the
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& work organization

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The Triumph of Emptiness

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List of Abbreviations

CSR   corporate social responsibility

DN   *Dagens Nyheter*

HRM   human resources management

MBA   Master of Business Administration

PBO   post-bureaucratic organization

SDS   *Sydsvenska Dagbladet Snällposten*

TFL   transformational leadership

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Preface

In today's society, a strong emphasis on 'it must look good', and preferably even shine, is vital for the success of individuals, occupational groups, and organizations. Considerable time is devoted to the right visual approach, the right jargon, and the right mass-media focus, while less attention is paid to considerations about substance, practical viability, and quality. The brand is often more crucial than the actual product, and the CV is more important than expertise and ability. The focus is on the surface. The ambition is to put a gilt edge on life by applying attractive indicators that often have no or little substance. I refer to this as grandiosity. A world in which certification and branding are increasingly emphasized and dominate over more substantive issues gives rise to uncertainty and scepticism and even outright cynicism. This is what I characterize as the triumph of emptiness. This is certainly not a completely new phenomenon, but it has been accelerating in terms of intensity and scope, and now appears to be a key characteristic of 'advanced' society.

In this book, I take a broad approach to certain contemporary phenomena. I highlight how consumption is becoming an increasingly crucial and widespread factor, without achieving greater consumer satisfaction, how the knowledge ideal and qualifications for higher education are becoming undermined, and how people in organizations and working life concentrate on developing and copying dubious recipes and impressive representations to ensure that everything looks good.

Some of my criticisms are hardly new, but my thesis is in direct contradiction to the main track in management and sociological research where knowledge society, professionalism, leadership, entrepreneurship, strategic human resource management, and other impressive framings are popular. Alternative, down-to-earth representations (post-affluent society, occupations, supervision, small businesses, and personnel administration) are less so.

This book is a contribution to academic research, but it is also an expression of a critical concern for society as a whole. I am more interested in contributing to a critical understanding than in indicating some specific solutions. Critical insight is often the major result of social science and this is normally

preferable to a blueprint for change, in particular when problems are deeply embedded in culture and there are no easy policy or technical fixes. As with all critical research, the purpose is not to offer maximum empirical accuracy in description so much as a framework for challenging and rethinking dominant lines of understanding. My goal is productive provocation. I am less interested in details and nuances than conveying a strong message about our existence, whether as institutions or individuals, in contemporary, affluent societies. I have tried to tame the inclination of the contemporary academic to be specialized, cautious, and not say 'too much'. My personal attitudes are relatively clearly marked in this book, although it is largely based on research—by both myself and others. I have personally been engaged in organization, management, and working life research for twenty-five years, and a fair proportion of the conclusions reached by my research groups, and myself, are cited in this book, together with the results of other research, of course. I have, however, tried to avoid overburdening the manuscript with too many references.

I should mention that part of this work is inspired by observations in Sweden, although I have considerable international experience and affiliations with universities in the UK and Australia. Sweden is fairly egalitarian and less overtly commercial than many other capitalist countries. That grandiosity is so visible also in Sweden gives credibility to my thesis and I don't think that frequent use of observations from Swedish contexts diminishes the book's general relevance—on the contrary, I think they underscore it. The book is mainly restricted to covering affluent societies—e.g., most of Europe, North America, Australia, as well as other countries—or groups and institutions within countries. The exact relevance of a theory or a framework is partly for the reader to assess. All theories and concepts work sometimes, and sometimes they don't. The value is in challenging established assumptions and offering new ways of seeing, which sensitize us as to how to approach and act in the world.

Mats Alvesson
Lund, August 2012

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Introduction

Zero-sum games, grandiosity, and illusion tricks

Modern society is characterized by grandiose self-personifications and claims on a large scale. There is a strong desire to be labelled in the most attractive and pretentious terms. This applies to individuals, occupations, organizations, and political elites. One problem is that the struggle for the most coveted sugar plums—high professional status, conspicuous consumption, 'world-class education', 'excellence', and so on—involves a zero-sum contest. This means that a benefit for one specific individual or group is gained at the expense of another. Not everybody can be excellent or afford high-status goods or get a degree from a high-status university. Grandiose projects occupy an ever-increasing proportion of the time, commitments, and resources of various elite groups, such as politicians, media people, corporate executives, union leaders, and other representatives of organizations and professional groups. But also the lives of common people increasingly circle around grandiosity. There is a strong emphasis on illusion tricks to back this up: CV improvement, title and grade inflation, organizations exhibiting impressive window-dressing through policy formulation and executive development programmes, and occupations re-launched as professions. This book focuses on the hollowness of such grandiosity and illusory projects, and emphasizes the zero-sum games involved, and also the destructive social and psychological consequences of such phenomena.

Based on these concepts, I will develop a framework for understanding the contemporary age and its institutions. I will examine critically some predominant ideas about management, organizational structure, working life, consumption, and education, which are often taken for granted:

- Economic growth and higher consumption are key sources of increased satisfaction.
- Education is something positive that leads to higher qualifications, and is needed to a greater and greater extent by both individuals and society.
- Current and future working life is permeated by views of a knowledge economy and a knowledge-intensive society, a greater degree of professionalization, and an emphasis on leadership in the creation of effective organizations.

I will show that many conditions and developments in these three areas, which may appear to be positive and socially functional, can be better understood in terms of grandiosity, illusion tricks, and zero-sum games.

My personal viewpoint is rather sceptical, perhaps on the verge of cynicism. My interest lies more in puncturing myths than in the dissemination of optimism or a social engineering philosophy. Like Habermas (1972), I see the raison d'être for social science as critically examining dominant institutions and broadly shared assumptions in order to point out how they constrain our ability and willingness to think through social issues and personal choices in order to arrive at conclusions grounded in reflective reasoning and sensitive ethical considerations. This often means struggling, not only with what appears to be repressive and bad, but also with what seems attractive and good.

Let me start by recounting an episode that will throw light on some of the aspects this book tackles.

I am on my way to a major conference on knowledge society and education. Being familiar with the conference's location, I decide to take an overnight train and a sleeping berth. After a night of relatively undisturbed sleep, I dress, brush my teeth quickly, and step down from the train whilst nodding to the guard—who is probably called a senior conductor these days, or maybe even a Train Master. At the Central Station in Stockholm, I push my way through the swarming crowds of commuters and make my way to the café in the main hall that serves porridge for breakfast. I wait for the young man who clears the tables to make a space for me. After a rapid breakfast, it is time to move on. Outside the station, I pass a long line of taxis waiting for customers. I cross the street and glance in a few shop windows. I see vans and other vehicles passing by, and a few street workers in the distance— some of them are emptying waste-paper baskets. My bus arrives and I get on it. We pass a number of shops. Employees are busy preparing the day's sales work. I get off the bus close to the hotel where I am heading. Once inside the hotel, I ask the receptionist how to find the conference hall. Outside the conference hall, waiters are preparing for the coffee break. I enter the hall. Now it is time for the 'knowledge society'.

In the course of the early morning, I have observed a mass of people at work. But soon I will be faced with another kind of work: conferencing on a knowledge society. Here they will be talking eagerly about 'competence', the importance of higher education and innovation, and suggesting that we can only cope with international competition if we have access to knowledge and quality. IT, high tech, and pharmaceuticals industries are heavily stressed. This knowledge-intensive society is far more acutely present in the conference room than in the working life that I observed in the street outside, which is notably absent in the context of the conference. And the converse also applies: all these transport, service, and retail employees can probably perform their tasks without worrying too much about all this talk about a knowledge society. Or maybe they can't? I will come back to this question.

Sources of inspiration

I am inspired, in particular, by Fred Hirsch, the economist, *Social Limits to Growth* (1976) and by Daniel Boorstin, the historian, *The Image* (1961). These works were published some years ago, but they appear to be even more relevant today. Further, somewhat more general inspiration comes from the Frankfurt school's critical theories—well known for attacking ideologies and 'truths' that lock people into taken-for-granted assumptions and societal forms misleadingly seen as given, rational, and superior. The key names are Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, Fromm, and Habermas. I have also drawn upon Lasch (1979), *The Culture of Narcissism*; Klein (2000), *No Logo*; Sennett (2006), *The Culture of New Capitalism*; and, to some extent, Foley (2010), *The Age of Absurdity*. There are frequent references to the field of 'Critical Management Studies' (CMS), although I make clearer use of the term 'new institutional theory' (John Meyer and colleagues; see, for example, Meyer and Rowan, 1977), which stresses that organizations develop structures to ensure that things look good so that others will think so too. This tradition is interpreted from a critical angle, however. The ideas expressed in Bourdieu (1984) about an economy with a social differentiation have also had an impact on this book. There are, of course, many others to refer to and draw upon, but I do not want to burden the text with too many references.

All the authors and theories that I have mentioned are in the business of unmasking myths, i.e., investigating dangerous 'truths'. This is the business in which I also consider myself. I am aware that my own truth may not be innocent either and hope that the book is very clear on this point. My aim is to offer a framework and concepts that may be useful, rather than to establish strong truth claims.

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Zero-sum games

The first manifestation of the three contemporary conditions and developments I emphasize in this book is that, in an affluent society underpinned by economic growth, the satisfaction provided by consumption has increasingly strong social or relative characteristics. By this, I mean that personal utility/satisfaction is closely interwoven with that of others in the form of open or lightly disguised competition.

In this case, increased satisfaction results primarily from the way the individual ranks in relation to others. Almost all consumption involves both a personal and a social aspect. However, people often think of consumption mainly, or even solely, in individual terms—the preferences and wishes of individuals are satisfied via consumption. This is a 'private' matter, not directly related to the standing of others. If you are starving and receive food, the value and satisfaction involved is primarily individual, and is not related to hunger in the rest of society. The value of shelter as protection against the wind or cold is largely independent of your neighbour's situation—your own exposure to cold is not affected by whether your neighbour is freezing to a greater or lesser extent. Fundamental needs are of this nature, and they involve an 'independent', or absolute, degree of satisfaction. Economists refer to these as 'non-positional goods' (Hirsch, 1976).

However, consumption with strong or relative social orientation is different. Here we talk about positional goods, referring to 'those things whose value depends strongly on how they compare with things owned by others' (Frank, 1985: 101). Crucial here is not what you have and do, per se, but what you have and do in relation to others. Such consumption is part of a salient social context, and the satisfaction/utility depends on your position in relation to others' preferences and behaviour. Consumption involves a significant degree of demonstration to others and/or awareness of others' levels of consumption. The social aspect indicates that utility does not represent some absolute, independent value and independent satisfaction but is, instead, dependent on other people's consumption (or other living conditions). This includes, for example, road congestion—traffic queues depend on other people's actions. Status objects such as branded clothing are another example. Their value is largely a question of their ability to allow you to distinguish yourself from others—and overshadow them. Fashion provides a similar example. Clothes that you once regarded as beautiful and of high quality, and which you actually like, can soon lose their value if everyone else switches to a new style. And if you are the only one in the village with a bicycle, and the other villagers have to walk, you are probably very happy. But if most of the people in your surroundings have big new cars, while you are driving around in an old small one, you may well feel rather dissatisfied. (That
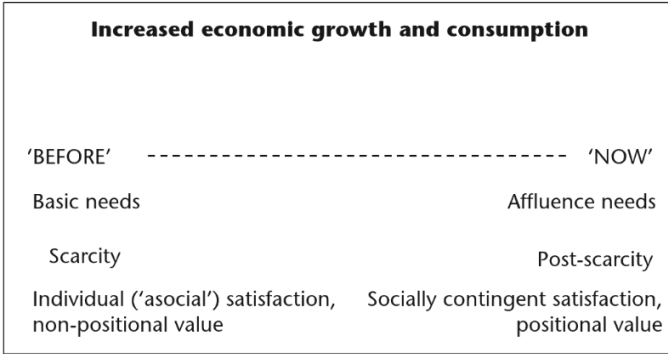
is to say, if you don't belong to the tiny minority that enjoys marking its deviation from normal status patterns. This usually calls for some like-minded people to support you, as when one belongs to a counter-cultural group. Sometimes this means a specific form of 'anti-mainstream' consumption, including paying a lot for 'retro' things, but there are also people who are simply quite uninterested in spending much time or money on consumption.)

In *The Social Limits to Growth* (1976), Hirsch proposes that an ever-increasing proportion of growth in wealthy societies is devoted to goods and services with a strong positional aspect. Status, social differentiation, and conspicuous consumption have been part of most societies since the beginning of civilization. However, there have been drastic changes since the industrial revolution, and particularly since WWII, as a large majority of the population have experienced increases in material living standards. Positionality is no longer an issue for a small elite, nor is it a marginal phenomenon for the majority of people. It is a key element of social life for a significant part of all people today in North America, Europe, and many other countries. The satisfaction following from economic growth depends on how you relate to others in terms of buying power and consumption. It is hardly a question of some general improvement in well-being. We must invest more, for example, in education, if we are not to slip back in the job queue, and must pay more for an attractive house location if we don't want to be forced to live in some peripheral suburb with long commuter journeys. Consumption is, as much else, increasingly becoming a zero-sum game. There is considerable support for the thesis 'that relative standing is far more important than the absolute level of consumption in determining individual well-being' (Frank, 1985: 106). What many people regard as desirable becomes, virtually by definition, reserved for the few. Only a limited number can be educated in prestigious institutions, get the most attractive jobs, or have access to a lakefront house, and the number of inner-city apartments with a view is also limited. The price of such education, lakefront plots, or apartments is forced upwards in line with, or more than, the average increase in salaries. The attractiveness of and competition for positional goods increase with economic growth.

One alternative is to increase the supply, but this leads to a decline in value. With more apartments in the city centre, high-rise developments and congestion reduce the satisfaction of such locations. If many people purchase high-status branded products their 'value-creation' capabilities (to use modern business jargon) are reduced.

This line of argument may be illustrated in Figure 1.

A problem is that the limited impact of growth on increased satisfaction is not clear for the individual, and what appears to be rational if everyone applies their personal rationality becomes the converse at the aggregate level. People purchase the most sophisticated status gadgets, complete a protracted educa-

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│              Increased economic growth and consumption    │
│                                                           │
│                                                           │
│  'BEFORE'  - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -  'NOW' │
│                                                           │
│  Basic needs                              Affluence needs │
│                                                           │
│   Scarcity                                   Post-scarcity │
│                                                           │
│  Individual ('asocial') satisfaction,   Socially contingent satisfaction, │
│  non-positional value                        positional value │
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Figure 1. A simple overview of a trend from the centrality of non-positional goods in pre-affluent to positional goods in post-affluent society.

tion career, or drive their cars from the suburbs to the city centre to save time, only to discover too late that other people have also bought the same gadget, that there are hundreds of other job applicants with the same education, and that the traffic jams are interminable. Our individual and political thinking is rooted in an old economy composed primarily of private (non-positional) goods that are not affected by consumption by other individuals.

> The bedrock is valuation by individuals of goods and opportunities in the situation in which they find themselves. At any moment of time and for any person, standing on tiptoe gives a better view, or at least prevents a worse one. Equally, getting ahead of the crowd is an effective and feasible means of improving one's welfare, a means available to any one individual. It yields a benefit, in this sense, and the measure of the benefit from the isolated action is clear-cut. The sum of benefits of all actions taken together is nonetheless zero. (Hirsch, 1976: 7)

Improvements in the ability to consume are, per se, less relevant than a relative increase. According to this logic, it is better to receive a personal pay rise of 4 per cent if the average figure is 2 per cent than a pay increase of 6 per cent if everyone else is getting the same. This applies to an economy in which basic needs are already provided for and the focus is instead on the consumption of positional objects, and in which possessions and habitual actions have repercussions on benefits for the individual. This situation has applied for some time to the majority of the population in modern Western societies. (It should be clear that most of the points made in this book mainly refer to wealthy societies and wealthy groups across the globe.)

This reasoning explains the paradox that, notwithstanding increased productivity and economic growth, many people feel a strong need for more consumption. According to Hirsch, meeting these demands by means of higher growth is no solution. This is no better than urging people in a

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crowd to stand on their toes to get a better view. As we shall see in Chapter 2, a higher material standard of living in affluent societies has not resulted in greater satisfaction. When I refer to zero-sum games in this book, I am referring primarily to the sense that greater benefits for a specific individual mean a reduction in someone else's benefits. Sometimes this involves a clear zero-sum game in which one person's advantage corresponds directly to another person's loss. This certainly is the case in the sports world, but also in the ranking of universities and schools where success is only achieved at another's expense. This is normally, however, a question of tendencies towards a zero-sum game rather than an absolute phenomenon. Perhaps one might refer to the fact that one person's greater advantage involves an under-mining/weakening of another person's situation. In this case, the pluses and minuses involved are not necessarily equivalent. One might, in principle, imagine a considerable plus for someone at a somewhat lesser expense for someone else, for example, when money is redistributed from the rich to the poor. This can also involve a small plus for some people, but a larger minus for others as, for example, when many individuals acquire a car in a historic city centre. But, for the most part, it is difficult to quantify the advantages and the disadvantages. For those mathematically minded, preferring a strict—rather than my intended metaphorical—view of zero-sum games, one can talk about 'small net-sum' games instead, where the positive advantage of an outcome is met by a similar, larger or smaller, disadvantage. The key point is that a plus for someone is at the direct or indirect expense of someone else, and not whether the equation yields exactly zero.

One variation on this theme is 'mimetic rivalry'. This concept was coined by René Girard (Asplund, 1989) and is based on the idea that people demand what others desire. The other people concerned are not necessarily the entire population, but may consist of a group with which an individual identifies, for example, a class, a profession, or a neighbourhood. In other words, an individual is more likely to be influenced and motivated by the aims of such a group than by his or her own independent preferences. Since we identify and compete with others, they become simultaneously our models and rivals. Girard describes this:

> The subject desires the object because the rival desires it. Through desiring one or another object the rival presents it as desirable for the subject. The rival is the subject's model, but not only on the superficial level of behaviour or attitudes, but also on the more crucial level of desire. (quoted in van Reis, 1988: 64)

A simple example is an auction in which you may be only mildly attracted by an object until you notice that others are interested, and then your own interest increases. Travel destinations, objects with a desirable trademark, employers and jobs, and everything that has a fashion aspect involve a

considerable degree of mimetic rivalry. But many things are durable and change slowly. Universities that have acquired elite status tend to hang onto it, and this also applies to many manufacturers of high-quality/high-status physical products. Our desires and perceived satisfactions depend on the corresponding desires and satisfactions of other people; what we want and we perceive outcomes of efforts to meet desire are very much group-related. While Hirsch emphasizes the centrality of the positional aspects, particularly with regard to economic growth and the affluent society, Girard sees mimetic rivalry as a more general human phenomenon. This does not prevent such aspects from becoming more significant in an epoch when the basic needs of the great majority of a society can be met with a fraction of the resources available. In such a situation, desires, motives, and energy are highly focused on aspects dependent on how personal achievement/consumption relates to that of other people. Mimetic rivalry reinforces the nature of existence as a zero-sum game, and societal development reinforces such mimetic rivalry.[1]

Grandiosity

The second manifestation of contemporary developments concerns living in a society where what I denote as 'grandiosity' is triumphing. This is perhaps the most important theme of this book. By grandiosity, I mean attempts to give yourself, your occupational group/organization, or even the society in which you live, a positive—if somewhat superficial—well-polished and status-enhancing image.

As much as possible is targeted and becomes symbolically upgraded and made remarkable and impressive, adding to status and self-esteem. Issues of substance (practices or tangible results) are marginalized. Grandiosity involves representing or loading phenomena such that they appear as attractive as possible within a framework of what seems to be reasonable.

In other words, grandiosity does not necessarily mean delusions of grandeur or something that is obviously mad. My interest does not lie in the obsession of dictators or other national leaders in the construction of monuments to commemorate themselves, or in the recognition of the value of major achievements, such as the Nobel Prize or Olympic championships. Contemporary grandiosity—at least in open, relatively equality-oriented (often high taxation)

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[1] A possible counterargument is that the spreading Euro-crisis, and the increasing inequalities, may mean that it is once again becoming more difficult to satisfy the basic needs for sections of the population in many countries. But this would not undermine the relevance of the theme discussed. For the major part of the population in countries with a GNP significantly above world average, the positional goods and zero-sum games are significant part of consumption.

societies—is socially controlled, semi-realistic, and confined to loading an increasing number of phenomena with strongly positive, exaggerated meaning that generate attractiveness, success, and distance from the paltriness and mediocrity of everyday life. Grandiosity is being democratized. Everybody wants it and feels entitled to it. It is typically camouflaged and represented as a favourable, but not obviously misleading, representation of a phenomenon. Grandiosity gilds the lily by lending a golden haze to various phenomena. Since this involves considerable doctoring of a world that is not always beautiful, it also involves the application of smoke screens. Grandiosity is linked with an increasingly widespread 'narcissism' and a desire to enhance self-esteem. We want to be in the public eye, confirmed, associated with something prestigious, and to distance ourselves from what is trivial. The desire to be fascinating is not just an individual phenomenon, but also very much a collective one. It applies to various institutions and groups that acquire labels to boost themselves in terms of meaning, sophistication, and status. Let me give some examples of this phenomenon.

Our society has rapidly moved from being seen as industry- and service-oriented to one of information (during the 1970s) and, in the absence of more rapid upgrading, has wound up being identified as a 'knowledge' society. A similar, perhaps even more grandiose idea is the one of the rise and domination of 'the creative class' and 'the creative economy' (Florida, 2001). All this sounds great and is very popular to communicate. Thompson et al. (2000: 122) write: 'Policy-makers and academics alike . . . endlessly repeat the mantra that knowledge work offers a rationale for the development of capital in the workplace, a blueprint for the creation of "world class" firms, and a way of preventing advanced economies restructuring away their sunset industries from becoming peripheral low-wage, low skill national economies.' This new economy, which was so popular a few years ago, may be expected to make a new appearance, maybe equally triumphant and captivating as its impact in the late 1990s. In this dynamic knowledge society, it is essential to keep up with things. In the education world, the number of higher degrees has grown almost explosively.

Many societies are becoming academic on a broad front, with new additions such as gastronomy, fashion science, and competence science. Restaurant, hotel, and tourism studies are being turned into academic disciplines, with special programmes offered at university level.

In working life, bureaucracy and mass production have had to make way for so-called knowledge-intensive companies, dynamic networks, and flexible, customer-steered operations. And people are employed for 'value creation processes' rather than for the production of goods and services. Small businesses are now run by 'entrepreneurs', at least according to researchers and policy-makers. Maybe one or two bicycle repairers or hairdressers have

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failed to keep up with the times and still regard themselves as small business owners? Managers and supervisors are increasingly labelled as 'leaders'. Strategic visions and empowerment have pushed aside organizational management of a more conventional, more boring, nature. In the universities, a sluggish collegial spirit has been supplanted by academic leadership.

New occupations have emerged—executive coaches provide sparring partners for leaders (formerly called managers). There is considerable inflation of job titles: more and more people have become 'managers' and 'executives', and it is not particularly exclusive to have 'vice president' on your business card these days.

And this is not exclusive to individual titles. Groups have become teams; and when senior managers meet, they become 'executive teams'. Rationalization is now termed 'business process engineering'. Plans have become 'strategies'. Management training now takes the form of 'executive development programmes'. Giving advice is referred to as 'coaching', which has become a booming industry, supposedly helping a world increasingly in need of expert advice. Expressions like 'world class' and 'excellence' are used more and more frequently, often without much backup in terms of demonstrated qualities or accomplishments.

We also have had an upgrading of education programmes, job titles, and representations of activities that, while giving a better impression, does not actually involve any real improvement. This illustrates the workings of grandiosity.

There are similar trends in the consumer area, where the focus is on youth, beauty, physical fitness, and success. Fashion and brand names have a great impact, and products are associated with identity and are given a strong loading for expressing, or even creating, buyer personalities. Individuality is promoted as a question of adopting a particular consumption pattern, and travel increasingly involves trips to exotic, faraway places. Basic needs have become less important, while a higher proportion of consumption has narcissistic overtones. Goods and services have become levers for improving self-esteem and status. According to marketing and other lifestyle experts, products express your identity and enable you to realize yourself to the full.

These are all trends that involve enhanced status and self-esteem, improving the image of individuals, groups, organizations, and activities. These trends often mean a combination of something deviating from, and superior to, others. But such efforts have become increasingly desperate, as the space for and competition over grandiosity have become tight. Most efforts have failed or have been only partly successful. As I will elaborate, grandiosity is increasingly haunted by its own emptiness—the lack of concrete content can strike back. People will experience disappointment and frustration.

My thesis is that our era is becoming permeated by such grandiosity—and emptiness—although this is not to say that other ages and societies did not also exhibit similar traits. Grandiosity, of course, is hardly a new phenomenon. At the individual level, the tendency to heighten personal self-esteem by self-glorification may well be an intrinsic feature of human existence. This is what psychoanalysts call narcissism, quite a normal condition, although in extreme cases it sometimes takes pathological forms. Psychoanalysts refer to 'the grandiose self', which is characterized by fantasies of omnipotence, exhibitionism, and ambition. The grandiose self is very prominent in early childhood, when the individual experiences separation from the parents and compensates for the feeling of being little, marginalized, and dependent (Kohut, 1971, 1977). Successful development involves integration of these grandiose fantasies into a more positive, stable, and realistic self-image. In some cases, though, the development process goes awry and results in 'narcissistic personality disturbances'. In most cases, there is a vulnerability to frustration, involving swings between reasonable perceptions and expressions of grandiosity—omnipotence, perfection, and success—and the opposite, a sense of emptiness, meaninglessness, and failure. Such narcissistic problems appear to have increased in recent decades, however (Twenge and Foster, 2010), where immature, grandiose, idealizing fantasies, and an unstable self-image have become an increasing feature of 'problem-loaded normal psychology'. Psychologists claim that pathological narcissism is a prime candidate for late-capitalism's archetypal emotional disturbance (Kovel, 1981: 104) and that we live in a 'narcissistic culture' (Lasch, 1978), where people spend time building up a positive self-image—usually only with limited success—with the help of relationships, status symbols, consumption, identification with and admiration of idols, fantasies, and so on. One aspect of this is giving oneself and one's surroundings a grandiose overtone, where there is a strong dependence on a reflective and supportive environment, although this is often hidden and denied.

> Narcissism represents the psychological dimension of this dependence. Notwithstanding his occasional illusions of omnipotence, the narcissist depends on others to validate his self-esteem. He cannot live without an admiring audience. His apparent freedom from family ties and institutional constraints does not free him to stand alone or to glory in his individuality. On the contrary, it contributes to his insecurity, which he can overcome only by seeing his 'grandiose self' reflected in the attentions of others, or by attaching himself to those who radiate celebrity, power, and charisma. For the narcissist, the world is a mirror. (Lasch, 1978: 10)

Celebrity cultures and Facebook addictionados, etc. both reflect and reinforce such orientations. Uncertainties and doubts about one's own abilities—shortage of good feedback and reaffirmation such as reliable

educational systems and cultural traditions offering stable reference points—also lead to a shaky sense of self and an exaggerated need for confirmation.

The grandiosity theme is not entirely new, even for the general public. Historical studies show that even in times of acute poverty, relatively poor people were prepared to devote some of their limited resources to luxury and status objects. There was no great change in the material standard of living between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, but nonetheless there was a marked increase in the consumption of 'luxury' goods. Söderberg (2002) refers to the increased importance of 'the narrow gilt edge'. Although the interest in gilding one's life is not a new phenomenon, economic growth and the ability of mass-media institutions to stimulate fantasies, ambitions, desires, and attractive ideals have made this a central life-concern for many people. Elite groups have faced competition from a wider circle in the luxury consumption area. The dynamism of the economy is increasing as the former try to maintain their advantage and the latter approach the former in terms of fashionable luxury consumption and high-status goods (Simmel, 1904). Conspicuous consumption has become more than an elite phenomenon, partly because the desire to become 'elite-like' is spreading.

Throughout history, collective phenomena have also been affected by grandiose ideas, and certain types of grandiosity were probably more marked in other eras. Pyramids, palaces, big statues of leaders, and other impressive monuments are largely a thing of the past and, to some extent, our own age is more modest when it comes to grandiose public excesses; there are exceptions, of course, such as the spectacular buildings in Dubai. Exaggerated status symbols in the form of 'monumental grandiosity' are considered slightly ridiculous in many countries, at least when associated with specific personas. But, of course, grandiose self-images also continue to flourish in the context of nationalism, colonialism, racism, and sexism. As grandiosity is everywhere, it would be presumptuous of me to deny such pretensions on my own part. Perhaps this book is also permeated by grandiose ambitions—if not in terms of glorification fantasies, then maybe in terms of grand claims to 'reveal everything'. So beware, dear reader!

Although grandiosity, as an individual and collective orientation, may go back to the Stone Age, this does not imply that it is a constant factor in human and social life. With increasing wealth, positional goods become more central than non-positional goods, and the former lead to a strong preoccupation with keeping up with, or being ahead of, the Joneses. Our time is characterized by a powerful accumulation of institutions and mechanisms that encourage grandiosity. They are perhaps less ostentatious than in the past—since formerly they were often associated with royalty, the nobility, or unabashed nationalism—but they nonetheless permeate our entire culture, sometimes in less obvious ways. In contrast with the

'monumental grandiosity' of another age, we note the distributed and, partially camouflaged, grandiosity of our own era. We can refer to the decentralization and cultural deep penetration of grandiosity, as well as its democratization—grandiose projects are no longer the preserve of an elite, but are now accessible to everyone, to some extent. Time, information, and money allow more groups to move from a focus on survival and comfort to grandiosity. And many occupational groups, organizational leaders, and individuals take this opportunity. The popularity of reality shows on TV suggests a widespread interest in ambitions and fantasies of winding up in the spotlight. The idea here is that anyone can acquire idol status—without the advantages of birth, talent, or actual achievement.

At the same time, these individual attempts to weld together an identity are often tied up with collective aspirations to upgrade projects undertaken by organizations and occupational groups. In this instance, there may be an emphasis on the feeling of belonging to a special species, since members of the group belong to a select category whose foremost qualities rub off on the individual concerned.

We can also refer to a strange mixture of fantasy and cravings as a unique feature of our age. The promoters of this process include politicians, the mass media, schools, universities and education institutions, marketers, therapists, and other experts on 'human improvement', and they are all selling a potentially better life—if you simply buy their products or utilize their services. The numbers and effects of various institutions creating and reinforcing fantasies and desires about creating and maintaining a happier and more impressive life are growing. The scope for increasing numbers of people to devote considerable time, energy, and resources to projects with grandiose implications is probably greater than ever before. Education, human improvement (development), travel, clothes, housing, and various gadgets offer ever-growing options. Telephony is a good example. A decade or so ago, it was mainly a question of having access to a telephone, and the opportunity to use it. Today, a mobile phone is a complex of opportunities to convince yourself and others about your degree of sophistication, technical know-how, economic resources, etc., involved in intensive competition for position and progress in terms of status and social differentiation. Thus, the mobile phone turns communication—and its associated sub-functions—into a strongly symbolic phenomenon in which opportunities for self-glorification and the admiring glances of others are an important factor. On the other hand, of course, I would not want to deny the practical advantages of mobile telephony. Probably seldom is it only a matter of showing off. More often, it is likely to constitute a complicated mix of motives and meanings where interest and practical advantage are difficult to sort out from the desire to keep up

with, or preferably be ahead of, and admired by, others. Grandiosity seldom appears in a pure, naked form.

It is often claimed that modern society is populated, at least among the younger generation, by individualists who are different from previous generations (Cartwright and Holmes, 2006). It is doubtful whether there is much substance in this, but at any rate, it expresses a strong belief in an independent ability to form oneself and one's life. Narcissism encompasses denial of the attributes of a mass society and an exaggerated belief in people's ability to create themselves. Problems and attempted solutions are individualized, but the underlying attributes are collective and 'recipes' for solutions comply with social standards.

Standardization tendencies and conformism are certainly powerful in a mass communication society such as ours. One classic example is the McDonaldization of society, which suggests the direct opposite of individualism in the traditional sense (Ritzer, 2004). Some time ago, Riesman (1950) and Fromm (1955) identified a cultural shift from people who were controlled from within, permeated by internalized ideals and with relatively stable values that provided a clear sense of direction, to people who were externally controlled or market-oriented, sensitive to signals from their surroundings, and willing to comply with the expectations of others. This trend appears to be continuing. Riesman summarizes his account by saying that 100 years ago the individual functioned like a gyro-compass—internalized values set the direction—while radar man began to predominate from mid-twentieth century—with highly sensitive registration and adaptation to the norms and reactions to his surroundings. Team members and brand worshippers provide good examples of this. Perhaps external control is not the direct opposite of individuality but, to the extent that our age is characterized by individualism, it is largely a socially sensitive and adaptable kind of individualism. There are templates for individualism, contingent upon class, gender, ethnicity, age, etc. The scope for individual characteristics is limited in an organization and consumption-oriented society. But nonetheless, grandiose fantasies about being a unique individual are rather common.

Grandiosity is often at odds with the average, the trivial. It is an active force in the struggle against the privileges of others and the banality of life. Education, working life, and consumption as well as many other parts of society and life are, whenever possible, charged with this grandiosity. This is my main thesis, but it becomes particularly relevant when related to the zero-sum-game quality of the grandiose aspirations of various individuals and groups and linked to its companion piece—the illusion tricks.

Illusion tricks

A third key manifestation of contemporary development is a declining interest in 'substance' and a greater interest in conveying images and ideas that give the impression of something positive: progress, politically correct values, general rationality, and adaptive ability. It is important to do something that gives a good overall impression. Such images are independent of, or loosely linked to, what is actually happening at a more substantial level. Pseudo-events, pseudo-actions, and pseudo-structures are all example of illusion tricks. These concepts allude to the way in which activities and developed structures focus less on a substantial practice or quality (behaviour, results) than on signalling what is positive, impressive, and fascinating—or is at least legitimate and anticipated. There is a strong demonstration element, which claims to indicate substance or quality but which is weak or non-existent and is hence misleading, at least in part. This representation is out on a limb—it is a signifier without actually signifying much. Ethical principles, gender equality plans, and many 'quality assurance' initiatives and corporate social responsibility policies are good examples. In an 'audit society' it is important to exhibit the correct indicators to be ticked off when mass media or authorities pay a visit (Power, 2003). In working life and organizations, professionalization projects, leadership talk, and reorganizations are typically in accordance with the latest fashion. (This will be discussed at greater length in Chapters 6–9.)

Boorstin (1961) noted, more than fifty years ago, that our expectations of new developments clearly exceed the potential candidates for such achievements. Major natural disasters, war, drastic political reforms, and revolutionary scientific breakthroughs that attract the attention of more than a narrow group of specialists are relatively rare. They barely suffice to provide the media with enough 'news', i.e., easily interest-triggering, sellable items. According to Boorstin, the solution for a shortage of interesting news items was the pseudo-event. Pseudo-events are synthetic news items launched by the media or other actors—various elite groups—with the intent of arousing interest and providing an object for mass-media reporting. Public opinion polls are, for example, often produced or financed by media that want to have something to write about. A pseudo-event has the following characteristics:

- Non-spontaneous, but arranged because someone has planned, placed, or initiated it.

- Primarily (but not necessarily exclusively) planned to match an immediate mass-media reporting requirement; its news value is the decisive aspect.

- Only loosely linked with the underlying reality that it is supposed to reflect. A press conference may mention intentions, plans, or

opinions about something that has taken place, or perhaps may take place.

● Tendencies to promulgate self-fulfilling prophecies; the pseudo-event becomes part of reality and, as a result, has consequences.

Over the course of time, pseudo-events have tended to overshadow 'real' or spontaneous events. Since they are staged for the mass media and public consumption, they are easy to handle and report.

> Pseudo-events from their very nature tend to be more interesting and more attractive than spontaneous events. Therefore in American public life today pseudo-events tend to drive all other kinds of events out of our consciousness, or at least to overshadow them. Earnest, well-informed citizens seldom notice that their experience of spontaneous events is buried by pseudo-events. Yet nowadays, the more industriously they work at 'informing' themselves the more this tends to be true. (Boorstin, 1961: 37)

Pseudo-events are easy to grasp from the consumer viewpoint, but consumers fail to appreciate the pseudo aspect and accept them as genuinely important phenomena. And they can also be recycled in a new opinion poll that provides opportunities for reporting differences from the previous sounding. Pseudo-events are planned to be easy to understand—it is almost impossible for outsiders to grasp how suitable candidates for political posts really are, but we can readily form an opinion of their ability to make a good impression on TV. As Boorstin (1961) points out, having the ability to say something convincing in 30 seconds is hardly a good indicator of one's insights into complex questions or one's ability to make a complicated organizational structure function satisfactorily. Some consumers of mass media might, upon reflection, realize this, but this realization does not necessarily lead to a drop in the consumption of superficial TV programmes or news articles in favour of more serious knowledge seeking, i.e., the reading of serious journalistic articles or books on a subject matter.

An example of a pseudo-event was a press conference in Stockholm about HIV/AIDS, with Sharon Stone, a famous American actress, and four of Sweden's leading researchers in this area. All the questions were directed at Sharon Stone. A news agency interviewed a local celebrity in the audience who explained how important it was for famous personalities to be ambassadors in such fields as the general public accepts what they say in a different way. The problem is that pseudo-events are competing with other, more important events and information. Maybe some mass-media organs would be attracted by a press conference, even if there was no movie star, and then perhaps the focus would be on the HIV/AIDS issue. In the ensuing newspaper

article, Sharon Stone got six lines (about friends having died from AIDS, etc.), the researchers got three, and the local celebrity in the audience got nine (SDS, 27 May 2005). This clearly indicates the importance of celebrities in this kind of context and, more broadly, how pseudo-issues easily attract more interest than 'substance'. The use of the celebrity to draw attention to HIV/AIDS transformed into the HIV/AIDS issue becomes a motive for paying attention to the movie star and celebrities more generally.

A more serious aspect is, perhaps, that aid organizations sometimes give more priority to their visibility than to encouraging support for those in need. In connection with the tsunami disaster that primarily affected Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Thailand in 2005/6, it may be noted that the various voluntary 'organizations' efforts to achieve rapid results and promote themselves sometimes led to unsuccessful aid since there were obstacles to effective coordination. They were quickly building houses that could be photographed, inaugurated and handed over to grateful families, but when the rain comes they were often flooded' (DN Debate, 18 January 2006).[2] Similar observations were made in connection with the earthquake disaster on Haiti in 2010.

Most mass-media output involves speculations, rumours, denials, comments, political initiatives for media purposes, commercial events, news about celebrities, and so on. Maybe we should condemn the media, but we should probably also condemn—or deprecate—a population that has come increasingly to expect that the world should deliver interesting news at frequent intervals. One might also think that sensible people might be content with news once a week or so, with a greater emphasis on 'real' events. We have created a world of pseudo-events in order to avoid obviating 'spontaneous' news items, and this fits better into the news-reporting machinery. In Europe, we sometimes know more about the families of American presidential candidates than ethnic genocide and hunger disasters in Africa.

Not only mass media but also locally staged events often have a pseudo-nature. In an organizational context, we can refer to pseudo-structures as involving visible, formal structures, or tangible patterns of behaviour that lay claim to, and are often regarded as having an impact on results and behaviour. Yet they still operate primarily at the symbolic or ceremonial level. Such symbolism, which is intended to display something substantive, is different from 'pure' or clearly symbolic phenomena such as commemorative speeches, guards of honour, and awards. In such cases, it is explicit that such ceremonies are symbolic and no one expects any tangible results or

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[2] Acronyms like DN and SDS followed by a date refer throughout this book to articles from Swedish newspapers. As most readers will not benefit from more detailed references, I only mention them with minimum information.

consequences. In this book, I am *not* addressing 'pure' forms of symbolism, easily recognized as entirely ceremonial.

Examples of pseudo-structures might be many quality-assurance projects, committees, leadership programmes, many political 'reforms', organizational changes, and so on. There are examples of a wide spectrum of quality-assurance activities in higher education. Programme evaluations and mandatory courses in pedagogy, or PhD supervision—sometimes strongly disliked by most people forced to participate but heralded as proof of quality and commitment to teaching by university management—are two examples that look good, although in many cases, such activities can be irrelevant or even counter-productive, other than performing a legitimizing function.

It may be difficult to identify pseudo-structures and distinguish them from structures that have a genuine impact on 'substantial' operations (i.e., the production that takes place as compared with purely symbolic activities). The litmus test of a pseudo-structure is that it is regarded as real and significant by some half-informed—but naïve—individuals, but that closer, critical examination reveals the structure to be primarily concerned with the symbolic and ceremonial. Like pseudo-events, pseudo-structures may be regarded as illusion tricks, normally with some degree of self-deception.

Grandiosity and illusion tricks are both in the field of presenting the world in a positive light, but there are differences. While grandiosity points to general attempts to redefine meanings, by giving something a gild-edged shimmer, illusion tricks involve specific events, arrangements, and texts. Illusion tricks are produced to signal something definite, but are in a dubious or misleading relationship with something 'substantive' (practices, behaviours, competence beyond impression management skills, tangible results). Illusion tricks do not necessarily have to give a particularly strong impression of attractiveness or success. They may just as well signal that the individual and others are 'following along' to avoid feeling shame for having failed to comply with the norm. An illusion trick involves small changes in the substantial content, while repackaging an object and presenting it in a more elegant form. A re-organization or a change of a title, which has limited effect on activities that go on more or less as before, could be an example. A change of the gender composition of the board of directors to display improved gender balance/equal opportunity, where the new female members do not represent anything qualitatively different or do not have much to say, is another illustration. Illusion tricks are particularly successful when the people concerned are not particularly well informed and, at least in some quarters, the intentions may be good. They often involve some element of the deception of one's self and others.

This is a phenomenon which has interested institutional theory (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio and Powell, 1991). One of the main points made is

that ideas, ideals, and recipes for what should be done are being constantly developed, and some of them tend to have fairly widespread dissemination, which is often taken as evidence that the idea or recipe is useful and should be taken seriously. But more substantial evidence is often weak or non-existent. Ideas about how organizations should be governed, the right pedagogical methods, and how prisons and psychiatry should be organized are seldom unambiguous indications of what is best. They are often expressions of many different logics: for example, the spirit of the age, effective rhetoric by those who have developed new ideas and recipes and interest in fashion (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001). The worry of being left behind or seen as slow on the uptake makes people and institutions inclined to follow the trend. This means that certain ideas and recipes may have a strong impact, even though it is difficult to specify what their benefits and viability are in practical applications—which are anyway often subject to local reinterpretation and adaptation, making what may work reasonable well in some context rather dysfunctional in others (Prasad et al., 2011).

Institutional theory claims that most organizations nonetheless adopt such ideas and recipes, at least at the formal structural level. They introduce, for example, techniques, practices, and structures, establish new departments, initiate projects and programmes, and employ certain terms. Such actions are implemented not because they have a proven positive effect on operations but in order to reduce cognitive uncertainty and/or establish legitimacy. People might, for example, be uncertain about what should be done. Is it essential to have a budget? Would quality circles lead to improvements? Is it a good idea to employ consultants? Would gender equality perhaps result in better managerial recruitment? It is not easy to disperse uncertainty. In the absence of self-confidence, time to think, and critical reflection, people tend to imitate others.

One advantage of doing what others do is that you gain legitimacy. If you do not have a gender equality policy, a training programme for 'leaders', strategic plans and visions, you may on the contrary appear to be out-of-date, irresponsible, sloppy, or unprofessional in some other respect. As a result, in order to avoid this and give the impression you are rational, ethical, up-to-date, or simply like everyone else, you adopt various well-established and new ideas and recipes, even though it is difficult to demonstrate any gains in efficiency or any other substantial advantages.

According to Meyer and Rowan (1977), such responses to what is generally defined as rational, sensible, and progressive tend to involve special structures, arrangements, and activities, which are readily presented and demonstrated, particularly in relation to the outside world. However, they are largely unrelated to productive operations, which might possibly be disturbed by the excessive impact of such new ideas and recipes for success. Hence, we find