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Entrepreneurship and the rest: The missing debate

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we seek to open a debate within entrepreneurship scholarship around a prevailing reductionist view when it comes to non-western or alternative contexts. We argue it is incapable of capturing behavioral differences across contexts without making ethnocentric, narrow and simplified theoretical assumptions about ‘the rest’. Drawing on the sociology of absences, we explain why the concept of entrepreneurship, as it relates to development, has remained captive and constrained by western economic and cultural assumptions, which has been boosted by a worrying absence of self-criticism. This is problematic but equally full of missing opportunities. Drawing from cultural relativism and the sociology of emergences, in this paper we propose a refreshed agenda for advancing research at the intersection of entrepreneurship and development, marked by the possibility of alternative futures and the potency of hidden causes.

1. Introduction

In this article, we argue that current entrepreneurship scholarship, beyond western borders, offers only a reductionist view of the phenomenon. It understands that entrepreneurial action is one we have synthesized in the west and whatever happens in the ‘rest’ is most of the time insufficient or inferior. This is typically viewed as requiring a replication of what has proven successful in industrialized countries needing a major institutional reengineering to function appropriately. We argue that this is the same technocratic illusion and theoretical blindness that has been observed in critical development studies (Easterly, 2014, 2007; Escobar, 2011).

The conceptual debate between the transcendental institutionalism (Sen, 2009) – the focus on an ideal framework for entrepreneurial behavior – that still characterizes western entrepreneurship research and the legitimacy of the emerging behaviors we observe in the rest (which diverge from the assumed norm) is still missing. By western entrepreneurship research, we mean one that frames the phenomenon as a set of human activities involved in the pursuit of business opportunities and/or the emergence of a new firm within a neoliberal conception of markets and institutions, making causal attributions within the boundaries of liberal humanism. One that therefore focuses on studying the antecedents, influencers, processes, outcomes and consequences of such a limited set of activities in a rather narrow set of ideological and cultural contexts.

Echoing recent debates in critical development studies (Easterly, 2006, 2014; Ziai, 2015), in this article we aim to open such a discussion. We argue that only a serious reconsideration of our ontological position will enable an adequate and place-sensitive development of the field that disrupts assumptions about other contexts, seen as less developed, impoverished and even desperate. This involves addressing the problematic lack of self-criticism within entrepreneurship research when it comes to the rest living in non-western contexts, the narrow appreciation of development theories and the complexity of development itself, as well as the

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Table 1
Research Agenda.

| | Traditional explanation and solution | Exploring possibilities | Exploring capacities (illustrative research questions) |
|---------------------------|---|---|--|
| Individual | The problem derives from individual laziness, bad choice, incompetence, inherent disabilities → It is about individual capacities. We need to understand and develop individuals with the adequate knowledge, skills and mindset. | In the rest, what if [productive] entrepreneurship... ...emerges in [or as a result of] the absence of agency, human capital, motivation and future orientation? ...emerges in the presence [or as a result] of counterintuitive cognitive and behavioral determinants? | In the rest: How can [productive] entrepreneurial action be explained through indigenous, spiritual, religious and/or mystical knowledge? How do these types of knowledge compliment western conceptions of human capital? How is [productive] entrepreneurship possible without an appreciation of future circumstances? |
| Cultural | The problem derives from subcultures adopting values that are non-productive and are contrary to norms of success → It is about social norms. We need to understand and develop informal institutions that are inconsistent with market development and require development. | In the rest, what if [productive] entrepreneurship... ...emerges in [or as a result of] the absence of a 'culture of entrepreneurship' and social norms assumed to be conducive to productive enterprises? ...emerges in the presence [or as a result] of non-conductive or non-supportive cultural and social norms? | In the rest: Does the creation of a [productive] entrepreneurship sub-culture help or hinder development? How do [productive] entrepreneurs organize outside of this subculture where it is assumed to be non-productive? What are the non-conductive or non-supportive cultural and social norms leading to [productive] entrepreneurship? |
| Political-Economic | The problem derives from systematic barriers preventing poor from access and accomplishment in key social institutions including jobs, education, housing, health care, safety, political representation, etc. → It is about the rules of the game. We need to understand and develop 'strong' formal institutions can improve the environment for entrepreneurs | In the rest, what if [productive] entrepreneurship... ...emerges in [or as a result of] the absence of private property, rules and laws that typically support business development? ...emerges in the presence [or as a result] of totalitarian or anarchist institutional forms? | In the rest: How is [productive] entrepreneurship possible (and what does it look like) in the absence of private property, rules and laws? Is there an alternative universal "right" set of formal institutional arrangements for understanding relationship between development and [productive] entrepreneurship? |
| Geographical | The problem derives from the fact that social advantages and disadvantages concentrate in separate areas. → It is about agglomeration, distance, economies of scale and resource distribution. We need to understand and develop disadvantaged areas to elicit market development. | In the rest, what if [productive] entrepreneurship... ...emerges in [or as a result of] the absence of resources or in places lacking the adequate material infrastructure, agglomeration or economies of scale? ... emerges in the presence [or as a result] of inhospitable market conditions? | In the rest: How do [productive] entrepreneurs organize themselves outside (or against) those geographical contexts fostering market development? Is there an alternative set of geographical and market conditions for [productive] entrepreneurship to flourish? |
| Cumulative | Problems cumulate to cause spirals of poverty, problems for individuals are interdependent and strongly linked to community deficiencies. → It is about spirals of poverty. We need to understand and develop locally embedded entrepreneurial ecosystems | In the rest, what if [productive] entrepreneurship... ...emerges in [or as a result of] the absence of virtuous cycles? ...emerges in the presence [or as a result] of spirals of poverty? | In the rest: What alternative cumulative forces can better explain the relationship between [productive] entrepreneurship and development? How do these forces combine and interact over time? |

*Our emphasis on productive entrepreneurship, rather than entrepreneurship in general, derives from [Baumol's \(1990\)](#) seminal distinction between productive, unproductive and destructive forms of entrepreneurship. While we do not fully adhere to his deterministic view where everything depends on the payoffs structure of the economy, contexts do shape action. Additionally, we agree on that only certain forms play some substantial role. We therefore seek to delineate the agenda particularly around those entrepreneurial activities that make a productive contribution to society.

neglected power relations between western and non-western knowledge creation that still prevail in our field ([Peredo and McLean, 2013](#)).

Dealing with a widely ethnocentric, narrow and simplified view of the phenomenon, we argue that a position of cultural relativism would be beneficial for advancing research at the intersection of development and entrepreneurship. Outside of the entrepreneurship domain, this has emerged by embracing of postcolonial theories in management ([Nkomo, 2011](#); [Özkazanç-Pan, 2008](#)) and discussion of epistemological origins ([Jaya, 2001](#)). However, such a critique has only been partially articulated within entrepreneurship research (e.g. [Peredo and McLean, 2013](#)). We build on this prior research by drawing from [de Sousa \(2012\)](#) sociology of emergences.

Embracing cultural relativism, in this paper we propose a radical agenda that uses the sociology of emergences ([de Sousa, 2012](#)) to explore alternative tendencies in a conjectural manner, along five critical areas reflecting the complexity of development. Firstly, we discuss how current entrepreneurship theory is applied in developing, non-western, impoverished and/or typically 'unconventional' contexts, which we argue lacks criticality. Secondly, we draw from [de Sousa \(2012\)](#) to problematize this to emphasize the shortfalls of extant research. Thirdly, we propose a refreshed research agenda that builds on extant theoretical knowledge, yet

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