

# **The Critical Turn in Social Entrepreneurship Research**

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## ***Introduction***

The idea for this paper emerged from the realization that social entrepreneurship research, despite recently having become a more diverse and, dare we say it, interesting subject of inquiry, entails a remarkably low level of critical self-reflection. In fact, reviewing the extant literature there was an uneasy feeling that many social entrepreneurship scholars have been keen to reiterate political and media narratives with no or only minimal critical interrogation. As a result, the scholarly debate of social entrepreneurship purports the view that social entrepreneurship is a good thing and that, by extension, the more social entrepreneurs the better. However, the obvious flipside of this ‘rose-tinted view’ of social entrepreneurship (Lawrence, Phillips & Tracey, 2012) is that it often becomes easier to discuss the most far-reaching utopia than to stage even the most marginal point of discontent. Ascribing a general ‘crisis of critique’ to the field of social entrepreneurship research, we were simultaneously delighted to see that at least some critical activity was already discernible (albeit at the fringes rather than at the centre of the academic canon). To capture, reflect on and intensify these ephemeral impulses, we decided to proceed by way of mapping existing forms of critique.

## ***Mapping Critical Social Entrepreneurship Research***

### ***Myth-busting***

The first form of critique, called myth-busting, counter-acts the fetish-like treatment of social entrepreneurship (Andersson, 2011) through empirical evidence. Myth-busting, a term borrowed from the entertainment series on Discovery Channel, is critical insofar as it probes whether what is casually said about social entrepreneurship (read myths) actually corresponds with reality. Common mythical themes pertain to the way social entrepreneurship is related to, for instance, system-wide social change or to the sweeping eradicating of the intricate problems of our era (Cukier et al., 2011). Importantly, the idea of myth is not limited to what is casually said about social entrepreneurship; myth also entails things which are not mentioned and thus hidden from empirical scrutiny. Emblematic in this regard is the issue of failure: failure has to this day remained under the radar of researchers (despite there being

notable exceptions; e.g. Seanor & Meaton, 2008; Scott & Teasdale, 2012) which in turn fosters the (mythical) impression of social entrepreneurship being infallible or at least far more successful than it actually is. Guided by the principle ‘sapere aude’, the hope of myth-busters is that the sacrifice of the myths of social entrepreneurship will lead to an incremental approximation of the truth (and emancipation, while we are at it). To attain this end, myth-busters must endorse an attitude of Cartesian scepticism (i.e., doubt everything that has not yet been subjected to empirical scrutiny) while premising their research endeavours on the Enlightenment ideal of reason.

### *Critique of power effects*

The second form of critique resulted from the realization that truth, which forms myth-busting’s basis of critical operation, might eventually be less effective than commonly assumed. Undoubtedly there is a fair chance that the ‘facticity’ of a given statement about social entrepreneurship might be less a function of its correspondence with reality/truth than of its normalisation through particular processes and technologies of power. Against this view, we termed “critique of power effects” those forms of critique which endorse an explicitly political stance towards what can legitimately be said and thought of social entrepreneurship. We deemed most informative approaches which frame social entrepreneurship as a Discourse (writ large), grand narrative or ideology which, in its usage by societal elites and powerful actors (Mason, 2012), presents dominant cultural and historical values and world-views as self-evident and natural, while rendering possible alternatives (read more egalitarian, participatory, democratic, etc. values and vistas) unthinkable. The pre-eminent aim of the critique of power effects is to develop an understanding of how power conditions the ‘truth’ of social entrepreneurship, and how this ‘truth’ in turn forms the basis for political (self-)control, disciplining and exclusion (Dey, 2010). The critique of power effects thus chiefly involves denaturalization as the operation through which representations and understandings of social entrepreneurship are highlighted not as quasi-natural, necessary or self-evident, but as social achievements and, by implication, as amenable to change.

### *Normative critique*

The third form of critique, normative critique, is chiefly involved in moral judgment, thus reflecting social entrepreneurship in terms of whether and how it contributes to the common good, the good life or an inclusive sociality at large. To this day normative critique has materialized mainly in treatises that put under scrutiny the ostensible win-win relationship

between the two terms 'social' and 'entrepreneurship'. The main concern thus expressed includes the assumption that markets would be able to tackle social and environmental problems (Humphries & Grant, 2005), a view which indeed becomes questionable as it suggests that the single best way of solving the ills of the market is through the market. Whilst social entrepreneurship derives large parts of its (moral) legitimacy from the presumption that market mechanisms will be able to solve the problems which neither the state nor the nonprofit sector were able to solve, a normative evaluation is worthwhile to hold in check the potential economic over-codification of 'social entrepreneurship'. Such checks involve inquiring whether the social entails any moral leverage whatsoever or whether it is reduced to a mere *'epitheton ornans'* of entrepreneurship (Steyaert & Hjorth, 2006). Existing normative reflections have gone as far as to dispense with the term 'social entrepreneurship' for it seems to undermine the democratic spirit of the social sector (Eikenberry, 2009) or simply because it ingests the social: the "social in social entrepreneurship is too weak, and entrepreneurship is too managerialised" (Hjorth, forthcoming).

### *Critique of transgression*

Critique of transgression is premised upon the assumption that the best way of practicing critique is to study carefully the witches-brew of actual practice (Brady, 2011), i.e., the complex, often paradoxical and ambivalent ways in which practitioners go about their everyday lives. Contrary to forms of critique which "pass judgment [...] from the Olympian height of absolute truth" (Eagleton, 1991, p. 131), critique of transgression grants people 'on the ground' significant levels of critical capacity. The notion 'transgression' (Foucault, 1998) thus testifies to the fact that the Discourses, grand narratives or ideologies of social entrepreneurship which inter alia demand that practitioners in the social sector become more flexible, risk-taking, perseverant, innovative, etc. are not blindly adopted by those working in the field (Curtis, 2008). For instance, Parkinson & Howorth (2008), who studied how discursive shifts in the third sector towards dominant entrepreneurship discourse affected practitioners, concluded that policy-makers (who were the primary promoters of entrepreneurship discourse) were only partially successful in infiltrating the thinking and acting of practitioners. One of the pre-eminent insights deriving from Parkinson and Howorth's study is that what power produces is not necessarily in line with its aims. This disjuncture has been visible in how third sector practitioners dismissed the idea of social enterprise, saying that "'it's amusing!', 'it's ridiculous!', 'too posh ... I'm working class'" (p. 301). Whilst transgression might take the form of down-right

resistance, it might also involve more nuanced, elusive reactions such as the ongoing struggles and ideological dilemmas taking place at the intersection of power and local action, where practitioners might simultaneously endorse and perpetuate certain spaces of constraint while rejecting others.

### ***The Road Ahead: Critique as Intervention and Provocation***

Whilst our mapping signaled the (slow) rise of critical activity in the realm of social entrepreneurship, we must not forget that every form of critique, even its most avant-garde version, is prone to being progressively solidified, that is, transformed into a mere cliché (Barthes, 1967). What this might entail can be extrapolated from the field of entrepreneurship whose subjection to the organic ideology of the market has essentially reduced the subject matter to a cog within the 'economic machine' (Perren & Jennings, 2005). Where similar tendencies of economic determinism have already been identified in the realm of social entrepreneurship (Edwards, 2008), it is evident that that the task of critique is yet not accomplished, and arguably never will. By implication, the critique of social entrepreneurship needs to be approached not as a project (which has a clear beginning and ending) but as an open-ended endeavor (Derrida, 2001). In order not to fall prey to the centripetal forces pinpointed by Perren and Jennings (2005), critique must not stand still but constantly reinvent itself. In our assessment, the pressing task ahead is to move the critique of social entrepreneurship away from an exclusively contemplative and scholastic mode towards one whose objective is to provoke and intervene into how social entrepreneurship is both understood and practiced.

A first inspiration for a more engaged and engaging type of critique might derive from ethnographic research which has recently found its way into social entrepreneurship research. Though some scholars might not view ethnography as a critical tradition (Putnam et al., 1993), ethnography's intimate fieldwork has critical potential in the way it gives voice to those people and perspectives who/which are conventionally not heard in academic discourse (such as beneficiaries but also social entrepreneurs; Hervieux et al., 2010). Such subaltern voices might not simply enrich our understanding of social entrepreneurship by adding just another perspective to the already existing stock of knowledge. Rather, voices of the subaltern bear critical significance precisely because they convey a kind of truth which is edited out or marginalized in official accounts of social entrepreneurship (Froggett & Chamberlayne, 2004). A case in point in how the voice of the subaltern provokes canonical understandings of social entrepreneurship would be recipients of micro-loans whose stories of hard-ship, failure,

domestic violence, stigmatization, etc. (Dichter & Harper, 2007) are diametrically opposed to and thus uproot the sort of eulogies enacted by social entrepreneurship competitions, conferences or think tanks.

Another promising line of inquiry entails action research (Steyaert, Marti & Michels, 2012) whose aim is to intervene in and change the conditions being investigated. Similar to ethnography, action research puts centre stage the perspectives of research participants. Action research thus encompasses a process of knowledge co-production whereby spaces of alternative thinking, acting and identity are brought into existence. A central component of action research is that it is not a priori clear where the research journey will lead or what sort of outcomes it will produce. Whilst the research trajectory is largely shaped by the participants, the responsibility of researchers is to explore how they can support a world-becoming-different. An illustrative case of action research stems from Friedman and Desivilya (2010) who used action science to engage with regional development in a divided society in the Middle East. In a complex design that interwove social entrepreneurial projects with conflict engagement, the researchers set up artistically-oriented spaces for collaboration where participants from excluded communities were able to “re-establish and redefine their relationship with the mainstream” (p. 502).

The last and arguably most challenging task suggested here is related to the question how social entrepreneurship might contribute to an alternative social, economic and cultural order. Granted, such a question might be counter-intuitive given the fact that social entrepreneurship is often portrayed as the embodiment of ‘alternative’ (Driver, 2012); however, at closer examination it appears more apt to suggest that social entrepreneurship is chiefly in line with a deeply uncontroversial version of capitalism (Boje & Smith, 2010). Whatever local successes social entrepreneurship might be associated with, there is no sign whatsoever that those successes have in any way changed the contagiousness and irrationality of capitalism (Harvey, 2010). Quite to the contrary, there are reasons to believe that social entrepreneurship has shifted into a subservient role in the support of the smooth operation of national and local economies. And though more radical manifestations and examples of social entrepreneurship do in fact exist, the problem seems to be that they failed to ‘scale up’ into large-scale forms of radical (not just social) change. Hence, what concerns the role of interventionist critique in this ‘scaling up’, we argue that researchers should not only identify the more radical examples of social entrepreneurship (i.e. those which do not immediately translate into support for the capitalist project) but actively create collective spaces and open platforms where such endeavors can be connected with the aim of articulating and negotiating

(alternative) reality accounts and identities. In line with Nealon (2008), the challenge of interventionist critique is not so much to uncover individual cases of social enterprises which swim against the (capitalist) current, but to coordinate those struggles, thus “finding channels, concepts, or practices that can link up and thereby intensify transversal struggles into larger, collective but discontinuous movements” (p. 106).

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