

Entrepreneurship, Context and History: Western European Entrepreneurship Fundamentals Revealed in Magistral Book by Leo-Paul Dana

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In this major work, via entrepreneurship studies, seldom-used combination of a context-sensitive approach ([Ramírez Pasillas *et al.*, 2017](#)) and comparative methods, Léo-Paul Dana provides a unique and useful analysis of the evolution of entrepreneurship as fundamental for the development of socio-economic life in no less than 21 Western European countries (Andorra, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Gibraltar, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Monaco, The Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland). The book is mainly targeting undergraduate students but can and should be read by a broad range of actors. To undertake such a major task as a single author is a Herculean effort, but wise delimitations and a large network of advisors are two of the variables that made it possible:

Important delimitations made are:

- only focussing on for-profit, economically oriented, “classical” entrepreneurship (excluding the rapid explosion of *other forms* of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship in *other sectors* of society);
- only focussing on Western Europe (not Central, Europe, East Europe or Caucasus); and
- operating consistently on the aggregated macro-analytical level combined with a rich variety of snapshots and examples from real-life micro-level cases and people (thereby excluding the traditional BA firm level that is in-between these two and also the dominating unit of analysis within entrepreneurship).

In our times, where all other forms of entrepreneurship than the for-profit, economically oriented, “classical” entrepreneurship are in vogue and most other geographical contexts than the traditional Western European ones are in focus, the choice to so consistently calibrate the analytical lens via these three wisely chosen delimitations pays off.

Another important feature of the successful outcome of this major undertaking is the large advisory board with more than 100 researchers, mainly from the countries in focus in the book. As it is beyond one person’s capacity to, in detail, go into the specifics about so many and so diverse countries and contexts, the active support and systematic input from an extensive network of researchers, we believe, was another important reason why this text ventured so well.



The text starts with a detailed and robust overview of macroeconomic theories on entrepreneurship combined with comments to the humanistic commitment to which Dana is committed. The foreword, written by Sabine Urban, is important as it provides a framework for and background to the analytical focus of Dana's text (macroeconomic entrepreneurship theories), as well as an introduction to the humanistic ethos underlying it. In the next chapter, Dana links back to Urbans' more macroeconomic-theory-oriented foreword, but focuses in detail on making the case of the fundamental importance that SMEs have in various aspects of Western European economies (i.e. as drivers of internationalisation via niche strategies in markets and sectors that major multinationals shy away from because of opportunity costs and as drivers of revitalization of over-institutionalised Western European economies). Here, Dana also establishes the fundamental theoretical link between context and history, and applies that to SMEs in Western Europe, thereby establishing the micro-context for this book: "SMEs are strongly shaped by historical factors. History shapes countries – and countries shape the environment for entrepreneurship" (Dana, 2018: 5). Dana then illustrates this statement with a brief outline of *the empirical development* of Western Europe after First World War, describes and exemplifies the *effects* that history and context combined produce (heterogeneity and diversity), and finally discusses the *implications* for the difficult task of policy making that this variation and (sometimes) fragmentation generate. With the stage set, with the dialectical exchange between macro level (macro-economic entrepreneurship theory) and micro level (historical-contextual empirical drivers) established, the analysis of the 21 countries is rolled out in one chapter per country (Chapters 2-22). It would, of course, lead too far to here comment upon the enormous richness that unfolds on these over 400 pages covering the aforementioned 21 countries. Two reoccurring themes or organising logics are though important to highlight: doing comparative studies on this scale requires simple but very consistent "rules" for *writing* the text up (besides all the normal protocols for any scientific method for doing the research, of course), and Dana here uses two of the most effective ones: same sub-headlines in all chapters (introduction, historical overview, the environment for entrepreneurship, toward the future) and extensive use of photos in all chapters. The former is a must if not to lose the reader (and oneself!) in such a vast amount of data and it makes comparison very easy (anyone interested in this and that country can easily make a table out of the texts under any of the standardised headlines and start analysing similarities and differences), and the latter is an important part of doing context-sensitive research for real, not only "as decoration" (as images convey contextual differences more effective relative to ever-so elaborated attempts to write it up). In the last chapter (23), Dana concludes about entrepreneurship in Western Europe on country-context level, on pan-Western European level and on meso level, as clusters as a common mechanism between macro and micro often is used by entrepreneurs in Western Europe as an organising logic.

More in detail and on top of what already has been mentioned above, the major strengths with this book in our reading are:

- *Very good balance between countries of various sizes*: Relative to other continents, Western European countries tell a story of various degrees of small. Analysis of and from the only five reasonably big countries in Western Europe in terms of population (Germany, France, UK, Italy and Spain) is in excess within entrepreneurship; why it is of immense value and interest to get an equally thorough analysis of six micro contexts (Andorra, Gibraltar, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg and Monaco) and ten small contexts (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Ireland, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland and The Netherlands) besides the "big 5".

- *Very clear pedagogical structure:* This is mainly provided by using the same sub-headlines in each chapter, and the concentrated and effective style of writing does the job here.
- *A reference list that is nothing less than a treasure:* With a 50-page-long references list (pp. 459-509), Dana provides us with the keys to a knowledge landscape so vast that few can oversee it. With this reference list, more of us might stand a chance to do better, and for undergraduate students, it should be one of the best and most effective ways to high-quality scholarly knowledge about entrepreneurship.

As clear by now, we find this book very stimulating and highly useful, but some weaknesses are, of course, as always present. In our reading, three of them are:

- The discussion and explanation of why definitions of SMEs and microenterprises have differed largely historically and still differ quite a lot is somewhat technical, numerical and descriptive. As the concept of “small” is a relative term (philosophically illustrated with the sorites paradox; if a heap, considered to be “a mid-sized heap”, is reduced by a single grain at a time, at what exact point does it cease to be considered as a “a mid-sized heap” and start being considered as “a small heap”?), an elaboration of various definitions relative to country sizes and geographical scales, preferably theoretically and philosophically underpinned, would have better explained the rationale why definitions differ so much. The great variations in definitions start to make sense in such light.
- Dana sometimes is inconsistent with his own delimitation, in that “Europeans” and “Europe” are used quite often in various parts of the text, when actually writing about/meaning “Western Europeans” or “Europe”.
- For us personally, the reading of the smallest countries in Western Europe was the most rewarding; even after having been researchers and professors in this field for 20 years, many aspects mentioned within these chapters were new for us. That said, the length, depth and thereby quality of these chapters differs quite distinctly. The best examples are, for instance, the extensive and rich chapters on Gibraltar and Iceland, while the chapters on, for instance, Andorra and Monaco would have benefitted to be on the level of length, depth and quality as the former.

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Reference

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