



The politics of narrating social entrepreneurship

Narrating social entrepreneurship

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Abstract

Purpose – Responding to recent pleas both to critically analyze and to conceptually advance social entrepreneurship. The purpose of this paper is to examine how the political “unconscious” operates in the narration of social entrepreneurship and how it poses a limit to alternative forms of thinking and talking.

Design/methodology/approach – To move the field beyond a predominantly monological way of narrating, various genres of narrating social entrepreneurship are identified, critically discussed and illustrated against the backdrop of development aid.

Findings – The paper identifies and distinguishes between a grand narrative that incorporates a messianistic script of harmonious social change, counter-narratives that render visible the intertextual relations that interpellate the grand narration of social entrepreneurship and little narratives that probe novel territories by investigating the paradoxes and ambivalences of the social.

Practical implications – The paper suggests a minor understanding and non-heroic practice of social entrepreneurship guided by the idea of “messianism without a messiah.”

Originality/value – The paper suggests critical reflexivity as a way to analyze and multiply the circulating narrations of social entrepreneurship.

Keywords Societal organization, Entrepreneurialism, Narratives, Social change

Paper type Conceptual paper

The utopian potentialities of society cannot just be extinguished in a seemingly disenchanting time like ours; rather they disappear in order to re-emerge in connection with other concepts and other fields of reality[1] (Sloterdijk and Heinrichs, 2006, pp. 52-3).

Social entrepreneurship studies: beyond monological narration?

Social entrepreneurship has quickly gained momentum, not least in the academic context (Mair *et al.*, 2006), where it has become institutionalized through new endowed chairs and newly founded research centres, mostly in business schools and often with considerable financing from successful entrepreneurs (O'Connor, 2006). Despite their inherent differences, academic stories of social entrepreneurship are united by their utopian rhetoric and their emphasis on newness. For instance, stories of social entrepreneurship often contain “foundational” plots (Ahl, 2006) about the cause and its

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potential to address social change (Bornstein, 2004; Drayton, 2006; Yunus, 2006). Moreover, and as aptly pointed out by Boddice (2009, p. 133), “[j]udging by the historical perspective of contemporary scholars in the field, social entrepreneurship is an entirely new and unprecedented activity”, which is illustrated through narratives which delineate the subject as a “new phenomenon” (Mair *et al.*, 2006), implying a “new look” (Thompson *et al.*, 2000) and “new perspectives,” “new theories” as well as “new models” (Nicholls, 2006b)[2].

The utopian and neophilic enunciation of social entrepreneurship has formed the preferred mode of academic representation, especially during the field’s infancy. These topoi are still in use (though the overall tone of academics has become more sceptical; Ziegler, 2009); they have the noticeable effect of erasing the trace of social entrepreneurship’s “pedigree,” and thus suppressing the concept’s historical and ethnocentric anchorage. Most importantly, promoting the impression that social entrepreneurship has no historical antecedents renders it a reified societal actor, i.e. a material and therefore not manmade phenomenon; it also becomes irrevocable as it makes it harder to imagine changing the phenomenon. It is precisely this ignorance of the linguistic factitiousness of “social entrepreneurship,” i.e. how it evolves as the effect of certain narrative practices, which will concern us in the present contribution.

We would thus like to raise the crucial question of how the academic representation of social entrepreneurship can be understood as a political process of narration. We seek to investigate how such a perspective influences the imagery of social entrepreneurship and its space of influence and intervention. Most importantly, our contribution aims at inquiring how an ostensibly “emerging field” (Marti, 2006) has come to install a monological agenda (Cho, 2006), and how one could counteract this tendency by allowing for more plurivocal genres of narration. This includes, among other things, critically reflecting how narratives of social entrepreneurship engender an effect of “newness” and how they legitimize the matter as a necessary and hence fertile rupture with the past.

Working from the conviction that narration at one and the same time gives rise to knowledge (through representation) while silencing otherness (Lyotard, 1993), we will analyze the genres being applied in the narration of social entrepreneurship, distinguishing narratives that represent social entrepreneurship monologically from those that allow for difference and alterity. To this end, we will first explain our understanding of narrative inquiry as critical analysis that reflexively reveals how social entrepreneurship is represented, influenced and constantly reproduced. Following the call to more thoroughly engage with and try to understand the social of entrepreneurship (Nicholls and Cho, 2006), we will describe three (political) narratives of social entrepreneurship – i.e. the grand narrative, the counter-narrative, and little narratives – which allow us review the ever-growing literature in terms of how it represents the social.

Our analysis starts with an investigation of how the grand, and hence dominant, narrative of social entrepreneurship imparts an optimistic script of social change which is chiefly buttressed by what Lyotard (1984) has come to call performativity (read: rationalism, utility, progress, and individualism) and an oblique quasi-religious exegesis. Second, we introduce the counter-narrative as an opposition to the first genre, not by confronting the (over-) optimistic script of the grand narrative head on but by shedding light on and discomforting its heritage. Using counter-narratives to support

the view that the phenomenon of “social entrepreneurship” need not be limited to the specific and selective textual connections which are currently prioritized, we take a third analytic step as our basis as we address the question of how to go beyond the present narrative representations of social entrepreneurship. Thus, we stage a quest for other connections on the basis of what we like to call little narratives, trying to think what is currently unthinkable inside of or in the centre of the grand narrative. Instead of an individualized, messianistic script that incorporates a model of harmonious social change (or a harmonious model of the social), we instruct the field of social entrepreneurship to inquire into its social focus through narrations of the social as a collective enunciation, a becoming minor of its dominant discourse on social transformation. Introducing the metaphor of “messianism without a messiah,” we suggest an image of social entrepreneurship that conceives of social change without nostalgic reference to the sovereign, heroic entrepreneur.

Our inquiry into the politics of narration will be selectively illustrated against the background of development aid (with particular emphasis on microcredit programs). We chose this focus having observed that the orthodoxy of entrepreneurship has increasingly become a reference point in development discourse, where it is employed to remodel the conduct and governance of established organizations (including non-governmental organizations (NGOs)), poor individuals, households or communities, or poverty alleviation quite generally.

Conceptual anchorage: narrative inquiry as critical analysis

Departing from the assumption that all representation is due to an oblique economy of presence/absence (i.e. those aspects which are, respectively, included or excluded in any given linguistic account), in particular Jameson (1981) reminds us of the political unconscious of narration. Jameson (1981, p. 9) emphasizes that we never really confront a thing in all its freshness since “texts come before us as the always-already-read.” In accordance with Boddice (2009, p. 134), we like to think of social entrepreneurship as a concept that has not yet been understood appropriately in terms of its “origins, the traditions it draws on and the kinds of ideology employed, sometimes unconsciously, in” its execution. Consequently, if we want to understand – to use Jameson’s expression – the political unconscious contained in social entrepreneurship stories, we have to accept that narrations, including its academic subset, have far-reaching consequences, not least because they imply a certain priority setting and narrative closure (Lyotard, 1993). Tempting as it may be to delineate social entrepreneurship as a new “thing,” we believe it is important to temper this assumption by contextualizing and historicizing its narrations, and by examining the particular interpretive master codes that are put to work. Clearly, then, the aim of this paper is not to evaluate, respectively, the rightfulness or wrongfulness of narratives and even less so whether they should be eliminated, but to better understand how narrative accounts get accepted as representing the truth. In order to undertake a narrative examination of the representation of social entrepreneurship, we are interested in discovering “how standard narratives establish their credibility and at what price that is purchased” (Bennett and Edelman, 1985, p. 163).

Conceiving of narrative analysis as a critical endeavour (Jackson, 2002), we try to engage with the task of learning “to use the narrative form more critically and more creatively” (Jackson, 2002, p. 161). By showing the political unconsciousness of social

entrepreneurship narratives, we seek to raise the critical reflexivity of the field and prevent that a singular representation of social entrepreneurship transforms from being fashionable to becoming pervasive or even compulsory (MacDonald and Coffield, 1991). Narrative inquiry, in our assessment, can offer a more “serious theoretical discourse” (Nicholls and Cho, 2006, p. 99) of social entrepreneurship, and enable genuinely different narrations. Seeking to counter-act the monological tendency of current narrative practice, we make a plea for more plurivocal forms of narration that reflect the focus on the sociality in (social) entrepreneurship (Steyaert and Hjorth, 2006; Hjorth, 2009).

The rise of social entrepreneurship and the grand narrative of harmonious social change

The “rise” of the social entrepreneur (Leadbeater, 1997) and the “spring” of social entrepreneurship is ubiquitous and mostly associated with what Maybin (2001) has termed a “positive evaluative accent.” “Social entrepreneurship” has aroused academics’ spontaneous enthusiasm, which explains why there is little difference between its dominant mode of representation and that of the media, social business promoters or policy makers. Partly as a result of this congruence, the success stories of social entrepreneurship have transformed the academic discourse into a grand narrative, that is, a narrative which demands that “one language game, denotation, be retained and all others excluded” (Lyotard, 1984, p. 25). The prefix “grand” follows from the observation that narratives of social entrepreneurship are uttered in the most disparate societal contexts where the matter is envisioned as a solution to, for instance, health problems (Drayton *et al.*, 2006), education (Sperandio, 2005; Su and Muenning, 2005; Todres *et al.*, 2006), work integration (Nyssens, 2006) or urban problems (Leadbeater, 2006). To be sure, “grand” refers not to the scale with which social entrepreneurship has been received in academia but to its narrative style and focus. The grand narrative of social entrepreneurship comprises, among other things, a high level of univocity, unambiguousness, one-sidedness as well as a quasi-religious makeover. In the following, we will indicate how the grand narrative works by pointing at some of the most constitutive interpretive repertoires it draws upon and by illustrating the discourse of performativity in the context of development aid. Afterwards, we will engage with the political effects of the grand narration, discussing how it presents social change as a harmonious process relying on a messianic script.

Social entrepreneurship as grand narrative

To reconstruct how social entrepreneurship becomes stipulated as a grand narrative, we can point at such distinct interpretive repertoires as utility, rationality, progress, and individualism, which in one way or another all hinge on the ideal of performativity (Lyotard, 1984). These alignments are strategic in the sense that they stabilize social entrepreneurship as a societal actor that confirms the modernist, Western notion of order and control, while contributing to the impression that social change can be achieved without causing debate, tensions or social disharmony. In spite of the ostensible simplicity of this imagery, it probably goes without saying that its underlying narrative dynamic is utterly complex.

First, the narration of social entrepreneurship as a performative entity requires that its utility be accentuated; it is depicted as being the product of a technical type of knowledge,

an epistemic commodity that is preferably purchased in the education or book market. Illustrative of this are the two volumes *Enterprising Nonprofits: A Toolkit for Social Entrepreneurs* (Dees *et al.*, 2001) and *Strategic Tools for Social Entrepreneurs: Enhancing the Performance of Your Enterprising Nonprofit* by Dees *et al.* (2002), authors who leave no doubt about the potential of social entrepreneurship. To be more precise, these tools aim to help social entrepreneurs enhance their performance by applying sound business practices. Presenting numerous chapters on subjects such as “competitive strategy,” “mission,” “human resource management,” “investor relations,” “innovation,” and “customer relationship management,” etc. the two books work as toolkits which invoke state-of-the-art management concepts to equip non-profit practitioners with knowledge that enables them to become more effective as social entrepreneurs.

Second, narrating social entrepreneurship as a productive force requires more than just portraying it as a utility, an object of (purchasable) management savvy. The “grandness” of the social entrepreneurship narrative is linked with rationalism in the form of a general problem-solving blueprint. Social entrepreneurship, in other words, is conceptualised as a universal means to universal problems, a “periodizing schema” (du Gay, 2003) that is applicable to any type of context, historical, cultural, and political. Rationalism *inter alia* implies that by applying best-management approaches to social issues one can remove uncertainties and make chaotic and complex affairs of (social) life appear well-ordered and manageable. In this way, the grand narrative hawks the promise that following the right code makes it possible to overcome the flabbiness and amateurishness casually attributed to the third sector (Grenier, 2002) so as to reach a higher social order.

Third, the grand narrative of social entrepreneurship heralds a progressive state (i.e. social, economic and, less frequently, environmental improvement) by means of juxtaposing the bad, that is, obsolete set of behaviours with the good, that is, the managerial techniques which will lead to improvement for a better future. For instance:

[...] [g]one, too, are the days of easy money from government and foundation grants, for which results and accountability were rarely required or reinforced [...]. Together, these trends are creating major changes in how societies around the world are dealing with providing public goods and services. They are leading to [...] a call for more entrepreneurial spirit in the social sector (Dees and Economy, 2001, pp. 12-13).

Clearly, if the narrative of social entrepreneurship is to become pervasive and socially authorized in the social sector, it will require a plot that promises improvement while radiating an aura of success.

Fourth, the grand narrative of social entrepreneurship often relies on an individualized notion of social transformation. To be sure, individualism is more than emphasizing atomistic agency (Hielscher and Beckmann, 2009) and framing large-scale social transformation as being the result of individual stamina, persistence, etc. Rather, individualism is an elitist repertoire that emphasizes that “not everyone is cut out to be an entrepreneur” (Roling, 2002, p. 301) and that entrepreneurial success depends on certain capabilities. In turn, those pre-eminent entrepreneurial capabilities are deemed to be both appealing and indispensable. When social entrepreneurship is visualised as an attractive opportunity for the individual, entrepreneurial characteristics such as commitment and determination, leadership, opportunity obsession, tolerance of risk, and self-reliance (Roling, 2002) gain in value and appeal.

Performativity in development aid

Moving from the abstract to the concrete, there is probably no easier way to illustrate how the ideal of performativity was introduced to entrepreneurship than to point at the context of development aid. For instance, in an UN report titled “Unleashing entrepreneurship: making business work for the poor,” entrepreneurship was promoted as a means for developing the private sector in developing nations, claiming that economic growth must be seen as the key for putting southern national economies on a solid foundation (UNDP, 2004). In 1996, by the same token, James Wolfensohn, then President of the World Bank, claimed that:

[...] microcredit programs have brought the vibrancy of the market economy to the poorest villages and people of the world. This business approach to the alleviation of poverty has allowed millions of individuals to work their way out of poverty with dignity (quoted in Brigg, 2001, p. 245).

This kind of stipulation became both seminal and pervasive in the sense that various institutional actors involved in “Third World affairs” were called upon to install performativity as the main feature of development aid. As in the discourse on private sector entrepreneurship, growth, and performance became core signifiers of development. Using NGOs to illustrate the case, it is Mair and Marti (2006, p. 42) who state that “assessing social performance and impact is one of the greatest challenges”. Likewise, Jacobs (2006, p. 247) points out that “evidence shows that their [NGOs] field-level performance remains variable and that yesterday’s mistakes may often be repeated today.”

As a consequence, the legitimacy of development NGOs today is largely discussed in terms of financial parameters such as the ratio between fundraising (i.e. revenues) and administration (i.e. expenditure; Slim, 2002). In a joint paper by the UN Global Compact, the UN Environment Programme and SustainAbility, Beloe *et al.* (2003) depict the NGO of the twenty-first century as an entity that does not decry market failures (which has been the ostensible task of the twentieth century NGO), but uses markets to solve social ills. This representation of development enterprises, which has become increasingly popular over the last ten to 15 years, is inextricably linked with the contention that the biggest challenge of contemporary (development) NGOs is sustaining them financially (Alymkulova and Seipulnik, 2005; Ramasheuskaya, 2005), thus a challenge related to the lacuna engendered by the retreat of the state (Brigg, 2006). We must remember that it was in the course of the neo-liberal replacement of government with the market (Barry *et al.*, 1996) that (development) NGOs were prompted to engage in entrepreneurial efforts for subsistence (Brugmann, 2005).

Construing the shift towards entrepreneurship as the result of changed economic circumstances, it has also been shown that many NGOs have come to adopt the entrepreneurial principles of the private sector not simply out of mounting frustration with the current funding situation but also out of a desire to avoid donor control (Davis, 1997). As a result of these semantic refurbishments, the so-called “hybrid” forms of organization came into being: organizations presented as non-profit in purpose and for-profit in approach (Dees, 1998b, a). Evidently, this is where social entrepreneurship enters the picture; early on it served as a signifier for (development) NGO entrepreneurs who developed novel strategies for creating sustainable funds by means of creative and sometimes lucrative “self-financing” enterprises (Nyssens, 2006). This narrative of social entrepreneurship, scoped on the ideology of entrepreneurialism (Chell, 2007), is not merely to be seen as an academic creation, as a master code that has

no effect whatsoever in the realm of practice. Quite to the contrary, it has equally become part of the vocabulary of individual practitioners who use it to re-interpret development. For instance, according to Davis (1997), NGO leaders of development aid organizations now see themselves as a new breed of “entrepreneurs” who strive to create a larger, more sustainable, pool of resources for NGO initiatives. To use the case of microcredit, consider Fazle Abed, the Founder of Bangladesh Rural Action Committee (BRAC), probably the world’s largest development NGO, which provides education, health services, microcredit and livelihood creation programs for a significant part of the population of Bangladesh. On the occasion of his resignation as director, he expressed his conviction that if “the next leadership continues in the same entrepreneurial fashion, the organization will survive and flourish.” While referring to BRAC’s entrepreneurial culture, Abed (2005) went on to state that:

[...] [t]he way we operate is very entrepreneurial, we question everything, we’re continually learning to do things better. I hope that we will have the same culture in the organization when I am no longer there.

Political effects

Looking at the repertoires outlined above and how they are employed in the narration of development aid, it becomes evident that the cunning interweaving of the above repertoires results, first, in an optimistic script of harmonious social change. That is, social entrepreneurship literally becomes “a source of delight” (Mair and Marti, 2006): it gets portrayed not only as an economic force that, for instance, replaces public services with market or quasi-market based offerings, but also as a guardian of virtue and morality. Conjoining individual superiority and impeccability (Dey, 2006) with a romanticized and heroic ideal of worldly recovery (Nicholls and Cho, 2006), social entrepreneurship becomes the new “ruler” of the social (change), who (= male = sic) is miraculously creative and who combines the ability to create national economic prosperity with the aptitude to warrant a just, wealthy and healthy co-existence of the people. What is most conspicuous in the context of scholars’ (grand) narrations is that the economic and the social sphere of social entrepreneurship are either artificially held apart (emphasizing either one or the other perspective; Adam, 2008) or else brought together in a seemingly unproblematic manner, often under the label of “hybridity” (Edwards, 2008) or the “dual bottom line” (Canadian Centre for Social Entrepreneurship, 2001). This latter semantic conjuring trick promotes the impression that the two goals of “doing good” (i.e. being social) and “doing well” (i.e. being economically successful) form a comfortable tandem; thereby it supports the positive evaluative accent of social entrepreneurship.

A second, and even less tangible, effect of conceiving social entrepreneurship as grand narrative nonetheless helps explain its enormous appeal and, ultimately, its effectiveness. Indeed, that the field of social entrepreneurship hinges on “the narrative of the innovative, romantic hero” (Nicholls and Cho, 2006, p. 106) might flippantly be interpreted as a mere re-performance of American culture individualism (Hjorth and Bjerke, 2006) or a regression to the early days of entrepreneurship studies where scholars focused on the personality of the entrepreneur. However, we prefer to look at it as “the untrammelled pursuit of a messianic social vision” (Nicholls and Cho, 2006, p. 106). What we suggest here is that the grand narrative of social entrepreneurship relies on a stream of religious thought which positions the subject matter as the other of

late capitalism's disenchantment, as an antidote to displaced idealism and the end of grand utopias or history altogether (Fukuyama, 1992). What we mean by this is that the sign "social entrepreneurship" has created a (however contrived) anachronistic move by dint of which dreams, hopes and promises again become possible. By shifting the focus to the promise of social entrepreneurship (e.g. worldly recovery, social equilibrium, inclusiveness, and community regeneration) through a discursive positioning of both the social entrepreneur (the chosen one who remakes the world in the creator's image) and its social context (i.e. the passive, obedient and idle crowd that awaits its redeemer) the proponents of social entrepreneurship make its messianic "flavour" most palpable. The messianic topos is thus an ideal figure for envisaging (global, national, communal, etc.) spaces of social rejuvenation by economic means (e.g. fair trade, inclusive value chains, self-employment programs, and microcredit initiatives).

Granted, the religious meta-script of social entrepreneurship is not necessarily discernable *prima facie*. This is the case precisely because it is "covered" by an ostensibly ideology-free façade. The "neutralization" of social entrepreneurship as a post-ideological, that is, pragmatic means of addressing social problems, in no way makes it profane, transforming it into a matter of everyday life. Quite the contrary: it is precisely because social entrepreneurship has been de-coupled from issues such as political economy, ideology, ethnocentrism, and gender that it becomes "easier to imagine the 'end of the world' than a far more modest change in the mode of production" (Zizek, 1994, p. 1). What we are proposing here tout court is that the high hopes related to the messianic representation of social entrepreneurship are effective because (and not despite of) the fact that the concept remains the object of the managerial ideology.

A third effect of the grand narrative, which is closely related to the managerial script of social rejuvenation, is a paradoxically passive attitude towards social transformation and change. Indeed, this imagery of the "promise" transmitted by the messiah-like figure of the social entrepreneur makes people believe that they have something to rely on; that is, they can remain passive and let the do-gooders clean up the mess. This messianistic vision of social entrepreneurship evokes the impression of redemption without any need for participation, activism, engagement, obligation, austerity, and work. The religious-inspired interpretation of social entrepreneurship as a grand narrative concurs with Sloterdijk's (1993) contention that Christian ideas of redemption have caused a broad orientation towards the highest good and end, and have been installed as a fixed idea in realms other than religion (i.e. politics, ethics, everyday life, academia, etc.). Further, the vigour that comes from a messianic reading of social entrepreneurship is related to its evocation of a happy-endism based on the figure of a human redeemer, and by the explicit affirmation of a metaphysics of duality (good versus evil) and an eschatology of the one.

Despite all the hope and reassurance associated with this eschatological image, there is no way around conceding that the grand narrative of social entrepreneurship introduces a de-politicized image of social change (Parkinson and Howorth, 2008) that simultaneously relies on and creates a mixture of harmony, messianic redemption, and collective passivity.

Critique and dissensus on the stage: developing counter-narratives of social entrepreneurship

Our analysis of the typical textual structure and semantics of the grand narrative of social entrepreneurship has highlighted one of its seminal political consequences:

it engenders a de-politicization of social change. We now introduce another kind of narrative, which we will henceforth refer to as counter-narrative. A counter-narrative is political *stricto sensu* in that it tempers the optimist genre depicted above, and by doing so counters the monological aspect of current narrations. This effort at moderation has been declared urgent by Nicholls and Cho (2006, p. 100) as they suggest analyzing “the political dimension of [social entrepreneurship’s] ‘sociality’, drawing upon insights from critical theory.” Increasingly, the political dimension has been brought into focus as the ideological, epistemological and ontological dimensions of social entrepreneurship have been critically examined (Chell, 2007; Cho, 2006; Humphries and Grant, 2006; Nicholls and Cho, 2006; Reid and Griffith, 2006; Roper and Cheney, 2005; Steyaert and Hjorth, 2006). Based on this literature, it is possible to trace a different genre for narrating social entrepreneurship and to envision the political possibilities of counter-narratives in conjunction with questioning and altering the monological agenda setting. First, we will exemplify our understanding of critique and how it works in the unfolding of a counter-narrative; second, we will demonstrate how a counter-narrative can be established, providing illustrations from development studies where increasing dissensus can be seen over the use and value of microcredit.

Counter-narrative and critique

We label the counter-narrative “critical” since it is, qua its prefix, sceptical about towards the over-optimistic utopia of social entrepreneurship and destabilizes the specific set of repertoires it draws upon to establish such effects. This is the case not because many, possibly all, utopias miss the nucleus of truth. Rather, it is because they generally run the risk of drawing the attention away from the here and now of social change, and hence from immediate responsibilities, inherent conditions of possibilities and room to manoeuvre. Importantly, praising critique in no way means glorifying the *jouissance* of “nay saying.” On the contrary, critique – in opposition to criticism – forms a mode of reading and relating that operates from the inside rather than from the outside of the established order. This, as Howard (1989) rightly observes, makes the whole enterprise a political undertaking since it does not rely on a reductionist mode of interaction that sets up its criteria for judgment, not to say repudiation, before the event (read: criticism) in order to seek certainty where there is none. The kind of critique we have in mind pays heed to Critchley’s (2008, p. 3) remark that “the explosion has to come from within and not be imposed from without.” Engaging with a counter-narrative allows us to take issue with the textual strategies of inclusion/exclusion which work to make particular narratives of social entrepreneurship appear to be representing the “truth.” Critique makes it possible to break open what appears to be a coherent and closed narration. It is simultaneously affirmative in the sense that it makes visible omissions and “silencings” which form chances to construct other kind of narrations. Critique of the grand narrative of social entrepreneurship problematizes its avowed nexus with reality/truth by laying bare its historical “rootedness” and contextuality as well as the forms of subjectivity it enables or disavows.

Dissensus in the politics of development aid

In order to establish a counter-narrative that questions, the novelty and “taken-for-grantedness” of the grand narrative of social entrepreneurship, we will proceed by offering some illustrations so as to historicize and contextualize the “recent”

arrival of entrepreneurship in relationship to the long history of development aid. In this process, we will make visible, first, the particular and partial choices and, second, their (negative) effects. Accounts of social entrepreneurship are eager to take their own logic as the starting point to tackle problems such as poverty. Hence, if we look at the most salient significations of development aid since the post-WWII era, it immediately becomes clear that a turn towards the orthodoxy of entrepreneurship has only taken place during the last ten to 15 years. As this “new managerialism” (Desai and Imrie, 1998) has found a new host to feed on, that is, development NGOs, there might be a certain irony in re-envisaging these organizations through the repertoire of entrepreneurship and/or managerialism since this might simply conceal the links with an abortive past (Cook, 2003). Jacobs (2006) has grasped the core of this critique by pointing at the typical essentialist and empiricist fallacy of NGOs working in areas such as humanitarian assistance or long-term development support. What is most significant at this juncture is that NGO initiatives are often framed in a (project) management logic, a logic which reduces reality to a set of simplified, “pre-defined activities, inputs, outputs, and outcomes” (p. 250). Apart from falling prey to cold quantification (Jones and Spicer, 2006), Jacobs shows us another pragmatic problem of such over-specified project tools: they come to reduce “complex social and political realities into simplified and discrete components” (p. 250). What is worrying on a broader note is that a particular picture of development and social change is created, one that overshadows “the ideas of participation and empowerment with the idea of what can be achieved as set out in the project plan” (p. 251). The interesting point is that it is business knowledge which operates to strip representations of development or social change from “contentious, process-based and ambiguous content” (Ebrahim, 2003, p. 90; quoted in Jacobs, 2006, p. 251). In response, this kind of counter-narrative documents how traditional or alternative rationalities either lost status and credibility or fell out of the realm of the possible altogether. Along this line, Anderson and Dees (2006) point out that social entrepreneurship is often subjected to a “value-laden language that casts the new idea in a favourable light, while denigrating old approaches” (p. 145). Thus, a counter-narrative exposes how a partial imagery of social change is effected in that it turns the future into something that is “accessible in advance” and thus into a mere “programme or a causality, a development, a process without an event” (Derrida, 1997a, p. 29).

Besides documenting how social entrepreneurship forms a particular and partial option of social change – since it is de-historicized and de-contextualized – one might counter the self-evident optimism by pointing at the negative effects left out in the narration of social entrepreneurship. To understand the impact of what is presented as a new alignment, initiated after the so-called “lost decade of development” (i.e. the 1980s), we can point to various studies that have come to delineate the far-reaching implications for the subjects and institutions working in the field (Ahmad, 2003; Bhatt, 1997; Brigg, 2001, 2006; Cook, 2003; Dichter, 2007b, a). For instance, the (counter) narration of microcredit programs points at a social (mainly language-based) practice that intrudes into the social stratum of the poor. Contrary to the immaculate representation of microcredit in (Western) public discourse, these narrations indicate how the programs (whether run by profit or non-profit organizations or cooperatives) have had detrimental effects. For instance, microcredit has destroyed some established social relations by replacing traditional modes of exchange and bonds of solidarity

with more formalized and conditional exchange relations (Bateman, 2007). Moreover, because microcredit often provides loans exclusively to women, it has come to foster domestic violence as a result of shaking up male-biased cultural hierarchies (Schuler *et al.*, 1998). There is also evidence that microcredit might lead the poor into chronic poverty if they must take a loan from one financial institution or money lender to repay their debts to another, leading to a vicious circle of debt (Narasaiah, 2007). Most alarmingly, there are reports of people, mainly women, who have turned to suicide because they could not repay their loans (Padmanabhan, 2002). We wholeheartedly acknowledge the importance of articles which have taken issue with these real effects (for a commendable overview, Dichter and Harper, 2007; Fernando, 2005). The reference to such negative effects is mostly omitted from the optimistic representation of social entrepreneurship as grand narrative.

Finally, the notion of counter-narrative can be related to inquiries that try to explain the negative effects of microcredit not as a result of the malevolent or mischievous behaviour of some ruthless actor but of subtle forms of domination, what Bourdieu (1991) has termed symbolic violence. What we mean by this is that not only must microcredit be challenged in terms of its effectiveness in leading the poor out of poverty (empirical evidence seriously troubles this connection; Khandker, 2005); it must also be construed as a strategy that practices violence through mechanisms of trust, obligation, personal loyalty, debt, that is, through “all the virtues honoured by the ethic of honour” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 127). Obviously, the symbolic violence of microcredit might take different routes. It may become manifest as a process of “disciplining” (Montgomery, 1996) or as what Johnson and Sharma (2007) call “institutionalized suspicion,” where self-help groups impose heavy burdens upon their members while using mechanisms of trust to “enforce” consent (Karim, 2008). Alternatively, symbolic violence can emerge through linguistic practices, as Pahnke (2008) revealed in a study of microfinance institutions that used language to align their code of conduct and the image of small-loan borrowers along the logic of World Bank policies while retaining the image of equality and fairness. What such examples imply is that (grand) narratives might work to exclude poor people from poverty-alleviating initiatives by appointing certain attributes to them, such as being credit risks (Ahmad, 2003). What is most notable in this context is that the grand narrative of microcredit works as an act of symbolic violence by endorsing a particular social identity: the self-maximizing entrepreneur.

This social positioning is problematic for several reasons. First, it has been shown that loans are often not invested in entrepreneurial activities (which are assumed to allow for returns; Coleman, 1999) but are instead used for consumption (Dichter, 2007b). It is problematic mainly with regard to the observation that the rural and urban poor might be ill at ease with the subject position of the entrepreneur, that is, with the “view of the poor as budding entrepreneurs, who, with access to formal financial services, would pull themselves out of poverty through business development, asset accumulation and wealth creation” (Dichter, 2007a, p. 1). Microcredit programs, in favouring entrepreneurial subjectivity over other forms of being, support a simplified understanding of poverty (Addison *et al.*, 2009) that diminishes the role of the state (in, for instance, basic health care, education, welfare; Fernando, 2005) while relying on an individualistic problem-solving script (Brigg, 2001). Furthermore, they may obscure the cultural tensions related to women’s empowerment (Goetz and Gupta, 1996),

bring about gendered imbalances in societal power (Mayoux, 1999) or fail altogether to reach the poorest of the poor (Bhatt, 1997).

In our assessment, the above references help to demonstrate that microcredit does not simply introduce a neutral approach for addressing poverty; instead, it is a set of linguistic devices which dramatically restructure the “being” of poor people in the “South.” Thus, this brief and example-based inquiry of the counter-narrative shows that (social) entrepreneurship must always and necessarily be studied in the context of its emergence and with regard to its (linguistic) mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. This in turn requires us to scrutinize the troubling intertextual relations of the dominant reading of social entrepreneurship in order to trace the traditional and alternative possibilities which have become silenced. The intertexts of social entrepreneurship which we illustrated in the context of development aid are troubling in the positive sense of the term: they reveal that social entrepreneurship is not new but instead is based on a well-known amalgam of ideas that have “found” a novel territory for application. Also, and maybe more important, once we reflect on the textual relatedness and hence the dependence of the ruling knowledge and representation of contemporary development aid, we can demonstrate that the seemingly marginalized other of (social) entrepreneurship (in the case above this would be classical development NGOs or the poor), is always co-implied in the system which establishes the grand narrative of harmonious social change at its unswerving centre. To use Derrida’s (1981, p. 5) wording to envision this dynamic: “closure is constantly being traversed by the forces, and worked by the exteriority, that it represses.” This means not only that there is not and never will be a definitive, stable centre of (social) entrepreneurship, but that the inside and outside of the discourse of development aid (and its appropriate, legitimated institutions and subject positions) are mutually constitutive. Furthermore, though this is often concealed, the idea of (social) entrepreneurship cannot be thought of without the existence of its other, its inferior supplement.

Re-imagining social entrepreneurship: affirming little narratives of social inventiveness

Starting with the realization that “a value neutral approach to the ‘social’ is impossible” (Boddice, 2009, p. 137), we would now like to make a more affirmative gesture and probe alternative forms of narration or what we term, with Lyotard (1984), little narratives. To understand the operation of little narratives of social entrepreneurship, and how they stimulate alternative interpretations of sociality and social inventiveness, it becomes essential to emphasize once more that the counter-narratives discussed above are indispensable for creating different meanings. That is, they create inventive potentialities by hinting at the margin of the dominant rationality operant in the grand narrative of (social) entrepreneurship. This inventive border-work comes close to the sort of activity Derrida (1981) circumscribes as “out-work,” i.e. the “non-dialectical ‘works’ of the outside” (Nealon, 1993, p. 18). We will first describe how little narratives can re-narrate social entrepreneurship as a form of social inventiveness, and then point out its minor politics through the idea of “messianism without a messiah.” It should be noted that this third form of narration forms a conceptual proposal rather than an established stream of scholarly work. Consequently, the little narrative stands in contrast to the earlier two forms of narration which have a sound empirical basis in the literatures, respectively, on social entrepreneurship and neighbouring fields.

Little narratives of social inventiveness

Agreeing with Nicholls and Cho (2006, p. 105) that “social entrepreneurship can only be considered a discrete focus of inquiry on the basis of the unique features of its social dimension” and that “[r]esearch that neglects this substantive dimension leaves the most important aspect of the field unexplored,” we find it especially important to find forms of narration which support re-imagining the social in social entrepreneurship (Steyaert and Hjorth, 2006). In our view, little narratives can render power/knowledge effects and social hierarchies visible, experiment with more polyvocal representations of the social, and respect the fact that invention is open-ended.

A first incitement for crafting little narratives is to make the social visible at all. In discussing the grand narrative, we indicated that the dominant meaning of the social is extremely poor and simplified, mostly because it adheres to an instrumental logic of give-and-take. For instance, looking at how the social is presented in the illustration of development aid, we encounter a situation where the affluent (read: the north) gains the upper hand in determining the course of development and where beneficiaries (read: the poor) are increasingly supposed to act according to the giver’s premises and practices. This new representational practice is inscribed into the body of official development aid on a broad scale, e.g. by “the discourses and practices of economists, planners, nutritionists, demographers and the like” (Escobar, 1992, p. 25), but it immediately raises the question of how such a reduction of the social violates people’s right to their own truth (Parrish, 2004). Little narratives can be considered attempts to understand how certain social hierarchies become prioritized. Hence, the task of little narratives is to bring to light whether social entrepreneurial initiatives, while trying to mitigate social problems, remain both reflective and critical of the way that problems and associated solutions are constructed. Little narratives are especially appropriate for inquiring into the political nexus between “truth”-telling and power and for elaborating the space of the outside, i.e. where the grand narrative reaches its limit and it becomes possible to imagine novel subject positions and hence forms of being.

Second, in an attempt to redraw the social configuration, little narratives can form communal experiments by writing a new future. Little narratives get to work against the kind of exclusion and marginalization implied in the economic matrix of microcredit programs by widening the horizons of people involved in the sensemaking and decision-taking of social change. To give an example, this would imply that both the parameters applied in credit allocation and the criteria that define “efficiency” in microcredit programs would become a collective undertaking and not the sole matter of managerial imagination; hence, they would be a matter for the many and the different, not the few and the homogeneous. In line with Palmer (1998), little narratives draw upon the potential of (stakeholder) dialogue, since its sensitivity towards otherness “invites transformation, calling us not only to new facts and theories and values but also to new ways of living our lives” (p. 38, quoted in Calton and Payne, 2003, p. 29). This plea delineates representation as a mutual process in which dialogical processes between social enterprises and their various stakeholders become the means for the ongoing negotiation of social reality. The performance of little narratives, then, is essentially about constructing a social space outside the existing parameters. Accordingly, we would like to conceive of social entrepreneurship as an event of social action that takes issue with the limitations of the status quo and with the enactment of new forms of living and thinking. It is in this way that a multiplicity of voices is

brought into contact and that people are encouraged to “reconsider not only their own and other’s jostling baggage of value assumptions and predispositions but also their implicit rules that govern [...] conversation and engagement” (Calton and Payne, 2003, pp. 10-11).

In alignment with the two earlier dimensions, we would like to add a third dimension of little narratives by pointing at their prosaic or unfinalizable character (Bakhtin, 1984; Morson and Emerson, 1990; Steyaert, 2004). Little narratives hold potential because they can acknowledge the complexity of social entrepreneurial initiatives and make it clear that social endeavours “*necessarily exceed our capacity to know them*” (Law, 2004, p. 6; emphasis in original) as they are perforated by secrecy, ambivalence, contingency, interdependence and chance. So far, this open-endedness of the social is missing from portrayals, case studies and anecdotal reports where we seldom find probing discussions of the relational paradoxes, complexities and dilemmas that come to the fore in the pragmatic context of everyday practice, and the political and ethical consequences that derive from it.

In order to engage with these parameters of little narrations, we suggest conveying empirical investigations of concrete social entrepreneurial initiatives which document their power effects, emphasize the polyvocal aspects of narration, and foster a more prosaic and open-ended image of social inventiveness. So far, few illustrations have entered the literature of social entrepreneurship, but we can get some ideas by looking at examples based on discourse analysis and how they suspend and disturb the monological and harmonious narrative of social entrepreneurship (Dey, 2007; Howorth *et al.*, 2009; Parkinson and Howorth, 2008). For instance, Parkinson and Howorth (2008), inquiring into the language used by social entrepreneurs, show that their articulations are ideologically at odds with the UK policies for social enterprise, which rely on a managerially defined rhetoric of enterprise that promotes efficiency, business discipline, and financial independence. The authors point out that interviewees (read: social entrepreneurs) are preoccupied with local issues, collective action, geographical community, and local power struggles.

Similarly, Dey (2007), investigating the language games used by development NGO practitioners, reveals the ambivalent character and complex “nature” of practitioners’ narratives by juxtaposing the representations of the “social” of entrepreneurship in business school research with the narratives of development NGO practitioners. The study not only revealed the immanent polysemia of the “social,” but also illustrated that practitioners’ talk was far more equivocal and paradoxical than what would be expected from the academically produced grand narrative. The study found that the entrepreneurship discourse served only as a marginal sensemaking device for NGO practitioners. Further, those practitioners’ representations of development, and their constructions of themselves, intermingled (economic) orthodoxies of entrepreneurship and managerialism with (social) notions of benevolence, religion, self-fulfilment, independence and professionalism. In other words, their narrations of development and self were defined through different (and at times antagonistic) semantic repertoires (e.g. doing good versus being effective, empowering others versus acting conditionally or authoritatively). As Dey concludes, these oscillations demonstrate, first, that practitioners constantly re-configure their ideological dilemmas (Billig *et al.*, 1988) according to the specific conversational situation and, second, that development forms a deeply contested, i.e. split, discourse in which ambivalence can erase any prior or originary (economic or social) presence.

A minor politics

As we have tried to illustrate, little narratives appear to be apt for spotting the potential of social entrepreneurship in its association with sociality (Steyaert and Hjorth, 2006); they help raise awareness that “the social is a deeply complex and contested category” (Nicholls and Cho, 2006, p. 105). These potentials imply not only coming to terms with the de-politicization of social change but also actively experimenting with the politics of representation. This is probably a viable option for the development aid sector, where we believe the “social” can receive quite different appearances. For instance, in the post-WWII era “development” was framed as the political space par excellence, but more recently, as we pointed out, it has been de-politicized through the idea of entrepreneurship which thrives on the logic of persons who, qua being part of a community, carry the burdensome task of transforming societies using economic and managerial means. It is in this connection that we turned to little narratives as they can reveal the *prima facie* post-ideological discourses of necessity and pragmatism, foreground the idea of “new individualism” as it is used and refined in third way policies, demonstrate the novel emphases on community (Hjorth and Bjerke, 2006) and, most importantly, emphasize the link between the individual (entrepreneur) and social duty and moral responsibility (Heywood, 2002). Hence, little narratives are textual performances (rather than analytic treatises) which depict development aid as a deeply contested field of representation, a field with many faces. For example, it can be seen as a highly submarginal field of investment, an aspect of mounting trans-political scepticism, a realm of increasing human calamities, or a political project that engenders a distinct segregation between “north” and “south” or, as some have come to say, the continuation of the colonial world order (Loomba, 1993).

Having said this, we realize that little narratives contain a danger; they let us conceive of the social as merely something to be fixed (Hjorth and Bjerke, 2006), though in a different (read: non-economic) order. It is precisely this danger which reveals the Catch-22 in which the field of social entrepreneurship currently finds itself: as it tries to become a new, interdisciplinary field, it simultaneously seems to repeat the many problems that dominate the field of entrepreneurship studies, especially the urge to de-politicize, trivialize, and individualize complex social processes. It is for this very reason that practitioners and academics alike are called upon to find (other) ways to represent the social aspect of social entrepreneurship in its plurality and ambivalence. As follows from our previous elaboration on counter-narratives, this presupposes un-hinging the phenomenon from those assumptions which currently hinder more creative understandings. Thus, the primary task will be to retain a focus on positive social change without mimetically repeating the chimeras of individualism, cognitivism, managerialism, and/or rationalism. While we have taken issue with the messiah-like flavour of the grand narrative of social entrepreneurship, it might be appropriate to suggest that the “essence” of little narratives can (still) be oriented towards utopia, albeit marked with a “perhaps” to indicate their unfinalizability.

Conceptually, we suggest connecting the little narrative with a different kind of “messianism” through Derrida’s (1997b) notion of “messianism without a messiah.” The kind of de-individualized understanding of social entrepreneurship’s sociality that we have tried to adumbrate is chiefly in line with what Deleuze and Guattari (1986) have called the becoming minor of language and narration. We find the term “minor” fitting since it relates little narratives to “messianism without a messiah” which has

nothing in common with the imagination of the ideal (yet impossible) social order or society, and even less with those writings which describe social utopias as ideas which are not even intended to be realized. In the phenomenon of “messianism without a messiah,” events are structured as “promises” and meanwhile circumvent the problem of saying definitively what such a structure would look like and thus of totalizing such a relationship to the point of excluding certain “others.” In other words, a minor reading of social entrepreneurship bypasses the “tradition of the ‘heroic’ leader” (Nicholls, 2006a, p. 20) and keeps an open mind towards the general possibility of societal improvement and amelioration, though this is always regarded as being due to collective negotiations of complex, interdependent, emergent realities, and hence subject to multi-stakeholder negotiations that might easily spiral “near the edge of chaos” (Calton and Payne, 2003, p. 7). The term “messianism without a messiah” is chiefly an ethical category since it deals with (unconditional) responsibility. Yet, it is equally an apt concept for taking account of the paradoxes and impossibilities of the social and, in turn, for realizing that it would be ironic to hang onto the belief “that global visions of sustainable change and development depend on an individual focus” (Boddice, 2009, p. 148) instead of on collective enunciation and experimentation.

CODA: social entrepreneurship, perhaps

Juxtaposing and exploring grand, counter-, and little narratives, we have tried to go beyond the current, predominantly monological narration of social entrepreneurship which culminates in a de-politicized story of harmonious social change. Given that our narrative inquiry has mainly relied on illustrations and conceptual considerations, our analytic tripartition might indeed look heuristic rather than steadfast (Weiskopf and Steyaert, 2009). But that impression is not accurate; our objective was precisely to illustrate the politics of narration, to nudge the field of social entrepreneurship to engage more critically with the proliferation of its stories, and to experiment with more ambivalent narrations that give credit to the micro-processes of its social constitution. Such a “social” turn clearly overhauls the paradigmatic and ethical parameters of the current research agenda, paying particular heed to the social ontology of social entrepreneurship (Steyaert, 2007). It should be noted that any minor readings of social entrepreneurship should remain sufficiently eclectic and open towards the many different routes (e.g. from empowerment to systems innovation; Nicholls, 2006a) and forms (e.g. “multi-goal, multi-stakeholder and multiple-resource enterprise”; Defourny and Nyssens, 2006, p. 9) that societal transformation and change can take. On the other hand, they should also support the view that the history-making engendered through social entrepreneurial initiatives is always difficult, controversial, paradoxical, complex, and even dangerous (Jacobs, 2006).

In conclusion, we would like to emphasize that the field of social entrepreneurship studies, as it currently operates, cannot be labelled as unerringly reflective since it has, with a few noteworthy exceptions, not yet proven to be inventive and is not even “hot-handed” regarding its theoretical and conceptual choices. What is needed, then, is a more reflective practice of research that continuously subjects its archive to scrutiny with the aim of inquiring and refurbishing its own narrative creations. Such a reflective epistemological practice is of course, critical, though this is not doing negative or critical for the sake of it. Rather, it is a way of understanding how even the most benevolent initiatives of social change can become “dangerous” as soon as they use particular “truths” to mobilize subjects and institutions.

Where all of the above implies an open-ended theoretico-institutional analysis (Derrida, 2004) which constantly questions the representation of social enterprises, such politics are nevertheless affirmative in the sense that they seek to “improve them, to make them more just” (Lyotard and Thébau, 1985, p. 23). To denote the affirmative aspect of this vision, one might claim that it operates upon a kind of “heterogenesis” that aims to establish links with neighbouring zones (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994), and thus to release the plurivocality that is currently neglected and obscured in the “social” (of entrepreneurship). This implies a kind of reflective epistemology that pays rigorous attention to disciplines outside the threshold of business and management science since, bluntly speaking, the field of the outside offers springboards for multiplying hitherto strictly patrolled and shielded sites of enunciation. Such a multiplying gesture or “novel folding” (Weiskopf, 2002) primarily aims to differentiate the available stock of thinking about the (social) problems of the social world and ways to solve them. What we are asking for here is a kind of research which is truthful to its etymology. That is, “re-search” done in conjunction with social entrepreneurship literally needs to be understood as searching “again” or for “the second time” and, by implication, searching for what might have “been lost or forgotten” along the way (Weiskopf, 2002). Hence, the ensuing re-search(es) of social entrepreneurship should start from the middle of things or, following Deleuze (1988, p. 119), from asking “what can I see, and what can I say today?” in order to then endeavour to find possibilities yet not realized.

We would like to amplify this suggestion and render it more palpable by pointing out the need to base inquiries not only on a dogmatic image of thought which relies on “hard” empirical models, precise definitional schemas and concepts, etc. but also to consider ways of thinking from, for instance, philosophy, literature, or any discipline – academic or not – which helps get us into the water, teaching us some strokes and guiding us through the water so that we may learn to swim. While “messianic without a messiah” is simultaneously connected to the idea of “promise” and “perhaps,” our discussion above has sought to demonstrate that the “promise” has been overstretched in the context of management and business studies. As a result, we welcome theoretical and conceptual perspectives which introduce some reservation (read: “perhaps”) to the available forms of narration. The “perhaps” trades on the idea that social change, which is necessarily paradoxical and ambivalent, always requires a leap of faith into the “land of the unknown.” The idea of the “perhaps” thus appears as the only responsible conception of the event(s) “to come,” since it invites us to embrace the idea that positive forward-looking expectations and actual failures are not necessarily contradictory but might go together in a synergetic way. In our assessment, this is the horizon of understanding in which social entrepreneurship needs to be situated, in that it combines the emancipatory promise of social change, the ambivalence and insecurity related to the finitude of consciousness, memory and foresight, and the secret of inventiveness. In short: social entrepreneurship, perhaps, etc.

Notes

1. The original reads: “Die utopischen Potentiale der Gesellschaft können auch in einer scheinbar entzauberten Zeit wie der unseren nicht einfach sterben, sie tauchen nur ab und verbinden sich mit anderen Konzepten, anderen Realitätsfeldern.”
2. To this day, only a few have suggested that the “same story” is told, only by a “new” voice (Boddice, 2009; Brown, 2001).

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