The rising tide of criticality in social entrepreneurship and social innovation

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we trace a rising tide of criticality to highlight three waves in a sea of social entrepreneurship/social innovation (SE/SI) research. Our aim is to draw attention to counter, alternative and critical perspectives in the field and how 'dangerous' their co-option by right wing narratives is. We review what we believe to be three waves in the development of a critical research agenda undertaken by a cohort of academics who, in their loyalty to the field, have sought to unpick the underlying assumptions in the practice of, and academic reflection on, social innovation. We set out the early instrumentalist critique, in which the success and social utility of SE/SI is questioned. We secondly highlight a post-structuralist shift, in which hidden and unheard voices and perspectives are welcomed and celebrated. The third wave, for us, constitutes a dangerous threat to the SE/SI project, threatening to undermine and co-opt the first two waves, as has happened in other related fields of intellectual endeavour. We position this paper to not only engage with scholars who challenge the normative assumptions behind social innovation research, but also to draw attention to the entry of right-wing politics in post-modernist critical theory. It is not that everything in this third wave is bad, but that everything becomes unexpectedly dangerous, especially if we uncritically adopt reflexivity, naturalization and performativity as politically and morally neutral positions. Contra to Foucault, in adopting a critical realist stance, we begin to propose that 'the social', posed as an inherently 'good' thing, is an ontological reality that is knowable, albeit given that our knowledge of what is 'good' is nonetheless limited and partial. In the first Skoll World Forum (2004) some activists put up posters in the toilets of Said Business School warning delegates, 'beware social entrepreneurship: a wolf in sheep's clothes!' (Nicholls & Young, 2008, p. 272). We conclude our paper warning that SE/SI is not the only wolf to be concerned about!

Keywords: Critical Theory; Social Innovation; Social Enterprise; Reflexivity; Naturalization; Performativity.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2006, Len Arthur took to the lectern at the UK Social Enterprise Conference and denounced the unquestioned positivity around the concept of social enterprise, expressing his revulsion toward those in the audience that had unashamedly amalgamated the terms without challenge. "*Ten or so years ago it would have seemed like an oxymoron to amalgamate the terms social and enterprise. Since that time the concept has rapidly passed from obscurity to the status of orthodoxy*" (Arthur *et al.*, 2006, p. 1). A small group of academics in the audience similarly puzzled by the lack of criticality began talking. On the whole, the social innovation (SI) and social entrepreneurship (SE) literature (hereafter SE/SI) in the last twenty years has been overwhelmingly interested in promoting SE/SI as (a) an inherently good thing, (b) a solution to all problems and (c) a politically neutral complement to neo-liberalism globally. As Arthur's point highlights, critical perspectives in the field emerged as a concerted effort sometime in 2006, in the heated debates of the Social Enterprise Conference, which continued once it became the International Social Innovation Research Conference (ISIRC). This first wave of criticality in SE/SI challenged the unparalleled performance and achievements of the 'new' social enterprise sector. Later publications developed critical themes in different directions, each skirting around the issue of critical theory and focusing on finding the 'social' in SE/SI, but not addressing critical theory head-on.

The second wave broke, from Switzerland, with Dey's (2010) paper that highlighted the symbolic violence at play in social entrepreneurship discourses, signalling a move towards a more theoretically informed debate. This was followed up by Steyaert and Dey's (2010) call for social enterprise research to remain 'dangerous', deliberately mirroring Foucault recognising the performative potential of research in creating reality and positioning the field as a source of social transformation. Their critical theoretical research agenda underlined a need to identify and challenge assumptions through denaturalizing, performativity and reflexivity; to link SE/SI to cultural, social and historical contexts; and to imagine and explore alternatives that actively disrupt established social orders (Steyaert & Dey, 2010).

Critical perspectives on SE/SI have broadened and deepened through literature engaging with critical theorists. Challenges to normative research have drawn on Bourdieu (Teasdale, *et al.*, 2012); Giddens (Nicholls & Cho, 2006); Foucault (Curtis, 2007); Polanyi (Bull & Ridley-Duff, 2018; Roy & Grant, 2020; Thompson *et al.*, 2020) and Ostrom (Ridley-Duff & Bull, 2021; Peredo *et al.*, 2020). In political economy there are Marxist, green and communitarian perspectives (Yıldırım & Tuncalp, 2016, Scott-Cato *et al.*, 2008; Scott-Cato & Hillier, 2010; Ridley-Duff, 2007). Feminist geographer J. K. Gibson-Graham's diverse economies approach questions the

dominance of capitalist forms of economy and has developed into a collective research network that seeks to demonstrate that 'another world is possible' (Gibson-Graham *et al.*, 2013).

A third wave may now be upon us. What seems to have occurred in the research and publications in critical perspectives on SE/SI over the last decade is a threefold engagement with epistemological issues, a drawing on theoretical insights from popular critical theory thinkers and challenges to normative methodological strategies in research and, with this wave, there is an emergence in challenges to ontological assumptions (Hu, 2018, Hu *et al.*, 2019). This third wave is marked by a potential crisis of relativism, and subversion of the primary categories of thought by the 'new right', thereby questioning the progressive credentials of the ideas, theories and theorists that critical theorists hold dear.

We seek to consider how future critical SE/SI research can continue to deepen our theorising and add to the SE/SI field. Our paper, therefore, explores the ways in which critical scholars in social entrepreneurship and social innovation began to explore aspects of the field that are concealed, edited out and pushed to the boundaries. We draw attention to those that challenged the grand narrative, to those that drew attention to reflexivity, naturalization and critical performativity, against the headlines that mythologise and romanticise the field, whilst downplaying the partial, incomplete and ideologically driven doctrine – or, in Arthur's words, orthodoxy.

THE FIRST WAVE OF CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL ENTERPRISE/SOCIAL INNOVATION

In this first wave, hybridity of social enterprises has largely been the focus of critical research in challenging the grand narrative. We draw attention to examining the 'wolf in sheep's clothes' by dividing our arguments in to three core themes of the literature: (i) cooperative tradition, (ii) voluntary and community perspectives and (iii) the emergence of a strong 'business focus'. These three streams are examined in turn, but neither would be sufficient without first summarising the emergence of SE in the UK (as a leader country in the field of SE) from a political perspective.

Re-emergence of social innovation: New Labour's Third Way

The first wave of SI/SE critical research coincided with the emergence of 'social enterprise' (SE) on the UK political landscape in the late 1990s. Under a 'pro-market' 'New Labour' Government, elected in 1997, the faith in the 'Third Way' doctrine was set in motion against a backdrop of state and market failure, and the injustices of globalisation and neoliberalism. The voluntary sector, social economy or third sector – for brevity we use these terms interchangeably – received heightened attention,

where previously the sector was not expected to contribute significantly to job creation, market and wealth formation. Amin (2002) rapidly identified aspects of the social economy as residual activities, marginal and at best temporal solutions to the damage caused by market and state, where now these organisations were being asked to play a greater role, cautioning against these replicating or replacing the welfare state through privatization or neglect (Amin, 2009). Tony Blair's Labour Government continued the previous administration's pursuit of individualism and market commodification and 'hollowing out the state' (see Rhodes, 1994) albeit, under a slightly different name of 'contracting out the state' (see Baekkeskov, 2011), creating the space for third sector organisations to deliver public services as complementary partners in public service delivery (Aiken *et al.*, 2021; Alcock, 2010; Macmillan, 2010; Nicholls & Teasdale, 2017; Teasdale, 2010). As Haugh and Kitson (2007, p. 983) stated, "*The Third Way was a political philosophy that sought to resolve the ideological differences between liberalism and socialism; it combined neoliberalism with the renewal of civil society and viewed the state as an enabler, promoted civic activism and endorsed engagement with the voluntary and community sector to address society's needs*". A new narrative gained traction with the first government adoption of the SE concept in the 1999 National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal Policy Action Team (PAT) 3 report in relation to the creation of social capital that SEs provided in communities (HM Treasury, 1999; Sepulveda, 2015). This was followed by a positioning of (social) entrepreneurship as the way out of poverty for deprived communities in the Phoenix Development Fund initiative in the same year. The concepts were gaining followers in Government policy; firstly, through the Social Enterprise Unit in the Department of Trade and Industry in 2001 and the launch of the first UK policy in 2002 espousing social enterprise as a '*strategy for success*', and secondly Department in the Office of the Third Sector in 2006, and their second policy push that announced a further action plan that proclaimed SE was '*scaling new heights*'. The euphoria of SE was not shared by those at the coalface.

Reappropriation and de-socialisation of Cooperative traditions: Where's the 'participative democracy' in social enterprise?

The conversations Ridley-Duff (see Ridley-Duff *et al.*, 2008; Ridley-Duff & Southcombe, 2012) was privy to in 1997, highlights the backdrop of a battleground for the identity and legitimacy of SE with respect to the longer history and tradition of the cooperative movement. Ridley-Duff talked of discussions between worker cooperatives and Cooperative Development Agencies (CDAs) around a sector support

agency (Social Enterprise London[1]) that in 1998 explicitly stated the promotion of '*cooperatives and common ownership*' and other organisations that practice the '*principles of participative democracy*' in their Memorandum of Association (Ridley-Duff & Southcombe, 2012, p. 185), quite different from the dominant narrative at the time, claiming that social enterprises were an entirely new phenomenon (Curtis, 2011). Indeed, the language was in use from the early 80s in cooperative development, and formally adopted by a national network (the Social Enterprise Partnership) in 1994. Arthur *et al.* (2006) bemoaned that the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI, 2002) definition of SE excluded cooperatives from the party, and their principles of ownership and control. These early champions of the concept of SE were now being squeezed out, Arthur *et al.* (2006) stating, their '*work has hardly featured in recent social enterprise discussions and is almost hermeneutically sealed from related academic debates*', adding that, the rhetoric and narrative around the terms social economy and SE were appropriated and adopted by government, supported by think tanks and passed down through the regional administrations as all part of a mainstreaming agenda to push an enterprise culture.

As Ridley-Duff and Southcombe (2012) argued, in early defining characteristics of SE from the 1970s and up until around 1998 when SEL formed, 'socialisation' and 'social purpose' were given equal weighting. However, by 2002 when the Social Enterprise Coalition was formed, closely followed by the Community Interest Company legal structure in 2005, a greater influence from the US around social purpose (social entrepreneurship) began to influence policy where individualism (and a not-for-profit clause) was given precedence over socialisation and communitarianism (and the removal of mutualism) (see Ridley-Duff and Bull, 2011). Arthur *et al.*'s (2006) frustration at the absurdity of this shift is clear to see in his reference to SE as an oxymoron (as cited above). His point is that SE discourse attacks the alternative habitus of democratic spaces. Huckfield (2022) also adds, SE had morphed into a political project, attached to a North American discourse of independent social entrepreneurs and the promotion of market-led business models was given precedence over the principles of participative democracy and community democratically owned organisations.

Blurred boundaries, managerialist co-option and marketisation of Voluntary traditions: Where's the 'mission' in social enterprise?

A second source of critique of the emerging notion of SE/SI was from a voluntary and community sector perspective. Dart (2004) outlined these as voluntaristic, prosocial,

[1] SEL was formed by co-op development agencies and the worker co-ops they supported into existence during the first Greater London Council period under Ken Livingston (late 70s/early 80s).

civic organizations that were traditionally funded through a mixture of member fees, government funds, grants, and user fees. However, due to neoliberalism there have been changes in government funding mechanisms, specifically the move from grant-giving to contract/competitive tendering with the devolution, deregulation and privatisation of welfare states happening globally over the past 40 years (Pearce, 2003; Goerke, 2003). Borzaga and Solari (2004) state 'like it or not' – sector funding streams were changing to a 'contract culture'. Grenier (2008) added that in order to drive this transition, benefit recipients were relabelled 'customers' or 'consumers' rather than 'beneficiaries' or 'service-users' – so that the perception shifted to one where they had choice and control as to what services they received. Thus, a market orientation and 'enterprise culture' rhetoric, as opposed to a 'dependency culture' on the purse strings of the 'nanny' state. Eikenberry and Kluver (2004) raised concerns about the 'methods and values of the market' being applied in the not-for-profit sector. Indeed, Aiken (2006) highlighted that they are incompatible, suggesting the move leaves the sector challenging 'mission drift', in the drive to remain financially viable. As Cornforth (2014) added, SEs may experience tensions in meeting competing institutional logics within the organisation, i.e., the competing market logic, or the competing funder logic (where an over-reliance on one [public sector] funder dominates the services delivered) against the altruistic logic.

The shift was also logistically challenging, as Spear (2001) talked about the insertion of private sector 'managerial competencies' trending in the sector. Relatedly, Bull (2008) identifies the heightened focus from funding providers that required more from organisations in terms of management systems, quality standards and marketing – none of which were funded appropriately through [public sector] contracts for services. Furthermore, the more business-like the sector becomes, the more volunteers are excluded, as contracts and legal liabilities limits the use of volunteers (Spear, 2001). Allan (2005), Macmillan (2010), and later Hazenberg *et al.* (2014), claimed a contract instrumentalist agenda was being promoted in public sector service delivery, driven by hard outcome targets, employability agendas and getting people back into work, as opposed to soft outcomes, such as self-worth and confidence. Grenier (2008) warned that the sector was following the culture of the private sector, where only 'enterprising individuals' are considered responsible and worthy citizens, based purely on a set of values around free-market competition and individual self-interest. For Pharoah, Scott and Fisher (2004) public sector funding decisions excluded beneficiaries of projects, where the funder had little knowledge of what interventions worked, or don't work, in any given context. That knowledge ultimately resides within community and voluntary organisations (something picked up again by Curtis in this Thematic Issue). Amin *et al.* (2003) also state that a worrying trend in the late 1990s was a professionalisation of the social economy through social

enterprise, where there is now a class of social economy professionals who move from place to place 'fixing' local problems, having no connection to the communities they serve.

The influence of neoliberal thinking in the UK forced the sector to comply through political instrumentation that rubs against civic identities. Aiken *et al.* (2021) identified resistance, suggesting that, despite the charitable form being the most numerically prominent SE model in the UK, these organisations did not tend to self-identify as SEs, and that its business-oriented definition failed to represent the value of the voluntary sector. Terry (1998) adds that the 'market' places no value on democratic ideologies such as fairness and justice, compromising the sector's role as 'value guardians'. Many voluntary and community organisations therefore rejected SE as a business model and preferred to see it as a financial activity (seeking contracts, pursuing trading, as an activity alongside grant income (Cox, 2007; Ridley-Duff & Bull, 2011). Pharoah, Scott and Fisher (2004) asked, '*Could more entrepreneurial approaches to income generation provide these sectors* [voluntary and community] *with a strong, more reliable and independent funding base?*' – to which their research identified that the jury is still out! The fear of dirigisme and pluralism in an instrumental use of the voluntary sector in becoming efficient and effective partners for public service delivery agents of the state, challenged the independence of the sector (Lewis, 2005). Likewise, Reid and Griffith (2006) warned of isomorphic pressures towards mainstreaming and business models, which is summarised well by Amin *et al.* (2003), stating that it is unfortunate that, rather than provide an alternative, SEs in the fashion of the moment have been co-opted into a policy discourse that is more concerned about efficiency (cost effective) welfare than the radical alternatives many organisations want to be. Consequently, we can't call it alternative, radical or even entrepreneurial if it is all about delivering government objectives! – can we?

Neo-liberal instrumentalist legitimation of the 'business case': Where's the 'social' in social enterprise?

A third and most recent theme in the first wave of critical consideration of the field of SE/SI was the 'business case' legitimation of SE research. Len Arthur's 2006 conference paper caught the imagination of those writing in the field. Bull (2008) puts that the global appeal of neoliberalism across many parts of the world in the 80s was reaching out tentacles throughout sectors and with commodification and privatisation came a culture that emphasised individual self-reliance, personal responsibility and entrepreneurship more generally in society as individualism took hold (Scase & Goffee, 1980; Kuratko, 2005). Hulgård (2014) outlines that, on the one hand, organisations in the social economy were seen as part of, and supporting of, a capitalist market economy within key political strategy mechanisms (see Dees, 1998;

Drayton, 2002; Emerson, 2006; Leadbeater, 1997), arguing the social entrepreneurship paradigm offered a panacea for addressing social market failures, promoted by institutions in the US, such as Ashoka, Schwab and Skoll Foundation, whereas on the other, they can be seen as a rejection of the values of neoliberalism and a counter-movement building an alternative economy – a social solidarity economy (see Scott-Cato & Raffaelli, 2017).

Grenier (2008) suggested the business case frames a convenient discourse that emphasises specific policy priorities, furthering a market orientation, thereby extending an 'enterprise culture' that Arthur *et al.*. refer to as becoming the orthodoxy. Grenier also attributed the swathe of institutions promoting this agenda to organisations like Ashoka, who were mindful of presenting themselves not as a 'foundation' making 'grants' to 'beneficiaries', instead they presented themselves as making 'awards' or 'stipends' to its 'fellows', therefore adopting the language of the corporate world – aligning themselves with the private sector. Arthur *et al.* (2006) supported this, by stating that the discourse that surrounds social enterprise had predominantly become enterprise-focused, and Bull and Crompton (2006) add that there was, without doubt, a political 'push' for the sector to become more 'business-like' and 'entrepreneurial'. Huckfield (2022) pinpointed the case that, as social entrepreneurship grew out of North American universities, the main focus of business and management scholars has been on logistical issues, such as performance; finance; innovation; impact; growth and markets. (Young, 2006; Dees & Anderson, 2006; Dees, 2008; Mair & Marti, 2006; Austin, 2006), legitimising the business case as the primary concern. Dart (2004) argued that *moral legitimacy not only connects the overall emergence of social enterprise with neoconservative, pro-business, and promarket political and ideological values that have become central… but also explains the observation that social enterprise is being more frequently understood and practiced in more narrow commercial and revenue-generation terms.* He also points to scholars such as Boschee (2001) and Emerson and Twersky (1996), in warning that institutional theory suggested that social enterprise was likely to continue a narrow, and operational, focus on market-based solutions, business like models and in revenue-generation terms because of the broader validity of pro-market ideological notions in the wider social environment. This brought to the fore the use of commercial entrepreneurship and corporate planning and business design tools and concepts aimed at an increased focus on bottom-line, earned revenue, return on investment and managerialism (Turnbull, 1994; Terry, 1998; Hulgard & Spear, 2006).

Returning to Arthur *et al.* (2006), they continued to outline the hazards of legitimising the business case, where there is tension, suggesting the narrative in the literature has moved toward one that "*if the business activities are a success in the market, it will follow that the social aims will in essence take care of themselves*" (2006,

p. 2). As Young (2006) added where most commentators concentrate on the 'entrepreneurial' in social entrepreneurship, there is a leap of faith with respect to the social process and outcomes of the enterprise and the neglection of the social. As Bull (2008) put it, this leap of faith is problematic as it characterises social enterprise as a way of 'doing' business much the same as private businesses. Doing business also had an unquestionable authority to it, that 'this way' is the 'one best way' (yet a further case of isomorphism!). Arthur *et al.* (2006, p. 2) identified a fundamental issue: *"…a 'business case' narrative and discourse is being privileged in the practice of social enterprise research to the detriment of providing conceptual and theoretical recognition of the social."* Bull (2008) suggests that the competitive environment and race for profits can be destructive, particularly if service delivery is about being more efficient and making profits at the expense of meeting community needs. As Pearce (2003) warns, social enterprises would be compromised to adopt the values and principles of private or state sectors.

Summary

The first wave of critical perspectives on SE/SI culminated in deconstructing SE, in particular critiquing the 'enterprise' as problematic but less about 'the social' being problematic. Wave one assumes that SE/SI is fundamentally a 'good thing', and that the social prefix to the words 'enterprise', 'economy' and 'innovation' are inherently ethically positive stances.

Studies within this emerging field challenged the ideology of the market, critiqued trading as a focal point, questioned organisational legal structures, problematised definitional identities and challenged the political agenda, but were, in turn, co-opted through a blurring of boundaries within the hegemony of the enterprise orthodoxy. The debate centred primarily around who 'owns it', with definitional battles and boundary-blurring, highlighting the contestation of the concepts between state, charity and capitalist hegemonies.

THE SECOND WAVE OF CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL ENTERPRISE/SOCIAL INNOVATION

Following the first wave, there has been a steady increase in research that seeks to understand SE/SI from a critical theoretical position, questioning the epistemologies of the field. When examining the critical turn in SE/SI research, it is not just about the application of critical theory, but the approach to and rationale for research (Fournier & Grey, 2000). Following Curtis's (2008) outline of the objectives of critical research: *"…to identify and challenge assumptions, to recognise the influence of culture, history and social position and to imagine and explore extraordinary alternatives, disrupt*

routines and established orders" (2008, p. 277), exploration of critical perspectives may include revealing hidden ideas or ideologies, examining institutional arrangements and challenging power relations, and identifying potential for alternative or transformative relations (Godin, 2019). Chris Steyaert and Pascal Dey's work has been instrumental in setting and sustaining a shift to the use of critical theory for framing thinking about SE/SI research. Their nine verbs for enacting research practice to keep SE 'dangerous' suggests that the practicalities of SE become more real in the way that they are communicated through research (Steyaert & Dey, 2010). In doing so, they signalled a shift to drawing more clearly on wider critical theory, mostly but not entirely, associated with the Frankfurt School. Critiquing research through denaturalization, critical performativity and reflexivity is central to this second wave of identifying and challenging underlying assumptions. Accounting for the cultural, historical and social environment has influenced the shaping and development of SE/SI research. Critical research takes place through contextualising, historicizing and connecting, to understand how practices take place through context. In doing so researchers are able to intervene, to envision change and transformation (Curtis, 2008; Steyaert & Dey, 2010). This framing helps us to get a sense of the extent to which SE/SI research has enacted a critical perspective of SE.

Identifying and challenging normative assumptions

This critical turn within SE research sought to challenge the normative assumptions behind SE research, that present SE/SI as inherently 'good things' (Chell *et al.*, 2016; Dey & Steyaert, 2016). Denaturalization involves questioning what is taken as given or natural, by deconstructing the perceived 'reality' or 'truth' of knowledge, by revealing its 'un-naturalness' and revealing the unequal power relations that are at play (Fournier & Grey, 2000). Language has an important role in inscribing meaning attached to phenomena. Language can be persuasive, powerful and constructed in a way to prioritise particular views (Steyaert & Dey, 2010), or essentialised (Gibson-Graham, 2008). Parkinson and Howorth (2008) were early pioneers of applying critical discourse analysis (CDA) to the language of SE to highlight how the dominant ideology imposed on social entrepreneurs conflicted with their lived experience as practitioners who felt closer to activists than entrepreneurs. Their research revealed issues of identity, power and ideology in relation to social enterprises.

Pascal Dey also drew on CDA to demonstrate how the dominant ideology of SE becomes imbued with meanings held by mainstream entrepreneurs and is at odds with real-world SE practices, thereby highlighting the political and politicising narrative associated with aspects of SE/SI research (Dey, 2006, 2010). This draws attention to how heroic narratives of SE/SI emphasise the benefits of innovativeness, creativity, excitement and collectiveness to construct an SE/SI narrative as an 'ideal

subject' that nascent entrepreneurs and community activists should emulate. The concealment of reality hides any discussion of struggle, obstacles and risks, weakness or failure, and takes attention away from the problems social entrepreneurs are seeking to address (Dey & Lehner, 2017). Discourse analysis has revealed how SE policy narratives promote a neoliberal ideology of marketisation and competition, rather than social welfare models associated with state, and non-profit provision (Mason *et al.*, 2019; Nicholls & Teasdale, 2017). Dey's work also showed how social entrepreneurs resist and subvert these dominant modes, by appropriating and using them for their own ends, mimicking the ideal of the SE/SI, in order to secure resources (Dey & Teasdale, 2016). The underlying message in SE/SI discourse is that it is people that need to change rather than institutions.

Another concept in critical research in this wave was performativity, which is related to denaturalisation in that it refers to the idea that reality is actively enacted by our words and actions (Law, 2004), not merely constructed or bound by it, and this helps explain how ideology becomes embedded across different social and geographical contexts. Critical performativity identified how policy narratives, such as the competitive view of SE, were taken up in policy and media communications – to influence everyday interactions and create the reality *for* social entrepreneurs (Gibson-Graham, 2008; Steyaert & Dey, 2010). This drew attention to how dominant economistic ideals of SE were continually re-inscribed, affecting the identity formation of potential entrepreneurs who modelled themselves in a performative act of 'becoming' (Phillips & Knowles, 2012). In considering the processes of denaturalisation, Critical SE/SI research has shed light on those practices that inscribe market ideals through the lens of performativity (Petitgand, 2018). Anti-performativity or critical performativity actively resists the dominant economistic position, to prioritise the 'social' of SE/SI. This can take place both through research that sheds light on alternative practices (Gibson-Graham, 2008; Gibson-Graham *et al.*, 2013).

Continuing the work started in the first wave, there has been a push to directly theorise the normative assumptions underpinning SE/SI. Critical researchers explored the ambiguity surrounding the term 'social', that masks the values accompanying the term (Bruder, 2021; Ranville & Barros, 2021). Bruder (2021) questioned assumptions of social missions that he suggested inevitably lead to social and ethical practices within SEs. He pointed to how a drive towards maximisation, inherent in market ideology, creates a focus on meeting a defined social mission rather than broader duties and responsibilities of the organisation. This narrows the social outcomes of the organisation towards achieving an often narrowly defined social goal, sometimes leading to other negative social and environmental outcomes. This economistic drive to maximise social impact can lead to the exploitation of social entrepreneurs, their

employees and the environment (see also Dempsey & Sanders, 2010). Bruder called for a definition of SE that incorporates both social mission and social practices, suggesting integrative ethics as a potential route to bring together the social intent of SE alongside practices, grounded in empirics.

Defining the 'social' in SE/SI in wave two relates to judgements over what is in the interests of society, it therefore becomes a political rather than technocratic investigation (Cho 2006). SE/SI has been positioned as a private response to public problems, whereby citizens become customers and market efficiency replaces democratic decision making (Ganz et al. 2018). This has been articulated in relation to the role of SE in the neoliberalisation of economies in the UK and Europe, outlined in the first wave. It is evident in SE/SI mainstreaming that politicisation continues and that SEs and their supernatural powers are to be held as the solution to grand societal challenges (Ganz *et al.*, 2018). Building on earlier work, researchers have recognised a need to repoliticise SE/SI through clarity over underpinning ideological and political principle (Dey & Steyaert, 2012). This has relevance to the political ideology underpinning SE's motivations (Jarrodi *et al.*, 2019), but arguably more so as researchers. As Ranville and Barros's (2022) point out in their analysis of 100 key SE papers, identified contradictory political philosophies within the field and individual papers, suggesting that the field is still either open and multi-vocal or inconsistent and incoherent.

Recognise the importance of context

Critical theory is concerned with understanding and explaining phenomena as shaped by (and shaping) context, rather than theoretical abstraction. SE/SI does not operate in a vacuum, it influences and is influenced by local conditions (Steyaert & Dey, 2010). To uncover the reasoning behind actions and events, it is important to understand how different contexts, aspects and conditions of phenomena influence others (Vincent & O'Mahoney, 2018). SE/SI can be viewed as a contextualization of entrepreneurship and innovation – a move away from the standard entrepreneurship models that focus on entrepreneurship motivated by profit and wealth creation. Reflecting standard entrepreneurship context studies, which were evident in earlier first-wave approaches, research considered how context was important for understanding 'when, how and why' social entrepreneurship happens, and also who becomes a social entrepreneur (Welter *et al.*, 2020, Welter, 2011). As outlined above, early studies focused on the context of social mission, differentiating social enterprise from for-profit business, and how the conflict between social and profit motives and pressures can lead to mission drift (as outlined in the first wave, citing Aiken, 2006, and Cornforth, 2014). There has been significant expansion in the number and nature of contextual studies of SE/SI in the last ten years, with research examining the

development in different geographical settings, incorporating gender, ethnic and indigenous cultural perspectives. Contextualised explanations can shed light on why certain similarly resourced ideas can have a different outcome in alternative political or community settings, or in the same place (or same organisation) at a different time. These individual cases are crucial in building critical mass that can influence a shift in the dominant assumptions and theories. This body of knowledge can help challenge assumptions of what constitutes SE/SI and can shed light on types of social enterprise and innovation that have been marginalised. However, many of these studies take their contribution as empirical and tend not to adopt a critical theoretical lens (de Bruin & Teasdale, 2019). Moreover, a focus on the micro/individual social entrepreneurs or organisations tends towards presenting a positive analysis of SE.

Parkinson and Howorth (2008) link the social and economic history of a place to how SE is conceived and perceived within a locale. They highlight how meaning making is contested in SE, by linking fine-grained local detail to broad national themes to demonstrate how context and local experience differs. Institutional theory has provided one way of critically understanding SE/SI within its contexts (van Wijk *et al.*, 2019; Stephan *et al.*, 2015). Institutional approaches have been drawn on to identify barriers and enablers for SE/SI activity through consideration of institutional voids and institutional supports (e.g., Stephan *et al.*, 2015). The EMES adopted definition of SE drawing on Karl Polanyi's institutional approach points to the fit of institutional theory for understanding competing logics: SE is conceptualised as operating between market, government and society spheres, the EMES scholars ICSEM project sought to link types of SE to configurations of institutional factors across different countries (Defourny & Nyssens, 2017).

The tensions in transformational change

The idea of transformation is central to definitions of SE/SI, and potentially the distinguishing feature between social innovation and social enterprise (Moulaert & MacCallum, 2018). Whilst SE is frequently positioned as the solution to inequality and deprivation, critical research has increasingly identified it as palliative (used as a salve for structural problems), rather than succeeding in altering or replacing dominant institutions, to address the core of a problem (Scott-Cato & Raffaelli, 2017). When considering the transformative potential of SE/SI, recent work has identified interacting levels and processes of change, that include micro-level changes in social relations, systems innovation that takes place within societal institutions and structures, changing the rules of the game at the macro level and narratives of change that seeks to challenge the existing order through counter-narrative (Avelino *et al.*, 2019; Pel *et al.*, 2020). Micro-level changes form the basis of J. K. Gibson-Graham's community economies approach, that draws attention to alternatives that have been

marginalised by dominant practices or ideologies. The many case studies, and contextual examples, can be seen here as building up to demonstrate to participants, wider society and government that 'another way is possible'. By defining SI as a process of social transformation there is a move away from a focus on the social benefits to recognise a potential dark side to change, that can serve vested and dominant interests (Pel *et al.,* 2020). This is evident in Teasdale *et al.*'s (2021) analysis that identified how Ashoka's discourse was guided by individual rather than structural transformation – thereby individualising responsibility for SI. Further studies have drawn attention to power relations, identifying how one group's empowerment can disempower others, highlighting the need to maintain a critical stance that recognises all parties (Avelino, 2021). This reinforces the drive to expose the assumptions underpinning research, and points towards a normative theory that involves a judgement on what SE/SI 'ought' to be (Avelino, 2021; Flyvberg, 2001).

Reflexivity and critical research

Second-wave studies have integrated reflexivity and started to consider the values of what is assumed to be socially beneficial. Examining practices from the perspective of the social in a way that can reveal how dominant assumptions can influence SE and the way we understand it. Curtis (2008) revisited a project with a critically reflexive view and found that their analysis had been co-opted by the competitive narrative whereby the evaluation of success rested on a managerial measure. This drew attention to the role of values in SE research and a need to be aware and explicit about them, as they can influence evaluations of success or reported impacts of SE (Ranville and Barros, 2022). Ruebottom (2018) highlighted how the integration of economic logics into community food production is not necessarily a negative step, but the problem arises if we automatically assume it to be good. Similarly, replication of programmes across geographical boundaries can impose certain values on communities which in itself is problematic (Ruebottom, 2018). This points to the argument that SE can undermine democracy, as SEs make decisions of public provision outside of the political realm. It highlights the importance of voice and public participation in SE/SI.

Summary

The second wave of critical perspectives on SE/SI had researchers looking in the mirror, examining how research was undertaken, with purpose given to a recognition of language, identity and power relations, with a view to creating spaces for alternative voices and experiences. In doing so SE/SI researchers were influenced by critical management studies scholars, exploring denaturalisation, reflexivity and performativity, adopting critical discourse analysis. The shift here, from the first wave,

is from a concern about the co-option of SE/SI into neoliberal organisational forms, policies and assumptions, to questioning the very basis of SE/SI itself, critiquing the assumptions that the early critiques made about the 'goodness' of SE/SI and its effect in the real world. Wave two, therefore, marked a shift towards using the progressive toolkit of critical theory to lay bare the underlying power dynamics implicit in research. The analytical frames, however, in making local context matter, in giving voice to alternate and minority voices – questioning mainstream narratives, is that everything is circumstantial and equally valid.

THE THIRD WAVE OF CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL ENTERPRISE/SOCIAL INNOVATION

When we look back at 2010, we saw a high point of what was understood to be critical theory (that informed SE/SI theorising). Yet, much has changed since 2010, especially in the world of sociology and critical theory. There has been an implicit notion that the 'Frankfurt School', the intellectual home of Horkheimer, Habermas and Gramsci, represents a left-of-centre, progressive world view critiquing dominant narratives and truths to arrive at a more accurate representation of the world. But new right (*nouvelle droit*) intellectuals such as Jordan Peterson and Alain de Benoist have been steadily co-opting the intellectual armoury of critical theory. Peterson, the more popularly well-known writer, champions attacks on what he calls 'cultural Marxism', calling it the new 'hegemony' (Sharpe, 2020). He misrepresents (or misunderstands) what the Frankfurt School project was about, and casts it as a communist plot to overtake academia and social discourse. Nevertheless, despite the apparent misunderstanding, he uses the very frames of critique used by the Frankfurt School in his own analyses to claim that the progressive project is the dominant mainstream logic. The anti-progressive has become the minority voice, in their argument, and Frankfurt School critical theory strategies are open to be co-opted by them.

Less well-known, but highly influential in the new right intelligentsia, is Alain de Benoist. His contribution is considered to be a 'novel restatement of fascism' (Sheehan, 1981) that takes up the influences of those traditionally accepted to be the core of critical theory, namely: Gramsci, Marx, Buber, Debord, Baudrillard and Pareto, amongst others, in an attempt to go beyond traditional left/right politics and mix radical left with radical right ideologies. He went on to have a significant influence in the English speaking right-wing intellectual circles (Copsey, 2013). The strategy of the new right is to co-opt the very terms used by critical theorists and twist them to non-progressive outcomes. An example is the use of Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony.

For the left, the insights of Gramsci are used to inform analyses of the functions of economic class within structures created for and by cultural domination. Cultural artefacts transmit and disseminate the dominant ideology to the populations of a society. In *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (1970), Louis Althusser develops this notion of a dominant ideology created and sustained by culturally dominating institutions to the state. *Ideological State Apparatuses* are all pervasive, from the clergy, through schools, the police, political parties, mass communications and the academy. For Althusser, the object of such critical analysis is the conservative state. For the new right, the object is what they refer to as left leaning neoliberal, globalist elites including state and capitalists.

For Peterson and De Benoist, the cultural hegemony is progressivism itself. Powerful university positions are, in their claims, dominated by 'Frankfurt School' informed 'cultural Marxists' (Tuters, 2018; Mirrlees, 2018). This leaves a strong question mark over attempts at applying 'critical theory' to thinking about SE/SI. We can take for granted Horkheimer's own notion of social innovation as 'sociological change and intellectual emancipation' as being a progressive or left-leaning interpretation. Sociological change is no longer solely a progressive project. Conservative, anti-globalist, reactionary and fascist movements also seek 'sociological change and emancipation', but their type of change? Change can be negative or positive, and emancipation is not just something that only the left does for its adherents. The right also seeks emancipation from the "expansive institutional complex that produces and regulates public opinion to ensure the perpetuation of the "progressive" status quo" (Woods, 2019. p. 39). When we reconsider phrases such as anti-performativity, denaturalisation and reflexivity, we can no longer assume the hegemony to which they are directed. What emerges is a debate, long avoided, about whose ethics are good?

This problem presented by the new right lays bare an ontological blindness that has hampered clarity in the field. In the contestation about the meaning and function of the terms (and associated phenomena), most often epistemology is elided with ontology. This is an 'episteme' that underlies our cognitive formations (Foucault, 1980, p. 197). What is known about social enterprises and social entrepreneurs, innovations and innovators, acting in a social(ised) economy or field is discussed endlessly, because such phenomena are knowable and measurable. The first wave assumed a common episteme, the debates centred around definitions, for example, in the same epistemic space. The relativistic shift in the second wave rightly pointed out that other knowledges existed (and had been ignored) but assumed that ontologies were also diverse and equally true. When this happens, without explicitly dealing with the ontological assumptions of the minority voices and experiences, new (and less savoury) voices and experiences are given the same space as those who are genuinely the subjects of SE/SI attention.

The dancing around the notion of the 'social in social enterprise' arises because the purpose of the social is deemed to be intrinsically (ontologically) good and progressive. The outcome of the new right challenge is to identify the relativism present in the ontological assumptions of the theorists involved. We do not want to call out research and researchers that have been affected by this, but journal papers can fly too close to 'environmental nativism' (Reidel, 2021) when exploring bio-regionalist innovations which emphasise community, localism, place-based interventions. Pursuing local community-based control is not the same as pursuing social justice (Pendras, 2002). Pro-local scholars tend to essentialize local communities as the network of trust and social harmony, and uncritically celebrate (assumed) ecological and political benefits of localism (Park, 2013). A community garden can be taken over by a far-right community group and become a white space. Bioregionalist social enterprises can frame their work in neofascist indigenist discourse (Manavist, 2018). Stopping with Frankfurt School analytical strategies, and unthinkingly adopting relativist social constructionist epistemologies is dangerous and demands a response. We think that this response lies in the field taking seriously the philosophical position of critical realism (Bhaskhar, 2013 [1975], Mingers, 2014).

In formulating our thesis of three waves, we have been influenced by the now common reference to 'critical turns' hailing new and more theoretically informed developments, or 'waves' of differing underlying epistemologies, ontologies and implicit assumptions in sociology and in SE/SI literature. Steyaert and Dey (2018), at a decadal moment, refer to three decades of "sometimes highly functionalistic research, anecdotal evidence and 'best management' thinking (2018, p. 6) in their rationale that it was the 'right time' (*kairos*) for their book. We believe that linear time (*chronos*) still cuts through their pivotal moment, in that all the issues with SE/SI research that they critique still continue, as new people enter the field unfamiliar with theoretical developments, unknowingly or deliberately further contributing to the growing mountain of un(self)critical research in the field. Steyaert and Dey use five forms of criticalness, the first three of which we find in our first two waves, (1) questioning popularist assumptions, (2) making visible the ideological foundations of those popularist messages, and (3) the performance of those foundations in speech and action. They suggest that (4) the normative moral foundation of SE/SI is 'participation and democracy', yet Ruebottom (2018), Eikenberry (2018) and Horn (2018), in the same volume break that down into pro-business liberal democratic values of freedom through work (sic), internationalisation of social ethics and an attempt to shift power to community-based deliberative democracies through stakeholder participation. These lead to the fifth point (Friedman *et al.*, 2018), that 'alternative realities' can be now imagined (p. 251) with 'fundamental changes of meaning' (p. 253) in which "neither 'social' nor 'entrepreneurship' is a fixed signifier"

(Calas *et al.*, 2018. p. 264) – dangerously conflating epistemology with ontology. The physical form of SE/SI is no longer fixed in the minds of critical theorists of SE/SI, it is now mobile and inconstant. The outcomes created by SE/SI now become liquid and slippery (Bauman, 2013). The conditions for this are set in the second wave, and are ripe for exploitation by the new right by processes of normalisation. This opens the door to alt-realities, flattening ontology (Choat, 2018), or in critical realist terms, conflating epistemology with ontology (Kant, 2014). Social innovation is reduced to an assemblage of individualistic actants, with no purposive ontology, no ultimate purpose or meaning, no structures that govern or structure action or thought. This matters, because if there is no ontological truth to good or evil, then post-modern and new materialist epistemologies of SE/SI are open to evil social innovation as well as good.

Where positivism posits that there is an ultimate reality, and it is reliably analogous to our perceived (epistemological) empirical reality, social constructionism (in its post-modernist extreme) claims there is nothing real except the surface, nothing real behind the hyperrealism of what we perceive and experience (Eco, 1986, 1995; Baudrillard, 1994; 1998) – the only thing that is real is what we think about the real; reality is merely constructed. Our notion of what social outcome is 'good' is merely a matter of one's political stance. The ontological is confused or conflated with the empirical in both these positions. A critical realist stance parses the difference between ontology and epistemology, whereas positivism and social constructivism conflate the two (Johnson & Duberley, 2003). Critical realists assert the existence of a causally efficacious reality (Greek: ὄντος ontos) independent of human experience about which we can acquire justified knowledge (Greek ἐπιστήμη episteme), whilst recognising the inevitability of the knowledge being limited, contextual and contingent (epistemically relativist). Critical realism allows for a reality that is independent of human knowledge (but perhaps not as simply permanent and unchanging as a positivistic naïve realism) and our knowledge of that reality is (sufficiently) reliable, but contingent on the limitations of human perception and the impermanence of reality, ontologically.

CONCLUSIONS

In the first wave, the purpose of the SE/SI concept is implicitly to smooth the functions of society and capitalism, to address the gaps and inconsistencies of (post)-modern capital and to ameliorate the negative outcomes of capital. What is deemed positive or negative is glossed over. In the second wave, the epistemological assumptions begin to be unpicked. The contexts within which social

enterprise/innovation arises are questioned, and the purposes for which SE/SI is created are also questioned, but still, the ethics of 'social' outcomes are left untouched or are assumed to be relativist (i.e.; a good social outcome; greater solidarity amongst people; less dysfunction within capitalism; a reduction in poverty with addressing the causes of poverty; or a means to tackle a hegemony of elitist neoliberalism, through progressive or regressive means). The theorist Max Horkheimer described a theory as critical insofar as it seeks "*to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them*" (1982, p. 244): One person's social enterprise is another person's liberation from hegemony.

We have presented the histories of two waves of the critical turn in SE/SI literature, first an instrumentalist critique, debating what agents and institutions get to be called social innovators and social enterprises, and which social movements gave rise to the 'new' phenomena. The second wave, a post-modern turn, shifted the critique to questioning whose voices and experiences were dominant in the framing of the practice of SE/SI and how it was written about in the academic and grey literature. Gaps and contradictions (Curtis, 2011) in the mainstream discourses were opened up and exploited to make spaces for feminist, environmental, race and class (Schachter, 2022) based discourses. Consequentially, the assumed ontological common ground has been shaken, such emancipatory shifts then run the risk of being co-opted and exploited.

We are not accusing any of the fantastic papers published in SE/SI research of being fascist, anti-progressive or at all antithetical to the positive social contribution of social innovation and social entrepreneurship, but we do wish to point to how the new right can readily co-opt the terminology and analytical strategies that progressive theorists have used, which (if unchecked) will result in taken for granted notions of 'the goodness of the social' being captured by those who are also anti-modernist, anti-globalist, and who judge that inequality is a naturally positive state of affairs (Finlayson, 2021). We ask whether the third wave will be where relativist critiques are co-opted by reactionary perspectives, or where critical realism demands a more forensic focus on 'the good' that we all purport to desire. In the aspirations to grow the field and be generous and inclusive, we are in danger of letting other, more circumspect, wolves in at the back door.

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