

## Renew or regress: maintaining a forum for radical entrepreneurship scholarship

In September 2016, the esteemed New York University Professor Paul Romer (2016) published an excoriating critique of his own academic discipline, entitled “The trouble with macroeconomics”. He identified a “general failure mode of science” in which a scholarly community can stagnate or even regress owing to insularity and the marginalisation of non-mainstream thought. He took a specific aim at complex theoretical modelling in econometrics that has become so abstracted as to have untethered from reality. Often, he argues quite scathingly, the resultant “post-real” theory has failed to reflect the broad scope of human motivations or behaviours it proposes to explain. Romer concludes that any field with a reliance on abstract mathematical modelling is prone to such failure, a fact underlined by the Bank of England’s Chief Economist Andy Haldane who acknowledges that “the economics profession is to some degree in crisis” (Wallace, 2017, p. 1).

So, where does this leave the field of entrepreneurship, and what lessons can the research community take from the apparent demise of macroeconomics? First, we conclude that the scholarly field meets Romer’s conditions for being susceptible to “failure” in that it is largely mathematically based, with the van Burg and Romme (2014, p. 372) finding that “most entrepreneurship studies published in leading journals draw on positivism, by emphasizing hypothesis testing, inferential statistics, and internal validity”. Furthermore, there is strong group identification within the discipline, with many entrepreneurship scholars appearing to hold a passionate belief in entrepreneurship as something that should be advocated and propagated in a way other social scientists are simply not inclined to do for their subject. Such combinations of methodological rigidity, and evangelical fervour, present challenges of an especially troubling nature to entrepreneurship scholarship.

“Unanimity of opinion may be fitting for a church, for the frightened or greedy victims of some (ancient, or modern) myth, or for the weak and willing followers of some tyrant. Variety of opinion is necessary for objective knowledge. And a method that encourages variety is also the only method that is comparable with a humanitarian outlook” (Feyerabend, 1993, p. 31).

Could these conditions lead, we ask with some trepidation, to overly optimistic interpretation of evidence about entrepreneurial phenomena, in the manner that has delegitimised macroeconomic theory?

We answer with a tempered no...for the time being at least. While there is undoubtedly evidence of uncritical acceptance of core assumptions relating to the entrepreneur, their motivations and function, there are a healthy chorus of dissenting and contrarian voices, who have, over the past decades managed to publish thought-provoking and challenging pieces in respected academic outlets, albeit largely from the periphery of the mainstream. The field has even had something of a “Romer” moment recently with Per Davidsson’s (2015) review of the opportunity construct in the *Journal of Business Venturing*, in which he unflinchingly directs attention towards systematically poor and inconsistent construct development across a range of influential and highly regarded publications. Unlike Romer, who critics argue unhelpfully diagnosed the problem without providing a solution (Mayeda and Torres, 2016), Davidsson (2015) advances a more robust alternative to extant opportunity theory, and in doing so demonstrates that the field, even at the highest level, is capable of self-reflection, taking on “sacred cows” and improving the theoretical rigour.

While we believe that these factors point towards an entrepreneurship research community that is in relatively good health, we wish to use our special issue to draw



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attention to the dangers of complacency, convergence and groupthink in social science, and to protect a “space” for the development of challenging ideas that we hope will reinvigorate theoretical work both now and in the future. Scholars, we argue, must remain cognisant that, given the size of the community, the impact on either policy or practice remains modest, and hence there is ample scope to identify research topics and problems that resonate more closely with the knowledge users. We use the notion of radical entrepreneurship scholarship in this special issue to describe just this space: somewhere for research that is characterised by a departure from tradition and that challenges the orthodoxy in some way to provide better, more useful knowledge.

We invited scholars to submit work that they felt they might not get an airing elsewhere, be it for empirical, theoretical, methodological, political or even stylistic reasons. We were somewhat delighted when we reviewed the initial corpus of submissions. Not only had some of the field’s leading scholars submitted articles to the special issue, but the breadth and creativity of the papers across both the published articles and those that did not make the final issue, confirmed there is indeed a latent demand for a forum to experiment and challenge the status quo. We are pleased to introduce these articles and to discuss their contribution to radical entrepreneurship scholarship in the following section.

### **Introducing the articles**

#### *Radical structure*

First, we begin our special issue with an article by Welter and Baker that casts a radical eye on the structure of the entrepreneurship research field(s), and consider implications of the apparent balkanisation of the research community into specialist sub-domains. In “Come on out of the ghetto, please! – Building the future of entrepreneurship research” the authors directly address the issue of “othering” non-mainstream conceptions of the entrepreneur. In echoes of Romer’s argument about heterodoxy in economic theory, the authors make a compelling case for radically reconceptualising the internal boundaries of the field, contending that broadening the core concept of entrepreneurship will strengthen the overall development of the paradigm.

#### *Radical practices*

Next we turn to Gross and Geiger’s examination of radical entrepreneurial practices. In their paper “Liminality and the entrepreneurial firm: practice renewal during periods of radical change” they build on the recent entrepreneurship-as-practice turn (Johannisson, 2011; Goss *et al.*, 2011) to study what entrepreneurs actually do, embedded in, rather than abstracted from, their social contexts. Such an approach, which builds on Schatzki (2006) and other key practice theorists such as Feldman and Orlikowski (2011) and Weick *et al.* (2005), provides a vital and necessary counterpoint to positivist work that dominates the paradigm. The authors make an important contribution to the emerging “practice turn” in entrepreneurship by problematizing the work of change, to understand how it is actually “done”.

#### *Radical empirics*

Dimo Dimov in his paper “Towards a qualitative understanding of human capital in entrepreneurship research” urges us to reconsider the interplay between concepts and their measurement. He does this by bringing to our attention the limitations of the current conceptualisation and measurement of a core notion in entrepreneurship, that of human capital. He invites us to reconsider our assumption of human capital as reflected in interchangeable indicators and shows evidence that this concept can only be adequately captured if conceived of as being built through different configurations of its individual indicators. Here, Dimov demonstrates the effectiveness of qualitative comparative analysis

as a methodological tool able to explain how different configurations of factors can lead to the same outcome. His proposed approach is holistic and can show configurational causation. His contribution to the SI relates to the broader call for context-sensitive and nuanced explanations and resonates with the view that “other things being equal” is hardly ever the case.

### *Radical philosophy*

Johnsen and Sørensen meanwhile, take us beyond critiques of the heroic entrepreneur in their paper “Traversing the fantasy of the heroic entrepreneur” to analyse the imagined, the mask, of such emblematic cultural representations itself, which persist in public discourse (in spite of extensive scholarly critiques). They employ Slavoj Žižek’s radical philosophy as a theoretical frame for exploring this fantasy, applying it with great critical success to Richard Branson’s biography. Johnson and Sørensen uncover a paradoxical, simultaneous drive towards transgression of boundaries – overcoming oneself – and the pursuit of true authenticity – becoming oneself. They argue that it is these very contradictions, incompleteness and fragility inherent within such fantastic figurations which shape their on-going public attraction. Beyond the increasingly critical world of the entrepreneurship scholar, then, these paradoxical fantasies continue to drive aspirational desire, and, indeed, faith in the saving grace of the heroic entrepreneur.

### *Radical beliefs*

The paper “Belief patterns of entrepreneurship: exploring cross-cultural logics” by Dave Valliere contributes to an enduring question in entrepreneurship research, namely, why so few individuals develop intent to go after identified opportunities (Venkataraman, 1997). The author strives to address this question by paying close attention to the differences in the unique sensemaking and cultural enactment of individuals. Exploring the influence of subjective factors on entrepreneurial intent, such as potential subcultural variations within a society, the paper helps entrepreneurship research move beyond the normative consideration of individual cognitions and economic and institutional environment (Bird, 1988; Fayolle and Liñán, 2014; Hmieleski and Corbett, 2006; Zampetakis *et al.*, 2009). Driven by the radical idea of the existence of an intermediate mechanism, by which national cultures give rise to individual beliefs about entrepreneurship, the investigation provides support to its core proposition.

### *Radical emergence*

Our special issue concludes, fittingly, with a story: “Entrepreneurship and context: when entrepreneurship is greater than entrepreneurs”. Gaddefors and Anderson tell a tale of entrepreneurship – “the means by which one thing becomes another” – emerging in context and through interaction. Exploring the dynamics between people, places and sheep, their longitudinal fieldwork in a rural Swedish town challenges entrepreneur-centric conceptualisations. They illustrate engagingly the role of place, their unit of analysis, over time, as “not just a site for entrepreneurship, but as the operand through which enterprise becomes entrepreneurship”. Highlighting the role of a herd of sheep as connecting catalysts in the town’s change processes, Gaddefors and Anderson’s study challenges strongly the mythology of the individualised entrepreneurial agent, and provides a strong example of how context may be effectively deployed as a unit of analysis.

### **Conclusions**

As these papers demonstrate, there is much to gain from publishing high-quality research that does not necessarily always “fit the mould” of traditional articles within the

entrepreneurship discipline. Whether it be through integrating the at-times challenging contemporary cultural theory of Žižek, or playing with structure and tone in the manner of Gaddeffors and Anderson in this issue, in each case, we believe the evolutionary renewal of the entire entrepreneurship paradigm will germinate from some such experiment. So, while the average reader may find much to enjoy or even object to in our issue, at the very least the contributing authors will have made you think!

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