

Euphoria and Despair (book review)

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Postprint / Postprint

Rezension / review

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Hutter, M. (2022). Euphoria and Despair (book review). [Review of the book *The inner world of research: on academic labor*, by S. Svallfors]. *European Journal of Sociology / Archives Européennes de Sociologie*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975622000157>

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Book Review — Accepted Manuscript (Postprint)

[Book Review] Euphoria and Despair - Stefan Svallfors, *The Inner World of Research. On Academic Labor* (London, Anthem Press, 2020)

European Journal of Sociology

Provided in Cooperation with:
WZB Berlin Social Science Center

Suggested Citation: Hutter, Michael (2022) : [Book Review] Euphoria and Despair - Stefan Svallfors, *The Inner World of Research. On Academic Labor* (London, Anthem Press, 2020), European Journal of Sociology, ISSN 1474-0583, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, Iss. forthcoming (accepted for publication: Feb. 2022), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0003975622000157>

This Version is available at:
<http://hdl.handle.net/10419/251764>

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EUPHORIA AND DESPAIR

Stefan SVALLFORS, *The Inner World of Research. On Academic Labor*
(London, Anthem Press, 2020, 125 p.)

The essay deals with two kinds of inner worlds, with the mental world of a researcher and with his social world of research. The emphasis is on the inner world of emotions, but most of these emotions are determined by communicating with other researchers, with policy-makers or with broader audiences. Since only his own mental world is known to the author, he draws on the life experience of Stefan Svallfors, a sociologist renowned for his empirical work on welfare regimes and attitudes to redistribution, a member of the Swedish Academy of Sciences, a research director at the Institute of Futures Studies in Stockholm, and a research professor at Södertörn University, a graduate level educational institution. He writes about himself in a way that makes his observations recognizable for other researchers: “This book is not just about me, but there is no one it is more about than me” (xiii). So it is not, and yet it is, about him. Paradoxa of this nature seem to be inevitable when tackling a topic that is so personal and therefore so intangible.

Svallfors consistently narrates incidents from his biography to make his points. The candid anecdotes provide energy and plasticity, as do the frequent references to the experiences of friends and collaborators throughout the text. In chapter 1, positive emotions are prominent, while darker feelings are exposed and discussed in the final chapter 3. Throughout the book, but particularly in chapter 2, the contours of the social world of research become clearer, as they are tightly coupled to feelings of recognition and rejection. Rather than reiterating the somewhat turbulent flow of argument, I will use a more systematic format to capture the insights of the essay. I will first discuss the mental, then the social inner world of research.

The mental world of research oscillates between positive feelings that reach euphoric “moments of unsullied happiness” (xv), and negative feelings that culminate in despair. In sorting the various examples presented, four kinds of mental constellations may be distinguished, each with its specific kind of euphoria, and its specific kind of despair.

There is, first, a deeply mental condition, which manifests itself on the positive side in the euphoric state of being when a text is finished and submitted, or in the “torrent of thoughts, ideas and arguments” (50), as they flow from the head of political scientist Bo Rothstein, his close friend and admired paragon. But at the same time, darkness overcomes his mind with recurring inevitability. Svallfors reveals that each November he is struck with *Seasonal Affective Disorder* (SAD), a form of depression that he describes as “a black storm of mud and oil” (107). Yet he tries hard to turn the tormenting episodes to advantage: writing is his only solace during these periods, and the feeling caused by a malicious review appears harmless in comparison.

A second mental constellation is less intuitive and more open to a slow process of experiential accretion. The result is a sense of “implicit embodied intuition” (6), a “gut-feeling that is genuinely based on deep-seated familiarity-knowledge” (8). This skill characterizes the expert researcher, the one whose recognition of implicit pattern enables him to identify socially relevant research objects.

But this positive emotion can switch into negative mode when the gut-feeling is exposed to doubt—when self-belief is shattered by some event or action, and gives way to fraud anxiety—“fear of being exposed as an imposter” (29)—and self-contempt, which can “in an apparently paradoxical way derive from arrogance and self-pride” (100).

The third mental constellation is triggered during the crossfire of argument, in immediate contact with other persons that are considered to be valid peers, opponents in “the same weight class” (65). Arguing is “what makes life worth living” (66), states Bo Rothstein. Svallfors describes in detail how his performance during a lecture or a discussion is determined by the “tightness” of the atmosphere, and even the shape of the room. The counterpart to the tingling aliveness of argumentative exchange is boredom. Boredom may result from staying too long in one place, privately and professionally. It feels “like a grey woolly blanket over my well-ordered existence” (92). The cure can consist in moving on to a new, more challenging environment, or, if no appointments from centers of research emerge, to accept boredom as a—again paradoxical—precondition of creativity: “You start to improvise, push the boundaries, anything to create a little variation. And then all of a sudden something new appears” (92).

The “new” however, remains a personal illusion until the judgments by colleagues, editors and referees confirm its appearance. In the mental world of the researcher, this fourth constellation is of particular, even overriding relevance: it is governed by feelings of acceptance or rejection in the particular kind of social world of research to which the researcher belongs or desires to belong. Such acts of inclusion or exclusion take place on several levels of social integration: they happen during the meetings of a research team, in “decoding” the critical remarks in a referee report, and in being awarded or refused a grant by the Swedish Research Council. Acts of rejection lead to feelings of humiliation, rage and bitterness—“a tsunami of emotions” (101). But since the system of qualified peer judgment is at the heart of the social world of research, a researcher’s success depends on his mental ability to deal with failure, with errors of judgment, with slights in personal encounters. He cites a journal editor who counsels the need to “handle rejections elegantly” (97). But in adopting the editor’s voice, he points to the flipside of the relationship: researchers in mid-career or later are the ones who perform the role of editors, referees and team leaders. Svallfors cites one instance where removal of a chapter from a volume he edited was “necessary” (64), but he does not dwell on the feelings that came with the power to make such decisions.

Given the richness of Svallfors’ exposition of the mental inner world, it is surprising that he omits one condition that has a long tradition in philosophy, which might be called the Dionysian approach. Where is the frenzy of intoxication, the willful inducement of certain mental states through red wine, cocaine, sleep deprivation or group ecstasy? None of his stories refer to such states. Even if they were alien to his own experience, he certainly must have observed such states, with their particularly turbulent mixture of euphoria and despair.

The essay gains complexity and significance by coupling emotions to the social world in which Svallfors is an active participant. It addresses the micro level of research teams, the meso level of professional engagement, and the macro level of (Swedish) society.

According to Svallfors, all research is motivated by the common goal of knowledge production: at the core is creativity, defined as “the ability to create something genuinely new” (44). He admits that such newness is elusive, “existing only if accepted by others” (45). This acceptance—as it is perceived by

the person who believes to have found or created something new—takes on different forms, depending on the level of social interaction. Each of the forms involves a paradox.

On the level of teams, Svallfors provides advice for conditions that increase the chances of “successful spontaneity” (24): find architecturally creative spaces, encourage a “disrespectful atmosphere” (16) and, above all, choose team members that are diverse in skills, background, personality and other features. Svallfors calls the optimal mix “Goldilocks diversification” (18)—adopting the term from a nursery tale in which a girl called Goldilocks intrudes into the house of three bears and tests their cups, chairs and beds until she finds the one with the “right size”. But the concrete specification of the balance between contradictory qualities, between structure and improvisation and between encouragement and critique—“the thin membrane between care and cruelty” (26)—is presumably left to the team leader’s embodied intuition.

The wider social world of research enters the mental world through the paradox of experiencing its periphery and center, at the same time. On one hand, Svallfors describes his strong desire for moving from the Northern periphery—which is cold, harsh and boring—to the central city of the country, where he is “close to the beating heart of the academic world” (56). He is aware that, on a global scale, Stockholm is still peripheral to the research centers in Oxbridge and the top US universities. Within his circle, only Bo Rothstein has accomplished this ultimate step. The center, however, evokes contradictory emotions. He warns that “the frigid sun of the centre blinds more than it illuminates” (56), and he sees it populated with “consensus-seeking and security-thirsting people” (60). Therefore, the most productive position for creating something new is at the margin, “having one foot in the ... familiar, and one foot in the ... unfamiliar” (43). Members from particular social groups are disposed to a view from the margin—Svallfors cites the examples of writers from the Jewish diaspora and those with Asperger’s syndrome—, but others have to design their marginality, in relation “to your friends, enemies, collective, the power base” (60). So there is tension between wanting to be “in the centre, elevated but still one with the others” (2), and “constantly being on the edge, and possibly on edge” (61)—or even “to slip off the edge, to be devoured by the black hole” (73).

Svallfors draws a remarkably narrow line around “planet Academia” (56). There are hardly any references to his teaching experience, and there is no reference to academic self-organization, be it on the level of a department or that of a university. In his view, courses and meetings seem to be inevitable features of gaining a living, and being able to dedicate one’s time to research.

Society makes its strongest appearance on the mental screen of the researcher through agents of political institutions who have the power to grant funded appointments and projects. In his view, those who execute research policy are “a parasitic group, living off the research system as they suck the energy and life out of it” (34). “We”—meaning the set of intrinsically motivated researchers—“are our best ... if we could just be left in peace to do our job” (39). Such suspicion, even contempt, comes from an expert who has published on the activities of policy professionals. There, Svallfors recognized that politicians as well as those who are employed or hired by them also “know their game”, even if it is a game different from that of social scientists. After all, the policy game connects the needs of researchers with those of other claimants in a national society, and assessment procedures are an inevitable medium, as clumsy as they may seem. Players from the two games will inevitably encounter irritation, frustration and the kind of bitterness that stems from feeling superior to the opponent who prevails.

The book's subtitle—"On Academic Labor"—suggests a focus on the economic context of the inner world, perhaps contrasting the labor of searching for something new with the surplus value gained from publicly available information capital. But no such road is taken. Economic power makes a fleeting appearance when Svallfors is invited to the Söderberg family, "one of the most important pinnacles in the landscape of economic power" (70). The taste and beauty of the surroundings do not blind Svallfors to the danger of being sucked in: "It's horrible to see how easily scientific independence is abandoned before the opportunity to dance in the magic circle of power" (74). Svallfors clearly prefers to dance in the magic circle of research, as far away as possible from external demands, be they political, economic or educational.

This small book, a mere 120 pages long, generates a rich harvest of insights on what it means to be torn between euphoria and despair, between acceptance and refusal, between desire for the center and dedication to the margin. Svallfors' use of personal incidents, his frank treatment of intimate emotions grips the reader with unusual directness, to the point where affective persuasion replaces rational conviction. The essay format frees him from reviewing relevant literature, be it on the phenomenology of the mind, the valuation of newness and novelty, the conditions of creativity in organizations, or simply the confessions of kindred spirits: "Disciplines are lonely hearts clubs where people adrift in the huge sea of intellectual possibility are trying to find a few souls with similar preferences."¹ Instead, Svallfors concentrates on moving the reader to assess his or her position relative to him—one's own biographical oscillation between periphery and center, one's own capacity to deal with rejection and failure, and one's own moments of unsullied happiness.

MICHAEL HUTTER

¹ Andrew ABBOTT, 2014, "The Problem of Excess," *Sociological Theory*, 32: 1-26: 22.