

Special issue: Entrepreneurship in popular culture

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From *Ideologies and Norms...*

Thirty years ago, the Council for Management and Working Life Issues, the so-called ‘FA-rådet’, founded by the Swedish Employers’ Association, ran a research program on *Ideology and Norms*. The overarching purpose was to shed light upon widespread and ingrained notions of ‘the entrepreneur’ in society, and – if possible – to counter negative or even false depictions of entrepreneurship, business life, and enterprising initiatives so that more people would be willing to start businesses and thereby strengthen Sweden’s economy.

Based on the assumption that writers, filmmakers, painters, and other artists contribute to shaping peoples’ worldviews, a specific interest was directed towards the arts and the cultural domains. A particular research project was set up within the program to address the following research questions: How are entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship portrayed by artists in domains such as literature, art, theatre, and films? And what “*mental scope of action*” does such portrayals set for real-life entrepreneurs? (see De Geer, 1994, p. 7 ff).

To answer these questions, several prominent scholars were invited to contribute at a symposium held to discuss notions of entrepreneurship in the fields of art and culture. These contributions were later to be published in the anthology *Skapare, skojare och skurkar: Företagaren i litteratur, film och konst* [Creators, pranksters and villains: The entrepreneur in literature, film and the arts], edited by the research program’s director, historian Hans De Geer (1994). The book is in many respects a fascinating read. First and foremost, contrary to expectations, authors did not find a wealth of negatively connoted portrayals of entrepreneurs in contemporary art and popular culture. Rather, entrepreneurs were deemed to be conspicuously absent in literature (Hägg, 1994), and rarely seen as antagonists on film (Hedling, 1994) or on TV (Ross, 1994).

From a historical perspective, De Geer (1994) concluded, this absence of entrepreneurs in literature, film and TV must be regarded as something of a ‘new phenomenon’; it seemed as if previous dark and negatively connoted depictions of entrepreneurs step-by-step had vanished from the 1950s and onwards, only to still hold forth in occasional televised ‘soap operas’, such as *Dallas* and *Falcon Crest*, and in some pulp fiction. In these types of works, it is, however, interestingly enough, only big business owners – ‘capitalists’ or ‘tycoons’ – that are portrayed in

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a negative manner. Owners of small and medium-sized businesses are most often treated benevolently.

For De Geer, the absence of entrepreneurs in artistic and cultural works was somewhat of a mystery – not the least, in light of his notions that entrepreneurship at the time seemed to have a greater influence on people’s lives than ever before. This mystery, he speculated, might be explained by changes in artistic directions – from an interest in social realism towards an interest in psychological matters – but also by changes in the markets for art and cultural goods. Consumers of literature, film and TV might simply have acquired a ‘distaste’ for portrayals of business life generally, and entrepreneurs specifically.

Speculations like these, are fascinating as is the book’s ideological intent, and how it is marked by its time. In 1994, neoliberalism began to tighten its grip on welfare politics with deregulated markets, privatizations, and tax cuts following in its wake. That is, the material infrastructures of societies, throughout Europe and in America, had undergone profound changes. The “*mental infrastructure*”, as De Geer (1994, p. 7) calls it, was however lagging. ‘Entrepreneurship’ was not on the agenda – neither as something worth investing in nor as a competence to develop and foster. The ‘entrepreneur’ was not (yet) made part of the social stock of knowledge.

De Geer’s book – and the research program it was part of – could in this regard be read as a very deliberate ideological attempt to align art and culture with the neoliberal agenda; to load the ‘entrepreneur’ with positive connotations, and to tone down the (at least historically substantiated) hostility towards entrepreneurs found in different types of artworks. Such attempts are, however, sharply rejected by Arne Jarrick (1994) in one of the anthology’s closing comments: “*It would be fatal to ask writers and filmmakers to produce gullible idealizations of entrepreneurs. The result would merely be reversed social realism. No, it would not happen at all. Ask artists for more pleasant representations, and you will get a stinging box on the ear*” (Jarrick, 1994, p. 336, our translation).

... via three decades of pervasive *entrepreneurialisation*...

Since 1994, entrepreneurship has indeed become a hot topic of conversation in several different societal sectors. Within business policy, entrepreneurship is seen as a solution to everything from unemployment to economic stagnation and lack of growth (see Gilbert et al, 2004); within the education system, entrepreneurship has become a profile area for both secondary schools and universities (see Katz, 2002; Lundqvist & Williams-Middleton, 2024) and in Sweden it has even become a compulsory subject in primary school (see Dahlstedt & Hertzberg, 2012). Within public and private organizations alike, entrepreneurship has become a sought-after trait, style or attitude amongst both managers and employees (see Eberhart et al, 2022); and within civil society, hopes are increasingly being tied to entrepreneurship as the answer to contemporary social challenges (see Light, 2010). Entrepreneurship’s praises have been sung to such an extent that there are ample grounds for claiming that Western societies have become *entrepreneurialised*.

Entrepreneurialisation intervenes in people’s lives in the most pervasive ways – from the cradle (see Thornton, 2011) to, if not the grave, at least old age (Shimoni, 2018). On the one hand, normative notions of entrepreneurship are conveyed as something fundamentally good, useful and desirable, with such conviction that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to even consider the idea that entrepreneurship also has its negative sides (for a discussion see Örténblad, 2020). This entrepreneurialisation seems to have taken control of our thoughts and made entrepreneurship into something completely irresistible.

On the other hand, just because entrepreneurship is being made so irresistible, people's identities are created and shaped in and through this entrepreneurialisation. 'Entrepreneur' becomes a life project for people to tie their ambitions, expectations, and hopes to; it becomes a position in society to direct one's efforts towards in the hope of one day being counted among the chosen few; and it becomes a function in society to which resources are attached in the form of both economic and symbolic capital. Entrepreneurship becomes, in short, something worth fighting for (for a discussion of the genesis of "*the entrepreneurial self*", see Bröckling, 2016).

... to a special issue on *Entrepreneurship in popular culture*

Against the backdrop of three decades of entrepreneurialisation, it is not a surprise that entrepreneurship has taken hold as something irresistible and desirable also in the fields of art and culture, especially within cultural policy discourses (see Pyykkönen & Stavrum, 2018). The long-established notion of a profound opposition between art and commerce, eloquently outlined and theorized by Pierre Bourdieu not the least (1993), has been challenged to its core, and the idea of 'art for art's sake' is increasingly being replaced by a commercial logic of market adaptation and profit-seeking (see Stenström, 2000; Ellmeier, 2003). In turn, new identities, positions, dispositions, and roles are being carved out in the fields of art and culture (see Paquette, 2012; Ericsson, 2018).

But what about the entrepreneurialisation's influence on artistic and cultural works in terms of form and content? Have new entrepreneurial identities – new protagonists and antagonists – emerged in artistic works? Have new literary, TV or film genres been developed in which entrepreneurs play a key role? Is perhaps entrepreneurship portrayed in different ways within different art forms and/or genres? Are depictions of entrepreneurship more prevalent in some art forms than others? If so, why? Are there differences between how men and women are portrayed as entrepreneurs in the fields of art and culture? If so, what are they? Why? And what are the consequences? And, most pressing in relation to the ideological intent of De Geer's (1994) project: Are entrepreneurs more present in literature, on TV and on film today? And if so, are they portrayed positively, negatively – or indifferently?

With such questions in mind, we decided to call for papers on the subject of 'entrepreneurship in culture'. Our call was empirically open and without any ideological strings attached: Instead of having an agenda to promote positive images of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship, our project was guided by curiosity. The result is a collection of texts in which different expressions of entrepreneurship in different types of artistic and cultural works are described and interpreted by relating them to different theoretical and societal contexts.

Taken together, the texts develop a differentiated understanding of how expressions of entrepreneurship vary in different artistic and cultural contexts, and they do indeed indicate changes in the artistic and cultural representation of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship over time and across space. Hopefully, our collection of texts will encourage further research efforts on ideology and norms within the fields of art and culture, and what happens with artistic and cultural material expressions as the ideological context of production –the "mental infrastructure" (De Geer, 1994) – is fundamentally altered. There are still many questions to be answered.

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