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published in
Revue de l'Entrepreneuriat
2017

DOI (link to publisher)
10.3917/entre.161.0037

document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

document license
Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act

Link to publication in VU Research Portal

citation for published version (APA)
Verduyn, K., Dey, P., & Tedmanson, D. (2017). A critical understanding of entrepreneurship. *Revue de l'Entrepreneuriat*, *16*(1), 37-45. https://doi.org/10.3917/entre.161.0037

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N° 1, vol. 16, 2017

A critical understanding of entrepreneurship

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Introduction

Critical entrepreneurship studies (CES), a dispersed and multidisciplinary field of inquiry, emerged from a general sense of dissatisfaction with how entrepreneurship is usually conceived of within the scholarly community: as a market-based and individualist phenomenon predicated on a "special" trait (or set of behaviours) that ignites venture creation, and, consequently, brings economic growth and innovation. Such a focus on entrepreneurship as a desirable economic activity, perceived unquestioningly as positive, however "obscures important questions" (Tedmanson, Verduyn, Essers and Gartner, 2012), questions which the emerging field of critical entrepreneurship studies wishes to bring to the fore and investigate. We hasten to add that the attribute "critical" is potentially misleading since it is open to multiple interpretations and usages. For instance, "critical" is commonly used to direct attention onto topics which, though important (read critical), have not been studied in sufficient depth. By a similar token, "critical" is often used in conjunction with research that seeks to identify factors that are crucial (or critical) for the success of entrepreneurial ventures (for an overview see Fletcher, forthcoming). Both renditions of "critical" remain firmly wedded to the foundational assumptions of mainstream entrepreneurship

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Revue de l'Entrepreneuriat
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research which gravitate around functionalist, essentialist, atomistic and economistic assumptions. However, when using the term "critical" in CES, we have in mind research which deliberately goes against the grain of functionalism and its deterministic view of human nature, reality and research, with the aim of opening up space to critique the canon of accepted knowledge and to create the conditions for rearticulating entrepreneurship in light of issues pertaining to freedom, emancipation or societal production. We seek to challenge and destabilise existing knowledge to open up new and different understandings that may change society for the better; we seek to critique in order to create. In this way, CES can be thought of as a double movement which critically engages with the mainstream of entrepreneurship only in order to break it open so that novel possibilities, be they practical or conceptual, can take flight. As we write this text, research that challenges the mainstream of entrepreneurship research clearly outnumbers studies which set out to rearticulate entrepreneurship as a society-creating force whose broader effects have emancipatory purchase, not merely economic utility. To carve out the unique potential of CES, we would like to sketch out, if only tangentially, different strands and research traditions which bear relevance for a critical understanding of entrepreneurship. We proceed by first shedding light on the more established traditions of CES in order then to gradually move over to discuss the more recent, and as we believe highly promising strands of CES research.

There is a voluminous critical literature whose predominant aim is to illuminate the messy, heterogeneous and problematic nature of entrepreneurship, understanding the same as "a complex web of intertwined socio-economic and politically framed activities" (Tedmanson, Verduyn, Essers and Gartner, 2012: 535). This entails exploring the taken for granted norms, self-evidences and paradigmatic roots of entrepreneurship scholarship as a whole, including its (neo-liberal) ideologies, dominant assumptions, grand narratives, preferred samples and methods. In doing so, a number of studies has aimed at "peeling away" such "layers of ideological obscuration" (Ahl, 2004; Martin, 1990; Rehn, Brannbrack, Carsrud and Lindhal, 2013) to engage openly with the dark sides (Beaver and Jennings, 2005)—the contradictions, paradoxes, ambiguities and tensions at the heart of "entrepreneurship" (cf. Armstrong, 2005; Jones and Spicer, 2009). This is not in the last place the case with those contributions studying entrepreneurship (or: even entrepreneurialism) as (hegemonic) discourse (cf. Armstrong, 2005), which lay bare the dominant assumptions and their consequences (Jones and Spicer, 2009), arguing how entrepreneurial discourse reproduces capitalist ideology (Costa and Saraiva, 2012), thus becoming complicit with existing systems and dynamics of economic exclusion, exploitation and oppression. It is hence one of the merits of critical research as we understand it here to have raised sensitivity for how entrepreneurship works as an ideological support of an economic system whose operational logic leads to largely perverse consequences. Arguably one of the greatest contributions of CES up to this point is the revelation that entrepreneurship does not necessarily offer a solution to the crises of capitalism (Jones and Murtola, 2012), such as the current recession, but that it is structurally linked with capitalism in such a way as to make it flexible and resilient, thus prolonging rather than changing its contradictory nature (Harvey, 2014).

Conceivably, CES is not limited to theories of political economy influenced by post-Marxism or the Frankfurt School type of critical theory, but spans a whole range of theoretical approaches and disciplinary orientations, from postcolonial views (Essers and Benschop, 2009; Essers and Tedmanson, 2014); non-entitative stances (emphasizing the relational and processual nature of entrepreneuring, cf. Nayak and Chia, 2011; Hjorth, 2013); feminist theoretical perspectives (Calás, Smircich and Bourne, 2009); and political-philosophical perspectives addressing the discourse of an enterprising subject (Foucault, 2008; du Gay, 2004). It is probably uncontroversial to say that Foucault is a foundational figure of CES. In his genealogical work,

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Foucault (2008) delineates the entrepreneur not merely as a partner of exchange but as a self-optimizing individual who uses himself (*sic*) as the object of ongoing investments and improvements. What Foucault offers to CES is a conceptual framework for understanding how discourse expands the norms and practices from the realm of entrepreneurship to individuals, groups and organizations which might not in the first place be deemed entrepreneurial (du Gay, 2004). At the heart of such attempts lies the realization that rather than forming a particular type of organization or a set of behaviours aimed at creating innovative products and services, entrepreneurship forms a discourse which is intimately related to extant relations of power and which thus works to demand that individuals should conduct their lives just as they would manage an enterprise (Dey, 2014; Dey and Steyaert, 2016). A key insight deriving from Foucauldian research is that entrepreneurship has become the heart-piece of neo-normative forms of control by infiltrating many areas of social (i.e. non-economic) life in seemingly innocuous ways (du Gay, 2004; Armstrong, 2005; Jones and Spicer, 2009; Wright and Zahra, 2011).

Postcolonial theory has been used to analyse minority entrepreneurship, and gender issues (Banerjee and Tedmanson, 2010; Essers and Tedmanson, 2014; Ozakazanc-Pan, 2014), and to illustrate the whiteness and otherness in entrepreneurship, excluding people of colour, women, and many "other" entrepreneurs from being viewed as successful. Fletcher (forthcoming) refers to these perspectives as "standpoint critiques" which are united by a desire to voice the viewpoints and realities of individuals or entire social groups which are usually at the margins of society and, thus, invisible in traditional research of entrepreneurship. Non-entitative stances in turn conceptualize entrepreneuring as an ongoing, continuous, fluid flux, non-linear and inherently open (Boutaiba, 2004; Sørenson, 2006), thus effectively transgressing ontological realism as the dominant paradigmatic orientation of entrepreneurship research. Feminist approaches, which have inter alia offered productive insights into how women are perpetually stigmatized or even written out of official accounts of entrepreneurship (Achtenhagen and Welter, 2011), have been instrumental in revealing the gendered nature and gendered subtext of the entrepreneurial subject (Essers, 2009; Ozkazanc-Pan, 2009), and to bring to the fore the barriers women entrepreneurs encounter because of the masculine connotation of the signifier entrepreneurship. Jointly, such attempts at advancing a critical understanding of the entrepreneurship phenomenon achieve to explicate pluralistic conceptualizations of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurialism and testify how understanding the entrepreneurship phenomenon is hindered by a "hegemony of the positive" (Olaison and Sørensen, 2014), with entrepreneurship predominantly being seen as a means for stimulating various positive outcomes (including the creation of markets, the invention of new products and services, boosting productivity, eliminating slack and inefficiency).

1. Routes ahead

It is obvious that—when thinking about the way forward—we should want to avoid falling into the trap of be(com)ing overly negative, or directive. Indeed, if we underscore that it is the messy, heterogeneous, and problematic nature of entrepreneurship that we aim to further explore and understand, this is not to say that heterogeneity, messiness, or even the problematic (e.g. the dark side of entrepreneurship) are bad per se. We feel that CES should not principally set out to do away with entrepreneurship premised on the contention that it is bad, or that "traps" are involved (and: should be avoided). Arguably, the vein of research that discusses "dark sides" in and of entrepreneurship has been quite successful. Nevertheless, such studies may run the risk of rendering the critical task into a gloomy one, predominantly emphasizing the negative. Rather, we feel, and suggest, that in principle, the "critical messiness" in and of entrepreneurship

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should be celebrated. After all, isn't that what makes entrepreneurship unique, and interesting to study? Whereas what we may call "mainstream" (or: positivist) contributions at understanding entrepreneurship might set out to minimize those "bad effects", we would like to bring them centre stage, but in an affirmative rather than negative way. Whilst acknowledging the necessity to go on laying bare dominant assumptions, in order to unveil and move beyond the rose-tinted views of entrepreneurship, we would like to call for critical entrepreneurship contributions to start offering "ways out", or alternatives. What does this entail? We see two routes ahead.

1.1. Trying to keep entrepreneurship critical

CES bringing to the fore the "dark side" of entrepreneurship play out alongside another vein of critical entrepreneurship research, i.e. those contributions investigating entrepreneurship's social and emancipatory potential (Verduijn, Dey, Tedmanson and Essers, 2014; Tedmanson, Essers, Dey and Verduyn, 2015). The latter marks an attempt to move beyond reductionist approaches of entrepreneurship, such as those which exclusively construe the phenomenon as economic (Grant and Perren, 2002). The critical thrust of this orientation derives from enlarging the conceptual horizon of entrepreneurship by locating it outside of dogmatic theories and paradigms (Jennings, Perren and Carter, 2005; Mole and Ram, 2012; Ogbor, 2000), thus moving entrepreneurship past its economic hotbed. Feminist research has been at the forefront in aligning entrepreneurship with social change, and in addressing the social and societal aspects and consequences (Calás, Smircich and Bourne, 2009) as well as the possibilities of emancipation (Rindova, Barry and Ketchen, 2009) and empowerment of entrepreneurial initiatives (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2013). Examples can be found in attempts that transgress the image of the entrepreneur as the "white knight of capitalism" by construing it as part of economic (and not capitalist) democracy (Schweickart, 2002) or what individualist anarchists have come to term "market-based socialism" (Chartier and Johnson, 2010). Non-economic conceptualizations have received increasing support by scholars who felt ill at ease with entrepreneurship's economic codification and which therefore started to ask: "What if we have been thinking about entrepreneurship the wrong way?" (Sarasvathy and Venkataraman, 2011: 114). This question reverberates in attempts that rejuvenate the vitality of entrepreneurship by putting the social back at the core of entrepreneurship research (Brush, Bruin and Welter, 2009; Steyaert and Hjorth, 2006). Seeing entrepreneurship as a pre-eminent social force (Sarasvathy and Venkataraman, 2011), the entrepreneurship-as-social-change tradition (Steyaert and Hjorth, 2006) points the way forward in terms of how entrepreneurship can be realigned with the interests, concerns and problems of the populace. Conceptual imagination has gone as far as depicting entrepreneurship as a means for eradicating poverty (Alvarez and Barney, 2014; Bruton, Ketchen and Ireland, 2013), for intervening into the social fabric (Steyaert, 2011), or for bringing into existence emancipatory conditions of possibility (Goss, Jones, Betta and Latham, 2011). Driven by a general desire to probe new vistas and perspectives, these studies have punctuated the canon of positivist, quantitative and functionalist research by making it clear that wealth creation is not the fundamental goal of entrepreneurial efforts (Rindova, Barry and Ketchen, 2009). In so doing, this orientation of CES opens up new possibilities for thinking about entrepreneurship in its relationship with various ethical and political sensitivities and opportunities, thus charting ways in which entrepreneurship can precipitate in practices of concrete freedom (Dey and Steyaert, 2014). By considering issues of context we argue CES provides an important platform for reflecting on the social consequences of entrepreneurial activity, not simply lauding it as a sole economic phenomenon.

What further bears emphasizing here are studies which have shown reflexivity in their methodological choices, adopting "other" ways of studying, knowing as well as reporting on

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entrepreneurship such as: action research, with contributions addressing entrepreneurship research's performative and interventionist possibilities (Steyaert, 2004; Johannisson, 2011; Dey and Steyaert, 2012), discourse analysis, investigating how, and by whom, dominant entrepreneurship accounts are being produced (Ahl, 2004; Pettersson, 2004; Berglund and Johansson, 2007), and narrative and ethnographic research, bringing to the fore the (subtle) nuances of entrepreneurial everyday life (Bruni, Gherardi and Poggio, 2004; Down and Reveley, 2004). Insofar as it gets accepted that methods are more than just an epistemological tool for creating knowledge about our subject matter but an ontological means of creating worlds, then it follows that non-objectivist methods such as the ones just mentioned permit us to use research as a means of constructing entrepreneurship in largely different ways (Steyaert and Dey, 2010). Although the business school in specific and the university more generally might not be particularly conducive to research endeavours that seek to probe the agentic, performative and constitutive thrust of methods, there are at least a few promising examples (notably Steyaert, 2011) which call on scholars to use research as a vehicle for both participating in and shaping entrepreneurship, instead of "only" studying it.

1.2. Complexifying rather than coherizing as research strategy

This second route also, markedly, forms an attempt at moving beyond a reductionist understanding of the entrepreneurship phenomenon, one that appeals to how entrepreneurship inadvertently variously provokes and appropriates existing "orders" (cf. Steyaert, 2007a; Nayak and Chia, 2011). This entails setting out to understand the micro-manifestations of entrepreneuring, and its engagement in localized, everyday struggles and practices of freedom (Imas, Wilson and Weston, 2012). Whereas a reductionist understanding is renowned for its focus on generalizability, and thus coherence, we propose for an understanding that allows, and accounts, for the complexity inherent in entrepreneurship. After all, any effort at model building, or systems-thinking in relation to entrepreneuring is too simplistic to understand the same, for entrepreneuring cannot "be captured in plain predictions, complete deterministic schemes or pre-existing patterns" (Steyaert, 2004: 19). To illustrate: "traditional" attempts at theorizing entrepreneurial processes present "the" entrepreneurial process predominantly as one that involves new venture creation, and positing it as an intentionally planned activity, a linear trajectory (Steyaert, 2007b). Most such conceptualizations assume that the development of a new venture proceeds through (identifiable) sequences of stages or steps—picturing a road towards a pre-defined goal (Churchill and Lewis, 1983; Carter, Gartner and Reynolds, 1996). In many contemporary analyses, however, such assumptions are being questioned, and more actual attention is being paid to dynamics and complexity. Markedly, the perspective of entrepreneuring as a non-linear and inherently open phenomenon is receiving increasing attention (Hjorth, 2004; Sørenson, 2006; Steyaert, 2007b; Johannisson, 2011). Such contributions stipulate potentiality (latency, cf. Hjorth, 2004), and lived actuality (including also "prosaics", or the mundane, cf. Steyaert, 2004; Engstrom, 2012) in new venture emergence, and other entrepreneurial endeavours. Indeed, they help to conceptualize how entrepreneuring usually does not follow a neat path, but rather portrays a messy one where initial ideas change and evolve over time, through action and interaction, with ups and downs, guided by coincidence and by what is at hand (Baker and Nelson, 2005), and as "wayfinding" (Nayak and Chia, 2011). This entails placing less emphasis on the individual (the entrepreneur), but conceptualizing entrepreneuring as—indeed—a complex conglomerate of (transindividual) practices (Johannisson, 2011), where any emergent ordering is being viewed upon as precariously achieved, indeterminate, always remaining open to further becoming (Verduyn, 2015).

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Each in their own right, these two routes can help expand the growing stream of critical entrepreneurship studies, and help the same to become recognized as an important tradition in understanding the entrepreneurship phenomenon.

Wrapping up

Our aim with this essay has been to emphasize how the field of entrepreneurship struggles with and fights its existing limits (political, cultural, material)—always with an eye to the invention of other possible worlds. We thank the special issue editors for this opportunity to provide our viewpoint of where CES "stand", and how they can continue to move forward.

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