

Preface

On 10 December each year, Swedish national television (SVT) broadcasts live coverage of the Nobel Banquet.¹ This four-and-a-half-hour extravaganza allows us to witness the assembly of the great and the good, celebrities, statesmen and royalty alongside the Nobel laureates and their families, attired in all their finery – some 1,300 guests in all. We watch them parading, dining, talking to one another and even, after the dinner, dancing. We hear the acceptance speeches and we are treated throughout to detailed expert commentary on what they are eating (there are interviews with the chefs and tastings with culinary experts) and what they are wearing (experts in high couture tell us how to appreciate the fashion on display).

The elaborate display of pageantry at the Nobel Banquet reinforces a sense of difference between those present and those watching from the outside. The message is that these guests are entitled to be there; they radiate a sense of privilege simply by being part of an exclusive occasion. For us onlookers, the question can arise: how might we become part of this? Short of actually becoming worthy of an invitation, how could one get into the banquet? What would it take to gatecrash this auspicious occasion? How could one imposter² as one of these privileged few? Indeed, are imposters already present at the banquet, and how could one tell?

Distinctions between insiders and outsiders are made and sustained everywhere. During a meeting of our research group a casual discussion about the Nobel Banquet gradually morphed into a broader discussion.

¹ As we write this in autumn 2020, it has been announced that the 2020 Nobel Banquet is cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

² Online sources variously advise that the spellings ‘imposter’ and ‘impostor’ tend to be used interchangeably; that the latter has a longer history; and that the alternatives are respectively characteristic of British and American English usage. We have chosen to use ‘imposter’ in the interests of consistency, and so leave open whether or not an imposter is really an impostor.

We found ourselves able to generate an apparently endless stream of idiosyncratic examples of imposterism and of settings populated by imposters and gatecrashers. We quickly came to realise that imposterism raises far more general and more pressing and significant issues than the example of the Nobel dinner with which we began, and takes us far beyond the questions of identity and belonging in which these discussions are often couched. From these conversations we set out to consider how the ubiquity of this troublesome figure might help us rethink some of social theory's core preoccupations.

The imposter is everywhere. The cases discussed in this volume attest to the richness and variety of examples of imposterism. Our preoccupation with imposterism derives not only from the seeming ubiquity of the imposter but also from a long-standing fascination with the relations between appearance and reality. In recent times, this general curiosity has characterized much of the more interesting research carried out within the multidiscipline of science and technology studies (STS). It has been explored in relation to a vast number of different aspects of scientific knowledge and of technological practice. Yet, as this volume demonstrates, continuing conversations about relations between appearance and reality and between identity and social order, are also of central concern in wide swathes of scholarship across the social sciences and humanities.

To explore the puzzles and delights of imposterism we staged an international conference – ‘Imposters and Gatecrashers’ – held at Linköping and Vadstena on 13–15 June 2018 (Figure 0.1). To those participants at Vadstena whose work does not appear in this volume, we offer our thanks for their energetic and insightful contributions: Jeffrey Christensen, Emma Dahlin, Ivanche Dimitrievski, Katherine Harrison, Tora Holmberg, Yelyzaveta Hrechaniuk, Ericka Johnson, Corinna

Figure 0.1: Imposters and Gatecrashers Conference



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