

# Social Enterprise and Dis/identification

## The Politics of Identity Work in the English Third Sector

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### ABSTRACT

*Social enterprise has been criticized for discursively transforming third sector organizations and practitioners into economic agents. Such a critique too readily construes the discourse of social enterprise as a deterministic force that encroaches on all aspects of organizational and individual identity. We reintroduce a sense of agency to discursive conceptualizations through an empirical study focusing on whether and how social enterprise infiltrates the third sector at the level of the subject. Drawing from a qualitative study in England, we use Pêcheux's three-part model of dis/identification as an explanatory schema to conceptualize the ways third sector practitioners endorse or reject the inherent norms and principles of social enterprise. The discussion covers how processes of identification, counter-identification, and disidentification, respectively, perpetuate or transgress the discourse of social enterprise and highlights the implications for future research in this developing field.*

Although the meaning of “social enterprise” is contested, most definitions refer to market-based strategies aimed at achieving a social purpose (Kerlin, 2009). Social enterprise is usually, although not exclusively, associated with the nonprofit or third sector, where it has often been presented as a panacea that brings the efficiency of markets to bear upon social problems that neither the state nor traditional third sectors were able to solve (Sepulveda, 2009). The social enterprise research literature is dominated by functionalist and managerial perspectives that conceal a normative and prescriptive agenda hiding behind the illusion of social enterprise's being inevitable. Critical

responses have tended to portray social enterprise as an inherent, if elusive, part of the neoliberal agenda that exerts a deterministic force upon the third sector. For instance, social enterprise has been associated with advancing the “marketization” of the third sector (Hogg & Baines, 2011) and transforming third sector organizations into delivery agents of the state (Carmel & Harlock, 2008) while in the process undermining the democratic spirit of the third sector (Eikenberry, 2009).

It should be noted that in both sets of literature, the influence of social enterprise on the third sector has been assumed rather than empirically studied. It remains unclear whether the third sector has been radically transformed by the introduction of social enterprise, precisely because too little is known about the extent to which its norms and principles have been received at the level of practice. Probably one of the most inventive ways that scholars can regain a sense of practitioners’ agency is to study discourse as it is played out and contested through processes of identification. Accordingly, in this article, we explore the intersection between social enterprise discourse and practitioners’ identity work by examining how English third sector practitioners identify with social enterprise. Based on a qualitative inquiry, which recursively connects our empirical observations with the theoretical literature, notably Pêcheux (1982), we develop a typology that maps different ways in which third sector practitioners dis/identify with social enterprise discourses, and reflect on how these different forms of dis/identification might alter or sustain existing power relations.

### THE INEVITABILITY OF SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

Functionalist and managerial accounts of social enterprise have largely shaped the view that third sector organizations, when faced with resource dependency constraints, are compelled to adopt commercial revenue strategies to survive. The case for social enterprise is premised upon the conviction that traditional Western models of welfare provision are coming to an end (Peredo, 2011). Welfare states are seen as unaffordable (Roper & Cheney, 2005), bureaucratic, and inefficient, and so unable to meet the social needs of citizens (Dees, 2007). Traditional charity is often criticized as patronizing recipients and perpetuating poverty by failing to tackle root causes. Because of the scarcity of government grants and private donations, third sector organizations are claimed to have increasingly adopted the market-based funding strategies of the private sector to avoid resource dependence (Froelich, 1999).

Social enterprise is portrayed not only as an inevitable response to state failure and resource dependency, but also as desirable (Clarke, 2009). The adoption of managerial practices and market-based funding mechanisms is assumed to enhance social and economic outcomes for third sector organizations by making them more efficient and responsive to needs (Thompson &

Doherty, 2006). Hence, market-based practices and values are widely portrayed as offering a more efficient way of tackling social problems beyond traditional (read: grant-dependent) third sector organizations and “bureaucratic” and “wasteful” government (Dees, 2007).

These functionalist and managerial accounts may oversimplify reality—first, by overestimating the degree to which third sector organizations are rational economic actors, and second, by concealing the ambivalences and dilemmas associated with their day-to-day practices (Bull, 2008). More problematically, the extent to which social enterprise is accepted as a rational response to state failure allows little space for a more critical engagement with the concept and its often-ignored ideological foundations (Boddice, 2009). Nonetheless, a relatively small number of authors has attempted to engage social enterprise from a critical discursive perspective (Dey & Steyaert, 2012; Mason, 2012).

### *Social Enterprise as Discourse*

A discursive perspective, especially when informed by Foucault’s seminal work (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000), implies viewing social enterprise as defining a field of meaning in which (new) things become conceivable and, by extension, certain forms of governing become legitimate. Just as the discourse of enterprise has been employed to render the neoliberal worldview thinkable and actionable (Doolin, 2002), social enterprise, too, can be regarded as producing a social reality that it ostensibly only describes. The state plays a crucial role in enacting this reality by embodying the third sector through rationalities such as managerialism (Curtis, 2008) and business discipline (Parkinson & Howorth, 2008), with the ultimate aim being to prescribe entrepreneurial forms of self-management and an ethos of constant self-enhancement (Dey, in press). Needless to say, transforming third sector practitioners into “enterprising selves” paves the way for rendering the third sector “governable terrain” (Carmel & Harlock, 2008).

Although discourse theory still occupies a marginal position in the realm of social enterprise research (Short, Moss, & Lumpkin, 2009), some of the more influential critiques associate social enterprise with the discourse of business and the marketization and commercialization of third sector organizations (Eikenberry, 2009; Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004). These authors have created a space for critical research by showing that seemingly value-neutral, “necessary,” and “inevitable” market-based reforms of the third sector should instead be conceived as a distinct ideological intervention into its identity politics.

Accordingly, critical perspectives questioned whether social enterprise could be seen as the logical result of scarce economic resources and challenged the seemingly unproblematic combination of market-based approaches and the pursuit of social goals. Instead, social enterprise was conceptualized as the ma-

terialization of broader societal shifts toward market dogmatism (Humphries & Grant, 2006). Consequently, where social enterprise's embodiment of the market discourse has permeated civil society (Dart, 2004), the ensuing subservience of the third sector to an economic rationality changes organizations' behavior through the marginalization of traditional practices and values that foster participation, solidarity, civic deliberation, and trust (Eikenberry, 2009).

Such strong views of discourse stress that social enterprise exerts its influence through either the normalizing force of a financial or legal disciplinary mechanism (Levander, 2010; Mason, 2012) or, more subtly, the moral legitimacy ascribed to businesslike activities and mentalities (Dart, 2004). However, there are good reasons for revisiting these assumptions. Although the discourse of social enterprise might solicit subjection on the part of third sector practitioners, this is just one possible scenario, for it is also plausible that an oppositional or antagonistic identity politics might occur. To gain a clearer understanding of the complex ways in which the discourse of social enterprise is received at the level of practice, it is particularly appropriate to turn to England, which is widely seen as leading the way in transforming the third sector through social enterprise and thus is the geographic site of our research.

### *Social Enterprise in England*

Social enterprise in England represents a deeply political phenomenon. According to Nicholls (2010), during the period of New Labour government (1997–2010), England instigated the most developed governmental support structure for social entrepreneurship in the world. This support structure placed a particular emphasis on organizational type, that is, the social enterprise—a third sector organization that trades for a social purpose, over and above emphases in other liberal welfare regimes on the (heroic) individual social entrepreneur. This emphasis is encapsulated in the “official” government definition, first proposed by the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), that a social enterprise is “a business with primarily social objectives whose surpluses are principally reinvested for that purpose in the business or in the community, rather than being driven by the need to maximise profit for shareholders and owners” (DTI, 2002, p. 8).

Two elements are crucial to this definition. First, the notion of a “business” distinguishes social enterprises from traditional (again, read: grant-dependent) charities. Second, however, objectives are “primarily social.” Ostensibly, social enterprises combine market-based efficiency and self-sufficiency with the philanthropic goals of charities. The seemingly unproblematic combination of these contrasting logics apparently enables social enterprises to make a profit from their activities and reinvest surpluses in the business or community.

This apparent ability to combine market dynamism with egalitarianism and social justice saw social enterprise initially positioned as a policy solution to social

exclusion and neighborhood renewal, both early priority areas of the New Labour government (Ridley-Duff & Bull, 2011). Over time, the tactical polyvalence of “social enterprise” (Teasdale, 2012) made it possible for policymakers to flexibly align novel ideas with political agendas and to promote more entrepreneurial and businesslike values and practices in quite diverse areas, such as health, social care, and regeneration (Baines, Bull, & Woolrych, 2010). A number of policies, such as the Social Enterprise Investment Fund and Future Builders, provided financial incentives to voluntary organizations that wished to become more socially enterprising (Nicholls, 2010). Meanwhile, policy rhetoric emphasized the positive virtues of sustainability through trading and professionalism. Policy documents such as the Social Enterprise Action Plan (OTS, 2006) abounded with selective case histories of successful social enterprises making a positive impact. The message to third sector organizations was that by adopting businesslike methods, they could tackle social problems *and* make a surplus to reinvest in their organizations or the wider community. It is in this way that social enterprise was part of a new regime of governing premised on a linkage of the tropes of enterprise, competition, and civil society, whereby social enterprise served the role of reshaping the third sector in its relationship with welfare-related issues (Clarke, 2009).

Policymakers in the new Conservative-led coalition government of 2010 continued to provide rhetorical support to social enterprise as part of its Big Society philosophy (Hogg & Baines, 2011). The early policies and rhetoric of the coalition government placed a particular emphasis on social enterprise as deliverers of public services. The 2010 white paper “Equity and Excellence: Liberating the NHS” specified an ambition to “create the largest and most vibrant social enterprise sector in the world” by enabling social enterprises to spin off from the National Health Service. Similarly, the recently passed Public Services (Social Value) Act was explicitly designed to enable third sector organizations to play a greater role in the delivery of public services (Teasdale, Alcock, & Smith, 2012). Hence, the dominant social enterprise policy discourse now places an even greater emphasis on the public service delivery role.

To some extent, it would appear that the landscape of the English third sector has been dramatically changed by the social enterprise discourse. In 2009, just fewer than half of the formally constituted third sector organizations claimed to fit closely the government’s definition of social enterprise (Scott & Teasdale, 2012). However, as the ensuing analysis will demonstrate, this apparent “identification” is more complex than would initially appear.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Research Objective and Sample*

In conceptualizing the English third sector as a multidiscursive space where ideological struggles in the wider polity and economy are reenacted (Evers,

1995), the objective of our study is to explore the complex identity work of third sector practitioners, focusing on how dis/identifications with social enterprise discourse are related to issues of agency. To achieve this, we draw primarily upon data collected from Real Times, a longitudinal research program that broadly aims to understand how third sector organizations work in practice, how they change over time, how they respond to the challenges they face, and under what conditions they flourish. Real Times includes a diverse group of 15 core case studies of third sector activities, alongside a wider group of associated “complementary” case studies. The sampling process deliberately aimed to capture a diverse range of third sector organizations that are differentiated by internal aspects, such as size, organizational age, and function, and external aspects, such as geographic context (for a full description of the Real Times methodological design and the case study organizations, see Macmillan, 2010; Macmillan et al., 2011).

### *Data Collection*

We were able to draw upon around 200 semistructured interviews conducted with individuals between March 2010 and December 2011 who were connected to the 15 case study organizations at the time this article was written. Interviews were fully transcribed and then stored and coded in NVIVO, a qualitative data-analysis tool. Although data collection was not structured in prospect of this article, the generalist nature of Real Times made the retrospective repurposing of data particularly suitable for our objectives. It is important to note that, whereas in the Real Times study the organization is the primary unit of analysis, for our purposes, the focal point was the individual practitioner, or, indeed, instances of their (dis)identification with “social enterprise.”

### *Analytic Procedure*

The analysis proceeded in two steps. First, we started with a keyword search of the 217 transcripts for instances of the terminology “social enterprise,” “social entrepreneur,” “social innovation,” and their derivatives, used by individuals (see Table 1). The keyword search showed that only “social enterprise” was widely used (466 references across 72 of the 217 transcripts). Unsurprisingly, “social enterprise” was most widely referred to by individuals connected to Beech and Teak,<sup>1</sup> the two organizations that self-identified as social enterprises. Nonetheless, the regular use of “social enterprise” in many of the other cases begins to hint at the permeation of the term within the third sector. Conversely, “social entrepreneur” and “social innovation,” despite being widely used in academia, were not commonly used by the practitioners in our study. Even “social enterprise” was not mentioned in two-thirds of the

**Table 1. Usage of Social Enterprise Terminology in Real Times Cases**

| Case     | N transcripts | References        |                     |                   |
|----------|---------------|-------------------|---------------------|-------------------|
|          |               | Social enterprise | Social entrepreneur | Social innovation |
| Ash      | 16            | 37                | 3                   | 11                |
| Beech    | 9             | 86                | 5                   | —                 |
| Birch    | 19            | 21                | —                   | 1                 |
| Cedar    | 19            | 34                | —                   | —                 |
| Cherry   | 19            | 10                | —                   | —                 |
| Fig      | 16            | 2                 | —                   | —                 |
| Fir      | 12            | 38                | —                   | —                 |
| Hawthorn | 13            | 7                 | —                   | —                 |
| Indigo   | 8             | —                 | —                   | —                 |
| Larch    | 14            | 27                | 2                   | —                 |
| Mimosa   | 17            | 1                 | —                   | —                 |
| Mulberry | 12            | 4                 | —                   | —                 |
| Pine     | 6             | 1                 | —                   | —                 |
| Sycamore | 22            | 3                 | —                   | —                 |
| Teak     | 15            | 195               | —                   | —                 |
| TOTAL    | 217           | 466               | 10                  | 12                |

transcripts, and most individuals across the Real Times study did not use the signifier “social enterprise” to narrate and make sense of their day-to-day experiences.

This nonuse of strategic discourse (Certeau, 1984) could be regarded as opening a space for a “politics of autonomy,” where practitioners create their sense of identity without using social enterprise discourse as a “constitutive outside” (Butler, 1993). However, we have to be careful not to assume that identity narratives that sidestep “social enterprise” are *automatically* instances of resistance. For many individuals in the sample, the term was simply not relevant to their identity, meaning that they had not (yet?) been reached by social enterprise discourse. For example, Pine, a community center, did not engage in “trading,” a key element of the UK government definition. The manager of Pine was not hostile to the concept, but he did not see social enterprise as relevant to his life-world.

Although the keyword search offered a preliminary sense of how frequently “social enterprise” was used in the sample, its main purpose was to identify instances of the use of the language of social enterprise by practitioners for future analysis. Following extended discussions with other researchers in the

**Table 2. Initial Classification of Instances of Social Enterprise Language Usage**

| Classification          | Description                                                                                   | Example                                                                                                                                 |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Avoidance               | Practitioners not engaging with social enterprise terminology                                 | e.g., Indigo—term not seen as relevant to practitioners' work                                                                           |
| Resistance              | Practitioners explicitly reject social enterprise logic                                       | e.g., Eucalyptus—we don't use the label "social enterprise" . . . Yes, it's deliberate<br>e.g., Fir—we are a co-op                      |
| Manipulation            | Practitioners strategically appropriate the sign "social enterprise" as legitimating strategy | e.g., Market Garden—Honestly, we're a small social enterprise doing things for their community, and they want to charge us!             |
| Passive acceptance      | Practitioners allow others to impose label upon them for financial gain                       | e.g., Teak accepts label "social enterprise" in order to access financial resources from government—I prefer the term "social business" |
| Enthusiastic engagement | Practitioners celebrate transformative potential of social enterprise                         | e.g., Beech—Oh, yeah, without a shadow of a doubt (we are a social enterprise)                                                          |

Real Times team, we started to classify instances in the transcripts when the term "social enterprise" was used according to the degree to which practitioners respectively endorsed it or rejected it. These preliminary classifications are identified in Table 2.

The second stage of the analysis hinged upon an abductive mode of inference. Abductive inference does not assume that theories emerge exclusively from the data. Rather, abduction flexibly aligns the conceptual and empirical realms of research (Dubois & Gadde, 2002), thus using the coding process primarily to render surprising or unexpected observations amenable to conceptual reflection. It should be noted that the sequential interpretation of empirical data against the backdrop of conceptual knowledge, in which the imagination and creativity of the researcher but also supposititious speculations and faith-based assumptions play a key role (Van Maanen, Sørensen, & Mitchell, 2007), is not usually manifested in academic articles, which chiefly demand a linear presentation of results and conclusions. Given the current disjuncture between the potential merit of abductive interference in scientific work and the paucity of explicit references to it, we reserve sufficient space to document our own abductive process. In so doing, we emphasize how we generated explanations for our findings by moving backward and forward among empirical data, research literature, and emergent theory.

The process of *post hoc* plausibilization of our data, which involved both authors as well as other researchers in the Real Times team, first led us into

the literature on subjectivity and subjection, notably as it pertains to Foucault's antihumanism (Paden, 1987). This body of literature proved relevant to understanding how social enterprise works as a technology of power that potentially brings practitioners' thinking and acting in line with particular political strategies and objectives (Rose, 1999). It further helped establish an explanatory link to "governmentality," a concept that pinpoints how societies are governed not through overt force but by the collectivization of risks and the individualization of responsibility (Dean, 2008). This offered a valuable entry point to how social enterprise works to create a post-welfarist regime of the social through the normalization of entrepreneurial norms and principles—and the responsabilization of citizens quite generally (Foucault, 1988). However, we felt that this literature was not suitable as an explanation for our empirical insights: Rather than acting as docile bodies who blindly endorse the policy context of which they are part (Curtis, 2008), third sector practitioners revealed notable levels of agency in the ways that they opposed or appropriated particular aspects of the discourse of social enterprise. Hence, although it remained plausible to assume that the discourse of social enterprise was part of a broader attempt to constitute the third sector as "governable terrain" (Carmel & Harlock, 2008), it appeared intuitively compelling that issues of agency (and resistance) take on a completely different meaning when studied at the local level of practice (Brady, 2011), which is to say, if we remain overly attached to what the discourse of social enterprise implies, then we neglect what it actually does to practitioners, particularly as it concerns the extent to which they identify with social enterprise and how this relates to processes of resistance.

We therefore rejected the more deterministic accounts of discourse (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000) and instead explored approaches that grant the individual considerable freedom in defining his or her identity. In opposing the view of discourse as an inescapable iron cage, our empirical observations supported the view that individuals are able to displace the identities ascribed to them by discourse (Holmer-Nadesan, 1996); power is not simply exerted on the subject because the subject almost always needs to assume power. This opens the possibility of the subject's becoming otherwise (Prozorov, 2007). Becoming otherwise presupposes neither a self-knowing nor a fully conscious and "rational" subject (Costas & Fleming, 2009). Rather, it assumes that while individuals never fully step beyond the influence of power, they always retain a certain degree of agency in punctuating, resisting, or transgressing the authoritarian inscription of discourse. In this perspective, identity is conceived as a paradoxical activity in that it represents the space where the dominant discourse is simultaneously perpetuated but also rearticulated in novel ways. The envisioning of identity as a site of tensions and struggle was conducive to understanding that conformity and resistance represent two aspects of the same process (Mumby, 2005).

Our desire to take account of this doubleness of identity led us incrementally into the literature on identification. As a concept addressed in various disciplines, such as psychology (notably psychoanalysis), cultural theory, and organization studies, identification essentially implies that broader societal discourses offer individuals and groups opportunities to produce individual and collective identities (Clarke, Brown, & Hope Hailey, 2009). While our analysis was focusing on the various ways in which third sector practitioners attempt to form, repair, maintain, or revise their identity (McInnes & Corlett, 2012), it was premised on the assumption that broader societal discourses form the repertoires through which identity is enacted. It is in this way that processes of identification are assumed to mediate between the individual and society (Ybema et al., 2009) as individuals enact identities based on the symbolic heritage made available to them.

Pêcheux's (1982) work on identification appeared particularly helpful for distinguishing different ways in which practitioners related to the social enterprise discourse. In concrete terms, Pêcheux (1982) would confirm our own analysis in its distinguishing instances when people identify with a given discourse from instances when they either counter-identify or disidentify with it. Following Pêcheux, identification represents instances when individuals "freely consent" to the subject position (i.e., discursive identity) offered by discourse. Counter-identification represents instances when individuals reject or directly oppose the subject position offered to them by discourse. Counter-identification, although encompassing a critical focus, is described by Pêcheux as inadvertently confirming the dominant ideology, because individuals ultimately remain "locked with the mode of thought they seek to deny" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1989/2002, p. 168). Disidentification, in turn, represents instances when individuals properly displace the dominant discourse by, for instance, tactically misrecognizing and hence demystifying the dominant rhetoric (Muñoz, 1999). As Pêcheux makes clear: "Disidentification constitutes a working (transforming-displacement) of the subject form and not just abolition" (1982, p. 169).

Even as Pêcheux helped us distinguish modes of identity work that hold the potential to effectively change a given discourse (disidentification) from those that are more likely to reproduce it (identification and counter-identification), we did not stop our analysis here. Our analysis suggested that Pêcheux's schema had to be refined further, for it was not fully able to account for the heterogeneity of practitioners' identity work. Before presenting the five modes of dis/identification that resulted from our analysis, it is important to stress that the classifications are neither clear-cut nor mutually exclusive in that individuals may flexibly change their patterns of dis/identification over time (Ellis & Ybema, 2010). However, our aim in this article is not to present how practitioners' modes of dis/identification change over time, but rather to isolate and illustrate the different ways in which practitioners can and do

relate to the discourse of social enterprise, and to understand how these different forms of identity work reflect acceptance of, and resistance to, dominant social enterprise discourses. In the following section, we therefore illustrate each of the five submodes of dis/identification by using data from our study contextualized within relevant academic literature. In the concluding section, we address some of the limitations of our findings and discuss how research into dis/identification and social enterprise might be extended.

## RESULTS

### *Identification*

#### *Enthusiastic Engagement*

The first mode of subjective operation discussed by Pêcheux (1982), identification, represents those instances when individuals incorporate interpretive resources made directly available to them by discourse. Hence, identification occurs when individuals identify with the terminology of social enterprise discourse and incorporate it into their own understanding of the world. As Holmer-Nadesan (1996) made clear, an important feature of identification is that it downplays or even denies the contradictions that usually infuse the dominant discourse. Similarly, Hoedemaekers (2010) sees identification as a process aimed at concealing the indeterminacy of meaning, thus producing the illusion that (individual and organizational) identity, which is necessarily polyvalent, can be stable and whole. This “denial” can be identified in Beech, an environmental social enterprise focusing on recycling and training disadvantaged young people and adults. Beech was created by Anna, a graduate of a university training program for managers of social enterprises, and her partner, Mike, who had previously run a for-profit environmental business. Beech was incorporated as a community interest company (a legal form designed explicitly for social enterprises). As is clear from the following extract, Anna took great pride in the fact that right from the start, they had adopted a social enterprise “ethos,” and avoided grant dependency.

We were quite pleased under the kind of black and whiteness of social enterprise, where we were able to boast that our start up wasn’t from grants, that essentially our first year trade wasn’t made up from grants, and everything that we did was able to be done through our trading income. (Anna, founder and board member of Beech, August 2010)

Similarly, when asked whether he saw Beech as a social enterprise, Mike responded: “Oh, yeah, without a shadow of a doubt” (February 2010). While for Mike this revolved around being involved in not-for-profit activities,

Anna connected the social enterprise identity with trading activities and its associated “sustainability.”

Being a social enterprise allowed practitioners at Beech to develop a positive identity, that is, an identity that made it possible to become clearly distinguishable from other (grant-dependent) organizations operating in the third sector. This was exemplified by Dave, a program manager at Beech: “We’re a social enterprise, and we’re something different: we’re not perceived as part of the system” (October 2011). It should, however, be noted that although these three individuals involved with Beech enthusiastically engaged with social enterprise discourse, each incorporated slightly different elements of dominant discourse into their identities.

### *Reflective Endorsement*

Whereas “enthusiastic engagement” entails an understanding of “social enterprise” as utterly positive and unambiguous, we found a second form of identification marked by a more reflective mode of judgment. Although in our analysis, both Anna and Mike identified Beech with the idea of social enterprise, it was particularly Anna who revealed what we see as a case of “reflective endorsement” in Beech’s decision to adopt the community interest company (CIC) legal structure, a legal form designed explicitly for social enterprises, and described by Nicholls (2010) as a form of legitimating certificate.

We understood that the CIC status perhaps wouldn’t give us everything that we required. I mean, it wasn’t going to help with tax breaks, and to a certain sense, it wasn’t going to help entirely with a sense of identity, but it was a way of jumping onto a bandwagon that essentially, at that particular time, gave us some idea of identity in a business sense. So, what are you? Well, we’re not just a company limited by a guarantee; we’re also a CIC. What does that mean? Well, it essentially means that you are a social enterprise. (Anna, founder and board member of Beech, August 2010)

Anna remains attached to the social enterprise identity, for it allows her and her organization to gain a sense of self. However, this form of identification is deemed reflective in that social enterprise is not endorsed in a spontaneous and automatic manner but through a process of circumspect reasoning. Reflective endorsement thus shows that identification presupposes an active subjectivity (Pêcheux, 1982), meaning that it would be wrong to assume that practitioners simply take on a particular (individual or organizational) identity that is made available by discourse. Following Butler (1993), reflective endorsement designates a process whereby the individual assumes power, rather than merely being dominated by or blindly embracing it.

## *Counteridentification*

### *Private Irony*

The second of Pêcheux's modes of subjective operation, counter-identification, represents instances when the individual denounces the dominant discourse. The more subtle forms of this process, which we here call "private irony," can be identified in narratives in which the speaker privately expresses an "uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong" (Butler, 1993, p. 219) while publicly remaining truthful to its ideas. An illustrative instance is exemplified by Liam, the chief executive of Teak, a charitable regeneration company that was originally created in the mid-1990s by its parent housing association to provide maintenance for its properties.

During the interviews, Liam was very critical of the direction taken by leaders of the social enterprise "movement." He felt that most organizations calling themselves social enterprises were not "proper businesses," instead relying on government contracts, which, as the recession deepened, would increasingly be won by private sector businesses. From his perspective, social enterprise was all "hype" promoted by people who had no idea how to run a proper business. What is conspicuous about this example is that Teak was often exemplified as a social enterprise in speeches by policymakers, but while its chief executive publicly sympathized with the values (if not the practices) of the social enterprise movement, he privately pursued his critical attitude of the discourse at large.

I think, we've got to stop putting our hand up. And some of the green ones are the worst: "We're social enterprise. We're—you're owed it—we're owed it; we are—we are wonderful people; therefore, the rules should be different for us." No. If you can't deliver on time, quality, and cost, then the rules are the same. (Liam, chief executive of Teak, May 2010)

Liam's counteridentification here takes the form of an explicit rejection of a particular aspect of dominant social enterprise discourse—as deliverer of public services. Liam thus rejects social enterprise, for it is used mainly by people who like to present themselves as entrepreneurial without, however, abstaining from receiving public money. To some extent, this complicates the analysis, as Liam appears to accept other elements of the dominant discourse, particularly sustainability through trading. However, it is because the chief executive resented the social enterprise discourse only on a private level that it became possible for Teak to allow itself to be used as an exemplary case of social enterprise by some high-profile players in the field.

### *Public Opposition*

Another more overt form of counteridentification was expressed by Janet, a social investment manager for Eucalyptus, an endowment-funded “social investor” that preferred not to label its award holders as social enterprises, because it saw the term as constraining social entrepreneurs to a specific (not-for-profit) organizational model. Janet recognized that “social enterprise” might be applied to their award holders but resisted such discursive positioning.

Q: You don’t use the label *social enterprise*?

A: No, we don’t.

Q: That’s deliberate?

A: Yes, it is, yes. . . . I think, it’s been possibly needed in the early stages to, sort of . . . create momentum and create a sector, but it . . . yes, it can be confusing for people, and if we really want to make changes, you’ve got to be open—you’ve got to be open to new people redeveloping their own mainstream business models to create more social value. I mean, that’s where the real change is going to happen—is if we influence mainstream businesses to look at social and environmental impact in a genuine, genuine way. (Janet, social investment manager at Eucalyptus, May 2011)

The rejection of “social enterprise” in the preceding extract was based on a problematization of its agenda from containing a “limiting definition around purist Social Enterprise.” In raising concerns over the limiting effects of the dominant discourse of social enterprise, Janet further pointed out that this might “confuse people” or “undermine real change.” Especially interesting is that the above narrative is opposed not so much to social enterprise being too businesslike (Parkinson & Howorth, 2008) but, conversely, to its being not businesslike enough, because it excludes “mainstream businesses.” Be that as it may, for Pêcheux both forms of counteridentification lack direction, thus exhibiting a tendency to support silently the social enterprise discourse by accepting its very force, instead of actually shifting it by offering a coherent alternative.

### *Disidentification*

#### *Displacement*

Unlike counteridentification, which does not transcend the dominant discourse, Pêcheux’s (1982) third mode of subjective operation, disidentification, not only rejects the dominant discourse by privately or publicly criticizing it but also

“proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 31). Individuals are most evidently involved in disidentification when they eschew the dominant discourse by adopting an alternative form of identity.

This displacement is encapsulated by Steve, the general manager of Fir, a cooperative sports club created as a response to what members saw as the commercialization of the sport and the marginalization of traditional supporters. Fir explicitly resisted the “fashionable” social enterprise label, preferring to emphasize its cooperative roots. This is particularly noteworthy because the Conservative-led coalition government, which took office in May 2010, with its emphasis on supporter models of ownership, self-help, and financial sustainability, offered Fir a general space to become a flagship for the Big Society. However, Steve was skeptical of the new government’s motives.

There’s a change in political philosophy, and that change of political philosophy means there’s a change in priority for grant funders, and there’s a different set of dynamics now within the economy, which are still settling down. That creates opportunities for us, but we’ve got to be careful that we measure our response to those opportunities rather than just leaping in. We’ve got to continue our dialogue with other people within our orbit, if you like—so, other people in the Third Sector, co-ops, [sports] clubs—to make sure that any steps we take are in the right direction.

Q: I suppose, what you’re doing chimes quite heavily with what [Prime Minister] Cameron’s going on about?

A: Well, it can do—yeah, that’s if the government is sincere in what it’s saying, and not just using it as a way of cutting [the] public sector. (Steve, general manager of Fir, January 2011)

What is revealed in this extract is a general skepticism about the new government based on the contention that its “political philosophy” might undermine Fir’s ongoing engagement with its stakeholders (“our orbit”). Thus far, this is no different from what has been said in conjunction with counteridentification. So let us move directly to another interview with Steve undertaken 16 months after the new government took office. Here, Steve was asked why Fir did not, despite the opportunity, call itself a social enterprise. His answer was: “We’re a co-op first; we are part of the third sector; and we are a [sports] club” (Interview notes, general manager Fir, September 2011). Steve’s stance for denying social enterprise was explicitly ideological. The dominant social enterprise discourse was rejected due to its association with the wider reforms of the public sector begun by the previous New Labour administration that continued under the new government, which was heavily involved in downsizing public

services. Steve came from a trade union and socialist background. He and other members of the staff at Fir had previously been employed in the public sector. Social enterprise to them was something not just to be avoided, but rather to be actively displaced through the espousal of an alternative democratic socialist (cooperative) discourse. Steve positioned Fir in opposition to social enterprise by offering a positive articulation of identity (“we’re a co-op first”). He thus demonstrates a more affirmative mode of subjective operation, which goes beyond mere opposition to offer an identity outside the dominant discourse. In concrete terms, displacement designates the process whereby individuals make choices of competing discourses and negotiate “their own understanding within their own particular worlds” (Cohen & Musson, 2000, p. 44).

## CONCLUSION

Five key implications derive from our study of the intersection of social enterprise discourse and practitioners’ identity work. To respond to recent pleas to interrogate the minutiae of how social entrepreneurial identities are enacted (Jones, Latham, & Betta, 2008), we have demonstrated, contrary to what is implied in certain strands of discursive research, that social enterprise does not operate deterministically in “making up” its subjects. Rather, practitioners’ individual and collective identities remain contested. Although this does not preclude the possibility that social enterprise will someday become a repressive force in the third sector, it certainly would be wrong to believe that it is in itself a “muscular discourse” (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000, p. 1130) that shapes third sector practitioners’ identities in an all-embracing manner.

Second, possibly the major contribution of this article is the adaptation of Pêcheux’s schema to disclose the multifaceted ways in which third sector practitioners in England reacted to social enterprise discourse. A key finding is that practitioners rarely identified with social enterprise by fully embracing its logic and values. This is largely in line with Howorth, Parkinson, and MacDonald (2011), who revealed that the way policymakers in the United Kingdom frame social enterprise is very much at odds with the ways that third sector practitioners construe their social realities. By the same token, our results concur with Seanor and Meaton (2008), who demonstrated that practitioners working in a social enterprise network rejected heroic images of social entrepreneurs, often denying any desire to become social entrepreneurs. Our results further confirm Parkinson and Howorth’s (2008) seminal study, which exemplified that practitioners often relate to social enterprise in negative ways—for instance, rejecting policy emphases on managerially defined notions of social service provision. In extending this work, our results imply that although it is premature to assume that social enterprise operates as a deterministic force, we should be cautious of conflating resistance with head-on opposition. Indeed, what derives from Pêcheux’s theorizing is that

resistance does not necessarily presuppose a downright oppositional practice, as exemplified by Steve at Fir. Rather, resistance is often enacted in a far more subtle manner, as in the case of the chief executive of Teak, who creates a sense of (organizational) identity on the margins of the discourse of social enterprise, or as in the case of Janet at Eucalyptus, whose identity work takes place outside the symbolic register of social enterprise. Hence it is often not so much the loud spectacle but rather the subtle performance that engenders identities outside of or at the fringes of strategic discourse. This insight is relevant to the extent that it opens up a middle ground in the academic discussion of social enterprise, which appears polarized between the positions of enthusiastic embracement and overt opposition.

Third, the level of practitioners' critical engagement with social enterprise raises some important questions regarding the particular cultural and political context in which this inquiry has taken place. More usually, the figure of the entrepreneur is associated with a positive evaluative accent (Jones & Spicer, 2009). This might suggest that the English third sector (still) represents a site where business ideologies produce considerable levels of discontent. It is likely that an entirely different picture would have resulted if this study had taken place in a country like the United States in which the Hayekian ideal of the self-organizing society, which is at the heart of social enterprise discourse, more closely fits the entrepreneurial values embodied by American culture (Hjorth & Bjerke, 2006). This implies that future research dealing with the intersection of identity work and social enterprise discourse should be explicitly situated within a broader ideological context.

Fourth, our results initially appear to indicate that "discursive shifts [toward dominant entrepreneurship discourse], driven by policymakers, funders, the sector and academics alike, do not necessarily infiltrate ideology at the level where the action is located" (Parkinson & Howorth, 2008, p. 305). However, we must not jump to premature conclusions. Although the practitioners in the study often refused the values and subject positions offered by social enterprise, this does not necessarily imply that social enterprise discourse has "failed" in the sense of being effectively displaced. In many instances, notably in those summarized under "private irony," noncompliance with the discourse's invocation occurred solely in the context of the research interview, whereas practitioners were publicly still acting as if they were endorsing its invocation. Such processes of dis/identification, even if only counterfeit, might engender instability of the practitioner's identity rather than of the level of discourse. Surface-level identification with social enterprise discourse might partly be driven by reasons that purportedly lie outside the discursive realm, such as financial and other incentives. In cases in which playing the system might extend practitioners' space of agency, we are called upon as researchers to find better ways for understanding the role of the nondiscursive in processes of dis/

identification—for instance, by looking at how changes in financial support for social enterprise bear on practitioners' processes of dis/identification.

Finally, it might be that distinguishing different modes of subjective operation suggests that these processes were easily divisible and stable. Although Pêcheux's schema has been analytically useful to grasp the heterogeneity of dis/identification, the synchronic focus of our study might distract from the fact that the practitioners in the study were readily moving from one mode of subjective operation to another. In part, we would argue that this is because the discourse of social enterprise conveys multiple meanings, thus offering people different opportunities for dis/identification. For example, in the study, Anna identified with the social enterprise ethos of self-sufficiency through trading. Mike identified with the not-for-personal-profit element of social enterprise discourse, while Dave, working at the same organization, incorporated a social enterprise identity as distinct from grant-dependent voluntary organizations. Shifts in the meaning of social enterprise discourse, although in part influenced by practitioners such as those in our study, are predominantly driven by policymakers, who align the term with shifting political goals (Teasdale, 2012). Given this, prospective research should look at modes of dis/identification as "an ongoing activity or accomplishment engaged in by people and groups" (Langley et al., 2012, p. 138), thus heeding the spiral movement between power and resistance (Foucault, 1998). Thus there is particular value in following up on how the discourse of social enterprise is changed by the shifting political agendas of policymakers, practitioners, and influential commentators, and how these ideological shifts, in turn, are reflected in recursive struggles at the level of third sector practitioners' identity work.

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### NOTE

1. Teak and Beech are tree-based pseudonyms used to disguise our cases. So, too, are Fir and the other organizations, mentioned below.

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