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The importance of being privileged: Digital entrepreneurship as a class project

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Abstract

Established professional occupations can become the preserve of elites when fitting in is driven by class-based criteria. In contrast, digital entrepreneurship has been proposed as a means by which people may emancipate themselves from societal constraints. We interrogate digital entrepreneurship's meritocratic foundations by way of a 36-month ethnography of a start-up incubator. Attending to the dispositions of digital entrepreneurs, we reveal they use cultural tastes and manners to create the incubator as a place where members of the privileged class can reinvent themselves at their leisure, all the while adopting the meritocratic mythologies of digital entrepreneurship to disavow their own privilege. This opens up a two-fold contribution to the study of professions and occupations. Firstly, we demonstrate how professional and occupational roles are epiphenomenal to class positioning. Secondly, the parallels between the legitimating discourses of entrepreneurs and more established professional jurisdictions attest to a community that is in the process of professionalization.

Keywords

Entrepreneurship; Digital entrepreneurship; Social class; Class; Dispositions; Ethnography

Introduction: Class and occupations

Classed-inflected cultural distinctions can limit social mobility and perpetuate structural inequality through a patchwork of taken-for-granted norms across the occupational landscape (Amis et al. 2020). Increasingly, policy makers have recognised the existence of structural and cultural barriers and the impact they have on opportunities for people from non-elite backgrounds (for instance, in the UK, the Social Mobility Report (2016)). These norms act to exclude those without the relevant capitals or knowledge of these occupational rules of the game (Lamont & Lareau 1988). For instance, it has been shown that the appropriate accent, mannerisms and dress are particularly important for entry into, and progression within, various occupations and that these cultural filters are especially pronounced in professional environments (Friedman et al. 2017).

We build upon research over the last fifteen years that has restated the importance of social class as a master concept for understanding organisational life (for a review, see Kish-Gephart et al. 2023). A central insight of this research is that patterns of class composition in the UK are changing and increasingly understood by reference to social and cultural forms of capital (Savage et al. 2013), even if these are still linked in some way to occupational fields (Crompton 2010; Friedman et al. 2015; Levy & Reiche 2018; Maclean et al. 2010; Spence, et al. 2017).

Against this background of changing class, governments of many different stripes promote digital entrepreneurship to achieve the twin aims of economic growth and opportunity for all (Isenberg 2010; Zahra & Wright 2016). Such discourse appeals to individuals who want to re-make themselves (Rindova et al. 2009), embracing the possibilities of working in a fast-moving, exciting space that is unencumbered by the social gravity of credentials or old-boy networks. Entrepreneurship generally is elevated as a

cultural ideal, portraying entrepreneurs as heroic battlers who have written their own success stories (Drakopoulou Dodd & Anderson 2007; Ogbor 2000). Despite these grandiose claims, entrepreneurship's status as a 'great leveller' in the UK has been questioned (Martinez Dy et al. 2018) with findings that entrepreneurs tend to come from higher social classes (Brändle & Kuckertz 2023; Jayawarna et al. 2014), or are children of entrepreneurs (Schölin et al. 2016) where they have better access to appropriate role models across social contexts (Zozimo et al. 2017), or where personal relationships provide better access to entrepreneurial networks (Brändle et al. 2023; Hite 2005). These critical studies aside, entrepreneurship tends to be dominated by a focus on economic success (Pret et al. 2016) and pays little heed to the processes by which this apparent social closure has emerged (Ahl & Marlow 2021; Parkin 1979). Building on this kernel of critical literature, we take the research object of specifically digital entrepreneurship and explore its class inflections.

To understand the ways in which class can inflect digital entrepreneurial activity, this study draws upon the findings of a 36-month ethnography in a new startup incubator in the UK. The ethnography involves both participant-observation and 29 interviews to explore the extent to which entrepreneurship is a classed project. The findings point towards an incubator dominated by the aesthetics of a privileged habitus. This appropriation by the privileged class casts aspersions upon digital entrepreneurship's role in social inclusion (Zahra & Wright 2016) and, perhaps surprisingly, also questions its role in economic growth (Isenberg 2010). This latter concern is developed to propose that digital entrepreneurs are moving beyond their classed origins (Friedman et al. 2021) by selectively using mythologies of entrepreneurship to imagine themselves as agentic, heroic pioneers within a meritocracy. Such disavowal of privilege has much in common with professionalization projects where groups of accountants, lawyers, investment bankers or consultants justify their jurisdictional privileges on the basis of 'public interest' (Spence & Brivot 2011; Walker 2018), 'meritocracy'

(Sommerlad 2015) or ‘cultural fit’ (Rivera 2012), arguments which belie the structural privilege and hierarchies that these projects effectively institutionalize. In this regard, our exploration of entrepreneurship has two clear implications for studies into the professions and occupations. Firstly, if particular occupational discourses appear as social legitimation devices for structural privilege, then elite occupations and professions are really epiphenomenal to the underlying class from which they emerge. Secondly, and relatedly, if entrepreneurship is following the professional playbook vis-à-vis social legitimation, then we are possibly witnessing the early stages of an entrepreneurial professionalization project.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section introduces a theoretically informed framing of digital entrepreneurship, finishing with the presentation and justification for the study’s central research questions. Research methods are then described in detail. The study’s principal findings are reported, drawing on both interview transcripts and ethnographic field notes. The paper then concludes with a discussion for what our findings imply for studies of both digital entrepreneurship and professions more broadly and offers some suggestions for future research.

The changing landscape of social class

While for much of the 20th century social class was a major organising concept in democratic politics, the assumed importance of class had started to wane towards the end of the 20th century (Evans 1992; Giddens 1973; Hart 1989), with identity politics assuming greater interest (Bernstein 2005; Hobsbawm 1996). The obituary for the concept of class proved premature as, rather than dissipating, class was being restructured through the neo-liberalisation of global capital (MacLeavy 2020). This led to a resurgence of scholarly interest in class, particularly in the UK, which has a long history of significant class divisions

(Le Roux et al. 2008; Maclean et al. 2014, 2017). Of particular note was the 2011 Great British Class Survey (GBCS), where Savage et al. (2013), using Bourdieusian concepts, proposed a means of drawing class boundaries in the UK, based on distinctions of wealth (economic capital), cultural tastes (cultural capital), and social networks (social capital) (see Devine & Snee 2015). It is from this Bourdieusian wellspring that we draw our own theoretical resources in order to position entrepreneurship as part of a broader professional class that includes managers, administrators and white-collar credentialed experts.

Theorizing Digital Entrepreneurship

An important expression of an individual's class is through their habitus as 'systems of durable, transposable dispositions' (Bourdieu 1990 p. 53). Habitus is historically embodied, internalized and taken-for-granted, guiding actions and feelings, realized as a pre-reflexive 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu 1990 p. 52). We expect to see a degree of homogeneity in this 'feel for the game' within a class, such that a 'singular habitus of members of the same class are united in a relationship of homology' (Bourdieu 1990 p. 60).

Bourdieu further distinguishes between a primary habitus, learned in the formative years of childhood (Bourdieu 1990), and a secondary habitus which is formed by experiences in adulthood (Bourdieu 1999). The latter might prevail in a particular occupational group, for example (Spence, Carter, et al. 2017). These two forms of habitus continually combine and recombine during life, influencing each other and revealing that habitus has 'a power of adaptation, it constantly performs an adaptation to the outside world which only occasionally takes the form of radical conversion' (Bourdieu 1993 p. 88). Indeed, the primary and secondary habitus rely upon each other in the sense that habitus *tout court* needs reference to a particular field in order to be meaningful (Bourdieu 1992).

The privileged habitus

Habitus is a means by which people can embark on classing projects, including distinguishing their own identified group from the working class (Skeggs 1997). This view of habitus is particularly useful in the UK, where use of term ‘middle class’ has been so malleable that it is often a metonym for a range of cultural, economic and social privileges and defined generally in contradistinction to the working class (Reay 2008).

Throughout his career, Bourdieu described how social classes expressed their habitus in contemporary culture (Bourdieu 2010). Through art, music, food and other expressions, he described the privileged aesthetic as self-imposed austerity, restraint and reserve with the rare and ‘pure gaze’ of aesthetics, contrasting with the underprivileged classes, and their desire for substance and function, the ‘easy and common’ (Bourdieu 2010 p. 171). Referring specifically to culinary art, Bourdieu distinguishes between the instinctive understanding of good taste which characterised the privileged classes and the rules of gastronomy which must be learnt by the ‘lower, modest order’ (Bourdieu 2010 p. 61). These distinctions of habitus through bodily traits such as manner and appearance have been shown to be influential in the hiring and promotion practices of various elite occupations such as architects, lawyers and accountants (Laurison & Friedman 2016).

Finally, although emphasizing the cultural rather than economic distinctions that pertain to a particular social class (Sayer 2005), economic capital still has a strong role to play (Spence & Carter 2014). However, it should be emphasized that this role extends beyond giving access to expensive goods and practices. Not only do cultural and social capitals ultimately convert into economic capital (Harvey et al. 2020) but more privileged classes can start to act as if their aesthetic disposition in itself is an elevation above the ordinary (Bourdieu 2010). The pursuit of aesthetic ideals that tends to be more prevalent in dominant

classes is an expression of privilege where ‘economic power is first and foremost a power to keep economic necessity at arm’s length’ (Bourdieu 2010 p. 48). This attitude can become common in economically privileged occupations, which then attracts yet more entrants with that same habitus (Friedman et al. 2015). In turn, people from underprivileged backgrounds without that original habitus fear that they will not ‘fit in’ and inflict ‘self-elimination’ (Friedman et al. 2015 pp. 171–83) by avoiding entering those occupations, despite being otherwise suitable.

Digital entrepreneurship and emancipation

In contrast to the socially embedded view of habitus, entrepreneurship has often assumed an individualistic lens. Individual motivations are evident in Schumpeter’s early conceptualisation of entrepreneurship (Schumpeter 1934), leading over time to a conflation between the unit of explanation (entrepreneurship) with the unit of analysis as the individual entrepreneur (Drakopoulou Dodd & Anderson 2007). In the common imagination, entrepreneurs can therefore be distinctly individualistic and heroic (Anderson & Warren 2011; Ogbor 2000). This commonly held view of the entrepreneurial habitus has been assisted by the emergence of digital tools and platforms, which favour ‘the emergence of new type of jobs that is hard to classify unambiguously in the traditional categories of employment, self-employment, freelance, or growth-oriented entrepreneurial undertakings’ (Sahut et al. 2021 p. 162).

The prominence of digital entrepreneurship owes a debt to the Silicon Valley model of entrepreneurship which revolves around high technology firms launched on the basis of ideas or research and development (Audretsch 2021; Engel 2015; Lee 2019). The focus of innovation on the generation of ideas means that entrepreneurs are immediately freed from the restrictions of financial and social capital which cause other industries to become heavily

classed. Specifically, the source of greatest value in digital entrepreneurship is thought to be business model innovation (Doganova & Eyquem-Renault 2009; Spigel & Harrison 2018) which, as a cognitive output, is much less reliant on expensive physical resources than other forms of entrepreneurship.

It is tempting to assume that the egalitarianism of digital entrepreneurship stems from this open market of, and for, ideas. However, digital platforms also remove intermediaries to the other resources an entrepreneur needs for their venture. Crowdfunding is an example of an open, digital platform-based financing option (Feola et al. 2021), whilst even venture capital funding can be accessed digitally and in cross-boundary fashion (Braune et al. 2021).

Digital platforms also break the constraints of national social structures by opening up global markets to entrepreneurs (Autio et al. 2018; Srinivasan et al. 2004). These markets commonly accept partially complete projects, such as minimal viable products, so that entrepreneurs can start to generate revenue from a relatively modest investment. This is encapsulated in the Lean Startup method, which is a way of working that assumes startups operate with a paucity of resources (Ries 2011). The Lean Startup has become so ubiquitous that the notion of digital ventures as bootstrapped endeavors, unsupported by the embedded privilege of wealth, has become taken for granted (Becker & Eendenich 2023; Frederiksen & Brem 2017; Giones & Oo 2017).

These lines of thinking have led entrepreneurship to be proposed as a form of emancipation (Rindova et al. 2009), both as a solution to poverty (Bruton et al. 2013), and as a means by which individuals may free themselves from the social restrictions of their pasts (Chandra 2017). However, entrepreneurship's liberating philosophy of individual achievement has been questioned (Drakopoulou Dodd & Anderson 2007), with the suggestion that new entrepreneurs must enact a field-specific habitus (De Clercq & Voronov

2009) if they are to successfully gain legitimacy. Failure to do so has been noted in the status of certain groups, such as women (Ahl & Marlow 2021; Marlow & McAdam 2013; Ozkazanc-Pan & Clark-Muntean 2018), older entrepreneurs (Kibler et al. 2015) and ethnic groups (Portes & Landolt 2000).

This consolidated view of entrepreneurship as either emancipation or oppression, or both (Verduijn et al. 2014) emerges from gender studies, but we know little of how it could apply to the changing and socially malleable structures of class. In these regards, entrepreneurs are depicted as both conformists and rule breakers; conservatives and pioneers simultaneously. The phenomenon has rarely been explored as a function of habitus and has rarely been applied to the egalitarian cultures and systems of digital entrepreneurship. We know little about the extent to which class might play a role in forming entrepreneurs as one or the other or, more importantly, about whether notions of entrepreneurship themselves promote unhelpful tropes that mask class privilege and a lack of social mobility, much in the same way that professional projects tend to proceed (Ashley 2010; Giazitzoglu & Muzio 2021; Millar 2021; Rivera 2012; Sommerlad 2015; Spence & Brivot 2011; Walker 2018). By pursuing a more reflexive approach to the study of digital entrepreneurship (Sklaveniti & Steyaert 2020), this article aims to explore the extent to which digital entrepreneurship is a classed project.

Methods

Empirical setting

To explore the extent to which digital entrepreneurship is a classed project in the UK, Edinburgh was selected as a study site. As its capital city, Edinburgh has been a centre of intellectual, legal and political life in Scotland for centuries and has a well-established

financial industry (Perman 2019). Edinburgh is generally considered to house a larger privileged class faction than other cities in the country (Docherty & Foulkes 1999) with elites formed around sentinel corporations in the financial sector (e.g. Kerr & Robinson 2016; Millar 2021). Accordingly, the city provides a landscape apparently at odds with the egalitarian entrepreneurship of Silicon Valley and so is suitable for exploring the consumption of that culture. Despite this apparent tension, at the time of study Edinburgh was garnering increasing interest as a centre for entrepreneurship specifically through two rapidly-growing technology firms and a number of incubators.

Incubators are organisations, normally sited within one building, that house and protect new ventures during their vulnerable early stages. By providing access to knowledge (Sá & Lee 2012), networks (Hansen et al. 2000) and legitimacy (Smilor 1987), they seek to confer the necessary forms of social and cultural capital that an entrepreneur needs. The incubator selected for study, TechAnchor (a pseudonym) had gained interest from Scottish business and political circles, which considered it to be a symbol of successful digital entrepreneurship. TechAnchor housed approximately 200 people, separated into different categories of office size. There were communal areas for meeting, socializing and hotdesking where entrepreneurs could interact, verbally, aurally, and visually. Despite the conspicuous attraction of offering low-cost office spaces, the stated aim of co-location was to create an entrepreneurial community from pioneering firms and give nascent entrepreneurs access to otherwise closed entrepreneurial networks and unobtainable resources (Bøllingtoft 2012). In short, the site was geared towards the cultivation of entrepreneurship, where people attempted to ‘become’ entrepreneurs (Steyaert 2007).

---insert table 1 about here---

Data collection and analysis

A researcher seeking to understand habitus has to become situated within the real activity so they may understand the imposition of the world they study (Bourdieu 1990). To experience that real activity of the incubator, the first author conducted an ethnography over 36 months, particularly considering the tastes in food, cultural activities, manners, dress and bearing which the literature foregrounded.

Given that habitus is at once the ‘anchor, the compass and the course of ethnographic journey’ (Wacquant 2011 p. 81), it is useful to give an indication of the first author’s habitus, to contextualise that journey and understand how the indicators of class tastes were understood. As a native of Edinburgh, the first author had some understanding of the city, and with a privileged class upbringing, had an appreciation of that locally-defined habitus. However, previous career roles had taken them out of that classed field to work alongside people from some of the most deprived areas in eastern and southern Scotland, affording an insight into their starkly different habitus. By straddling the significant class divide in the local context, the first author had familiarity with the two cultures, and reflexive distance from both sides, to be able to capture ‘the intentionality without intention, the knowledge without cognitive intent, the pre-reflexive, infra-conscious mastery that agents acquire in the social world’ (Bourdieu 1992 p. 19).

Drawing on this immersive experience, the research team was then able to construct questions for 29 semi-structured interviews lasting an average of one hour each to understand their reflexive and pre-reflexive attitudes towards the situating of their habitus within this social milieu. Because habitus can be identified most clearly when norms are questioned (Norwicka 2015), counter-factual questions were particularly useful in exploring boundaries of inclusion, especially when trying to define who would not fit into the space, or be included in the social group.

Each set of field notes was typed up as soon after the event as possible. These field-notes were subsequently coded by expressions of taste and their consumption of the Silicon Valley mythology (Geiger 2020; Ogbor 2000). Regular consultations with other members of the research team served to challenge these emerging codes and refine them in an iterative fashion.

The ethnography generated insights that helped inform questions explored at interview. Interviews were undertaken from month four onwards. All interviews were fully transcribed and then became part of the analytic process, which resulted in a continual refining of themes between periods of interview and ethnography in a recursive process (Locke & Golden-Biddle 1997). Coding was refined through discussion every two weeks with other members of the research team and was conceived as a second phase of reflexivity where distance generated new understandings (Costa et al. 2019).

Findings

Classed Tastes

TechAnchor had one central area that was populated with hotdesking, ping-pong tables and a café. Although this area was often filled with noise, most entrepreneurs worked in quiet offices. The co-working office housed several companies and was almost completely silent, despite there being no formal rules on noise. When companies had phone calls, or wanted to discuss something, they would leave the co-working area in order not to disturb anyone.

Julie, an American entrepreneur, had noticed this well-observed implicit social rule, despite the clear prerogative for entrepreneurs to talk during the working day. When we asked her if someone would impose these rules if anyone broke them, she distinguished between British culture, which we would contend is of the privileged class, and the American alternative:

‘Well that’s a cultural thing. An American might. I’ve been living here for 18 years and have been acclimatised to the British culture. But I think if someone were being consistently loud, an individual might say something diplomatically. Maybe there could be rules. Are there rules? It’s just general consideration.’

As a break from the silence, there were designated communal areas for taking lunch. Most people went to a local shop to get lunch and then brought it back so everyone could eat together. They tended to avoid the local supermarket’s pre-prepared sandwiches and lunch deals; instead they frequented one of three boutique eateries which surrounded the incubator. Unlike the rather cheerless sandwiches from the supermarket, the boutique eateries served a wide range of freshly-prepared world foods: falafels, empanadas, bibimbap and spiced soups were all on offer. It was delicious, healthy food, but relatively expensive. Such was the volume of lunchtime traffic from TechAnchor to these eateries that one got the impression that our trade was fairly critical to their business.

One day at lunch, some entrepreneurs happened to be talking about recruitment. Being startups, it was an important topic. Companies were always recruiting new people, mostly because they were growing and needed new posts and new functions. Recruitment was normally external: movement between companies within TechAnchor was a controversial subject because the practice of poaching staff from each other was ‘frowned upon’ in the local parlance. While there was no formal rule, in three years of ethnography not one instance of it was observed. When people talked of its prospect, they used pejorative terms such as ‘unpleasant’, ‘not ideal’ and ‘not right’. The polite restraint of this language belies a strongly-held aversion to the practice and a clear view that it constituted an expression of bad manners that was not acceptable within this place.

During the conversation, one of the CEOs described their attitude towards people wearing suits for interviews:

‘I mean, no one here wears a suit. It’s just stupid. It just says ‘you’re not us’. There’s something, I don’t know, that when someone walks in for an interview wearing a suit, that they just don’t get it. I would never wear a suit to an interview. Ever. Well unless I was going to be a banker or something, but I just wouldn’t do that. I mean, just wear what you want to wear. Be yourself. That’s what I want to see.’

His comments reflected a wider aversion within the incubator to people wearing suits. The people were pejoratively referred to as ‘suits’ and were seen to represent the professions. The suit was a social marker that bore the curse of negative symbolic capital: to wear a suit was not to fit in, it was a failure to understand the prevailing habitus.

Some suits had attended a panel discussion at TechAnchor the previous week. Some of them removed their jackets, whilst others did not but none of them could shed the suit identity. Despite being a similar age and social class as the TechAnchor residents, there was little mixing between the suits and the digital entrepreneurs: they were tribes apart. Paradoxically, many of the digital entrepreneurs were former suits and drawn from same social class, identifiable through their distinctive Edinburgh privileged-class accents. As one of the interviewees noted:

‘Having that Edinburgh working-class accent it really doesn’t exist in TechAnchor. I’ve maybe heard 3 or 4 people who have that accent. Because Edinburgh has lots of private schools and is very middle-class. That’s why I don’t think the middle-class is a prerequisite for what this is. It’s just kind of what has happened. I don’t think that’s an intentional thing.’

Conversations with the suits revealed that they and the entrepreneurs also shared many cultural interests. Many of the sports of choice in TechAnchor had their historical roots in the activities of the privileged class but with the advent of cultural omnivorousness in the UK (Warde et al. 2008), the distinction was somewhat lessened. Nevertheless, the traditionally working class sport of the UK, football, was discussed and enjoyed much less commonly than sports with privileged class roots, such as rugby (Kelly 2008) and skiing (Fry 2010). International rugby matches normally spurred conversations the next day around performances or refereeing decisions yet international football matches could pass almost unnoticed. If entrepreneurs did express a strong interest in football, it tended to be as a cultural omnivore where they also enjoyed activities of the privileged class, such as playing badminton or golf. When a CEO described some of the sporting activities that his (mostly male) workforce played together, football was conspicuously absent in favour of sports linked to cultures of Silicon Valley (ping-pong), California (surfing) and privileged Scotland (rugby):

‘Ping-pong is a good challenge because who’s the best? It was funny because people started getting really into it and the quality started getting really high. People figuring out how to do spin and good levels of competitiveness. But I got to know some of the guys quite well and went surfing with them. And there was [non-contact] rugby in the park for a while. Yeah, I think it’s just also we’re close to the park. And it’s just that thing where we’re trying to create a great company culture so all these things happen as part of that. I think that’s what it’s about.’

Cultural omnivorousness extended beyond sports. One of the entrepreneurs had left academia in Oxford to launch a technology company serving the football industry, but his enjoyment of football was combined with an appreciation for a wide range of artforms:

‘I moved to Edinburgh 5 weeks ago and hit the [international arts festival] quite hard. My girlfriend and I tried to go to as many shows as possible. Spend as little time in the house as possible and as much time as possible out.’

Omnivorousness was further evident during community activities. TechAnchor arranged monthly socials where entrepreneurs could mix. The only ‘rule’ applied was that no-one was to attempt to sell their products or services. Pubs in the UK had long since expanded beyond their classed roots in the working class and are now relatively class agnostic. However, TechAnchor did not choose an ‘average’ pub (or ‘boozier’) for these social events. The chosen pub was sited near the University of Edinburgh, adorned with décor that the entrepreneurs described as ‘funky’, ‘unique’ and ‘cool’, playing a carefully curated mix of soul and funk music. The only beers served were premium and artisanal and there was a wide selection of expensive cocktails. Accordingly, the food resembled that which the entrepreneurs chose to have for lunch, with plates of selected tapas or seafood. This place was quite a distinction from a typically working-class pub with its traditional interior, chart music and local, mass-produced lagers such as Tennent’s and Carling, serving burgers and meat pies.

Many of the entrepreneurs even lived in the same areas and shared social circles as those from the city’s privileged occupations. Nevertheless, suits were seen as ‘inauthentic’, ‘uncomfortable’ and ‘unimaginative’. At least one speaker at an event saw the connection when they remarked that ‘people who work in corporates are not necessarily unintelligent or unambitious’, but that ‘the difference is because of the structures...it’s a luxury of a startup that you can have no structures.’

Denying Privilege

Interviews were mostly conducted in the ‘hub’ area of TechAnchor, which included a café. The café owner insisted that his establishment was referred to as a ‘roastery’, rather than as a coffee shop. It seemed a rather grandiose term for a one-metre long counter and a coffee machine, although they did have other ‘roasteries’ around the city. As one entrepreneur said, with a distinctive tone of pride, the brand was well recognized amongst lawyers and corporate types in the city. The coffee was more expensive than average for the city coffee shops but it was very popular amongst TechAnchor entrepreneurs. Before the ‘roastery’, filter coffee had been available but the quality was considered to be inadequate. The entrepreneurs would frequently express their appreciation for good coffee and tended to have preferences of bean origin and roast intensity. Even when making coffee in their own offices, they tended to choose artisanal chemex coffeemakers rather than a standard French press, using beans sourced from specialty shops rather than from the supermarket.

We arranged an interview with an entrepreneur called Charlie in the café. In he walked, a little late, and wearing his standard clothing of crumpled oxford shirt, chinos and sneakers. He loved to mock his own class tastes and had even titled his social media account ‘the chino diaries’. There was a sense of *soi-disant* irony to his relaxed preppy style and he would often refer to his middle-class tastes in clothing, food and leisure pursuits with a mocking pride. Although most people in the incubator wore a ‘tech bro’ uniform of t-shirt or sweater and jeans, Charlie’s form of dress was becoming more common as more people came to TechAnchor from the surrounding corporate firms. They mostly retained a collared, oxford shirt but wore it in a sort of nonchalant way, always crumpled with the tail hanging half out. The Italians have a word for it: *sprezzatura*, which is an ‘ease of manner, studied carelessness - the appearance of acting or being done without effort’ (*Oxford Dictionary of English* 2010).

Charlie had started his career in finance, which was common for people of his class in Edinburgh (Millar 2021). He had apparently done rather well, as evidenced by his having a house in one of Edinburgh's desirable neighborhoods, as well as owning a weekend home on the west coast of Scotland. He also sat on the board of a professional organization in the finance industry. His story was typical of so many within TechAnchor: he had been working in one of Edinburgh's largest financial firms but had become disillusioned by the industry. Charlie, as with so many others, used the metaphor 'just a cog in a big machine' to describe the work, with little opportunity to make much difference to anything. Charlie still sounded frustrated:

'It was just boring. What was I doing there? Really? You'd work on a project for weeks and then someone somewhere would just cancel it. Nothing to do with the work we had done, they had just changed their mind. It was really simple work and I was getting paid well but what was the point?'

One wondered if there was more to it. Another entrepreneur, Simon, who had left an Edinburgh university and had determined not to join a corporate finance company, added a moral dimension to Charlie's view:

'I just have a general distrust of banks and big corporations. Watching the Big Short film. It just doesn't feel. Uneasy. I'm not saying there aren't ways of working with them. I guess small businesses need to work with big businesses. But you need the next level of transparency on what's happening, and I don't think banks will ever achieve that.'

The Big Short is a film that charted the immoral behaviour of some financial institutions in the lead-up to the global financial crisis of 2008. Charlie had worked for one of these ‘big corporations’, albeit not one accused of impropriety, and through subsequent chats, it was revealed that he had a similar view. When asked about his experience at TechAnchor, he offered the following contrast with his previous role:

‘I don’t feel ashamed of it. Unlike working for [the financial institution]. Pride is probably a strong word. You’re happy to be here. It’s what I do I suppose.’

Unlike the ‘corporations’, that Charlie associates with shame, working in the startup world was asserted as being a moral good. It was considered to be free from the immorality displayed in films like *The Big Short*, or more general narratives surrounding the global financial crisis of 2008, and much of this revolved around their attitudes towards money. Despite Charlie owning two houses, he insisted that he was deterred from working in finance partly because he had little interest in wealth. Simon agreed:

‘I’m quite frugal as my friends point out. As long as I have enough to support my lifestyle I’ll be quite happy. To be honest if I have an extra £50k I wouldn’t know what to do with it. They’d know what to do with it better than I would.’

Charlie’s attitude towards remuneration seemed to be more orientated around fair value, rather than a concern for its purchasing power. We were talking about him networking, which he thought should be done speculatively and without motive:

‘I think you have to do everything without motive and see where it takes you. And this is a wonderful place to do it.

I was actually introduced to one person who was speaking at a diversity event. I was invited to speak as well. And I was like “great, I’ll just pop along”. Then I found out she was charging £2k for her time. It’s like ok well if you’re going to start charging, I’ll start charging. £2k to turn up for an hour and a half in the morning, say a few words and wander off again.’

Charlie is showing how he had continued to learn the evolving ‘rules of the game’ through being embedded within the social network that dominated the local entrepreneurial scene (Bourdieu 2010; Lamont & Lareau 1988). He had a tacit understanding of how to network within this classed society and was able to use that to continue to build social capital and, when he felt appropriate, convert it to economic capital.

His views also reflected the wider attitude across TechAnchor that they were not primarily motivated by money, but that if they worked hard and built good companies, then a ‘fair’ remuneration would result. They often described how the distinct features of startups allowed them much more agency in their work. Many emphasized how hard they worked to achieve the results that they did. Here is an extract from field notes taken after attending a ‘lunch and learn’ session for new coders, where experienced coders in TechAnchor (defined as having worked for five years in role) shared their wisdom with younger colleagues:

‘He then said he was trying to build a community and prevent overwork and burnout. To support each other. This seems to be an overriding concern of people in software. He mentioned the story of working late and sleeping under desks, but I feel these are

heroic war stories and perhaps happen infrequently, even though he said “often when we’re getting a product ready we’re working until 2am”. Actually, most of their stories are about working until 10pm and this was another story which he mentioned. When I say story, it’s one line like “overworking is a real issue in our industry, like working until 10pm is just not sustainable and you get burnout”. Then I think what Bill [my boss at TechAnchor] considers to be excessive work. I have very rarely known him to spend more than eight hours in the office. I’ve watched the daily exodus from TechAnchor at 5pm. You need to arrange with the TechAnchor management if you want to stay after 6pm. I begin to wonder if these hours really are as long as they say.’

The other aspect to gaining agency was that, in contrast to the ‘cog’ metaphor of corporates, the entrepreneurs valued being able to see the outcomes of their work. Simon especially valued this:

‘The impact of being in this place for a year has completely and utterly changed my career goals. Before I wanted to work in a big corporate company and earn a lot of money. For me, it sounds clichéd, but now [I want to work for] a business that has a positive impact on people’s lives. [My company] arguably does that and I like that people say now they can sleep at night.’

Discussion and Conclusions

Our 36-month long ethnographic study of an incubator permits us to extend scholarship into the role of social class in occupations by attending to the dispositions of digital entrepreneurs. Despite the purported meritocratic foundations of digital entrepreneurship, we found that

within the incubator there is a dominance of a habitus of the ‘middle class intelligentsia from which professional cadres are recruited’ (Spence et al. 2017). Whilst they accept that they have the habitus of a privileged class, they harness the entrepreneurial trope of meritocracy to deny that this equates to structural privilege. This sleight-of identity allows them to retain their attachment to the privileged class through their primary habitus.

This reimagining of their own habitus as they take up a new occupation leads to our first contribution. As class divisions no longer neatly conform to occupational type as they did in the past (Crompton & Scott 2005; Friedman & Laurison 2019), we must look to deeper ways of understanding social class. Our study shows that the primary habitus endures as people move between occupations. The primary habitus is primordial while the professional pathway is epiphenomenal to this, an aesthetic choice much like the choice between which bean grade or roast intensity to ask for at TechAnchor’s roastery. Yet the entrepreneurs do not discuss their digital entrepreneurialism as an expression of a collective class habitus. Rather, they refer to it in individualistic, not universal, terms.

The entrepreneurs use of this tactic points to the emergence of choice within contemporary constructions of class such that while their primary habitus may be mostly fixed in childhood and instinctively expressed in matters of taste (Bourdieu 2010; Savage et al. 2013), they were able to appropriate select elements of the digital entrepreneurial mythology as a secondary habitus. Where the two clash, such as with the value placed on economic capital, they reverted to their primary habitus by downplaying economic necessity (Bourdieu 2010). They reframed entrepreneurship as a non-economic pursuit. Therefore, the disavowal of habitus as a marque of privilege is an explicit strategy to ensure consonance between the privileged and digital entrepreneurial disposition, between the primary and secondary habitus.

This finding raises the question of why they felt the partial appropriation of entrepreneurship was necessary. Accepting structural privilege denies to an actor a sense of agency over their outcomes and they can address this dissonance by internalizing meritocratic norms (Littler 2017). Furthermore, their origin stories within occupations of the professional class were tainted by the narratives of unethical values and behavior surrounding the global financial crisis of 2008. Instead, the digital entrepreneurs assumed agency by distancing themselves from the ‘cog in a machine’ metaphor and grasping the narratives of hard work and agency within entrepreneurship. The mythologies of digital entrepreneurship appeared to provide them with the necessary destination story by which they could disavow their privileged pasts. Rather than the original conception of entrepreneurship as emancipation from the strictures of poverty (Rindova et al. 2009), this is (imagined) emancipation from the strictures of privilege.

Class, in this view, becomes hidden and denied through their change of occupation. Whilst Savage et al. (2013) remind us that the outcomes of social class are still underpinned by the accumulation of capitals, the findings here, in common with Friedman et al. (2021), show that people from more privileged classes are starting find ways to deny that their possession and accumulation of capitals relate to a structural privilege. The notion that particular professional pathways may be epiphenomena has important implications for the study of professions, demanding that researchers look beyond the dynamics that pertain to specific professional fields and understand antecedents and inter-field dynamics (Atkinson 2022), paying particular attention to other fields (e.g. the family field, the education field) in which the primary habitus was formed and class inflections established.

Our second contribution is to our understanding of digital entrepreneurship as an occupational type that was meant to break embedded occupational class structures and provide a route to emancipation (Rindova et al. 2009). Breaking these structures in

professions has proved challenging because their origins are based on exclusion (Johnson 1972); they claim social status for themselves and draw a distinction between members of the profession and the laity. When successful, professions gain legal protection and a monopoly on certain practices (Abbott 1988). The blurring of classes that has occurred over the last half century sometimes obscures the class-based nature of the organised professions. Our paper serves as an important reminder to the sociology of the professions' literature that social class matters (Carter & Spence 2020; Spence et al. 2017).

Privileged social classes and professional elites walk in lock-step. While digital entrepreneurship is not a profession in its classic formulation, it is a high profile and lucrative occupation that confers prestige upon its practitioners. In our case, it is practiced by former professional bankers and physicists; people drawn from the professional classes. As with analyses of 'new professions', such as management consultants (Muzio et al. 2011), project managers (Hodgson et al. 2015; Paton et al. 2013; Sabini & Muzio 2017), corporate social responsibility practitioners (Brès et al. 2019) and executive search consultants, digital entrepreneurship is potentially a harbinger of a new form of professionalism (Kirkpatrick et al. 2023). While not the corporate professionalism of the aforementioned studies, it is an occupation that attracts high levels of capital investment, is at the vanguard of technology, and increasingly viewed as a cultural ideal (Ogbor 2000). Its manipulation of technology for commercial ends captures the zeitgeist (Audretsch 2021) and leading exponents of the digital economy are some of the best-known entrepreneurs on the planet.

Each occupation / profession possesses a specific habitus (Harrington 2017; Spence & Carter 2014) and digital entrepreneurship is no different. Our ethnography and ensuing analysis took us directly into a world of privilege, where economic capital was downplayed in favour of a habitus best characterised as anti-corporate, where particular forms of cultural capital were highly valued. The importance of cultural capital is a point well made in the

literature. For instance, in their study of accountants, Spence et al. (2017) identify important differences in cultural capital between Big 4 and State employed accountants and draw out the implications this has for the practice of accountancy. Our study reaffirms the importance of cultural capital, but unlike Spence et al.'s (2017) Big 4 accountants, economic capital was not a central feature of entrepreneurial discourse. This may be, in part, due to a strategic distancing from gauche pecuniary concerns which professionals can often exhibit (Harrington 2017) but is more readily explained by our entrepreneurs being relatively free from money worries.

In this regard, our study shares a close resonance with Friedman and Laurison's (2019) analysis of elite occupations. As with their study, our research revealed that our digital entrepreneurs were insulated from economic hardship, in our case through previous earnings and inherited wealth. Friedman and Laurison (2019) find that some elite occupations are more closed than others. For instance, they identify law, medicine and journalism as being dominated by those from privileged classes; in contrast, they found engineering, accountancy and IT to be more open to those outside of privileged groups. Despite not yet being established as a profession, the digital entrepreneurs in our study fit very closely with the elites identified by Friedman and Laurison (2019). This challenges the extent to which digital entrepreneurship is open to all.

For scholars interested in tackling social inequality, our findings make for dismal reading. Privileged professionals – in our case, mainly bankers and physicists - seamlessly transitioned into being digital entrepreneurs. Their primary habitus mapped onto the cultural and aesthetic 'rules of the game' required to be successful within the technology incubator we researched, which included expectations of dress, culinary taste, conversation, elocution and leisure pursuits. Through this dominant habitus and cultural capital, the incubator acted as an elitist place more akin to that of an established profession than one of entrepreneurial

emancipation, serving to include the privileged class at the expense of others. This reflects the findings of Cook et al. (2012), who showed that elite law firms within the City of London selected for a similarly narrow set of cultural and aesthetic ‘rules of the game’, thereby hindering attempts to diversify the social composition of the profession. Ironically, it is the potential of digital entrepreneurship for emancipation and meritocracy that attracts the professionals to the field, yet practices within this incubator were starting to replicate the process of professionalization that has been long-established within the City.

Future research could explore these themes in greater detail. While, following Marx, all capitalist societies are class societies, it may well be that our choice of location to study, a notoriously classed city in a historically highly divided nation (McCrone 2022), threw up more class privilege and less ambition to accumulate economic capital than would be the case in other contexts. Other cities in other countries may produce different stories. Place, whether as a city, incubator or other entrepreneurial space, may be influential in the development of these occupational ‘rules of the game’. Also, when comparing digital entrepreneurship to other entrepreneurial domains, digital forms can be inflected with heightened mythologies of meritocracy, yet non-digital forms potentially offer greater opportunities for outsiders, mavericks and peripheral groups. (Anderson & Warren 2011; Baker & Welter 2017; Drakopoulou Dodd & Anderson 2007). Therefore, future studies of other entrepreneurial domains offer plausible areas within which to explore the extent to which the disavowal of privilege that we find here are widespread in entrepreneurial circles. Further research can therefore stress test our findings but we would suggest that looking through the methodological prism of entrepreneurs’ habitus is a useful way to capture class-based and other forms of social exclusion and can aid the construction of methodologically robust, sober counter narratives to some of the more excitable nostrums that emanate from orthodox entrepreneurship discourse.

Notes

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