employers. Many felt that their Norwegian bosses and fellow workers treated them with disrespect.

**Table 1.** Ideal typical differences between craft administration and neo-Taylorist management principles.

	Craft administration	Neo-Taylorism
<i>Governing work principle</i>	Craft discretion	Task specialization and coordination of interfaces
<i>Function-centring (supervision and quality control)</i>	Skilled workers	Management
<i>Appreciated skills (craft workers)</i>	Independence and professional responsibility	Commitment and subservience
<i>Appreciated skills (management)</i>	Personnel management and practical craftsmanship	Law, economics and contract management
<i>Preferred mode of work organization</i>	Akkord-based in-house	Temporary staffing and subcontracting
<i>Competitive advantage</i>	Productivity and skill development	Control of costs and building time
<i>Exponents in companies</i>	Skilled workers and elements of senior management	Middle management and elements of senior management

**Table 2.** Ideal typical differences in the class position of *akkord* and hired workers.

		Akkord workers	Temp agency workers
<b>Market position</b>	<i>Pay</i>	Relatively good	Relatively poor
	<i>Job security</i>	Relatively high	Insecure
	<i>Career opportunity</i>	Good	Limited
<b>Work situation</b>	<i>Division of labour</i>	Internal specialization, often rotational	Deskilled all-round work
	<i>Relation to colleagues</i>	Stable and congenial	Instable and conflictual
	<i>Relation to management</i>	Cooperation, negotiation and conflict	Servile, docile
<b>Status situation</b>	<i>Autonomy and influence</i>	High	Very low
	<i>Occupational pride</i>	High but under pressure	Low

## Concluding discussion

We began this article by asking how large-scale labour migration from Central and Eastern Europe has affected work organization, management ideologies and the position of craft workers within the production process within large construction companies in Norway. Our case selection strategy followed a least-likely logic: our sample of contractors has traditionally represented best practice in the national construction market, when it comes to offering secure employment, high wages and involvement for craft workers, and with respect to contributing to skill development by taking on their fair share of apprentices.

Our analysis shows that fundamental changes in the organizational principles governing the work process have indeed occurred, and that these changes are intrinsically linked to the recruitment of migrant workers. At the firm level, the most significant changes can be described as (1) a change in workforce strategies – from employment predominated by permanent contracts and *akkord* work, to employment through flexible subcontracting and temporary staffing, and (2) a disruption of the power-balance between workers and management in the production process, in favour of the latter.

The transition from *akkord*-based production methods to production based on temporary staffing and subcontracting is deeply linked to a shift from what we refer to as *craft-centred* to *neo-Taylorist* management principles (see summary in Tables 1 and 2). The transition in production modes and management principles has subsequently caused a general degradation of craft workers' position in production, in respect to wages, working conditions and career prospects (their market position), craft worker status, and their social relations to colleagues and management, regulated by the division of authority and labour (their work situation).

Our analysis suggests that it is the changes in management ideologies and production regimes that are the proximate causes of craft work degradation rather than the inflow of foreign workers in itself. After all, a significant minority of migrant workers are fully included in the regular production regime based on *akkord* gangs and permanent employment. However, we would argue that the large-scale movements of labour following the

eastward enlargements of the EU in 2004 and 2007 has been an important underlying factor, providing employers with the necessary leverage to impose changes in their production regime which otherwise would have been difficult to implement.

We conclude that the changing organization of the labour process taking place at Oslo building sites in the wake of large-scale migration, conforms to the classical Bravermanian deskilling story in several respects. First, we have shown that the increased use of formally unskilled foreign workers hired from temporary staffing agencies has given managers incentives to intensify supervision over the work process, and led to a separation of conception from execution of tasks. This stands in contrast to *akkord* production where planning to a larger degree has been ‘concentrated in the manual roles’, in line with Stinchcombe’s ideal typical craft administration. Second, the moving away from permanent employment and *akkord* work has led to a more fragmented building process, involving more management-led coordination between different actors and interfaces. Whereas the highly self-governed *akkord* teams traditionally have been responsible for doing most tasks within the occupational jurisdiction of their respective trade, the growing presence of competitive subcontractors specializing in narrow task areas has increased the division of labour between groups of workers operating within the same craft. According to the conventional wisdom that ‘as a rule, there is no division of labour in crafts’ (Felstead, 2016: 226), such specialization might represent a threat to the future of skilled construction work in the long term. In his comment on why German-style occupational skills historically have been less subjected to deskilling than manual occupations in Anglo-Saxon countries, Streeck (2012) points exactly to the lack of specialization in Northern European trades and crafts, because ‘broad’ skills make workers functionally flexible, and enable them to engage in differentiated production tasks across firms. Third, the shift from ‘manufacture to machinofacture’ that follows from increased use of robot-built prefabricated elements may also reduce the demand for skilled workers, if such trends catch on. As migrants’ lower wages reduce firms’ incentives to invest in technology and rationalize production, it is, however, not certain they will (Berg et al., 2016). Nevertheless, in combination with previous research documenting a steep decline in recruitment of young people to Norwegian manual trades in response to migration (Røed and Schøne, 2016), the tendencies in sum makes the future of skilled manual work in the construction industry seem rather bleak.

However, there are several counter-acting forces to these trends within Norwegian working life, stemming from the close tripartite relations between unions, employers and government.

One stems from the fact that for many contractors, the transition to flexible staffing and neo-Taylorism appears as a result of collective action problems emerging from an under-regulated market, rather than an actual shift in business ideologies. Many of the companies in our sample have therefore joined forces with local and central unions and actively supported regulatory measures in order to secure a higher share of skilled workers and apprentices in production. This mobilization seems to have had an impact: as we write this article, the municipal government in Oslo is about to implement apprentice clauses in public tendering. What’s more, imposing new regulations on the business of temporary staffing is emerging as a major issue in the upcoming national elections in September 2017, where prohibiting zero-hour contracts and restricting companies’

access to hire agency workers are among the questions being discussed by several major political parties. Whether these measures, if they are passed, provide sufficient remedy to reverse current trends and get the Norwegian building industry back on the high-skill, high-wage track of the past, or if they are simply ‘too little too late’, will be an important topic for future research.

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### Notes

1. The article is a partly based on work previously published in Norwegian. See Friberg and Haakestad (2015).
2. In 2012, a total of 210,095 persons were employed in the Norwegian construction industry. About 70,000 of these were foreign nationals (Friberg and Haakestad 2015; Nazarko and Chodakowska, 2015).

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## Author biographies

Hedda Haakestad is a PhD candidate in sociology at Centre for the Study of Professions, Oslo, Norway. Her research interests are in the sociology of work and occupations, political sociology, and the effects of Europeanization on manual work.

Jon Horgen Friberg holds a PhD in sociology and works as a research fellow at the Fafo Institute for Labour and Social Research in Oslo, Norway. His research focuses mainly on immigration and integration related issues.