SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN CONTEXT AND AS PRACTICE

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Regional Studies

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Social problems are complex and deeply engrained in the places where people live (Kimmitt & Muñoz, 2018). Social problems are also at the core of social entrepreneurship as drivers of individual and collective action (Farny et al., 2019; Zahra et al., 2009). It is not a surprise that the notion of place has grown in importance in social entrepreneurship research and practice (Kibler & Muñoz, 2019), beyond their role as geographical containers of prosocial action. Research has looked at ways in which social ventures create and leverage different types of attachment to places (Kibler et al., 2015), how entrepreneurs use placial embeddedness to create opportunities (Korsgaard et al., 2015), how places uniquely propel entrepreneurial activity (Muñoz & Kimmitt, 2019), the relationship between prosocial venturing and land property (Peredo et al., 2018), and so on. These studies have advanced the idea of place-based enterprising, which Shrivastava and Kennelly (2013) and Lang et al. (2014) have recognized as central to foster ecological and social sustainability in local communities.

Social entrepreneurship research has spanned across disciplines (Dacin et al., 2011; Saebi et al., 2019), attracting also the attention of regional studies and economic geography. This is a recent development, in contrast to traditional entrepreneurship that has a long and important tradition within regional studies (Fritsch & Storey, 2014; Kibler et al., 2014). As entrepreneurship scholarship has gradually opened up a new space for place in social entrepreneurship, early work on local innovation and territorial development (Moulaert &

Sekia, 2003; Moulaert et al., 2007; MacCallum et al., 2009) has done something similar in regional studies, inviting social and economic geographers to rethink the role that innovative prosocial action can play in and for regions.

In this context, the book *Social Entrepreneurship and Innovation in Rural Europe* offers a novel perspective to appreciate the complexity involved in researching and developing a theoretical and practical understanding of social entrepreneurship across and within contexts. In this review essay, we take up what we found inspirational in the book and reflect on two critical issues for advancing regional studies of social entrepreneurship: *social entrepreneurship in context* and *social entrepreneurship as practice*.

In crafting our review, the book editorials by Oinas and Leppälä (2013) and Fratesi (2017) in *Regional Studies* served as inspiration. Oinas and Leppälä (2013: 1786) reminded us that scholarly discourse particularly benefits from *reflective* reviews, as compared to or complementing *informative* and *evaluative* ones; as they can uniquely serve as a "flexible medium that can do what other forms of scholarly communication cannot". Here, Fratesi's (2017) collection of reviews of 'classic' books offered excellent review examples that move from descriptive to evaluative and from evaluative to reflective pieces, written by leading scholars of our time. In this spirit, we aim to offer a reflective review of *Social Entrepreneurship and Innovation in Rural Europe* and unpack "what potential controversies or questions can emanate from the book that can fruitfully inform [new] future debates" (Lindebaum et al., 2018: 138). Limiting our essay just to the book seems rather fruitless giving our interest in providing additional value to the reader.

Social entrepreneurship in context. In their book, *Richter, Fink*, *Lang*, and *Maresch* bring to the fore the notions of social networks, social capital and strategic action fields in a synergistic manner, as it allows for situating social enterprises and their innovations in a regional/rural context. The authors borrow from organizational sociology to complement,

refine and further expand novel perspectives in social entrepreneurship that are more sensitive to place. This is exciting to us, as it mirrors our own efforts where we have leveraged organizational sociology to better ground social entrepreneurship in rural/regional context(s) (e.g. Farny et al., 2019; Muñoz & Kimmitt, 2019; Muñoz & Kibler, 2016; Muñoz et al. 2019). With that said, we believe this movement would particularly benefit from concepts established in the *sociology of the local* (Fine, 2010) and the *sociology of the place* (Gieryn, 2000). This, by bringing social geography, much more decisively, into the study and theorization of 'context' (Welter, 2011) in regional entrepreneurship studies.

Richter et al. show in detail how social entrepreneurs apply different network and resource mobilization strategies (e.g. bridging and linking social capital) across three different levels, the regime (e.g. government body), intermediary (e.g. local development funds) and community level (e.g. care networks). However, their work still puts the social enterprise or social entrepreneur at the center stage leaving contextuality and embeddedness, unique to regions, as part of the landscape. We should not ask for anything different from a book on social entrepreneurship. Yet, there is a missing opportunity here as these insights can breathe again if the *locale* is brought into it to become part of the core argument. This approach would consider places as constitutive parts of the social enterprises, not just the sites where they are operating in or seeking to have a social impact on. By places we mean more than geographical locations. They unfold at the intersection of locations as well as having symbolic meanings and material consequences (Gieryn, 2000), "places in which organizational life occurs [and] can have profound consequences for the actors involved, the actions they take, and the outcomes that follow" (Lawrence & Dover, 2015: 371). Ones that are created through upstream forces channeling "power and wealth; professional practices of place-experts [and] perceptions and attributions by people who experience places" (Gieryn 2000: 468).

For instance, we find Fine's (2010) work to offer useful tools for advancing a location-sensitive understanding of the interplay between social enterprises and rural communities. Fine introduces the local as a two-sided analytical artifact: the *local lens* and the *local stage*. The local lens refers to peoples' place-based (shared/divergent) experiences and interpretations of their local material and social order; whereas the local stage means the 'actual' material space/infrastructure in place but also the less visible historical and cultural foundations underpinning the local social order. While local lens is formed by and unfolds in a particular local stage, the local lens reproduces and can change the local stage. This can offer a new way to explain how social entrepreneurs interpret and act upon locally situated grammars in rural regions, also how it shapes and is shaped by its local context.

Similarly, Richter et al. stress that strategic networks and action fields are central to understand how social entrepreneurship can mobilize resources and funding. This resonates with recent social entrepreneurship research suggesting that social entrepreneurs often make strategically use of the – ambiguous yet persistent – label of social entrepreneurship in a field to acquire important resources (Chliova et al., 2020). However, we believe future regional studies on social entrepreneurship can benefit from bringing the analysis of fields and networks closer to the above articulation of *places*, which are the communal product of unfolding cultural and material local manifestations (Gieryn, 2000). We suggest that such a place-sensitive approach contributes to a better unpacking of *what* social issues are, *how* and *why* they are deeply entrenched in a (rural) region as well as the ways social "entrepreneurship is formed from the context itself, rather than being individual" (Gaddefors & Anderson, 2017: 267) and able to tackle the social issues in place. This brings us to our next argument.

Social entrepreneurship as practice. Dreams, motivations and intentions of social entrepreneurs have received significant attention (Saebi al., 2019), what they actually *do* in practice significantly less so. Richter et al. make an important step forward in this sense

expanding regional social entrepreneurship research. This is also interesting for the growing *entrepreneurship-as-practice* research community (e.g. Gartner et al., 2016). We also appreciate how Richter et al. engage with the entrepreneurs' voices as a way of making sense of and drawing conclusions from the case studies. This is a welcomed contribution as it comes to close the science-practice gap in current social entrepreneurship research.

As in our previous discussion, we also believe there is a missing opportunity here. *Social Entrepreneurship and Innovation in Rural Europe* inspired us to think *why*, *how* and, most importantly, *where* does social entrepreneurship practice actually matter?. While our colleagues shed new light on the social entrepreneurs' strategic actions, we wonder how the everydayness of entrepreneurship (Welter et al., 2018) connects to the everydayness of social problems. If we aim to find answers pertaining to how social enterprises are capable of tackling social challenges in rural regions, there is a clear need for understanding what is 'social' (Kimmitt & Muñoz, 2018) and, relatedly, what is an 'opportunity' (Hu et al., 2019) in social entrepreneurship. This becomes even more important today as our research community is gearing up to explain whether and why social enterprises might be more efficient solutions in tackling social problems than state-led and civil society organizations. This issue is relevant within and across national contexts (Kibler et al., 2018).

It follows that we see need a move from the dominant focus on social venture formation to understanding the everydayness of the social work performed by social enterprises, alone and in collaboration with community members or other social organizations, which tend to share the passion to actively engage in community development (Farny et al., 2019; Montgomery et al., 2012). Here, we believe the study of social entrepreneurship practice in a regional context may (theoretically and methodologically) benefit from everyday sociology (Kalekin-Fishman, 2013) and in particular from research disciplines focused on understanding

situated meanings of, and tackling, social problems, such as the sociology of social problems (e.g. Kitsuse & Spector, 1973) and social work (e.g. Howe, 1987; Coady & Lehmann, 2016).

For instance, we find insights from social work theory particularly useful for recognizing and addressing how social enterprises and social entrepreneurs develop and apply location sensitive concepts to make sense of what is going on in their operating place. Likewise, in the way they structure and pursue their everyday work to solve problems. Not long ago, David Howe (1987) was already emphasizing the need to help social workers reflect the theories which inescapably underpin their thoughts and actions. This is an aspect which might be of great relevance if we aim to advance a more practice-based understanding of how social entrepreneurs go about tackling problems in a particular place. Similarly, Coady & Lehman (2016) offer an interesting general-eclectic framework of social work, as they call, which focuses on understanding 'grounded' (client- and place-based) specialization work practices within generalist theoretical views of social work practice. In doing so, they combine a design thinking/problem-solving process perspective with a person-in-environment lens to clarify the importance of social work practices. This recognizes and addresses the link between social problems, unique to the public, and broader social issues in a local community or region.

Against this backdrop, we believe that complementing organizational theories applied to social entrepreneurship, such as in the book by Richter et al., with insights from social work research serves as one fruitful way forward in the regional study of social entrepreneurship as community development practice (Kibler & Muñoz, 2019). Most notably, this would allow for a move from understanding how social enterprises emerge, grow and survive in a particular context to a place-based analysis of how social entrepreneurs engage in successful problem-solving practices, in collaboration with other actors. Drawing from social work, we encourage social entrepreneurship scholarship to engage much more meaningfully with the emergence of social problems in a local community. This, while recognizing what social problems can be

best tackled by the practices of social enterprises instead of, or together with, state-level and civic society organizations.

Two last remarks to conclude our commentary. First, we celebrate the invitation made by colleagues in regional, management and organization studies (Oinas & Leppälä, 2013; Fratesi, 2017; Bartunek & Ragins, 2015; Lindebaum et al., 2018) to take reviews as an important space for scholarly reflection. Second, in embracing such an invitation, we believe there is fascinating space in between (prosocial) entrepreneurial practice and place, which is still in its infancy. We hope our communication will spur further interest and reflection in this area.

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