

# Afterword: What Does it Mean to be *Against* Entrepreneurship? From Antagonistic to Agonistic Critique

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## Introduction

Entrepreneurship leaves no one indifferent. It is not just a multifaceted and polysemous concept (i.e. a concept carrying different meanings) (Shepherd 2015), but an appraisive concept conveying different *value judgments* (Choi and Majumdar 2014). Entrepreneurship is appraisive in that it is accredited with some kind of valued achievement, be that wealth creation, or the provision of employment, innovation and prosperity. Since entrepreneurship is such a normatively charged term, one can either be for entrepreneurship by touting its purported achievements (the position of *mainstream entrepreneurship research*), or challenge entrepreneurship's ability to actually produce such positive effects (the position adopted by *critical entrepreneurship scholars*). It thus appears that there is

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no in-between, no nuance of judgment as one is literally forced to take a stance: either *for* or *against* entrepreneurship.

I will use the liberty that comes with writing an afterword to reflect on whether the binary opposition between *for* or *against*, as well as the implicit understanding of critique as a purely oppositional gesture, still has purchase in contemporary critical entrepreneurship scholarship. While it is no secret that I wholeheartedly identify with the critical entrepreneurship community, this chapter takes it upon itself to argue that critical research could reach a dead end if it continues to reduce its mission to an *antagonistic* confrontation with (a however defined) mainstream of entrepreneurship research. At the heart of this contention is the realization that the mainstream of entrepreneurship research has changed so much in recent years that it has become superfluous to conceive of critique solely as an act of pure negativity (Noys 2012). Thus, given how entrepreneurship is studied and theorized today in mainstream entrepreneurship scholarship leads me to purport that being *against*—in the oppositional sense of the term—is hardly appropriate for leading our critical enterprise into the future. Using the first part of this short reflection to delineate and challenge the prerogative interpretation of critique as oppositional engagement with mainstream research, this leads me, in a second step, to ponder the possibility of an alternative interpretation of critique based on Chantal Mouffe's (1999, 2013) notion of *agonism*. I thus use the article by Olaison and Sørensen (2014) on entrepreneurial failure to exemplify the potential inherent in agonistic critique.

## **Critique 1.0: *Against Entrepreneurship* as Antagonistic Opposition**

Although critical entrepreneurship scholars, with few exceptions (Fletcher and Selden 2016), have not made any systematic attempt to define what critique actually is and what set of principles and goals it should uphold, it is fairly uncontroversial to assume that the majority of critical research on entrepreneurship has an antagonistic orientation. The basic premise of this article thus is that it would be wrong to consider antagonistic opposition as the best, let alone only model for criticizing mainstream

entrepreneurship research. But what does antagonistic critique actually entail? Antagonistic critique is predicated on a friend-enemy imagery (Schmitt 2007) which separates the “I” and “us” from the “other”. This separation is irreconcilable in that the enemy throughout the confrontation remains in a position of complete exteriority or outside to the “I” and “us”. The aim of the antagonistic engagement with the “other” thus consists in creating the terms for distinguishing the good and the bad, and to take measures to put the enemy in its place and, possibly, to overcome it. So conceived, antagonistic critique can be pictured as a “battle” with the enemy that knows only one winner. This is not to glorify the potential excess of antagonistic critique, but a cautious reminder that oppositional encounters growing out of a concrete issue or concern always carry the seeds of “war” (Schmitt 2007).

Antagonistic critique made its entrance to management and organization studies via Critical Management Studies (CMS) (Alvesson and Willmott 1992), which was defined by its anti-performative orientation (Fournier and Grey 2000) and its distinct anti-management ethos. In this framework, to critique essentially meant to bring to the fore management’s entanglement with unequal relations of power, the systematic exploitation of workers in the labor process or management’s complicity with immoral and reprehensible phenomena such as genocide or human trafficking. Although CMS comprises different theoretical orientations (Marxism, Critical Theory, poststructuralism, feminism, critical realism, etc.), it is united by a belief that there is something fundamentally wrong with how management is understood and practiced. These antagonistic feelings can also be found in part of the critical research on entrepreneurship. I refer to this research as Critique 1.0. Although such a thing as a clearly delineated “mainstream” of entrepreneurship research never existed (Baker and Welter 2020), Critique 1.0 has essentially been sparked by a discontent about the way in which entrepreneurship was conventionally studied and theorized (Dey and Mason 2018). The primary enemy of Critique 1.0 was the preferred position of economic and management theory in entrepreneurship studies (Hjorth 2013; Hjorth and Holt 2016). Critique 1.0 thus tried to denaturalize dominant renditions of entrepreneurship as “new venture creation”, “opportunistic wealth creation” or “profit making” (Shane and Venkataraman 2000) by

pinpointing how these understandings tend to present entrepreneurship quite naively as a univocally “positive economic activity” (Calás et al. 2009, p. 552). Jones and Spicer’s (2009) seminal book *Unmasking the entrepreneur* offers a paradigmatic example of antagonistic critique or Critique 1.0. Their unapologetic critique sheds light on how mainstream scholarship has turned a blind eye toward central elements of entrepreneurship, such as excess, failure, irrationality or unethical behavior. Jones and Spicer go on to argue that these suppressed phenomena are not just rare deviations or outliers, but defining characteristics of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurs. Consider, as an example, the case of excess. Jones and Spicer aver that excess in the form of, for instance, wasteful consumption and decadent parties is a constitutive element of entrepreneurship, and they point toward real-life examples like Richard Branson or Steve Fossett to argue that entrepreneurs are “cruel and vindictive” actors (p. 115). Ignorance of excess in the academic literature according to the authors is not just a failure to consider relevant evidence, but is seen as indicative of the general refusal on the part of the scholarly community to engage with the “dark side” of entrepreneurship. Jones and Spicer’s book thus sets out to reveal that behind the ideological smokescreen of entrepreneurship lies another, less rose-tinted reality which is deliberately edited out of academic (and policy) accounts. In a truly antagonistic gesture of “creative destruction”, the authors treat the mainstream as an “enemy” making strategic use of economic discourse to fabricate (fictional and thus largely untrue) fantasies about the productive value of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship. The ultimate aim thus is to transcend the enemy’s ideological fabric by suggesting an alternative to it.

To be sure, Jones and Spicer’s antagonistic critique made perfect sense during a time when entrepreneurship was almost univocally regarded as a positive thing, attributed with a seemingly limitless capacity to produce valuable achievements (Weiskopf and Steyaert 2009). Jones and Spicer thus had good reasons to attack mainstream research head-on to dismantle its various taken-for-granted assumptions and blind spots pertaining to the virtuousness of economic practices, the moral and rational nature of entrepreneurial actors, or the primacy of functionalist and constructionist theories. However, as entrepreneurship research has become more pluralistic and diverse in terms of its theoretical and paradigmatic

orientations (Calás et al. 2009), many of our antagonistic knee-jerk reflexes no longer seem adequate.

For instance, Jones and Spicer (2009) maintain that mainstream research ignores the shortcomings and negative ramifications of entrepreneurship. This might have been accurate more than 10 years ago when their book was published. What we witness today, however, is an increasing interest amongst mainstream scholars in the “dark side” of entrepreneurship. For instance, in a recent paper, Shepherd (2019) makes a plea for exploring the “negatives” of “entrepreneurship” (p. 217), including the dark side (the entrepreneur’s negative psychological and emotional reactions during the entrepreneurial process), the downside (e.g. the entrepreneur’s loss of status and financial resources) and the destructive side of entrepreneurship (the damage which the entrepreneur inflicts on society as a whole). The broader insight to be gleaned from this cursory example is that mainstream scholars have come to acknowledge that it would be wrong to assume that entrepreneurship is universally positive, and that it is important to better understand if and when people engaging in entrepreneurship actually benefit from these endeavors, and to study in greater depth the conditions under which entrepreneurship produces positive effects for entire societies and economies (Wiklund et al. 2019). Attending to how entrepreneurship ends up creating unintended effects, thus potentially doing harm to key stakeholders (Khan et al. 2007), mainstream research has taken it upon itself to understand if and when entrepreneurship creates dysfunctions in individuals, families, communities and society (McMullen and Warnick 2016) with an eye toward creating effective responses to the widespread suffering precipitated by the dark side of entrepreneurship (Shepherd 2019).

Or to use another example, Jones and Spicer (2009) lament the absence of research dealing with the ethics of entrepreneurship, while accusing mainstream research of offering a thin account of the “social” of entrepreneurship based on an understanding of social entrepreneurship as mere charity (Roscoe 2011). This critique resonates with Calás et al.’s (2009) seminal article which in the very same year pointed out that our preoccupation with economic activity prevents us from understanding what else entrepreneurship could be and do. Today, such antagonistic statements essentially miss their mark since mainstream research no longer

considers entrepreneurship exclusively in terms of wealth creation and profit (Shane and Venkataraman 2000), but as an engine of positive social change (Stephan et al. 2016). During a time where social change is becoming the New Normal of entrepreneurship research, entrepreneurship is increasingly theorized as a source of social value, social change and emancipation (Rindova et al. 2009). As part of this Copernican revolution, it has been argued that entrepreneurship is perhaps the most effective means for solving some of the grandest challenges of our times, such as poverty (Bruton et al. 2013) or economic exclusion (Gauthier et al. 2020). The view of entrepreneurship as a medium of social change has become so compelling that scholars have started to address whether every new enterprise should in fact “be required to be a hybrid organization” capable of producing financial value alongside environmental and social value (McMullen and Warnick 2016, p. 631).

What is the lesson to be taken from these examples? One answer would be that critical entrepreneurship research has become obsolete as mainstream research has completely absorbed its various allegations and concerns. Another answer, which I prefer, is that mainstream entrepreneurship research has changed so fundamentally in recent years that we need to adjust not just the object of our critique but also our fundamental assumptions about what critique is. While the previous section has demonstrated that Critique 1.0 has lost some of its purchase, the question then is what an alternative mode of critique could look like that does something *more* than just treat the mainstream as its enemy.

## **Critique 2.0: *Against Entrepreneurship* as Agonistic Engagement**

Having highlighted what I consider to be the limitations of antagonistic Critique 1.0, I will now sketch out the tentative contours of an alternative understanding of critique based on Chantal Mouffe’s (1999, 2013) notion of agonism. I will refer to this as Critique 2.0. Agonism (from Greek *agōn*: Contest) has been used by Mouffe to argue that conflict has a special relevance within democratic politics. Specifically, Mouffe proposed agonistic pluralism as an alternative to liberal conceptions of



politics based on the ideal of consensus. Mouffe's basic idea is that democratic life is rife with irreconcilable conflicts between "us" and "them", wherefore it makes little sense to adhere to the liberal ideal of consensus and harmony (Tambakaki 2014). Agonistic politics is hence a response to the question of how the democratic process can be secured under conditions of perpetual difference and disagreement. Mouffe defines agonism as a process of ongoing "contest". Thus, while both antagonism (see above) and agonism entail an element of struggle, Mouffe (2014) makes it clear that the "agonistic confrontation is different from the antagonistic one, [...] because the opponent is not considered an enemy to be destroyed but an adversary whose existence is perceived as legitimate" (pp. 150–151). Transposing agonism to the current context, we can see that the aim of agonistic Critique 2.0 is not so much to erase and replace its adversary (e.g. by offering a better, more valid account of social reality) (Roskamm 2015), but to challenge the adversary on its own terms (Mouffe 1999). Conceived in this way, agonistic Critique 2.0 seeks to channel the positivity of the confrontation with the adversary by carrying out critique from a position of respect for and admiration of the "other" (Critchley 2005). Critique 2.0 acknowledges that the mainstream is legitimate in its attempt to say something meaningful about its subject matter. It is this bond of respect which serves as a moderating element in the ongoing confrontation with the "other" (Tambakaki 2014), which creates the ground on which new insights and ideas can arise.

Let us now use a concrete example to render palpable the potential merit agonistic Critique 2.0 can have for entrepreneurship studies. To this end, I like to summon an article by Lena Olaison and Bent Meier Sørensen published in 2014 in the *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research*. I have chosen this particular article not just because I had the pleasure of accompanying it in my role as an editor for a special issue on critical entrepreneurship research (Verduyn et al. 2014), but because it deals with a topic that was identified by Jones and Spicer (2009) as a conspicuous absence in entrepreneurship research: entrepreneurial failure. While Jones and Spicer (2009) rightly pointed out at the time that failure has been a blind spot in entrepreneurship research for many years, entrepreneurial failure has quickly developed into a passionate stream of research since the publication of their book. Over the last

decade, mainstream scholarship has tried to better understand the antecedents, elements and boundary conditions of entrepreneurial failure, and to increase the effectiveness of responses to both entrepreneurs' suffering and stigma (Byrne and Shepherd 2015), and the broader socioeconomic damage caused by entrepreneurial failure. These are valuable and legitimate objectives, and one can justifiably ask whether critique is still necessary under these circumstances. Olaison and Sørensen's article responds with a clear *Yes*, since although it treats extant research on entrepreneurial failure as legitimate, it still considers the mainstream as inadequate and thus in need of critical scrutiny. Instead of following Jones and Spicer's example of using ridicule and parody to engage their adversary, Olaison and Sørensen immerse themselves in academic accounts, policy documents as well as political speeches, press reports and the narratives of entrepreneurs to develop an embedded sense of dominant understandings of entrepreneurial failure. While the analysis confirms that entrepreneurial failure is readily seen as integral to the entrepreneurial process, the authors are struck by the particular way in which failure is usually understood. In contrast to earlier discussions which used to blame the entrepreneur for his or her failure, Olaison and Sørensen's analysis brings to the fore how entrepreneurial failure is largely considered a positive thing. That is, failures are seen as empowering and generative moments as entrepreneurs can learn from them so as to increase their chances of succeeding with their next venture (McKenzie and Sud 2008). This insight points immediately to the question whether entrepreneurial failure has lost all its stigma and blemish. Olaison and Sørensen offer a double answer to this paradox. On the one hand, they aver that the negativity of failure continues to exist as an inescapable reality of entrepreneurship. On the other hand, they convincingly make the case that the negative reality of failure is continuously suppressed on a discursive level whereby the "real and material kernel" of entrepreneurship (p. 194) gets denied. In line with these observations, Olaison and Sørensen offer important insights into how entrepreneurial failure is split into good and bad parts, arguing that only "productive" failures tend to gain broad recognition since being presented as an elemental stepping-stone toward entrepreneurial success. Unraveling the mostly concealed censorship mechanism shaping our shared understanding of failure, Olaison and



Sørensen's deconstructive endeavor casts a new light on the discursive prohibitions and hidden affective dynamics at play in our epistemological practices. Importantly, even if Olaison and Sørensen's article invites us to temporarily abandon existing prohibitions by shacking up dominant understandings of entrepreneurial failure, they are not interested in providing a better, more truthful understanding of this subject matter. Indeed, the article does not treat dominant renditions of entrepreneurial failure (i.e. "good failures" that are conducive to learning) as an enemy that needs to be overcome. Rather, their approach has an educational dimension, aimed at raising sympathy for and awareness of how "acceptable and unacceptable types of entrepreneurship" (p. 201) are fabricated and sustained in mainstream scholarship, thus using agonistic Critique 2.0 to create a space where dominant assumptions reach their limit. These insights are of immediate importance to critical researchers, but potentially also have relevance for the mainstream entrepreneurship community. Indeed, that Olaison and Sørensen's article might have broad appeal and utility that goes beyond our critical community is reflected in the fact that the article won the Best Paper Award of the *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research* in the year of its publication.

## Coda

This afterword has argued that critical research on entrepreneurship is at a cross-roads: it can either continue to lose relevance and legitimacy by applying a form of critique that is only partially adapted to the changed circumstances of mainstream research (Critique 1.0); or it can explore alternative forms of critique that are better suited to address the current state of entrepreneurship studies (Critique 2.0). Having favored the second option, I have drawn on Mouffe's notion of agonism to adopt more affirmative and granular critical dispositions that allow us to transcend Schmitt's antagonism between friend and enemy by prodding a space between being either "for" and "against" entrepreneurship (Parker and Parker 2017). This "in-between", which is a constant thread running through Mouffe's political theory of agonism, reminds us that the pre-eminent task of critical scholarship today consists in treading the fine line

between “belonging” and “breakthrough” (Critchley 1999). “Belonging” demands that critical scholars remain sympathetic toward their adversaries, while trying to gain relevance amongst mainstream entrepreneurship scholars by working from within the tradition they critically engage with. “Breakthrough”, on the other hand, signifies that there is always the danger of selling our critical sensitivity by overly trying to become palatable to the “other”. Critique, to remain worthy of its name, thus needs to keep a productive distance from the mainstream so as to retain its ability to see that entrepreneurship could be different from how it is traditionally understood. And while Olaison and Sørensen’s paper has helped us create a better appreciation of how agonistic Critique 2.0 can produce important impulses for both critical entrepreneurship scholars as well as for the mainstream entrepreneurship community with which it engages, it is to be hoped that we will see more such studies in the future.

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