

Alvesson, M. (2013). *The Triumph of Emptiness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 243 p. ISBN: 978-0-19-966094-0.

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“As emphasized throughout this book, we live in an economy of persuasion, circling around promotion, desire, and expectations.” (Alvesson, 2013, p. 218).

The discourse of constant change, of continuous growth, has become one of the dominant rationalities in modern Western societies, or as Alvesson puts it, post-affluent societies. Behind this idea, which almost spontaneously presents itself as a solution to every problem, lies a far more complex set of relations of power, described primarily by Foucault (1980, 2008) as productive power. This shifts through postmodern discourse, leaving aside prescriptive claims while firmly establishing itself as subjectively inscribed as the right way of understanding things.

The *Triumph of Emptiness* sheds light on the boundaries inherent in the habitual¹ reality that many of us have at least partly internalised and come to see as “the way things are, or the ways things should be”. Alvesson demonstrates that this reality is partial and it is not Reality as such. Behind the grandiose concepts lies hollowness and the paradox of a very limited chance of change. Alvesson argues that post-affluent societies have become focused on form rather than substance. In a certain sense this is not new, but it is in fact one of the few social phenomena touched upon in this book that is actually continuously growing.

The book is based on critically challenging some of the predominant ideas – many of which are often taken for granted – about management, organisational structure, working life, consumption and education. The basic idea is that economic growth and higher consumption are key sources of increased satisfaction. In line with this idea, education (especially higher education) is something positive, and leads to higher qualification; it is therefore a growing need of individuals and society. The third predominant idea is that current and future working life is permeated by views of the knowledge economy and a knowledge intensive society (pp. 1-2). All of these social theories, predominantly seen as positive and functional, can, as the author demonstrates, be understood in terms of grandiosity, illusion tricks and zero-sum games (ibid.). The concepts refer to

1 The term is used in line with Bourdieu's notion of habitus (1998).

those aspects of social life that are more or less systematically targeted for creating a positive, one-sided view of diverse phenomena (p. 206).

Zero-sum games refer to promised satisfaction in connection to positional goods. The value of the latter is inscribed in the relation to others. One (wo) man's gain is another (wo)man's loss, a situation that is reinforced by continuous economic growth. Alvesson explains the way it functions. Once a new car no longer distinguishes the few from the rest, it is no longer a positional good: the value is lost with the loss of the distinguishing element, and with it satisfaction is also lost. Needless to say that salvation is just around the corner (pp. 4-7, 21). Zero-sum games reinforce the need for grandiosity: competition, attractiveness and status enhancement become an essential part of the continuous struggle of interest groups and individuals. Trying to distinguish oneself from the crowd in a free market calls for a positive, well-defined and status-enhanced image; this also holds for specific organisations or institutions. This creative economy claims knowledge as an essential pillar in the development of capital, and perhaps even a necessity for keeping up with things (pp. 8-9).

The response of the educational world is evident in the increase of higher education degrees, and of higher education institutions. New additions are being made to the scientific world every day: more higher education institutions than ever are becoming universities, and more "fields" are acquiring academic status. Grandiosity is omnipresent. That which was once reserved for the privileged few is now decentralised and democratised: everyone desires it and feels entitled to it. "Showing off" becomes an essential part of keeping up with... It is a mix of motives, meanings, interests and practical advantages (pp. 11-14), enabled and reinforced by the adaptation of free-market logic to ever wider spheres of society. Social status and position become a question of the continuous struggle of interest groups and rational investments. Here, the economy shifts from production to the creation of needs and desires (pp. 24-25). Grandiosity attempts to change meanings, and this is supported, as the author determines, by the third manifestation of contemporary development: illusion tricks. There is a declining interest in substance and a greater interest in conveying images and ideas that give the impression of something positive: pseudo-events, pseudo-actions and pseudo-structures are examples. The strong representation element acts as a signifier, without actually signifying much. Many ethical principles, gender equality plans, quality assurance initiatives and corporate responsibility policies are good examples (p. 15, 18).

As Alvesson explains, this involves reorganisation or change with a limited affect on activities. Ideas of how things should be impact institutional theory, they introduce techniques, practices and structures, establish new departments,

initiate projects and programmes, and employ certain terms in order to reduce cognitive uncertainty and/or to establish legitimacy. “In the absence of self-confidence, time to think, and critical reflection, people tend to imitate others” (p. 19). The imprint of consumer culture and its logic is felt throughout the themes covered in this book: education, working life and organisations (p. 29).

Alvesson stresses the “other” reality behind the predominant ideas, and explains why economic growth and consumption are not satisfaction-creating projects. He sheds light on the limits of the satisfaction-raising enterprise. This is closely connected to the three core aspects of this book. An increasing part of it centres around promises of grandiosity, quality assurance markers that are often uncertain and can in many cases be seen as illusion tricks. Grandiosity is expressed in direct sales messages with glamour, superiority and promises of extraordinary qualities. Relationships, work, knowledge and actions are, according to some critics, loosing ground in relation to materialistic values and consumption as sources of identity (pp. 30-33). Double-edged rationality, as the ability to make the right purchasing decisions, deflects from promises of security, and in fact increases irrationality and uncertainty. The paradox repeats itself through expectations of satisfaction. As shown in the third chapter, research indicates that greater consumption is not a source of greater average happiness. The key here is not to undermine the need for material security in order to achieve a secure and happy life, but rather the notion that consumption implies: the need to score higher than other people, and with this the increased significance of positional goods. However, this has only a limited return: increased growth has less and less to do with individual needs and more and more to do with status in relation to others (pp. 69-71). Consumer choice is nevertheless a hub around which society rotates. It controls production, guides innovations and the political market, and determines ecology: the satisfied consumer has become a powerful indicator of quality (pp. 33-34).

Chapters four and five are dedicated to manifestations of the key concepts in the field of higher education. The “self-evident” knowledge engine for the knowledge society and the knowledge economy is critically examined. It has become a well-established truth that education paves the way to success in life, to national greatness and to a fast track to top jobs. The author notes that he is not opposed to education when it leads to greater knowledge and improved intellectual abilities; however, educational fundamentalism, as he calls it, overemphasises the positive results and opportunities offered by education (pp. 72-74). Grandiosity and illusion tricks accompany the massification of higher education and raise fantasies, while ambitions that are unlikely to be fulfilled, especially in relation to well-paid jobs, fall under the zero-sum game (p. 75). Alvesson speaks

of two kinds of tendencies: greater numbers often mean a deterioration in learning, a wide variation in student ability and motivation, large classes, and students processed in a McDonaldized way; greater numbers also reduce the true value of education in the labour market, pushing people into more advanced forms of education in order to improve their credentials and competence. On the other hand, there is weak empirical evidence supporting the effect of education on economic productivity (p. 77). Zero-sum games also imply quality reduction, and give rise to problems of a “flabby” education system (such as a low level of requirements, an extremely wide range of possible subjects of study, problems with student motivation and ability).

This in turn gives rise to a variety of quality assurance mechanisms (pp. 87-89, 97-100) that very likely only reinforce grandiosity, illusion tricks and zero-sum games. The question of power can hardly be avoided. Following Foucault, the knowledge-based economy becomes acute; knowledge is not neutral, it tends to produce a world in line with its pronouncements, creating particular visions of the world (p. 109). The same is true of the interests that form higher education and provide formal qualifications with legitimacy (p. 97). The power-knowledge axis also implies a subject (see Foucault, 2008) in relation to which it manifests itself as a regulative way of being and (continuous) normalisation, while, in a knowledge-intensive society, people with a lower level of education are appropriate targets for change efforts (pp. 114-115). In a zero-sum circle, this becomes a question of a lifelong learning.

Chapter six presents the discrepancies in modern working life and organisations. Characteristics such as knowledge-intense, flexible, non-hierarchical, network and project-based seem to be exaggerated (p. 135), even more so when compared to the statistics regarding over-educated people. Formal degrees are often not utilised on the job. Both claims suggest a discrepancy between the grandiose promises and the realistic needs of the labour market, which takes us back to the element of satisfaction: there is a considerable correlation with job satisfaction in the “over-educated” population (pp. 105-106). This is further elaborated in chapter eight: “With increased interest in grandiosity, it is becoming more and more important for an increasing number of occupations and workers to avoid tasks that are not in line with the raised expectations of qualifications and high status” (p. 167). Occupations become involved in zero-sum games about high status and avoiding routine, boring, heavy and unsatisfying work tasks. Parallel to this, there is increasing competition in professionalisation projects, but improvements in status and qualifications do not guarantee better performance (pp. 167-169). This is also closely connected with the idea and the position of leadership (chapter nine). The seventh chapter discusses imitations

and shop-window arrangements in organisations. This is enhanced by mass media, education programmes, articles and consultancy practices. Grandiosity puts pressure on surface work: in order to keep up with the latest fashion, the substance of the service often loses its priority (pp. 150-152).

In conclusion, Alvesson summarises four major problems associated with the triumph of emptiness, all of which are in line with the fundamental problem, that is, with the sense of reality they create (p. 207). Firstly, increased quantity leads to decreased quality; Alvesson stresses that this is not universal, but that it often occurs. Corporations and higher education institutions trying to find their place and enhance their status in an increasingly competitive space often resort to window-dressing recipes (copying recipes for success), which implies less effective operations and fails to encourage improved practices. The diversity that comes with massification paradoxically resorts to homogeneity in attempts to minimise risks, resulting – especially in higher education – in a reduction in the number of talented and motivated people. As Alvesson adds (following Ritzer), this enhances the use of standards, resulting in a loss of distinctiveness, uniqueness, quality and richness (pp. 207-209). The second problem is the erosion of trust: grandiose promises often have little output. Recourses are spent on improving the surface, leaving little to improve practices. Accreditation is awarded to institutions that meet certain criteria – not always implying that the recipient has certain characteristics – and is accompanied by manipulations to match the criteria (pp. 210-211). “The downward pressure on quality is a powerful factor” (p. 213). However, it seems that symbolic capital (titles awarded by higher education, the status of institutions) is still worth fighting for. While saying this, the author also critically addresses the earlier institutional logic, which was marked by an uncertain naive respect, subordination and excessive status differences. These are all trends: massive expansion and the exploitation of grandiosity and illusion as routes to success can lead to sound scepticism and resistance, a loss of trust, cynicism and opportunism, as well as a variety of other experiential and psychological effects (*ibid.*).

The third problem is connected with narcissism. While the book is primarily concerned with economic, social and cultural factors, much of this cannot be dissociated from psychological implications. The key aspects in this regard are unstable and vulnerable subjects, as well as the culturally oriented exaggeration of subjectivity, accompanied by the need to conform to idealised self-images (p. 214). Grandiosity plays the role of a (short-term) solution for feelings of doubt, insufficiency and uncertainty. Established conventions rather than cultural free-setting seem to be a suitable background for identity projects. Discrepancies between expectations, demands and that which reality offers

force people into either change or depression. Like many phenomena discussed in this book, identity-boosting is also double edged: it shows a dialectical relationship between the problem and the solution at the same time (pp. 214-215).

The fourth cost of grandiose society is functional stupidity, or the lack of socially supported reflection, substantive reasoning and justification. This, following Alvesson, entails the refusal to use intellectual resources beyond a narrow and safe terrain, and has nothing to do with intellect. Functional stupidity provides a sense of certainty to an individual who is, as seen, fairly uncertain, while also allowing social life to function smoothly (p. 216). It provides security from doubt and reflection while following the flow and avoiding too much scepticism and resistance. This, as the author claims, is especially significant in the contemporary economy of persuasion. Functional stupidity has a motivational aspect. Cognitive capacity is used in narrow instrumental ways, accompanied by a lack of curiosity and an orientation towards complying with the dominant social logic. The emotional aspect is connected to anxiety and personal insecurity, which reinforce functional stupidity and overlap with narcissism. The consequent criticism is that the dominant social institutions of our time tend to reduce the quality of critical thinking and dialogue (pp. 216-217).

To conclude, Alvesson admits that the problems discussed are not the only characteristic, or even main characteristic, of our time. The costs outlined here have a variety of balancing and opposing effects. Nevertheless, he insists on the reality of the problems, which are primarily connected to the question of values of a positional nature, where the social limits of growth signify the exchange managed in relation to others (p. 220, 225) “even if you stretch up and stand on your toes, you don’t see any better if everyone else is doing the same” (p.225).

The Triumph of Emptiness discloses some of the important trends of post-affluent societies. It offers a strong platform for rethinking some of the basic notions and truths of our time, some of which cannot be understood properly without genealogically rethinking some of the central ideas and notions of Western societies, such as liberalism, democracy, political economy (see Foucault, 2009) and, last but not least, equality.

References

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