

ENTREPRENEURIALISM AS DISCOURSE: TOWARD A CRITICAL RESEARCH AGENDA

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ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to a growing literature that examines entrepreneurship with a critical perspective, arguing for a research agenda that makes entrepreneurialism as discourse visible. We define the discourse of entrepreneurialism as a style of thinking and economic intervention that invites actors to pursue their interests by drawing on a limited notion of agency that locates itself in an imaginary economic universe independent of institutions, broad social contexts, and identity considerations. Associated with the global rise of neoliberalism, entrepreneurialism provides actors with tools and competences to imagine organizations in narrow, instrumental terms and with an idealized notion of agency. We argue that seeing entrepreneurial capacity in such a limited way makes it impossible to fully understand entrepreneurship as a phenomenon. Highlighting the adverse consequences of entrepreneurialism, we map areas of inquiry that can contribute to the emergence of a more effective and comprehensive critical research agenda concerning entrepreneurialism.

Keywords: Entrepreneurialism; discourse; ideology; neoliberalism; entrepreneurship; economic sociology

The young are losing. At a time when we have the poorest, most indebted and most unemployed new generation in recent history, we are advising them to become rich by being an entrepreneur of some sort – find an idea, and the capital will find you; build your start-up, start your adventure, get fabulous rewards.

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While entrepreneurs can play an important role in economies, research shows that entrepreneurialism fails spectacularly at addressing its stated objective of individual and collective economic take-off – especially with regard to economic growth and job creation (Shane, 2009). In addition to the fact that most entrepreneurial start-ups fail, draining hard earned savings of friends and families, the correlation between real GNP growth rates and the rate of self-employment in OECD countries is negative (Blanchflower, 2000). Yet, looking at this dark picture through rose-colored glasses, newspapers still call for entrepreneurship, TED talks are a breeding ground, academic entrepreneurship programs are burgeoning, and left- as well as right-wing politicians speak of entrepreneurship as the summary of general economic policy. Irrefutably, we are surrounded by an ocean of propositions relating to and calling for entrepreneurialism (Armstrong, 2005; Bromley, Meyer, & Jia, forthcoming; Ogbor, 2000).

This pervasive talk began to pick up around thirty years ago. The Google Ngram frequency of the term “entrepreneur” skyrocketed after 1980, an upsurge comparable to the term “internet.” The last quarter-century witnessed a 1,000% increase in entrepreneurship programs and a 2,000% increase in the number of entrepreneurship classes taught at US universities (Bromley et al., forthcoming). A multitude of academic journals and practitioner magazines were founded to study and foster entrepreneurialism; one of them started its life with an article by Ronald Reagan (1985), titled – in no uncertain words – “Why this is an Entrepreneurial Age.” In the context of academic scholarship on entrepreneurship, the dominant emphasis has been on high visibility technology entrepreneurship winners (e.g., Apple, Google, Facebook, etc.), feeding into a broader narrative that embraced hero worshiping, and celebrated the glitz and glory of exceptional situations (Aldrich & Ruef, 2020).

In this paper, we seek to contribute to a growing literature that examines entrepreneurship through a critical lens (e.g., Armstrong, 2005; Bröckling, 2015; Essers et al., 2017; Hjorth & Steyaert, 2010; Irani, 2019; Jones & Spicer, 2009; Lindtner, 2020; Marttila, 2013; Örtenblad, 2020; Plehwe, 2020). We advocate for a critical research agenda that unpacks entrepreneurialism as a discourse. This is necessary not only to provide a more balanced understanding of entrepreneurship or economic initiatives but also to understand how entrepreneurialism as a discourse subsumes creativity and hope while socializing failure (Irani, 2019), as well as the ways in which it leads to symbolic violence (e.g., Bourdieu, 2001) by marginalizing other approaches and practices that may offer better pathways to personal and social well-being (e.g., Kenny & Scriver, 2012).

A growing stream of scholarship has documented how dominant models of entrepreneurship are heavily gendered, limiting efforts to address problems of social inequality (Ahl, 2004; Bruni, Gherardi, & Poggio, 2004; Calás, Smircich, & Bourne, 2009). Other work has highlighted how the universal celebration of the Silicon Valley model of entrepreneurship has catalyzed state- and NGO-led interventions to boost economic initiative and investments – many of which have failed miserably. It is argued that more attention needs to be paid to how

entrepreneurship models can be re-imagined or replaced to become more inclusive and focused on community-building in order to enhance the well-being of marginalized peoples (Essers & Benschop, 2007; Gill, 2014; Imas, Wilson, & Weston, 2012; Peredo & Chrisman, 2006; Peredo et al., 2004; Steyaert & Hjorth, 2008).

How should we conceptualize and study such loud talk for entrepreneurialism? Anyone who approaches the subject realizes, first, its elusiveness. One cannot be sure where its ideological boundary ends and where its discursive geography begins. It is difficult to be certain whether it should be critically used to make organizations better, or whether we should do away with it altogether in order to address economic initiatives more effectively. Does it apply to every modern economic enterprise, as long as there are risk-taking individuals such as in the Soviet Union (Rehn & Taalas, 2004), social democratic Sweden (Marttila, 2012), and Denmark (Robinson & Blenker, 2014), or communist-party-run China (Duckett, 2001)? Or is it limited to specific political economies? One can never be sure. We believe that such elusiveness is the key to understanding its nature, not a problem to be addressed by sharper theoretical tools or more robust research agendas.¹ Such an essential vagueness has to be tolerated when it comes to understanding and making visible discourses, because their fuzziness prepares them to be used in multiple contexts with varying objectives in mind.

What is entrepreneurialism? How should we approach it? One way to answer this question is to flip it and to ask: How does it approach us? Critical scholarship has provided two general answers. The first sees it as an *ideology* that won hegemony as neoliberal market reforms began to transform the political economic universe since the late 1970s (Gamage & Wickramasinghe, 2012). The ideology of entrepreneurialism informs us how we organize work, educate ourselves, and perceive social interactions” (Eberhart, Barley, & Nelson, 2022). For others, entrepreneurialism is an ideology that “celebrates a specific vision and leadership style.” Describing its historical emergence and function in reference to neoliberalism, Bromley et al. (forthcoming) argue that “entrepreneurial ideology” approaches economic actors and creates a global “binge” that transforms “education, media celebration, business literature, consulting activity and very real organizational structures,” in parallel with the neoliberal transformation of economies (Bromley et al., 2022, p. 71).

Another approach conceptualizes entrepreneurialism as *discourse*. Thus, some have construed it as an instrument of realizing neoliberal ideological objectives.

AQ1 This first way of deploying the concept of discourse sees it as a realization of a more fundamental ideological tone-setting.

An alternative way of approaching entrepreneurialism as discourse resists such an instrumentalization and understands discourse as fundamentally shaped and interpenetrated by broader institutional processes (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). Drawing on how actors do things on the ground, these approaches see discourses as a way to reimagine organizations and thus material practice itself. du Gay and Salamon’s (1992) seminal article on “the discourse of enterprise” shows how a

new type of governance emerged, providing actors with new ways of conducting themselves in economies. In their approach, “enterprise” is not a mere organization. It refers to a vast accumulation of ways of conduct that seeks from actors “energy, initiative, calculation, self-reliance and personal responsibility” (du Gay & Salaman, 1992, p. 629). Shifting the responsibility of success in economic matters of concern from the organizational structure of institutions and public policies to the personal traits of economic actors, the emergence of the discourse of enterprise marks a categorical transformation: If things go wrong, it is because people did it wrong.

In advocating for a critical approach to entrepreneurialism as a discourse, we do not ignore its ideological power. Conceptualizing entrepreneurialism as an ideology helps us understand its historical roots, its conditions of possibility and its political functions (Gray, 2018). Approaching it as a theme in the larger context of its neighboring ideologies associated with neoliberalism makes visible the cultural universe where it is embedded (Seeck, Sturdy, Boncori, & Fougère, 2020).

While ideology has been invoked in a wide variety of ways, it is conventionally associated with Marxist ideas related to false consciousness and commodity fetishism, providing a distorted image of the real world that is inaccessible to human recognition. In this tradition, ideologies are often conceptualized as sets of propositions that intervene in putting together a set of (often sketchy) politically charged *answers* to the key questions that political economic worlds face. Given this view, entrepreneurialism is more about an intervention to *problematizations*, which, in turn, politically structure possible ways of addressing these already discursively framed questions.

Our emphasis on discourse resonates more closely with other approaches to ideology in the Mannheim (1972) tradition where ideology constitutes social reality. This tradition conceptualizes ideology as a distributed social process that establishes hegemonic objectives for actors by defining a set of prescribed actions that are believed by the actor to be worth pursuing (e.g., Bendix, 1956). In highlighting the opportunities for institutional scholars to engage more fully with the notion of ideology, Meyer, Sahlin, Ventresca, and Walgenbach (2009, p. 5) emphasize that in the Mannheim tradition ...

Ideology becomes a general problem of epistemology: All human thought is historically and culturally situated, that is, anchored in a socio-historical context, and this context is constitutive for content. Since all knowledge is relational and can be understood only with reference to these socio-historical circumstances, no human thought and no knowledge ... is immune to the ideologizing influences of its social context. What is more, relationism is not a flaw of knowledge that ought to be overcome, but its very condition.

Given that ideology is a bit of a tortured concept that exists betwixt and between these polar traditions, we prefer the notion of discourse even though the Mannheim tradition enables ideology and discourse to mesh well as complementary ideas (e.g., Barley & Kunda, 1992). Studies of contemporary discourses have transformed how we look at the world; the most impressive example is Edward Said’s (1978) *Orientalism*. Transforming Middle East Studies as a discipline, this intervention located Orientalism as a style of thought that manufactures an

essential distinction between “the East” and “the West.” Orientalism as a discourse then prepares this binary construct as a framework to be used for a variety of political motives such as “dominating, restructuring and having authority over the East” (Said, 1978, p. 3). Said chose to make visible Orientalism by approaching it from the theoretical opportunity that the post-structuralism of Foucault opened to him. Other studies followed a similar path in locating various discursive formations and associated them with ideologies as well as political and economic considerations. From the analyses of Colonialism and Patriarchy to Developmentalism, the deployment of discourse as an analytical tool has helped us to better understand the political nature of seemingly neutral propositions that contribute to the making of the realities they claim to represent (Brown, 2015; Escobar, 1995; Kandiyoti, 1988; Mitchell, 1998).

Summarizing such a vast empirical literature in an impressively economical way, Howarth and Torfing (2005, p. 33) argue that discourses are made up of

an ensemble of cognitive schemes, conceptual articulations, rhetorical strategies, pictures and images, symbolic actions (rituals), and structures (architectures), enunciative modalities, and narrative flows and rhythms.

In addition, they shape meaning and structure possible fields of imagination and practice. However, they also lose strength when challenged by (1) the empirical realities that they cannot shape, or (2) economic political developments that divorce them. We should also add that discourses lose their power when people begin to see their discursive and thus manufactured character. Entrepreneurialism as discourse is no exception.

Drawing on this theoretical thread, we define the discourse of entrepreneurialism as a hegemonic style of thinking and economic material intervention that invites actors to pursue their interest by drawing on a limited notion of agency that locates itself in an imaginary economic universe independent of institutions, broad social contexts, and identity considerations. Associated with the global rise of Neoliberalism, Entrepreneurialism provides actors with tools and competences to imagine organizations around such an idealized notion of agency. Seeing a discourse as a hegemonic representational intervention in life provides researchers with a single theoretical frame to analyze it, *not* as a collective *misunderstanding* imposed on individuals, persuading them to misrepresent processes around them, but as an assemblage of intangible material interventions that transform the agency of actors who use them on the ground.² Entrepreneurialism as discourse works not only as an ideological enabler that confronts the actor from outside, but it contributes to imagining and thus performing agency in empirically identifiable contexts.

Building on nascent lines of work in this direction, we advocate for a critical empirical research agenda on various aspects of entrepreneurialism as a discourse, focusing on how discourse is interwoven with practice. First, we observe that entrepreneurial discourse *enables* actors to participate in economization relations in specific ways associated with neoliberalism, while at the same time disabling actors in other respects.³ By giving actors the tools to articulate their

objectives and motivations, entrepreneurialism makes it possible for agents to use their personal characteristics as a resource and, if possible, a guarantee for the successful pursuance of their self-defined objectives in a given organization – this is at the heart of research on cultural entrepreneurship (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2019).

Cultural entrepreneurship scholarship has been focused at the interface of institutional analysis and identity scholarship, emphasizing how the stories that entrepreneurs tell emphasize their human and social capital and stressing that successful stories resonate more strongly with key audiences and aspects of the institutional environment that are more legitimate (e.g., Martens, Jennings, & Jennings, 2007; Überbacher, 2014; Überbacher, Jacobs, & Cornelissen, 2015). However, it would be useful to expand this line of work to account for how broader discourses shape the stories of entrepreneurs, as well as for what aspects of self-presentation resonate most strongly. Rather than locating structural problems that limit one's choices, entrepreneurialism invites actors to innovate in order to disrupt structures, putting the stress on the creativity of the agent and seeing the external environment as a challenge to be addressed, not as a roadblock to be pushed away with collective political and social endeavors or movements. Yet, once challenged by incorporating “others” in the picture, entrepreneurialism's effects on actors' neoliberal orientations decrease in empirically identifiable ways (Lackeus, 2017). Thus, we need to unpack further how stories of disruption and the celebration of hero entrepreneurs are institutionally conditioned and how they may actually vary across time and space in significant ways. Recent exciting studies on India, Egypt, and China hint at both geographical variation and historical continuity (Irani, 2015, 2019; Jakes, 2020; Lindtner, 2020).

The enabling devices of entrepreneurial discourse invite actors to see and use their agency as a catalyst for change. Reviewing the literature on entrepreneurialism and carrying out empirical research among self-described entrepreneurs, Scharff (2016) analyzed not only the contours of such an entrepreneurial agency but also revealed its gendered nature. Actors imagine and enact their agency by locating themselves as a “business incorporating self” who displays positive, risk-taking and simultaneously competitive and self-competitive characteristics; yet, these actors also suffer from various insecurities, anxieties, self-doubting and other-blaming attitudes (Scharff, 2016, p. 107). Scharff's study confirms the findings of other scholars such as du Gay and Salaman, yet also shows how entrepreneurialism gives actors certain tools that would disable a critical, self-reflective and thus stronger notion of agency. It simultaneously enables and disables, strengthens and weakens.

Such a contradictory potential of discourses is sometimes seen as an opportunity to challenge neoliberalism with the mobilization of a critical and “better” entrepreneurial discourse (Fernández-Herrería & Martínez-Rodríguez, 2016). Such approaches, however, mistake discourses with strategies that can be used as a political organizing tool. Theoretically speaking, such projects are like addressing nationalism with a “better” nationalist discourse.

Thus, our second research emphasis focuses on interventions in the ways of resisting entrepreneurialism. The dynamic and modular tool kit of entrepreneurialism discourse can be used with ease to imagine its alternative and variations (Cohen & Musson, 2000). One can call for and develop a social entrepreneurialism that mobilizes institutional resources instead of an idealized methodological individualist conception (Ribeiro, 2013; Seelos & Mair, 2005; Shaw & Carter, 2007), or critique the Eurocentrism in entrepreneurialism that would otherwise be more neutral and applicable in non-Western contexts (Gamage & Wickramasinghe, 2012). Such interventions are perhaps best thought of as acts of institutional entrepreneurship that involve the collective mobilization of alternative discourses and practices to reshape the nature of entrepreneurialism in a particular context. However, such routes also entail the risk of strengthening entrepreneurialism as discourse.

The third research focus to which we want to draw attention has to do with the legitimization of new wealth and wealth creation (Hitt, Ireland, Camp, & Sexton, 2001). The frequent association of the emergence of platform economies or economic platformization with the personal characteristics of new entrepreneurs such as Elon Musk suggests that entrepreneurialism as a discourse mobilizes a narrative that explains wealth based on the personal trait of the capitalist. Drawing on other ideologies and discourses whose emergence goes back to the nineteenth century (Armstrong, 2005), such a legitimating function of entrepreneurialism also entails an irony, such as proposing the wrong suggestion that Elon Musk is the founder of Tesla. This legitimization function also draws on identifying “entrepreneurs as people like us,” as wearing simple t-shirts and living humble lives. These nouveau riche entrepreneurs associated with the founders of companies such as Facebook, Google and Apple enjoy their “legitimate” wealth, as they create it by being loyal to their true entrepreneurial selves. Entrepreneurialism as a wealth creation strategy can even be studied so that it can be deployed as policy or strategy in a variety of contexts (Peng, 2001). Enframing a moral order by imagining the preferred characteristics of economic actors active in various economization processes, entrepreneurialism aims at naturalizing richness; yet, wealth is also challenged on the ground by the decreasing social acceptability of figures such as Musk, Bezos, and Zuckerberg (Bromley et al., forthcoming; Howarth & Torfing, 2005).

Finally, entrepreneurialism as a discourse draws on the rewards and advantages it presents to actors, thus attracting their engagement with entrepreneurialism. The writers of this essay are both academics who work on and teach subjects directly related to or indirectly associated with entrepreneurialism. For instance, Caliskan is the organizational designer and co-founder of a limited liability company-cooperative initiative that received an entrepreneurship of the year award in 2017, from a consortium led by Microsoft Turkey. Lounsbury received a Canada Research Chair in Entrepreneurship and Innovation for his research as well as outreach activities, including the development of a university incubator for early-stage student-entrepreneurs. Does this mean that we, as writers of this paper, or

our professional practices are geared toward the application and maintenance of entrepreneurialism as discourse?

Our answer is both yes and no. Yes, in the sense that we chose to be parts of institutions that make and maintain discourses. Thus, we contribute, in varying degrees, to the realization of discursive interventions. No, because we chose to make entrepreneurialism as a discourse visible, raising awareness about it and thus resisting the easy temptations of discursive and ideological constructs that have latent or obvious political motivations. Still, we do not claim to stand outside of politics, for we think that it is impossible to mobilize an idea, disseminate it via scientific journals and then claim an extra-political agency. Such are the problems of institutional change: to enable more critical reflexivity, to enable collective mobilization in ways that allow marginalized voices to be heard and progressive change to be catalyzed.

We can build, improve, and change organizations and their cultures in rapport with environmental and justice considerations in reference to evidence-based research platforms. Our intervention in this paper does not suggest that we should *not* be studying entrepreneurship, or entrepreneurial engagements on the ground. On the contrary, our call is for a better engagement with them, by unpacking how entrepreneurialism as discourse shapes and deforms how we deploy our agency and the world, locating it as an object of study.

Much like Edwards Said's efforts to render visible Orientalism as discourse called for a better study of the Middle East (rather than dismissing the Middle East because it appears to be a merely discursive product), we call for making entrepreneurialism as discourse more visible (rather than dismissing entrepreneurship as an object of study). We have to study economic initiatives, policies and organizations better, in part by clearing our analyses from discursive interventions and in part by making visible how interventions such as entrepreneurialism make it impossible to accurately understand entrepreneurs and their practice in the first place.

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NOTES

1. Our approach to elusiveness of discursive constructs draws on Mitchell's (1991) analysis of the state and its elusiveness.

2. For a discussion of how such representations play a performative role in economization and marketization processes see (Caliskan & Callon, 2009, 2010).

3. We draw on Caliskan and Callon's (2009) understating of economization, "which refers to the assembly and qualification of actions, devices and analytical/

practical descriptions as ‘economic’ by social scientists and market actors” (p. 369). For an analysis of neoliberalism with reference of studies of economization, see Madra and Adaman (2014).

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AUTHOR QUERIES

AQ1: “Drawing on the case of Brazil, De Costa and Saraiva (2012) show how “hegemonic discourses on entrepreneurship” work “as an ideological mechanism for the reproduction of capital.”” text is deleted as we have been requested to delete the De Costa and Saraiva reference.