

**The triumph of emptiness; consumption, higher education and work organization, by Mats Alvesson, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, 256pp, £25 (hardback) ISBN 0199660948, £25 (ebook) ISBN 9780191636721.**

Alvesson's latest work centres on the depiction of three contemporary conditions of modern western society: grandiosity, illusion tricks and zero sum games; principle among these being grandiosity. Alvesson argues that behind the seemingly impressive façades, there is little to show for consumption, economic growth, prosperity or mass higher education. He ends the book with the rather downbeat conclusion ... *underlying the grandiose society's illusion tricks is the triumph of emptiness* (p225).

The stated purpose of the book is to consider the nature of modern society, which Alvesson variously describes as post-affluent, a society where quality has been traded for quantity, where there has been an erosion of trust, where narcissism dominates our actions and where functional stupidity means that all of us are unwilling to use our critical faculties in our home and working lives; in other words, a place where it is easier to believe the hype and not to think too hard about things.

In a culture of grandiosity individuals pump-up their CV and inflate their job titles; while governments make great claims about the benefits to be derived from a world class education or health system and through press release and sound bite, they tell a story of upwardly mobile performance indicators or downward trends in unemployment figures and crime levels. But all the hype is masking what Alvesson describes as a zero sum game; where one person's gain is another's loss. If everyone can afford the same type of

expensive designer clothes they lose their value. If everyone has a degree, then there is no benefit to having a degree, if one person gets the new job several others do not.

Illusion tricks complete the gloomy picture of contemporary society. These tricks (which we could also call spin) place all their emphasis on conveying positive images rather than the substance of the message. The pressure to constantly present a positive picture, leads to an all pervading need to present an improved image of reality.

The focus of the analysis is on three largely unrelated areas: consumption; higher education and work and organisations. There are two chapters on each topic, the section on work and organisation being for me the most interesting and relevant to readers of *Business History*.

Alvesson announces to the reader that he is not someone seduced by consumption (the proof of his immunity being that he does not choose to own a car); however, the rest of post-affluent western society suffers from a consumption paradox. The more that is consumed the more is demanded and in general the less happy everyone is. Alvesson's chapters on consumption cover the same sort of territory as Zygmunt Bauman and draws on the work of other well read authors like George Ritzer, Naomi Klien. Perhaps he aspires to have the same impact? The chapters on work and organisation cover the nature of work in contemporary society with insights into leadership and organisational narcissism. The observations on leadership were interesting although I have to say I was

rather disappointed that there is also some bashing of stereotypical public sector bureaucrats along the way.

I was least convinced by the chapters on higher education. The massification of higher education has undoubtedly created many problems but for me these two chapters seemed to be the stuff of senior common room rants rather than insightful observations. There was much talk of inferior *vocational colleges* that have become universities and sneers at what he calls *light-weight* courses in a range of subjects which he felt the need to stereotype as *Beverage Management*. This is Laurie Taylor territory, but in my opinion *The Triumph of Emptiness* is neither as funny nor as penetrative as the weekly Poppletonion column on the back page of the Time Higher Education Supplement.

Nursing Studies is one of the *light-weight* higher education subjects he attacks. Alvesson clearly does not think that nurses should be awarded degrees. Nursing is also in the firing line in the third section on work and organisations. He seems to feel that the professionalization of nursing has led to a reduction in the quality of care in hospitals. Nurses, he suggests, have become rather grandiose about their role and no longer want to perform the caring that should be the staple of their role. Whilst there may be some justification for worrying about the standard of care afforded to patients in health care institutions, Alvesson's argument largely ignores the significant developments in medical technology and pharmaceutical sciences that have come along since Florence Nightingale got to work in the 1860s. Other trades that seek to become professionalised are similarly frowned-on,

The evidence presented is culled from a wide range of sources most of the data quoted being from Alvesson's reading. For example he frequently quotes Arum and Rosksa's 2011 book (*Academically Adrift: limited learning on College Campuses*, Chicago, Chicago University Press) in order to justify his argument that students are bored and would be better off not undertaking university degree programmes. Little evidence is presented that might counter this view. More frustratingly many of the observations on the state of higher education seemed to be the anecdotal observations of his colleagues and contacts made at a series of *major* international conferences that he attends while working on the book.

The use of the word *major* annoyed me. Why would someone writing a book about grandiosity and pomposity feel the need to tell his readers that he was on his way to a *major* conference? Why do we need to know that he has been invited to speak at a conference in Canada unless it is to boost the status of the writer in the eyes of the reader. Is that not grandiosity in an academic context? Using the zero sum game principle, by implication the conferences that his readers attend are *minor* conferences.

Will this book be of interest to readers of business history? Well yes, some readers will love reading the anecdotes about the inadequacies of degree courses in Spa Management and Surfing Studies and will scoff with incredulity when they are told that a Russell Group University has a module on Harry Potter. But there is not a lot of history in it and only a limited amount of Business. It is a reasonably entertaining piece of

popular sociology ideal for grumpy academics, but I suspect it has some marmite qualities. Some of you will love it, while others (especially those who work in post 1992 universities) will not take to it and will, like me, think it is rather pompous.

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