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Unconventional entrepreneurship

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ABSTRACT

The present article, which opens this special issue, focuses on unconventional forms of entrepreneurship not captured sufficiently by current theory. Changes in society and escalating economic difficulties have led to a mutation in entrepreneurship, driven less by conventional professional interest and more by passion, a new paradigm that in turn has opened the door to an unconventional approach to entrepreneurship. We here seek to discern the main elements that help define the unconventional entrepreneur, including 1) the role that passion plays, notably in the pursuit of leisure and adventure; 2) the important role of tribes before, during, and after entrepreneurial creation; and 3) liquid society as a cause of the identity crisis and a factor of the quest for entrepreneurial recognition. Lastly, we discuss the possibility of this unconventional entrepreneur being part of a type of governmentality as a perfect example of neoliberal alienation.

1. Introduction

‘Unconventional’ is a rather trendy word in the management realm. When a scholar wants to break free from previous works, s/he states that s/he is studying an unconventional phenomenon or developing an unconventional approach. This may be a way of avoiding formulaic research and routine content (Alvesson & Gabriel, 2013). Unconventional ‘somethings’ have flourished across management disciplines such as “unconventional marketing” (Cova & Saucet, 2014), “unconventional finance” (Buchner & Wilkinson, 2015), “unconventional management research” (Clair et al., 2016), and even “unconventional research contexts” (Bamberger & Pratt, 2010). Much of the time, these works overly use terms such as “alternative” or “new” in attempting to break with the mainstream of their discipline.

Here, we propose returning to the etymology of unconventional: not adhering to established convention or accepted standards. In the entrepreneurship discipline, an established convention corresponds to the standard – if not canonical – profile of the Schumpeterian entrepreneur. Even if the last decade has seen a flurry of research on such alternative profiles as the accidental entrepreneur (Shah & Tripsas, 2007), the user entrepreneur (Haefliger, Jäger, & Von Krogh, 2010), and the lifestyle entrepreneur (Bredvold & Skälén, 2016), entrepreneurship seems to face difficulties in breaking free from the Schumpeterian figure.

The point of departure to breaking free from it is thus the notion of opportunity recognition that lies at the core of the entrepreneurial process. Ardichvili, Cardozo, and Ray (2003, p.106) argue that “identifying and selecting the right opportunities for new businesses are among the most important abilities of a successful entrepreneur”. Conventionally, and corresponding to the stereotypical entrepreneur, opportunity recognition consists in recognising the opportunity first and then developing an organisational development path as described in the traditional literature. Unconventionally, we argue that opportunity recognition is not a necessary first step, and that the desperate search for opportunities could end in failure. We propose looking at

entrepreneurship as a shared passion and communal incentive to develop something that could become a successful business venture. Passion and interaction with other passionate people as well as the environment lead to generating potential opportunities (Cova & Guercini, 2016). We thus argue that the entrepreneur's profile pertains to the single entrepreneur, while obviously the literature has moved on to consider the entrepreneurial team (Lechler, 2001) and the community sharing the passion (Martin & Schouten, 2014).

The unconventional entrepreneur distances himself from the mythical figure of the Schumpeterian entrepreneur. “Unconventional” entrepreneurship is neither bound by nor accords with the conventional approach involved in planning, launching, and developing a new venture. By definition, “conventional” entrepreneurs operate in an uncertain environment (Knight, 1921) where they are able to create Schumpeterian opportunities in view of the opportunity-seeking activities or alertness and readiness to recognize them (Casson, 1982; Kirzner, 1979). This means they are prepared to take responsibility for overcoming the challenges inherent in ever-present uncertainty. By so doing, they make things easier for other actors (wage-earners, banks, etc.), but in exchange expect to be rewarded. The problem with this model is the rapid acceleration of change in information-rich societies (Rosa, 2013) in which uncertainty has become so widespread that it transcends elite entrepreneurs' traditional areas of intervention. In liquid times, society requires people to take an entrepreneurial stance, not primarily due to the need to incorporate technological innovations or maximize profit, but because entrepreneurship offers a way to cope with precariousness and uncertainty.

In an unstable world, people may be reassured by (and hang onto) passions they can use as springboards to act on the world that surrounds them (Seregina & Schouten, 2017). Such passions become “sources of stability” (Castel, 2009) and can, when developed across a wide range of leisure or hobby activities, lead to new forms of entrepreneurship. Indeed, an entrepreneur's commitment may be fuelled by motives superseding the rational search for profit; it could be based on passions

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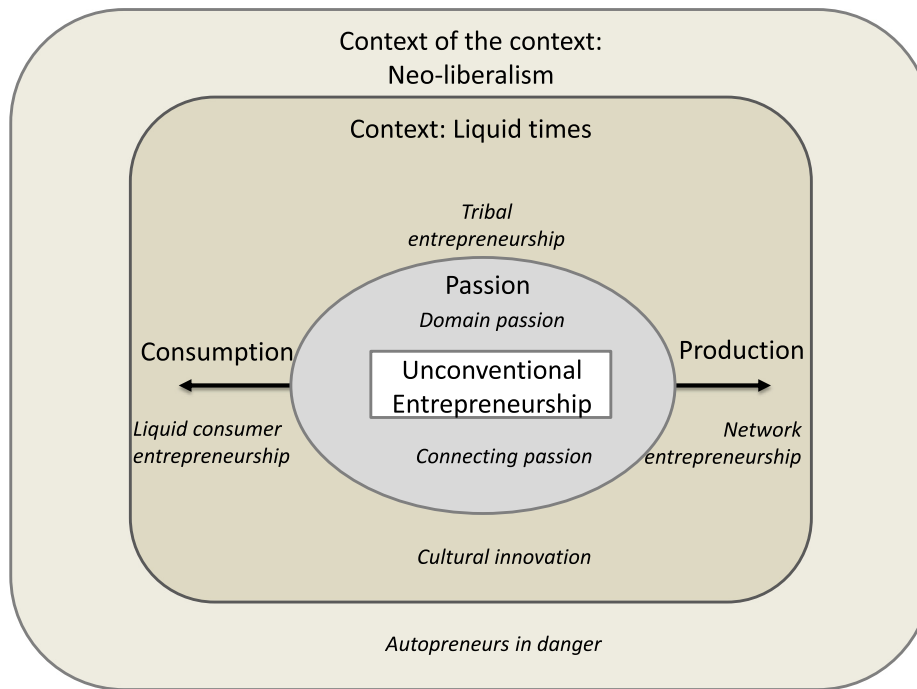


Fig. 1. Contextualizing unconventional entrepreneurship.

unrelated to professional experience but linked to personal aptitudes and leisure preferences. Such passions are located in other domains of the actors' existence, namely, consumption instead of production. After all, the main driver of most consumption is passion, since this is what causes individuals to consume certain products or brands and share their passion with fellow users/consumers (Stebbins, 2007). At the same time, most passions foster the development of competencies, skills, and knowledge. In turn, this sparks innovation (Martin & Schouten, 2014).

Consumption and entrepreneurship have long been recognised as fundamental economic and social phenomena (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). The interface between the two is increasingly relevant for research on consumers, business owners, and manager experience. Consumer experience and entrepreneurship are commingled for many entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurial consumers have commercialised their personal leisure innovations in industries ranging from sporting equipment to youth products, stereo components, or new media. Recent studies propose new business models (Guercini, 2014) revolving around users' lifestyles and experiences (Shah & Tripsas, 2007). There is, however, another way to analyse the connection between consumption and entrepreneurship (Goulding & Saren, 2007). Consumers gain expertise, and their experience is fuelled by passions that bind them to a community (Haefliger et al., 2010; Hietanen & Rokka, 2015). Passions – along with skills and social relationships (Guercini & Ranfagni, 2016) – then become key factors in generating entrepreneurship, as in the case of Nick Woodman who invented the GoPro to share his consuming passion for surfing.

Contemporary consumption might then be construed as a reservoir of skills, passions, and communities enabling innovative entrepreneurship that in turn creates a positive dynamic for the economy, for people, and for society in general.

The focus in this conceptual paper is on the main dimensions of unconventional entrepreneurship spanning consumption and innovation. Thus, in the first section, we focus on the role of passion as a stabilising force. The emphasis here is on the different types of passion and how they correspond with entrepreneurship. In the second section, we look at the entrepreneur's passion, and particularly the role that fan tribes play in this variant. The third section contextualises the

emergence and diffusion of these forms of non-conventional entrepreneurship, detailing how Western societies have been liquefied and have changed people's lives. The final section looks at how this unconventional entrepreneurship affects individual wellbeing. In sum, these sections capture the main themes evoked throughout this special issue, namely, unconventional entrepreneurs, liquid society, domain passion, connecting passion, emotional labour, and cultural competency.

2. Passions and entrepreneurship

Perseverance is a leading challenge in today's world, a challenge that increasingly confronts people with instability, insecurity, and uncertainty (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). Since the 17th century, work has structured Western societies' relationship to the world, as well as the social relations and the general *Weltanschauung*. In more recent times, however, work has become less of a stabilising factor and has largely mutated into a fleeting “liquid” (Bauman, 2007). Lifetime employment in a single company disappeared long ago, progressively depriving work of its ability to structure identities, especially over the past 30 years. Westerners have therefore turned towards new sources of identity, to wit, ordinary passions they now represent as inexhaustible sources of meaningful experience (Bromberger, 1998; Seregina & Schouten, 2017).

Passion has become a refuge for many individuals who no longer find stability or recognition through work. It is a way of escaping boredom and stress. Many university graduates launch their careers, for instance, as senior managers in large industrial groups, even if the job does not precisely correspond to their aspirations. Within a relatively short period of time, they succumb to a sense of disappointment that weighs on them day after day. They expected more meaningfulness in their daily lives, hoping for less routine and boredom. This is compounded by a lack of recognition, a feeling that who they are and what they do is undervalued. For many, passion becomes a way out of this impasse (Stebbins, 2014).

Research shows that passion can play an important role in times of crisis. Bromberger (1998) suggests that many “ordinary passions” – like the passion for genealogy – occur at a critical juncture in people's lives.

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