



Compassion and contradictions in the world of creative knowledge work

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review of

Susanne Ekman (2012) *Authority and autonomy: Paradoxes in modern knowledge work*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. (HB, pp. 264, US\$95.00, ISBN 978-0-230-34822-6)

The book *Authority and autonomy: Paradoxes in modern knowledge work* (hereafter referred to as *A&A*) is written by Susanne Ekman, assistant professor at the Department of Organization at the Copenhagen Business School in Denmark. With a background in anthropology and management, Ekman's ethnographically informed study of media companies in Denmark is a useful contribution to our understanding of the role passion plays as a driving force in the performance and management of creative knowledge work. Comprising approximately 250 pages, the book poses many questions about the conditions that exist for those involved in knowledge work and the organizations where it is concentrated today.

Ekman has conducted ethnographic case-studies at two major media companies that produce television and radio programmes. The core data comprises interviews with employees and managers, combined with relatively lengthy participant observations at the two companies' offices. Ekman is generous with her ethnographic material and gives the reader a nice sense of being present, especially in the interviews with company employees and managers. The introductory section is followed by two chapters that deal with data gathering, ethics, and analytical strategies, and four chapters that focus firmly on the empirical material, drawing on interviews with management and staff in

particular. The book ends with a short concluding chapter that includes suggestions of topics for further research.

The title of the book elegantly captures the scope of the study, Ekman sets out to capture the 'simultaneities' and paradoxes inherent in the conditions of doing knowledge work by looking at three themes: (i) the tensions between existential meaning and exploitation; (ii) the simultaneity of having the power to influence one's work as well as being in a vulnerable position; and (iii) the power dynamics of contractual demands and profit on the one hand and existential journeys expected of and by the personnel on the other (3). It is a general research problem to find ways of grasping simultaneities in the work situation of creative knowledge workers in such a way as the methodological queries and design are closely intertwined with the aims of the study. If nothing else, it requires an analytical framework that remains open to the contingencies of knowledge workers' power relations, as well as the researcher's interpretations of them. More detailed research questions are then formulated in the course of the exposition.

There are obviously several exciting aspects of this study that are worthy of discussion, but Ekman has two major strands to her argument that I would particularly like to address here. First, she argues that the study makes an empirical contribution by elaborating on knowledge work as something that operates in contradictory work contexts that are not acknowledged or even conceptualized as contradictory. Second, a methodological argument is developed that draws on what the author calls an *analysis of compassion*, promoting the idea that the author/ethnographer should enter the world of work with evident compassion for everyone involved, without pre-determining who the 'bad guys' might be in the work environment studied. I will discuss these issues from the point of view of current research on knowledge work and its methodological challenges, and will then reflect on the conclusions that can be drawn from a reading of Ekman's book, especially concerning social inequality. First, however, we must enter the world of knowledge work as presented to us in the opening pages of *A&A*.

A world of knowledge work

When we first encounter the topic of this book, a narrative is presented to us that many of us will recognize from magazines, television shows, conversations with friends and family, and from our own workplaces, and thus it catches the reader's attention. This particular story is taken from a women's magazine, and paints a picture of a perfect, ambitious, female knowledge worker. In the

example she is called Michelle, and is a well-known host on one of Denmark's most respected topical debate programmes. Michelle is characterized by 'professionalism, insight, and competence' (1). However, in the article, Michelle describes how she was gradually overcome by anxiety, had trouble sleeping, and became unfocused. She eventually broke a shoulder falling off the chair when checking her emails:

Soon after this incident, her exhaustion was so deep that it prevented her from getting out of bed. In retrospect, Michelle admits that it is extraordinary how she could ignore these symptoms and just keep working. She explains that she had always been a highly ambitious woman who did not include in her repertoire the message 'I can't do it'. (1)

Michelle's assignments at work had often been so challenging that she doubted she would be able to complete them. Paradoxically, Ekman notes, this was one of the things that made her feel passionate about her work, because 'The job was like a pioneering voyage — always exploring new horizons and treading unfamiliar ground' (1). There are many illuminating examples from the interview data given in chapters 4, 5, and 6 that could be related to Michelle's story. One example is the vividly portrayed radio host who had a nervous breakdown every Tuesday because he needed to come up with a new, innovative theme for the show he hosted on Thursdays. The same problem recurred almost every week, and it was therefore suggested by his manager that he might like to create a database of the topics that had been aired on the show before: the weeks when he was not inspired enough to come up with something new, the database could be used to look up previous topics for inspiration. The programme host refused the idea because he firmly believed that he was *supposed* to go through the agony, or, as he said, 'it's my fucking program and I will walk the plank!' (104). Every week, this painful process proved that he possessed the unique skills for the job. Ekman states that 'he preferred the breakdown' (104). It was important that he managed himself in order to sustain the fantasy of being the chosen one, convincing himself and others of his irreplaceability.

At the same time as the knowledge workers talked about how they were driven by a passion for their work, individuals as well as organizations seemed to be constantly on the verge of collapse. Ekman even argues that the story about Michelle 'is almost a mandatory formative repertoire for highly skilled workers' (2). One question that piqued Ekman's interest was how this breakdown narrative could be such a resilient dynamic? The question also serves to provoke the interest of the reader, and is then methodically woven into a research design where the author takes an interest in the longings and fantasies that fanned the desire to be 'the chosen one' despite all the agony. Thus it is worth considering the ontological and epistemological assumptions that underpin the analysis.

Methodological explorations of an analysis of compassion

The methodology starts from a deconstruction of some of the ‘grand narratives’ of contemporary social sciences. It finds its leverage in critical readings of sociological theories of modernity — labour process theory and critical management theory; general level theories Ekman argues often overlook the complexity and heterogeneity of everyday life in organizations. Here, the author invokes the common criticism that grand theories of modernity and/or post-bureaucracy tend to look for sharp ruptures in history and disregard how different developments slowly emerge and overlap (14)¹. Given that this critique is indeed common, Ekman here is pushing at an open door, and instead greater credit could have been given to those who have raised similar criticisms before (Alvesson and Svenningsson, 2003; du Gay, 2000; Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004; Stokes and Clegg, 2002; Storey et al., 2005). When the argument moves on to the construction of a methodological framework, it turns on a critique of labour process theory (LPT) and the works of Kunda. Ekman states that Kunda and others have built their analysis on an assumption of suspicion and that LPT researchers tend to assume beforehand who the ‘good guys’ and ‘bad guys’ are:

These analyses tend to operate with predefined dualisms imbued with normative value, such as: freedom (good) and power (bad); employees (victims) and employers (exploiters); authenticity (good) and profit (bad). (228)

Ekman argues for compassion towards everyone and constructs a framework for an exploration based on compassion in an *analysis of compassion* (39). This approach promises more openness to the unexpected: victims can become exploiters and profit can draw on authenticity. This approach springs from the wish to establish ‘methodological tools capable of reading for difference and surprises rather than corroborating general diagnosis’ (15). It includes ‘messing’ with common ‘messages and data which do not immediately correspond with my hypothesis, with my theoretical “darlings”, or with the dominant tales of the field’ and instead ‘read for difference’ (71)².

With an analysis of compassion setting the agenda, Ekman looks for a way of relating to the data, allowing researchers to continuously reflect on their

1 In particular the works of Bauman, 1993, 2009; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2009; Giddens, 1991; and Sennett, 1998, 2006, are here discussed.

2 The expression ‘read for difference’ could be used in different ways. Glynnos (2008: 286) brings it up in relation to the Lacanian concept of fantasy, suggesting that ‘the more subjects are invested in fantasies, the more likely they are to read all aspects of their practice in terms of that fantasmatic narrative, and the less likely they are to “read for difference”’. In Ekman’s study, ‘reading for difference’ becomes an analytical strategy.

assumptions and positions in the research field. In this search, the author takes an eclectic approach, drawing on systems theory as well as poststructuralist discourse analysis inspired by the work of Laclau (and its reading by Glynos and Howarth, 2007). The integration of Laclau's work into an analytical framework of logics of critical explanation, however, takes a central position in the methodological design. The logics framework builds on the idea that a social science explanation involves the mobilization of three types of logic: social, political, and fantasmatic (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). The notion of fantasmatic logic is inspired by the Lacanian use of fantasy, and aims to understand why particular practices and regimes 'grip' subjects and what either sustains social order or weakens its hegemony. Ekman specifically refers to Glynos's work on fantasy in an organizational setting.

At risk of oversimplification, logics could be described as the articulation of a set of 'organizing principles' for discourses. Here Ekman describes how two discourses are at work simultaneously in the media companies. On the one hand, a *contractuality discourse* that emphasizes traditional (modern) orders of hierarchy and authority that strive for clarity in terms of the division of labour, impartiality, and fairness, and that regulate relations between employees and managers as well as between subjects within these groups. On the other hand, an *authenticity discourse* that privileges (post-bureaucratic) self-realization, rebellion and authenticity, and mutual trust. All of these things were active simultaneously in the everyday work of the knowledge workers, and are described as forming contradictory work environments that place employees and managers in conflicted positions. An illustrative example is how some parts of the workforce were deemed qualified by their education and formal merits, while others were deemed qualified by 'X-factor' and sheer passion: this added to the complex conditions for 'making it' as a creative knowledge worker, let alone the difficulties of identifying what the qualifications actually *are* for managers and employees.

Ekman describes the organizations' lack of language with which to call contradiction by its correct name and the difficulties that arise from this. Here, the notion of logic provides a meta-language that is identified as missing in the organizational contexts. Ekman argues that 'through a logic of projection, both contractuality and authenticity could maintain their positions as legitimate and important discourses without having to rule each other out' (216). Work provides a life-project for those who hold to this logic, and Ekman describes how managers and employees vest themselves in ideological fantasies, such as 'the chosen one'.

Discussion: Authority and autonomy intertwined

What then is the contribution made by Ekman's empirically informed analysis and the way it becomes intertwined with the assumptions built into this methodological work? More particularly, what *does* the methodological construct with and to the analysis? Given the outcome of Ekman's data analysis, I will reflect on what it tells us about social inequalities in knowledge-work environments.

The impression when having read *Authority and Autonomy* is that the backbone of the book is the descriptive, empirical material. The ethnographic data are telling illustrations of how everyday knowledge work becomes laden with emotional work. The empirical material is clearly central for grasping the ways in which knowledge work aligns with the narratives that posit self-realization to be utterly meaningful for the workers at the same times as it is exploitative of their emotional attachments to their work. These readings in Ekman's empirical material tempt me to think about what the breakdown narrative does for what Ekman calls the logic of projection. Could the knowledge-work companies in the study, for example, be described as (a milder version) of the 'reflexive and masochistic' corporate culture analysed by Cederström and Grassman (2008)? These media organizations — or even the more general narratives of knowledge work introduced in Ekman's study — seem to call 'on the employees to identify with — and enjoy — their symptoms' in self-torturing ways (Cederström and Grassman, 2008: 43). Enjoying one's symptoms to the full, whether it is a broken shoulder or Tuesday agony, becomes a symbol for having a career as a proper creative knowledge worker. However, it becomes clear in Ekman's study that the masochistic characteristics of the job at the Danish media companies are most often coupled with a sincere pride in working there, something that does not seem to occur at the masochistic organizations Cederström and Grassman write about. Does the logic of projection in Ekman's study conceptualize a 'Nordic style' of knowledge work where the strong contractual law on working environments co-exists with the warm organizational embrace of self-realization discourses about individual freedom, neoliberal governance, and flexibility (see also Børve and Kvande, 2012)?

The different faces — fair as well as foul — of such self-sacrificing professional cultures of knowledge work have been observed in various national and organizational contexts. Among others, the works of Boltanski and Chiapello (2005), Archer (2008), Shore (2008), and Storey et al. (2005) should be mentioned; studies that reveal the dual nature of the ideals of the simultaneously self-managing and cracked-up knowledge worker, where entrepreneurial spirit is highly valued. The ability to stage a come-back after a wipeout proves the

strength of the individual and individualized work, and makes sincere dedication to one's work a great asset. The descriptions of knowledge work in other contexts than the Danish media companies in *A&A* contribute further to the avoidance of the 'sweeping diagnosis' for organizational life, and illustrate how characteristics in varied organizational settings agree in some ways and differ in other ways. It is therefore unfortunate that a more detailed interrogation of the literature in direct relation to the analysis of the data is avoided in the empirical chapters. In the instances where other authors are referred to, Ekman does not engage with their work (e.g. 164, 172), a strategy that jeopardizes the 'thickness' of the analysis and leaves important contributions to relevant theories less visible to the reader.

Another hazard is that dwelling on individuals' self-interpretations overly long could give the impression that discourses and logics are located at a level of analysis where *the subject* becomes equal to *the individual*, with the effect of locating the analysis of power relations in relationships between particular individuals rather than in wider social patterns. This disposition may lead to an overemphasis on the individual 'agent', even though the author looks at the role of power and discourse. Although West (2011: 429) has argued that we generally could linger longer in the empirical world of social practices if we are to do the critical agenda of the logics framework full justice, we also need to make sure that empirical descriptions do not rule out the middle-range analytical steps.

On the one hand, there is the issue of messing with analytical categories and endeavouring to reject dualisms and enforce contingencies, and on the other hand, there is the study of the contradictions of knowledge work along 'an axis of manager and employee, and an axis of societal dispositions and individual agendas' (62). The metaphor of the axis gives the impression that 'societal dispositions' and 'individual agendas' operate in different corners, while discourse theory encourages the problematization of dualistic models of structure and agency. Moreover, two predetermined categories that organize the analysis emerge — *employees* and *managers*. It is intriguing that these contractual categories are privileged, because one of the arguments Ekman makes is that the analyst should not take for granted who will take the role of employee and manager in each situation. Values connected with work are then analysed from the 'manager perspective' and the 'employee perspective' (see 198–9, Table 6.1). The methodological introduction also gives the impression that a conflict between employees and managers is presumed (70). One problem that emerges from the decision to stick to these two categories from the very beginning is that it privileges particular types of differences and conflicts, namely the ones based on organizational-hierarchical differences, which do not provide much evidence of the similarities that could shed light on the complexities that Ekman sets out

to explore. This becomes particularly apparent in the conclusions, especially regarding social inequalities:

Seen from a perspective of social inequality, the trends favor versatility, flexibility, and adaptability and they thus represent a potential exclusion of people with low tolerance for ambiguity, with a focus on depth rather than scope, and with limited talent for improvisation. (227)

Important as this may be, differences between employees and managers may only in parts explain the implications of this finding. For example, differences within each of the groups of employees and managers risk being downplayed. Ekman concludes that those who 'chose to stay' in creative knowledge work could avoid burnout by introducing 'pockets of "checking out" and "recharging" between the periods of high intensity' (217). Here, the notion of 'choosing to stay' could be further problematized. For example, given these conditions, which subjects will be privileged or more likely to be able to create such 'pockets'? Were such privileges only linked to the categories of manager and employee, or were there other important aspects to consider? Despite the use of discourse theory, the argument slips towards a rhetoric about the existential aspects of knowledge work and the ones that 'chose to stay'. Failing to get your act together (like Michelle in the introductory passage) is the same as leaving, failing, losing your job and your professional identity, and disregarding everything you have previously invested in them. When it comes to the analysis of the implications for social inequality, the extensive literature on the subject could safely be invoked even more. I particularly think of gender and intersectional research on organizations and their effects on the lives of knowledge workers involved in them (see for example Archer, 2008; Hovden et al., 2011; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006; Shore, 2008).

I have read this book from the position of an academic with my own interest in social inequality and working conditions, and as an academic, I also spend my own working life in a knowledge-work setting. Just as Ekman hopes, this is an engaging book and well worth reading. There is no doubt that Ekman pinpoints the centrality of personal and organizational breakdown of which many of us struggle with on a daily basis, but I also think that people could identify with this narrative across many types of organizational scenery, not only those that are usually understood in terms of knowledge-work settings. Nevertheless, it is crucial to pin down its specificities in terms of knowledge work whenever knowledge-worker subjectivity becomes a key signifier for living the good, modern life. With its flexible time cultures and strong connotations of creativity and self-realization, knowledge work occupies a prestigious position in a world of work that socially and culturally privileges those who can make it there (Gorman and Sandefur, 2011). It becomes clear that the performance-orientated,

individualized, competition-based audit cultures do not stand in contrast to more ‘traditional’ and idealistic, fantasies about professionals; it breeds them. Self-indulging and self-sacrificing subjectivities are sought after, but are always dependent on multiple, possibly dispersed, and sporadically willing ‘investors’: employees, managers, customers, audience, us, them, we, you.

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