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# **Enacting (new) possibilities of living: entrepreneurship and affirmation**

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## **Abstract**

Motivated by the need to reflect upon the role of entrepreneurship in the economy and society, we seek to understand entrepreneurship as having the potential to ‘produce’ new possibilities for living when departing from a critical awareness. We consider existing critical entrepreneurship research as necessary but insufficient in adequately bringing about new perspectives of entrepreneurship as it often tends to be a position ‘against entrepreneurship’, discrediting the phenomenon from the many possible values it may invoke. We suggest *affirmative* critique (Weiskopf & Steyaert, 2009; Dey & Steyaert, 2018) to ‘turn critique into creativity’, thus making critique productive and exploring how actual transformation (e.g., alternatives) can be invoked when adopting such a stance.

**Keywords:** Entrepreneurship, entrepreneurship-as-social-change, critical research, affirmative critique, social change

## **Introduction**

In many ways, state withdrawal has given rise to entrepreneurship's augmented popularity. An essential element in this development is that entrepreneurship is seen as a motor of economic progression, innovation, and job growth. The entrepreneurship phenomenon is frequently associated with a neoliberal discourse of free enterprise, forming an imperative measure to move away from a state-planned economy and state intervention. This belief in a market-driven ideology combined with the assumption that new businesses lead to job creation and innovation has firmly embedded entrepreneurship into the political discourse (Perren & Jennings, 2005).

This chapter aims to move away from the hegemonic allure given to entrepreneurship toward a more critical and broadened consideration of the concept (Weiskopf & Steyaert, 2009). We point out other social aspects that fall under the heading of entrepreneurship, such as its ability to provoke social transformation or enhance civic freedom, that have to strive for attention in entrepreneurship research. As such, in our endeavor of reversing the arrow, and thus turning towards the impact of entrepreneurship on society (as well as the other way round), we build on the premise that all entrepreneurial initiatives generate social and societal change for the better or worse and should be studied and understood accordingly (Steyaert & Katz, 2004; Calás, Smircich and Bourne 2009). We build on Calás et al. (2009), who argue that scholars should no longer view entrepreneurship and (social) transformation as if they were separate concepts and as such position this chapter within the entrepreneurship-as-social-change conversation (Steyaert & Hjorth, 2007; Weiskopf & Steyaert, 2009; Calás et al., 2009).

To put (social) transformation more to the heart of entrepreneurship, we offer reflections on how to make critique creative and productive in offering solutions to dominant assumptions about entrepreneurship in research. As such, we adopt the concept of *affirmative* critique in this chapter. We do so to understand entrepreneurship as having the potential to ‘produce’ new possibilities for living when departing from a critical awareness (following such efforts as, e.g., Weiskopf & Steyaert, 2009; Goss, Jones, Betta & Latham, 2011; Dey & Steyaert, 2018). We are aware that affirmative critique is another logic or way of thinking about the social change potential of entrepreneurship and illuminate its distinctive features.

This chapter is structured as follows. We first present extant contributions that highlight entrepreneurship and economic logic and its extant critiques. Then, we elaborate on affirmative critique and discuss extant contributions adopting such a stance in understanding entrepreneurship. Finally, we conclude by specifying what adopting affirmative critique, i.e., the attempt to challenge the mainstream entrepreneurship perspective and create alternatives, may bring.

### **Entrepreneurship in the economic logic**

Early contributions have emphasized that entrepreneurship has been limited by assumptions that conceptualize entrepreneurship as a positive economic activity associated with an enterprise discourse (e.g., Hjorth & Steyaert, 2004; Calás et al., 2009). Entrepreneurship is notably established in management literature as an engine that sustains capitalism (Zahra and Wright 2016) and is comprehensively recognized as a means for economic development. Entrepreneurship has been associated with economic growth, competitiveness, and employment on the macro-level (Audretsch, Keilbach, and Lehmann, 2006) or wealth-creation and well-being

on a micro-level (Sarasvathy and Venkataraman, 2011). Building on the norm that entrepreneurship generates new jobs and enhances competitiveness, it has gained traction in the public imagination, policy discourse, and academic domain. A rhetoric that describes entrepreneurship as a common practice to generate economic growth is spread to the public sphere and encounters universal acceptance. Such rhetoric romanticizes entrepreneurship as having the supremacy to enhance welfare creation for everyone, everywhere (Verduijn & Essers, 2013). This positivist and economic rationale about entrepreneurship remains unambiguous in literature and is established as a dominant attribute of entrepreneurship.

The commitment to such conventional outlooks of entrepreneurship has created a limited and distorted image of entrepreneurship as conventional narratives tend to ignore the multifacetedness of the phenomenon. As Calas et al. (2009) argue, with a few exemptions, literature tends to position entrepreneurship as an economic activity with a few possible social outcomes. The commitment to economic outcomes of entrepreneurial initiatives has produced a misguided image of entrepreneurship as it is often assumed to be the ideal practice to challenge low economic progression and generate new jobs, regardless of the contexts in which it unfolds. As Wiklund, Wright, and Zahra (2019) explain, that misguidance can be attributed to the absence of measurement work in literature that is supposed to test assumptions about entrepreneurship. Already over 20 years ago, Ogbor (2000) has pointed out that entrepreneurship is often described and understood in literature based on unexamined and contradictory assumptions and knowledge about the entrepreneur, which produces an unrealistic image of the phenomenon. This distorts the

heterogeneity of the entrepreneurship phenomenon and creates dominant narratives that are difficult to challenge (Jones & Spicer, 2009).

### **Critical treatises in entrepreneurship research**

Motivated by the need to reflect upon the role of entrepreneurship in the economy and society, critical research has emerged to offer alternative understandings and perspectives of entrepreneurship. This involves challenging assumptions that help ascribe limited meanings to entrepreneurship that are not accurately representing the entrepreneurship phenomenon, most commonly conceptualizing it as a capitalist practice to push economic growth (e.g., Rehn, Brännback, Carsrud, and Lindahl, 2013). The binding argument of this critical stream of literature is that a limited conception of entrepreneurship ignores multiple aspects of the term, such as possible social effects.

This critical stance was followed by more critical work that urged for a more refined representation of the entrepreneurship phenomenon. The critical treatises aim to dismantle entrepreneurship from the uncontested myths that have ‘contaminated’ the discourse (Ogbor, 2000, p. 629) and have resulted in a limited conceptualization of the term (Ogbor, 2000, but also see Drakopoulou Dodd and Anderson, 2007; Shane, 2008; Rehn et al., 2013). Critical perspectives addressing the singularity of entrepreneurship in the literature can unveil what often remains undisclosed with regards to ‘taken for granted’ assumptions that constitute entrepreneurship and can inform the domain, contributing to a more refined representation of the entrepreneurship phenomenon. (Verduijn & Essers, 2013).

Weiskopf & Steyaert (2009) argue that whether critical treatises of entrepreneurship studies can counterbalance the ‘overly optimistic and one-sided attributes to the positive dimension of entrepreneurship’ (p.192) will depend on how visible critique becomes. As they argue, current critique in mainstream entrepreneurship research has gone mainly unnoticed. It requires that entrepreneurship research becomes ‘dangerous & inventive’ to consider how ‘all kinds of societal issues are problematized and re-invented’ (Weiskopf & Steyaert, 2009, p. 201).

Aware of the extant critique by Weiskopf & Steyaert (2009), we argue that despite an increasing number of contributions that aimed to critique dominant narratives of entrepreneurship, critical entrepreneurship research ‘just’ tends to offer a warning. Therefore, it is deemed limited in bringing about new theoretical perspectives of entrepreneurship, given that it tends to be skeptical and not transcend mere negation (Latour, 2004). Critique is commonly enacted as a gesture of negativity and a position ‘against’ entrepreneurship (Dey & Steyaert, 2018). This limits the ability of current critical research to fully conceptualize entrepreneurship as a means to enact social change against the established literature that equates the phenomenon to economic logic. As Calás et al. (2009) argue, there is a need for more, other, theoretical frameworks to examine the diversity in social change that entrepreneurship may bring when reframing entrepreneurship from an *economic* activity with possible social outcomes to entrepreneurship as a *social change* activity with a variety of possible outcomes.

Aware of the limits of purely negative forms of critical entrepreneurship research, in this chapter, we pick up on a specific conversation on ‘entrepreneurship as social change’, and specifically



those contributions engaging with the notion of ‘affirmative critique’. We explain how affirmative critique departs from other forms of critique in that it can be creative and productive in creating discussions that may produce novel perspectives of entrepreneurship concerning social change (for better or worse) (e.g., Holt & Hjorth, 2016; Dashtipour & Rumens, 2018). We exemplify how instead of being oppositional, affirmative critique points toward a more generative conceptualization of critique. In the next section, we first explain what affirmative critique entails.

### **Affirmative critique**

Bunz, Kaiser, and Thiele (2017) commence their book titled “Symptoms of the Planetary Condition: A Critical Vocabulary” with a phrase by Trinh T. Minh-ha which says that “*Rather than going for the new object of study, the new product to consume, one should work on new ways of seeing, of being, or of living the world*” (*D-Passage*, 122). This is precisely what affirmative critique aims to achieve. Latour (2004, p. 225) argues how ‘traditional’ modes of critique in academia have ‘run out of steam’, and that tools used by researchers whose aim is to contribute to social justice should be replaced. He explains that the primary objective of the debate on critical research is to embed criticism in ways more adjusted to current conditions. He argues that critique has been scathing enough and that we now need to make critique constructive and productive. In line, contributions have emphasized how, often, critique is ‘negative’, and ‘immobilizes’, in a certain sense (see, e.g., Kaiser, Thiele, and Bunz, 2014; Denzin, 2017; Hohti & Gunnarsson, 2018). Thus, affirmative critique aims to transcend mere negation (Latour 2004) and the ‘barriers of negativity’ (Braidotti 2019, p. 64) and be concurrently oppositional, as well as inventive, productive, and creative (Ulmer, 2017). This creativity translates into offering new thoughts, new

ideas, and new logics that continue to critically interrogate (mainstream) problematic conceptions but also provide alternatives.

Bunz et al. (2017) argue that affirmative critique has a diagnostic role in the sense that it can detect the ‘inequalities, asymmetries and never innocent differentiations we live in’ (p.26). As Bunz et al. (2017) elaborate, under more traditional ways of critique, an outsider position to the phenomena under critical consideration is the dominant practice. An affirmative stance rejects a researcher's subject placed outside the phenomenon of interest (Andersen, 2018). It thus rejects a ‘critiquing from a distance’ approach (Juelskjær and Staunæs, 2016). This is in line with Bunz et al. (2017a), who urge for a more ‘embodied form of critique’ (p. 9).

One of the foundational thinkers of affirmation is Rosi Braidotti (2011, 2013, 2019). For her, (conceptual) creativity is a requisite in critical thought. She argues that affirmative ethics are a form of collective practice for constructing ‘social horizons of hope’ that respond to injustices and new forms of domination (Braidotti, 2019, p.115). The force of such affirmative ethics enables a grounded analysis of the operation of discursive power and how it provides new parameters of knowledge (Braidotti, 2019). Enacting such grounded analyses require affirmative politics that lead to alternative projects and possibilities in research (Ulmer, 2017) that make room for creativity, inventiveness, and experimenting (Braidotti, 2011 & 2013). In the next section, we further elaborate on how this affirmative 'treatise' can be relevant to entrepreneurship and what it can bring to the field.

## **Entrepreneurship and affirmative critique**

To put more weight on the social productivity of entrepreneurship, Weiskopf & Steyaert (2009) proposed adopting affirmative critique in their critical treatise of the entrepreneurship phenomenon, which embraces entrepreneurship's social change potential, but then from a critical perspective, to see if and how entrepreneurship can invoke actual transformation (alternatives) from a critical stance. As they put it, affirmative critique is a form of resisting the dominant conceptualization of entrepreneurship construed in the enterprise discourse whilst favoring an inventiveness that increases possibilities of life, new ideas, new markets, new institutions (Rindova, Barry, and Ketchen, 2009) but from a critical awareness, without discarding what the same has brought in terms of insights. Affirmative critique invites entrepreneurship scholars to explore, experiment, and take risks (Hjorth, 2017). It encourages scholars to become a 'binding force' for societal production (Rindova et al., 2009; Calás et al., 2018) rather than critiquing their object of inquiry from a distance (Juelskjær and Staunæs, 2016). As such, affirmatively critical treatises are from the *inside* rather than the *outside* and are offered by people who have taken it upon themselves to ground the foundational assumptions of what they are criticizing thoroughly.

Extant contributions that linked affirmative critique with entrepreneurship can be found in, e.g., Dey & Steyaert (2018) and Calás, Ergene & Smircich (2018). They use affirmative critique to scrutinize the concept of *social entrepreneurship* and its reputation as a means for social change. Dey and Steyaert (2018), for example, argue that we need affirmative critique in relation to 'social entrepreneurship' not to discredit the field and its extant contributions, but rather to assess what is wrong with it in both an epistemological sense (i.e., detached research practices and

methodologies) as well as an ontological sense (i.e., misguided assumptions relating to social entrepreneurship). For example, they argue that critique is needed to question the grand narratives in this field to unleash the full potentialities that have been silenced by the same. Their proposition is affirmative in that it inspires opening up to new ways in which transformation can be enacted through social entrepreneurship.

Calás and colleagues (2018) reposition the concept of social entrepreneurship and wonder *what if* we could be thinking about entrepreneurship otherwise through affirmative critique. They argue that current modes of social entrepreneurship may be trapped in a ‘space of signification that may no longer be there’ (p.264). As such, they make an affirmative argument when exploring how alternative worlds may be possible when engaging with affirmative critique. However, they acknowledge that this imagination of a new world comes with no guarantees for success. Nevertheless, their contribution is affirmative in that it questions conventional ideas about the field (i.e., by questioning what is being ignored or made visible by conventional ideas) and opens up to other spaces for theoretically re-imagining such conventions.

Affirmative critique has also been picked up by Verduijn and Andersen (forthcoming) in relation to research on *entrepreneurship-as-practice* and to investigate whether and how we can make use of the inventive thinking of affirmative critique to move the field forward. They suggest that to move the field forward, we need to prevent research on *entrepreneurship-as-practice* from ‘closing off’ and construct and present a manifesto for research in this field. This requires critique that affirms rather than just negates the drawbacks of the domain. More specifically, such a stance

not only resists dominant practices within the field but tracks the shifting grounds such as to re-order them.

A distinct component of affirmative critique that enables it to explore other theoretical soci(et)al lenses of entrepreneurship is that it is *progressive*. This form of critique is not ‘against entrepreneurship’, but neither against destructive critique *per se*. Instead, it acknowledges what previous critical research has brought to the field and balances this negative critique with critical thought’s creative and productive potential. Instead of a positioning ‘against entrepreneurship’, which ordinarily implies disqualifying entrepreneurship given its problematic aspects, an affirmative stance tends to go beyond the particular economic logic embedded in entrepreneurship and offers ways forward on how entrepreneurship can enact social change.

One way of putting affirmation to work with entrepreneurship is demonstrated by Dashtipour and Rumens through their elaboration of ‘Gringo’, a Swedish magazine that represents one way through which entrepreneurship can embrace issues of structural inequality, empowerment, and emancipation (Goss et al., 2011; Rindova et al., 2009). To exemplify, we detail the case as a further illustration.

*Dashtipour and Rumens (2018) have elaborated on the case of the Swedish anti-racist commercial magazine (Gringo) to elucidate how “entrepreneurship introduces incongruence and newness and thus ruptures established norms, familiarity, and coherence” (p. 224). They explain via the case of Gringo that entrepreneurship can produce social change by creating ‘heterotopia’ that enables ‘an encounter with the*

*real', which in this case is the normalizing discourse of power. Gringo aims to change immigrant media portrayal and thus question the normalized notion of 'Swedishness'. Dashtipour and Rumens (2018) argue that a 'normalizing' discourse represents the suburb and its people as criminal and uncivilized. Although the magazine's content was often humorous & colorful, Gringo explicitly sought emancipation from normalizing forces of power 'that outline how one is supposed to live and whom one is supposed to be' (Dey and Steyaert, 2016, p. 630). These normalizing forces excluded suburbs and their people and represented them as deviants. Although many people appreciated the aim to pay tribute to the suburbs and appreciated alternative journalism, critics were more vocal and numerous than supporters. Dashtipour and Rumens (2018) point to the potential of entrepreneurship to create affect in the form of anxiety caused by disordering the existing social orders. As the authors argue, such anxiety is necessary to provoke social transformation, potentially leading to opposition to the entrepreneurial effort (Dey and Steyaert, 2010). Gringo became one of the most-read magazines in Sweden and an example of the more significant social change potential of entrepreneurship that goes way beyond the 'economy', the individual venture, or the individual entrepreneur.*

The case informs about alternative ways of thinking about entrepreneurship that diverge from the economic logic. It also points to a relatively neglected side of critique: how critique can be disruptive, creative, and useful in breaking free from normalizing powers (in this case: representing the suburb and its people as criminal and uncivilized) and seeking emancipation. Ultimately, it points to the ability of entrepreneurship to shape social realities deprived of such

normalizing powers that may be oppressive towards certain groups in society. The Gringo case demonstrates the ability of entrepreneurship to put anxiety to work for uprooting established norms, highlighting how entrepreneurship may produce a disturbing incongruence. The case highlights that this affect in the form of anxiety is needed to enact social transformation. That transformation, however, is not always positive and comes with paradoxes, disruption, or, as demonstrated by Gringo, anxiety. Affirmative critique acknowledges that paradox (disruption) is part and parcel of the transformative movement. Aware of such a stance, entrepreneurship is coined as having generative potential, but there is no guarantee that the actual transformation will be successful.

Hjorth and Holt (2016) also elaborate on a way to put affirmation to work in relation to entrepreneurship by equating entrepreneurship to generosity and provocation. They argue how entrepreneurship at heart has little to do with commerce and enterprise and all the more with the social nature of creativity which may result in collectivity and resistance. Through their analysis of a particular art installation of the Chinese artist and activist Ai Weiwei, they critique the easy association between entrepreneurship and enterprise and illustrate how entrepreneurship can serve as a practice to promote civic freedom:

*Hjorth and Holt (2016) use the case of Weiwei, a Chinese artist whose work they describe as an opportunity for social transformation. They elaborate in particular on Weiwei's exhibition 'Sunflower Seeds', which entailed placing 150 tons of handmade porcelain sunflower seeds on the floor of the turbine hall gallery in Tate Modern in London. It took five years to create this installation, meant as a form of protest and*

*provocation, suggesting that China can do better than just produce goods for the rest of the world, such as promoting civic freedom. Sunflower seeds were a common theme of the communist party in China. While the leader of China would often represent himself as the sun, the people of China would usually be represented as the seeds in sunflowers in artworks. A single seed is lost among the millions of seeds, symbolizing censorship of the communist party of China. However, the artwork demonstrates that with all seeds together, the people can stand against the perceived oppression from the communist regime in China. The artist shows the sunflowers without the need of the sun as they are placed inside a hall: an independent democratic mass. As the authors argue, the entrepreneurial in this case is social and sets an example of entrepreneurship's power to transform relationships with institutional factors. Hjorth and Holt (2016) acknowledge economic, social, and societal benefits from Weiwei's art projects and explain how the case's transformative power extends beyond the enterprise interpretation. While Weiwei's art and exhibitions create jobs and welfare, the case sets an example of social impact by enhancing civic freedom via provocation.*

Hjorth and Holt acknowledge that Weiwei's art installation is not enterprise *per se* but still portrays more common entrepreneurial attributes. They argue that Weiwei's work is not commercial, it is imaginative and disruptive and opens up the social capacity of those involved; hence, it is entrepreneurial. Although the case is critical towards the conceptualization of entrepreneurship as enterprise, it still keeps its creativity and productivity by suggesting alternative ways and how we could go about conceptualizing entrepreneurship beyond the enterprise narrative. They elaborate on this case to exemplify how entrepreneurship can be



affirmative in that it offers new possibilities for living for the sunflower seed producers involved and potential new realities that have a far broader impact.

This account of entrepreneurship does not reduce the social change potential to a limited record of entrepreneurial endeavors. Instead, it suggests exploring new contexts where no accounts of social change were presumed. The case of Weiwei illustrated by Hjorth and Holt (2016) exemplifies this point rightfully. One would not have imagined that a connection between entrepreneurship and social change could be identified at an art installation, simply because it does not represent a case of entrepreneurship as understood in ‘mainstream’ depictions of the phenomenon (i.e., merely understanding entrepreneurship as enterprise). Therefore, this case is critical towards reducing entrepreneurship to enterprise and illustrates how we may explore novel articulations of entrepreneurship when conceptualizing entrepreneurship beyond the dominant narratives found in academic research. Furthermore, such a stance may lead the way in exploring more associations between entrepreneurship and social change; possible cases that could remain disregarded if we do not expand our understanding of entrepreneurship and social change.

In line with Dashtipour and Rumens’ and Hjorth and Holt’s efforts, we plea for more affirmatively critical entrepreneurship research contributions to explore other, more alternatives of transformation that can be enacted when adopting such a stance. We deem an affirmative stance a ‘worthwhile’ direction for future entrepreneurship research as it creates the conditions that enable novel theoretical perspectives in the field (i.e., Hjorth, 2013a, Hjorth, 2013b; Sandoval, 2019). It can help identify and acknowledge more cases where entrepreneurship may, e.g., help enact

justice, solidarity, collective resistance, or enhanced cooperation. We consider the features of affirmative critique as a vital foundation to understanding entrepreneurship as a phenomenon at work for the common good for scholarship concerned with understanding the social change contributions of entrepreneurship.

We realize that existing studies relevant to entrepreneurship and affirmative critique are still few in number and that the affirmative stance is at a nascent stage in entrepreneurship research and yet has to come to fruition to grasp its full potential. As such, our chapter means to provide a springboard to help move forward future contributions in this vein. Offering alternative views on how entrepreneurial endeavors lead to societal change and can be aligned to common good matters can open up our understanding of entrepreneurship, leading to a broader recognition of the multifacetedness of the field that we deem inadequately represented in existing contributions. As such, in our endeavor of reversing the arrow and thus turning toward the impact of entrepreneurship on society, we deem an affirmative stance in entrepreneurship research essential to explore the complete set of social implications that entrepreneurship may bring about.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter synthesizes challenges to the mainstream entrepreneurship perspective based on economic logic wherein entrepreneurship is mainly viewed as a catalyst for progression, innovation, and job growth – and also extends those challenges through its critique. In our endeavor to reverse the arrow, we build on the premise that all entrepreneurial initiatives generate social and societal change (for the better or worse) and should be studied and understood accordingly (e.g., Steyaert & Katz, 2004; Calás et al., 2009). We offer reflections on how an

affirmatively critical stance may help move social transformation more to the heart of (our understanding of) entrepreneurial endeavors. We move away from the hegemonic allure given to entrepreneurship and argue that we need not only critique but also affirm to make (our understanding of) entrepreneurship *productive* to understand how entrepreneurial initiatives generate social and societal change (as a move away from its liaison with the economic logic).

In particular, the affirmative stance acknowledges how critical work can unleash novel ways of thinking about entrepreneurship. This stance is not against the economic logic in entrepreneurship but critiques how entrepreneurship is reduced to the same. This chapter elaborates on the inventive and experimental nature of affirmative critique as an alternative critical stance to provoke social change. The affirmative stance recognizes that social change is not always positive (as exemplified through Gringo's case), acknowledging that inequalities and paradoxes are part and parcel of the social-change movement, but rather than 'just' present them as bothersome, affirmative critique aims to *work with* rather than *be against*, making critique productive and exploring how actual transformation (alternatives) can be invoked when adopting such a stance. It builds on such a foundation and opens up alternative perspectives to move the field forward. This can lead to social realities that offer alternative views on how entrepreneurial endeavors lead to societal change and can be aligned to common good matters.

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