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Entrepreneurship through Thomas Mann – Ideas on what entrepreneurship was, is, and is not[1]

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ARTICLE HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

Through the writings of Thomas Mann, this paper explores ideas about what entrepreneurship was, is, and is not. The starting point is the question of how the discourse on entrepreneurship has evolved over time. The methodology is inspired by a research program that emphasizes the relationship between social science and literature, and the empirical inquiry is guided by the works of the German author Thomas Mann, particularly, *Buddenbrooks* and *The Magic Mountain*. Through these works, the discourse on entrepreneurship is explored at two points in time: one in the 19th century and one in the present day. This exploration illustrates the contrast between the 19th-century perception of the entrepreneur as a capitalist and risk-taker, and the contemporary discourse where the entrepreneur is often seen as a creative and flexible innovator. The final section of the paper delves into the ever-expanding discourse on entrepreneurship and elaborates on what entrepreneurship is not, as well as whether the broad discourse – where even artists are considered entrepreneurs – risks obscuring the understanding of entrepreneurship.

KEYWORDS

Buddenbrooks; Entrepreneurship; Literature; The Magic Mountain; Thomas Mann

Introduction

Entrepreneurship is a central phenomenon in society and has been for quite some time – at least some 200 years. Throughout this time, entrepreneurial practices and assumptions about entrepreneurship and the entrepreneur have taken a variety of forms and meanings (Landström,

[1] This paper is an extended English version of a study that was originally published in Swedish under the title *Om lugnet i stormen* (Holgersson, 2020). In this English rendition, I offer a more comprehensive overview of the study's positioning and significance within the field. Additionally, I elaborate further on the methodological approach and discuss the contributions of this paper to the broader research landscape of entrepreneurship.

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1999). In this paper, I am interested in these forms and meanings. More specifically, I explore the historical development of the entrepreneurship discourse through two points in time: one in the 19th century and one in the present day. The aim is to critically examine entrepreneurship and try to see it anew. The question that sparked the exploration was: What did the discourse look like then compared to today? As the research progressed, another, timelier, question emerged: What is not entrepreneurship, and what does not fit within the current discourse?

The motivation for this inquiry lies in the growing prominence of entrepreneurship in society and its increasing presence across various spheres (Mahieu, 2006; Murtola, 2020). Despite this, entrepreneurship is often understood either through a narrow, constrained lens (Landström et al., 2016; Ramoglou et al., 2020) or from a perspective that broadens the concept to include a wide range of features and activities deemed entrepreneurial (Steyaert & Katz, 2004; Johannisson, 2005; Hjorth & Holt, 2016). In response to both views, I seek to offer a historical and critical perspective that questions some of the prevailing ideas and narratives in the literature (cf. Tedmanson et al., 2012; Örtenblad, 2020), particularly the tendency for the entrepreneurship discourse to expand to the extent that its core meaning risks becoming blurred (see also Ericsson, 2010; Bögenhold, 2020).

Methodologically, the study is inspired by a research program built on the relationship between social science and literature (cf. Edling & Rydgren, 2011), and more specifically the use of novels in business administration research (Czarniawska-Joerges & Guillet de Monthoux, 1994; Evans & Fraser, 2012). The program is especially prominent in organization and management studies, and the relationship has been addressed in a myriad of ways (see Rhodes & Brown, 2005; Czarniawska, 2009; Savage et al. 2018). However, it should be noted that the approach is present in basically all subfields of business administration (for a couple of accounting cases, see Parker & Meehan, 1999; Evans, 2009; Czarniawska, 2012).

An entrepreneurship-oriented inquiry is the subject of a Swedish anthology, edited by Hans De Geer (1994), which explores how businesspeople are portrayed in Swedish art. The findings, as spelled out in the title, indicate that businesspeople are, in broad terms, often pictured as: "*Creators, tricksters and villains*" (in Swedish: "*Skapare, skojare och skurkar*"). However, and curiously enough, in Swedish literature, during the late twentieth century, portraits of business-people are rare (Hägg, 1994). In relation to the explorations in De Geer (1994), the present study places both entrepreneurship and the entrepreneur in focus, has a historical scope, and does not limit itself to the Swedish context. Furthermore, the primary focus lies not in merely examining how entrepreneurs are portrayed in literature, but rather in using literature as a tool to enhance our understanding of entrepreneurship. By doing his, I also answer calls for interdisciplinary, transversal, and nonformulaic approaches that can enrich our understanding of economic and businesses phenomenon (Alvesson & Gabriel, 2013; Nordqvist & Gartner, 2020; Calås, 2023).

Inspired by Holt & Zundel (2018), I embrace two distinct aspects of the relationship between social science and literature (literary fiction): 1) the use of *literature as empirical material*, and 2) *literature as a source of inspiration*. The first aspect – literature as empirical material – is quite straightforward. The argument is that fiction and artworks can be treated as valid empirical material. Not least if they are formed within a realist tradition, built on extensive research, such as fieldwork and interviews. A complementary argument is that literature can capture aspects that are difficult to see and gain access to using more conventional approaches to empirical material (Nordqvist & Gartner, 2020). The second aspect – literature as a source of inspiration – is vaguer. Holt & Zundel (2018) make their case using organizational theorist Karl Weick and how he uses stories that might, or might not be, true and other fictional elements as part of his way of theorizing in an essayistic style. Another example is how Erving Goffman theorizes using both fiction and

real events in such a way that the origin of the empirical material is toned down or not mentioned at all (see Holgersson, 2024, p. 55). Put differently, literature and fiction can be used to explore and highlight interesting and thought-provoking themes and ideas in unconventional ways.

In this paper, I have explored entrepreneurship through the works of the German writer Thomas Mann. The reason for choosing to work with and through Mann aligns with the points made above. In the family chronicle *Buddenbrooks*, he did extensive research into the business life and circumstances of the time and worked in a realist, even naturalist, tradition (Levander, 1995, p. 50). Thematically, Mann is also known for his broad, creative, and deep dives into many societal and philosophical topics. From these endeavors, I found inspiration, relevant for our current understanding and discourse of entrepreneurship. Given the methodological approach of the present study, the research questions can be reframed through the lens of Thomas Mann. They then look like this:

1. How is entrepreneurship depicted in *Buddenbrooks*, and how does that compare to our present understanding of entrepreneurship?
2. Inspired by readings of *The Magic Mountain*, and given the broad current academic framing of entrepreneurship, what is not entrepreneurship?

The outline of the remainder of the paper is as follows. First, I introduce Thomas Mann before turning to the main work under scrutiny, *Buddenbrooks*. Following this, I expand and elaborate on a historical perspective of entrepreneurship, before putting it in contrast to a contemporary understanding of the phenomenon. Based on this comparison, I reflect on what entrepreneurship was and what it is. This is followed by a reading of *The Magic Mountain*, which is used to frame a perspective on what entrepreneurship *is not*. I conclude with a brief reflection on what we can learn from this analysis. In sum, and put more bluntly, I attempt to articulate what entrepreneurship was, is, and is not, through the works of Thomas Mann.

Thomas Mann and the Buddenbrooks

Thomas Mann was born in 1875 in Lübeck into a privileged family with his father being a wealthy merchant[2]. He grew up in a secure and educated environment, but school did not capture his interest. Instead, he developed a passion for writing. It became clear to his father that neither Thomas nor his brother Heinrich would follow in his footsteps as merchants. Consequently, after his father's death, the family business was liquidated, and their financial stability depended on the interest generated from the remaining wealth.

In 1891, after his father's passing, Thomas Mann left school and took a job at an insurance company. He found little satisfaction in the working world. Encouraged by the success of one of his love stories, he mustered the courage to quit his job and dedicate himself to writing. The financial support left by his father played a role in this decision. He gained university admission and studied journalism while continuing to improve his writing skills.

It was during this period that an opportunity that would change his life presented itself. A publisher approached the young Thomas and inquired if he had plans to write a substantial work of prose, preferably a novel. This request marked the beginning of his journey toward a Nobel Prize in literature and the creation of one of the most remarkable family sagas ever written: *Buddenbrooks* was starting to take shape.

[2] The reference for this section is the first chapter in Levander (1995).

The story takes place in Lübeck and follows the wealthy Buddenbrooks, a prominent merchant family, through four generations in the 19th century. Inspired by Thomas Mann's own upbringing, the characters and settings are carefully crafted based on observations and research. The narrative is not romantic but rather embraces a naturalistic approach, supported by family trees, notes, and chronological tables for historical accuracy. Heinrich Mann, Thomas' brother, praised the book as a reflection of their own family history and ancestors (Levander, 1995, p. 50).

The story delves into the lives and history of the Buddenbrooks, beginning with a big birthday party hosted by the family. Here, the reader meets all the generations except the last, who will ultimately bring the story to a close. The main characters are Johann the elder, Johann the younger, and his sons, Thomas and Christian Buddenbrook. The party portrays the bourgeois lifestyle in grandeur, with large halls, important business discussions, opulent dining, pretentious guests, intellectual conversations, and bourgeois formalities.

The family dynamics are revealed when Tony, Thomas and Christian's sister, is accused of laziness and pride. Johann the elder acknowledges this but considers it irrelevant, believing that everyone has their own character and own place and that everything does not suit everyone. This conservative mindset is prevalent in both the family's future roles and the broader society. The destinies of Tony, Thomas, and Christian are already predetermined. Thomas is seen as a responsible and serious individual destined for a career in business, while Christian is perceived as more restless. The conservative outlook is also seen in the political and economic landscape, where the present and dominant norms of traditional values should be passed on. The only challenge to this ideal occurs through Tony's forbidden lover, who espouses ideals of freedom and equality. However, such ideas fade away, and duty to the current social order prevails. Tony's later marriage to an older, less affectionate man symbolizes the reinforcement of traditional values.

The story also highlights the growing divide between the two brothers, Thomas and Christian. Their relationship is characterized by the contrast between duty and passion, business and artistry. This divide becomes more pronounced when Thomas marries Gerda, a woman with an artistic nature that sets her apart from the family's business affairs. Gerda is depicted as a unique and captivating individual who defies conventional measurements. Thus, the novel explores the complexities of family, tradition, and individual aspirations within a changing society.

In connection with the passing of Johann the elder, the grain company is handed over to Johann the younger. Shortly thereafter, sixteen-year-old Thomas also joins the company, leaving school to devote himself to the family business. While growth, profitability, and business development are important, the ability to 'sleep soundly' is even more crucial. However, those who work without similar principles seem to have an advantage. The intense competition puts a strain on the company's finances. Around the same time, Johann the younger prematurely passes away, leaving the company in the hands of a young Thomas. While Christian indulges in emotions, wine, and song, Thomas expands the company and proudly witnesses its growth. This is largely due to his innovative ideas and willingness to take risks that surpass his predecessors. He also doesn't confine himself to the office, as he has a different approach, stating that "*a businessman cannot be a bureaucrat!*" However, Thomas takes risks that do not always yield the expected returns, and after a few years, both the company's finances and the family start to decay.

A historical perspective

The above paragraph summarizes the economic narrative that runs throughout the book. It does not involve any spectacular events or major conquests. The company is what it is. Above all, it should be two things: prosperous and passed down through generations. The story should be

placed in its historical context. Following Hans Landström's (1999) research into the roots of entrepreneurship, it is appropriate to read it against the backdrop of two notions based on an early view of entrepreneurship. Landström highlights an early notion of the entrepreneur as a *risk-taker* and as a *capitalist*. If we broaden our perspective on Thomas Mann's book and view it as a depiction of more than bourgeois family life and traditions, it seems reasonable to consider it as a cultural insight into the early developmental phase of capitalism. There are no extravagant CEOs dressed in jeans or overnight innovations revolutionizing lives and markets. Instead, it is the already affluent families and bourgeoisie who own and run the companies and dominate the markets. The reason for this is the exclusivity that characterizes the upper echelons of society. In addition to access to capital and knowledge, political connections are also prerequisites for starting and conducting business.

Like businesses, some political positions are also inherited. As a result, the Buddenbrooks are one of the privileged families with the opportunity to operate in the markets. They are well-educated, financially strong, and politically influential. For new actors, there are high barriers that must be overcome before gaining access to the markets. The distinction between capitalist and entrepreneur appears rather vague. If we are to highlight some sort of demarcation line, risk seems to be a suitable candidate. To the extent that it is meaningful to speak of any difference, it appears to lie in the distinction between the administrator and the risk-taker. In the Buddenbrook family, this is illustrated by the difference between Johann and his son Thomas, where the former symbolizes the calm administrator and the latter the more innovative risk-taker. However, it should be noted that the differences still co-exist within a strict set of bourgeoisie ideals and values. The valued qualities in business life are duty combined with classical education and connections. There are no upstarts emerging from nowhere to disrupt traditions. Creative and unexpected turns had no place then. Such things were not present nor tolerated.

Thomas Buddenbrook can be regarded as an entrepreneur in a dual sense. He is both somewhat of a capitalist risk-taker and a dutiful citizen who skillfully strives to drive the business forward. Unlike his passionate wife and brother, he, however, never indulges in creative or aesthetic activities. But the strict business-oriented and bourgeois lifestyle takes its toll on him. Later in life, he is plagued by a melancholic state that leaves him far from happy. He appears trapped in a world – or perhaps an iron cage – that he did not choose. Everyone has their place, and Thomas bitterly realizes that he is little more than another link in the heavy chains of time.

A contemporary take on things

If we fast forward to the end of the 20th century, the picture is vastly different. The previously outlined discourse of entrepreneurship, where the bourgeoisie is the privileged and entrepreneurship is considered a mix of risk-taking, capitalistic administration, and work on political connections, has been replaced. Nowadays, everyone is encouraged or educated to become an entrepreneur. Entrepreneurship appears to be the answer to contemporary issues, and it is by no means a concept that excludes everyone who is not born privileged. In both primary and secondary education, as well as in universities, entrepreneurship is seen as a guiding principle and a co-creator of the future welfare society (Mahieu, 2006). The classic discourse of entrepreneurship has not only expanded to encompass more individuals and areas, but its content has also changed. In a discourse analysis examining research in the field, Berglund and Johansson (2007) identify 'the creative individual' as the central notion. In addition to the idealized type of person, they also identify words that frequently appear in entrepreneurship research. As far as I can understand, these words seem to coincide with those used to describe the entrepreneur as an individual

(see Landström, 1999, p. 14). The ideal entrepreneur is innovative, flexible, original, proactive, independent, and open-minded.

Berglund and Johansson (2007) contextualize this discourse within a larger modern narrative of progress, where good is put against evil. To do things and move forward is good, and to stand still is bad. The entrepreneur, here, is the hero who makes things happen and society go forward. Before introducing a different perspective, let's nuance the discussion a bit. This can be done using Björn Bjerke's (2013) division of entrepreneurship into two perspectives: *narrow* and *broad*. The narrow perspective, which is far more dominant, treats entrepreneurship as something confined to the economic sphere of society. Here, the most pressing concerns appear to be new products in the market and increased (or disrupted) demand. Capital, innovation, and growth are the primary goals. The broad perspective extends beyond economic markets and sees entrepreneurship as a creative and process-oriented endeavor. Unlike the narrow view, the primary drivers are needs, meaningfulness, and playfulness. The purpose of the broad perspective is to challenge and expand the narrow one, seeking to overcome its economic narrow-mindedness. It is simply a way to broaden the discourse on entrepreneurship (Hjorth, 2003; Olaison, 2014; Hjorth & Holt, 2016). Within the broad perspective, defining ideals or individuals does not seem as important. However, the positive connotations are difficult to escape. Entrepreneurship is simply something good, regardless of whether it is seen as a process or not, and being entrepreneurial is still 'positive'.

One who has explored the broad nature of entrepreneurship is Bengt Johannisson (2005). His insights in the field emphasize creation and play as essential elements. He turns away from the narrow economic realm and argues that entrepreneurship is closer to the domain of art, where the inherent playfulness and creative capacity of individuals are the essence. Johannisson goes even further and suggests that entrepreneurship ultimately revolves around self-realization and identity formation. Entrepreneurship appears as an existential mindset in which the entrepreneur explores oneself through the act of creation. Life, the question of meaning, and playfulness are far more central than money.

Here, it is interesting to return to Thomas Buddenbrook, and his melancholy. As we know, his dutiful and business-oriented way of conducting business is not purely bureaucratic, but it lacks a sense of creative spark that offers him any deeper meaning. Thomas is an entrepreneur in the capacity of a risk-taker and capitalist, nothing more, nothing less. However, the demands and conditions that surround him in both his family life and on the capital market leave him unhappy. He is nothing more than a branch in the family tree and a bag of money in the market – he is a link in a rusty chain. Approached through Thomas's tragic fate, the contemporary discourse of entrepreneurship seems to hold an additional feature. From Thomas's perspective, it dissolves the contradictions, obstacles, and incompatibilities that characterize his life and doings. The traditional and dutiful are replaced by the rebellious and creative. Seriousness co-exists with play, and reason intertwines with passion. In today's entrepreneurship discourse business acumen and artistic nature unite in what appears to be harmony – the characters of Thomas and Gerda would today not necessarily have been so far apart. In a peculiar way, the discourse of entrepreneurship seems to have transformed past contradictions into present certainties and prerequisites. Everyone no longer has a predetermined place – everyone can, and should, become or create something. Everyone is an entrepreneur.

One way to frame this transformation of the discourse is through an ideological perspective (Ogbor, 2000; Spicer, 2012). The discourse undeniably possesses a powerful positive, almost natural, appeal in a society where both individuals and society are expected to constantly grow. In other words, it is an inherent part of the modern project of progress that is difficult, if not

impossible, to question. However, what seems obvious often conceals aspects that are anything but self-evident. A classic attempt at ideological critique would focus on the power interests that lie behind, and who benefits from, the self-evident nature. Who are the winners and losers? A deeper look at the narrow, economic, perspective on entrepreneurship is a logical starting point. Does it promote a worldview that stands for justice and prosperity for all? Even the broader perspective can be subjected to critical examination. Does it invite and include all individuals? Additionally, one can interpret the broad view as a good-sounding legitimizing cover around an economic core that allows everything to fit, so that it blurs and hinders criticism.

The Magic Mountain

In what follows, I would like to put forward another form of ideological critique. I combine the narrow perspective with the broad one and pose the question of what lies beyond the multitude of fantastic words that together constitute the discourse. What is hidden behind creativity, action, innovation, and creation? Could there be something we do not see or risk forgetting? Berglund and Johansson (2007, p. 81) are onto something when they present a list of antonyms to the words used to describe entrepreneurship. The list is thought-provoking. Antagonistic terms for the words mentioned above include unimaginative, doubt, passivity, and destruction. This collection of words is not uplifting, and I wonder if the 'opposites' could take a different form. Perhaps there is another way to portray what entrepreneurship is not.

I found inspiration for the exploration in Thomas Mann's Bildungsroman *The Magic Mountain* (in german: *Der Zauberberg*). A clue to what I am aiming for rests in the title word "*magic*", a word that leads to thoughts on the supernatural and out of the ordinary. Before I give a brief overview of the plot and events, let me clarify something. *The Magic Mountain* is a beautiful novel where every word, sentence, and page merges into a philosophical whole. It's not so much about the story itself, but rather how time distorts both the reader and the sequence of events. Themes like time, life, and death are explored extensively, yet they simultaneously fade away into oblivion. They are always there, yet somehow elusive. That's why I feel a bit uneasy trying to interpret and convey this work, as its nearly thousand pages encompass everything and yet, nothing at all. However, it's precisely this idea of 'nothingness' that mesmerized me. Thomas Mann worked on this masterpiece on and off for twelve years, and I believe this is part of how that "*magic*" was developed.

The protagonist, Hans Castorp, is a bourgeois engineering student from the German lowlands. He visits his sick cousin, Joachim, at a sanatorium in the Alps for three weeks. Little does he know that this visit will open a whole new world for him, one that captivates him in a strange and enchanting way for a long time. Curiously, Hans becomes immersed in his cousin's daily routine, which consists of five meals a day, walks, long periods of solitude, and rest cures in his room. Death is a constant presence, but it fades away along with the rest of the outside world. Later, when Hans catches a cold, the doctor advises him to stay on the mountain.

What was initially intended to be a three-week stay turns into months, and then seven years. Time and the demands of the outside world become irrelevant and gradually fade away. Soon, Hans, who was initially shy and uneducated, develops an interest in books. He spends days, weeks, and years studying them diligently in his chamber. During his stay, he encounters two influential figures with contrasting views: Settembrini, a learned humanist who passionately advocates for a future society based on reason and enlightenment, and Naphta, a dogmatic Jesuit and radical socialist, who argues for stricter methods to achieve a classless society. Hans finds himself in the middle of deep philosophical discussions but is unable to align with either side. Instead, he becomes captivated by the worldly discussions that seem to have no end. Later, Hans

encounters Peeperkorn, a character who adds a touch of human irrationality and joy to the otherwise often mundane existence on the mountain. Despite the monotonous life in the Alps among the dying people, Hans feels truly alive for the first time in his life. Thomas Mann's portrayal of the bourgeoisie is indeed an ironic and decadent one.

The narrative does not follow the usual conventions of progression. Instead, the author deliberately portrays Hans as someone who is not constantly developing. The paralysis and indifference that permeate life at the sanatorium bear resemblance to *Oblomov*, Goncharov's 19th-century classic, which introduced the word 'oblomovism', a term that describes a state of inaction and sloth (and sometimes even nihilism), despite personal qualities and circumstances that would make the opposite (e.g. action, vigor) viable. Oblomov, a lazy and inactive character that spends a large part of the book just lying on the couch, served as an inspiration for Thomas Mann (Levander, 1995, p. 164), although Mann incorporates at least a glimmer of hope and some personal growth to counterbalance the decadence and decay.

What entrepreneurship is not

The title of the book – *The Magic Mountain* – suggests a physical place that does not exist in the real world. The word "*magic*" signals what is mysterious, and we are instinctively drawn to it. It is and offers something 'else' – beyond, and that makes us curious. Transformed into a more personalized form of 'magic' we can think of someone who is enchanted – touched by magic. It deals with a state of being where the senses are captivated by the extraordinary and unknown. The reality (lowlands) fades away and makes way to a higher realm (mountain) where time and life are no longer the same. The sanatorium environment depicted by Thomas Mann is, in many ways, a tragic and distant story, yet it increasingly appears as a mythical and exotic oasis, a magical place of sorts. Not least if we see it from the perspective of a fast-moving industrial and modern society that forms creative and achieving entrepreneurial individuals. It is a sanctuary that, like the institution of the sanatorium itself, has disappeared for good. It is a place that no longer exists but perhaps one that we – metaphorically – still need, especially in a time when contemplation and slowness are nowhere to be found.

Thomas Mann's inspiration for the work came from his visit to a sanatorium while his wife was undergoing treatment for a lung disease (Wessell, 2004, p. 137). The initial intention was to write a short story, but the outbreak of World War I intervened and disrupted not only the world but also the author's inner self. The book came to illustrate the political and intellectual currents swirling within him (see Levander, 1995, Chapter 5). It is tempting to illustrate the writing of the book by simply suggesting that the author himself was enchanted. Perhaps it is only in such a state that it is possible to write a work that spans humanity's deepest questions in a sophisticated and humorous manner, over a thousand pages. Thomas Mann had the privilege of living a life where he could be captivated and create masterpieces. Like Thomas Buddenbrook deciding that his son would not become a merchant, his father made the same decision. The Mann family had the financial means required. One interpretation of Hans Castorp in the lowlands is that he represents the ideal type of the average bourgeois man. He is well-mannered, reasonably educated, and confidently enters society's taken-for-granted hierarchy. However, in the high-lands, he becomes Thomas Mann: someone who has time to develop at his own pace, allowing personal interests to pave the way for education and cultivation without pressure and outer goals. He is a man who learns to question and see through predetermined pseudo-choices and develops an ability to ideology critique. However, the author appears to be an anomaly—a link not

connected to any chain. In the current society, where entrepreneurship (narrow and broad) is what is encouraged, this condition and behavior can almost be described as some sort of disease.

The broad discourse of entrepreneurship can label Thomas Mann as a true entrepreneur, and his work as the result of an existential creative process that is difficult to put into words (cf. Johannisson, 2005; Hjorth & Holt, 2016). However, I wonder what the purpose of such an endeavor would be. The conclusions resulting from such interpretations closely resemble the discussions surrounding the concept of the 'economic man'. It is possible to interpret all human actions in terms of calculating self-interest using pros and cons. But what is the point? What is the purpose of reducing human mystery, meaning, and social complexity into trivial formulas? I would rather leave Thomas Mann in his magic chamber, year after year, contemplating and writing. In that way, he, his magic book, and the process behind it, symbolize what entrepreneurship is not.

The resolution

After seven years on the magic mountain, Hans Castorp comes alive. He is awakened by the gunfire from the ongoing world war in the lowlands. He has formed a worldview and is now ready to fulfill his duty and act. Thomas Mann leaves both the protagonist and the reader on the battlefield, with no clue of the outcome. But one thing appears clear. On the battlefield, there is only room for two kinds: winners and losers.

In this paper, we have seen that entrepreneurship has taken different forms, and meant different things, at different times. Through *Buddenbrooks*, we saw that during the late 19th century, the entrepreneur was more of a capitalist and risk-taker than a business innovator. Additionally, we observed this from a richer, more nuanced perspective than how conventional research presents it (cf. Landström, 1999). Literature can indeed enrich our understanding by providing fruitful, lively, and in-depth descriptions of business phenomena (Nordqvist & Gartner, 2020). We also received an updated, and more international perspective on entrepreneurship in literature than what was provided in De Geer (1994). Today, however, innovation and creativity tend to overshadow the economic, not to say capitalistic, connotations (Steyaert & Katz, 2004; Johannisson, 2005). In the current discourse, even artists could be considered entrepreneurs (Hjorth & Holt, 2016). Currently, the positive, buzzing, and all-embracing discourse appears to expand in almost every direction that relates to what is creative and innovative. While this development might initially seem strange to contest, in line with Ericsson (2010; 2020) and Bögenhold (2020) I would like to provide a warning sign to this development.

The Magic Mountain is – like reality – open-ended, and I believe there is a point to be made from that. If we explore what entrepreneurship is not—through Mann in this case—we gain insight into what we may risk losing sight of, if the discourse keeps expanding, and everyone should be an entrepreneur, or at least entrepreneurial. What happened to the virtues of taking things slowly, listening, and acting wisely on knowledge? Nowadays, they seem to be nowhere to be found. One way to reconnect with these virtues could be to spend time with Thomas Mann. Whether that is desirable or not – or if that too should be labeled entrepreneurial – I leave for the reader to decide. The future understanding of entrepreneurship has not yet been written.

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