

# SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP: SOCIALITY, ETHICS AND POLITICS

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I, Carolina Bandinelli, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.



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Signed

Date

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*For Beatrice and Zoe*

## ABSTRACT

Social entrepreneurship is a growing cultural phenomenon that involves a variety of actors – politicians, academics, business men and women, private citizens - across a range of interconnected fields – e.g. social work, sustainable development, the sharing economy and technological innovation. Notwithstanding its heterogeneous manifestations, social entrepreneurship is characterised by the attempt to re-embed social and ethical dimensions within the individualised conduct of the entrepreneur of the self. The aim of this dissertation is to investigate how this process is thought of and negotiated on a subjective level by young social entrepreneurs in London and Milan. Based on an understanding of social entrepreneurs as individuals who perceive work as a means for self-expression, I contextualise this enquiry within the field of cultural studies on the changing nature of labour in neoliberal societies. This thesis draws on an 18-month period of multi-sited and reflexive fieldwork that involved recorded interviews, participant observation and action research. Combining thick ethnographic descriptions and theoretical analysis, I focus on social entrepreneurs' understanding of sociality, ethics, and politics, in so far as they are intertwined with the discourses and practices of entrepreneurship. My argument develops in three stages: to begin with, I show that social entrepreneurs engage in opportunistic and compulsory sociality; then, I dwell on social entrepreneurs' individualised form of ethics; finally, I contend that social entrepreneurs enact and embody a post-political subjectivity. This subjectivity is defined by discourses and actions whose scope and significance are restrained within the bounds of individuals' experience and influence. What remains inevitably excluded from this conception of politics is the possibility to of formulating a structural analysis of social issues. In this respect, my research may be regarded as a study on how the neoliberal subject *par excellence* – the entrepreneur of the self – attempts to retrieve and reclaim her political and ethical agency, and what the implications and limits of this endeavour are.

## PROLOGUE

*One warm day in July, in a smart café in Milan, I am waiting for Veronica, an independent fashion designer. She finally arrives. She wears a long grey linen dress. Coral polish on her nails. She tells me she wants to make clothes following a different "philosophy": she does not want to exploit cheap labour forces in developing countries. She neither wants to save on the quality of the materials, nor she wants to follow the aesthetic rules dictated by mainstream fashion. Rather, she wants to do "things differently", producing garments that "last over time". Sipping her piping hot double espresso, she vaguely hints at the "economic, moral and environmental" crisis and declares that "things must change". The details of the auspicated "change" remain mostly obscure, but the desire to tackle some of the backlashes of neoliberal capitalism is expressed enthusiastically.*

*Joanna, a Danish woman who lives in London, reveals a similar attitude: she wants to create a fashion collection involving the community. "People need to feel actively part of the brand" she explains "after all, fashion is such an intimate thing... we need to change the mode of production and include ordinary people, as many people as possible!" Joanna lives in a newly re-decorated flat in Shoreditch, one of the most hipster boroughs of London. Next to her house there's a Wholefood shop where a loaf of bread costs about three pounds. On the other side, there's a brand-new bar that serves 'organic cocktails' in antique tea pots, and plays vinyl records. In her minimalist living room there is a canvas she is about to complete: "I need to express my creative potential" she says, probably to offer an explanation for the painting paraphernalia spread on the wooden floor. Pouring red wine into a big stem glass, Joanna tells me about her career projects: "I had been working for the big names, you know? But what's the point in working for someone else?" Of course, the question is rhetoric. "So I quit my job and decided to set up my enterprise... I needed to do something I believe in, something to improve the world, at least a bit!" she utters persuasively, just before proposing a movie night.*

*Alfredo is the same age as Veronica and Joanna, he is Italian and lives in North London. He dresses in a casual-sport styles. He loves nature, hiking, and mountain biking. He is trying to change the world too. In Italy, he worked for a major bank, he earned a very good salary, and was living with his girlfriend of ten years. He was ready to settle down. But he ditched everything. He could not stand working for people who did not share his "values". He felt "depressed". "I needed to change", he tells me over a pint of pale ale: "I wanted to do something to change how things are, I wanted to have an impact!". Following this drive, Alfredo has moved to London and now is trying to set up his social enterprise. "I am a privileged person, and it's just fair that I give society something back".*

*Veronica, Joanna and Alfredo are running very different projects, their activities encompass different fields and have different objectives, but they share the same desire to "change things" – even to "change the world" – and the will to do it through entrepreneurship. They are social entrepreneurs, often branded "changemakers": well-educated middle class women and men, graduated in a range of subjects that span from engineering to design, from media and communications to economics and finance. They are characterised by their ethical consumer habits, and the firm belief that enterprise is the best tool to tackle social issues.*

*The fact that young people cultivate the project or illusion of "changing the world" is nothing new. Yet, it could be argued that until a couple of decades ago those who wanted to do so would have signed up to a political party or joined a social movement. Now, many people choose another option: becoming entrepreneurs. This may seem paradoxical. After all, wasn't the entrepreneur the narrowly self-interested homo oeconomicus who only cares about his or her own wealth? How come that to "change the world" one must deal with business plans, market research and cash flows?*

*However, on closer inspection, the idea that to set up an enterprise may be the best way to have a positive impact on society seems to be one of the few alternatives left for young adults betrayed by their parents' provisions of a bright, wealthy future. They were the teenagers who were told to "follow their passions" to be "happy" (i.e. (also) rich) and who now struggle to make a living despite their prestigious degrees. They are those who ate snacks and fast food for ages, before finding out they were just contributing to the death of planet earth. They are those who grew up thinking chicken breast was nutritious, and now they are horrified by yet another documentary on the meat industry. By the time they stopped listening to Oasis to move on to Radiohead, they found themselves caught in a post-crisis society where the decline of democracy, the environmental apocalypse and the threats of war and terror weighed on their guilty and well-intentioned souls like the predictions of a contemporary Cassandra. They are trapped in the moral contradictions of trying to solve the problem of exploitation by launching a twitter campaign via a made in god-knows-where I-phone, taking an aeroplane every two months to visit their family and friends, finding a quantum of solace by buying organic carrots for double the price of the good old OGM ones. They may be those who maybe occupied their schools, or participated in the G8 in Genoa, or in the Seattle protests, and then have been left with David Cameron and Theresa May, Angela Merkel, Donald Trump. Moreover, although they have meticulously cultivated their inner talents, the job market seems to reject them, or to offer positions for which these talents have no outlet.*

*Perhaps they have started to think that this entrepreneurialised world, regardless of its contradictions, is the best of all possible worlds. Maybe, they have started to think that representative democracy was a good idea, but considering the levels of corruption and the actual impact of democratic decisions, perhaps the time has come to find some alternative routes for political participation. In such a scenario, it doesn't sound that weird that the grandiose desire of changing the world may take the form of an uncertain but promising career in business, which – if everything goes well – can be a way to make a*

*living and at the same time to follow one's ideals (maybe also to become rich? Look at Zuckerberg!). And all of that in total autonomy, at least until bankruptcy does us part...*

*If this is the case, then what is involved is a mode of thinking ethics and politics; a mode that reflects the condition of existence of many people, and which regards all of us. A mode that puts at stake a certain understanding of the social, ethical and political dimensions, and that may have profound implications, because: What happens when ethics and politics are actualised by means of entrepreneurship? And how does this reflect or contrast the current neoliberal paradigm?*

*Investigating the world vision of social entrepreneurs, analysing their attempt to reintegrate ethics and economy, is a way to understand something important about the circumstances in which we live. This doctoral dissertation moves a step in this direction.*

## INTRODUCTION

### The lifeworld of social entrepreneurs

Over the last two decades there has been a steady growth of a what is called social entrepreneurship. The definition of social entrepreneurship varies in the literature and there is terminological confusion. I use the term in its broadest sense to refer to the variety of initiatives that combine business tools and social aims. In this respect, social entrepreneurship is part of a wider cultural tendency that see the attempt to reintegrate ethics and responsibility with economic conduct. The idea that by means of an enterprise people can reform, transform and improve society is core to a series of interrelated fields that are increasingly popular: social innovation, sharing economy, ethical business, are a few of the tags attached to this manifold phenomenon. What seems to be at stake is a revival of ethics and social responsibility in late neoliberal society. The neoliberal actor *par excellence*, i.e. the entrepreneurs, is re-signified in relation to her or his power to positively intervene in society, and to do that better than professional politicians and political activists.

How can entrepreneurship be redefined as the royal road to express one's will to change society? How can people decide to actualise their desire to change how things are by means of a business? These are the questions that I asked myself when I started this research. The choice of studying this topic originated from an authentic difficulty in understanding and making sense of the very possibility of something like a 'social enterprise'. Indeed, to someone with my background in leftist critical theories, these two words can echo two very different, even opposite, spheres of thoughts and actions. The term 'enterprise' points at the maximisation of individual profit in the context of neoliberal highly competitive market; the term 'social' indicates responsibility towards the collectivity, and values of solidarity and cooperation. I wondered: how come that many

people, especially young adults, could think of the first as instrumental in the achievement of the latter?

To tackle this questions I conducted an eighteen months' fieldwork in London and Milan, during which I met dozens of individuals who express the urge and desire to build a more just and equal society, and who wanted to do that by being entrepreneurs. I asked them how and why they think this is possible; why they have chosen to become entrepreneurs to "change the world"; how they think this change will eventually happen. In this thesis, I analyse their answers, and the data collected by means of participant observation and action research, to deduce social entrepreneurs' lifeworld, the modes in which they constitute themselves as social entrepreneurs.

I appreciate that social entrepreneurs' discourses could be interpreted as ideological: a form of false consciousness that ultimately hides the real state of things. In this view, social entrepreneurs and social entrepreneurs aspirants could be seen as eloquent expressions of a neoliberal world vision that wants the social sphere to be subjugated to the laws of the market. This is at least partially true. But to dismiss the will and desire of social entrepreneurs as merely ideological could prevent us from reaching a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, ultimately leading to the tautological argument that neoliberal subjects act in a neoliberal way. I contend that a more nuanced understanding can enrich cultural, social and critical studies for it can shed light on the space of action and thought left for ethical and political subjects in neoliberal societies. It can also help to unveil the specific forms that sociality, ethics and politics may take after and within the neoliberalism.

In this thesis, I approach social entrepreneurship as a cultural phenomenon: for how it mobilises a series of values that articulate a vision of the world. I argue that this is a significant endeavour since social entrepreneurs are representative of contemporary

cultural atmospheres. These are marked by a profound dissatisfaction with party politics, a dramatic decrease of trust in mechanisms of representation and collective action, and the fall of the belief in infinite economic growth. Social entrepreneurs carry the burden of the economic and political crisis of the contemporary Western world. They are the offspring of neoliberal capitalism, but at the same time they challenge some of its foundational pillars.

Importantly, this thesis is not concerned with social entrepreneurship as an economic sector, neither it aims at establishing its potential efficacy. It also leaves out aspects concerning the ways in which social enterprise are part of an institutional and corporate networked ecosystem aimed at the implementation of a series of policies. In other words, it is not a work that easily fits in the disciplinary boundaries of sociology or economic sociology. Rather, it belongs to the field of cultural studies.

The empirical data presented in this thesis show that social entrepreneurs are immersed in the discursive and material dispositives of power of neoliberalism: they are financially precarious, they believe in the power of the self, and think of work as a means of self-expression. At the same time, they are aware that the current regime is unsustainable: they are left with no job security, they don't know if they can ever afford to buy a house or provide for their eventual children, they fear the ecological disaster, and are sensitive towards patterns of capital exploitations. Caught in this painful ambivalence, they embrace social entrepreneurship.

This thesis is about the ethical, existential and personal lifeworld of social entrepreneurs. It fosters an unusual focus on the selfhood to explore the modes in which some individuals in neoliberal post-crisis Western societies may think and account for their ethical values and virtues as material to be actualised through an entrepreneurial form. It is a study on the constitution of a subject that holds as true a series of discourse that

connect social responsibility and entrepreneurship. It is an ethical study, in the Foucauldian sense of ethics as a hermeneutic of the self (Foucault, 2005)<sup>1</sup>. It is a study on the hermeneutic of a subject, the social entrepreneur, that is representative of the *zeitgeist*.

### What are we talking about when we talk about social entrepreneurship?

As a matter of fact, social enterprise is gaining momentum. According to a recent survey in the UK 'over one in four people starting their own business is motivated by a social purpose or cause' (Unltd, 2015). Social Enterprise UK estimates 70,000 social enterprises in the country, 'around half of which were founded in the last five years' (Social Enterprise UK, 2016). Since the New Labour era, UK governments have adopted a series of initiatives to support and promote social enterprises. This led to the multiplication of satellite structures that 'champion the sector and lobby for it': in the UK 'at least 256 umbrella bodies' can be identified (Bridge et al, 2009: 219).

In the last few years the scene of social entrepreneurship in Milan (and in Italy in general) has risen dramatically. When I first started the fieldwork only a few insiders would know what I was referring to with the term 'social enterprise', while most people simply ignored its existence. After seven years, the term 'social enterprise' is a buzz word, and is increasingly popular in a range of fields: from arts to social services, from technological innovation to the green economy. As Bertram Niessen and Davide Zanoni illustrate, since 2012 there has been a multiplication of initiatives to fund and support social and creative entrepreneurship. For instance, Fondazione Italiana Accenture has launched a call for arts projects related to social innovation, with a prize of one million euros for those shortlisted. A further example is Changemakers for Expo, which involved the selection of 10 start-ups for an incubation programme (Niessen and Zanoni, 2016).

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<sup>1</sup> I will expand on this in Chapter III.

Social entrepreneurship is a growing, ever-changing network in which different actors participate, suggesting different perspectives and interpretations - sometimes contradictory, sometimes closely related. This undetermined status is reflected in the varieties of activities that may fit under the umbrella term 'social enterprise'. These include practices of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR); businesses that produce sustainable products or services, operating in the so-called green economy; private welfare providers; enterprises that experiment with open-source production and the sharing economy; and also cooperatives and cultural associations, e.g. community cinemas, libraries, cafes, animal shelters and so on...; and firms in the field of behaviour changing design (sometimes referred to as 'design for change')<sup>2</sup>; alternative finance projects such as crowdfunding platforms (e.g. Kickstarter) or the famous Grameen Bank founded by the Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus<sup>3</sup>. The phenomenology of social entrepreneurship has a similarly fluid and composite character, it appears as mostly evenemential: comprising of myriads of events, festivals, on-line platforms, seminars, workshops, think tanks, conferences, lectures, camps, booklets, research papers, how-to books, coworking spaces, business clinics, incubators, accelerators, and so on and so forth.

Despite its heterogeneous manifestations, there is a conceptual core that pertains to and traverses its diverse interpretations and definitions. This is the idea that entrepreneurial means can be successfully deployed to have a positive impact on society: to make it more just, sustainable and healthy. Consequently, the social entrepreneur emerges as the

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<sup>2</sup> Behaviour changing design is a field that combines behavioural science with design thinking. Generally, it is defined as a technique to tackle social issues: for instance, a Design Council and Warwick Business School booklet states that: 'the best way to solve social issues is to not only research how and why people make decisions, but use the design of products, services and places to help us all make better decisions', The Behavioural Design Lab (2013).

<sup>3</sup> The Grameen Bank was founded in 1983 to provide microfinance services to the poorest in Bangladesh without requiring any collateral. In October 2011, it was estimated to have '8.349 million borrowers, 97% of whom are women.' And to provide 'services in 81,379 villages, covering more than 97% of the total villages in Bangladesh' Grameen Bank (2016).

champion of the collective interest, the better-suited subject to build a better society. This is evident in the public as well as academic discourses on the matter. Alan Fayolle and Henry Matlay, editors of the *Handbook of Research on Social Entrepreneurship* boldly claim that ‘the main vocation of social entrepreneurship [...] is to meet social and societal needs that have not yet been addressed by the state or the commercial sector’ (Fayolle and Matlay, 2010: 1). The website of the Skoll Foundation - one of the largest organisations offering funding and support to social entrepreneurs – describes them as ‘extraordinary leaders’ whose ‘organizations are creating innovative models to drive equilibrium change — the disruption of social, economic, and political forces that enable inequality, injustice, and other thorny social and environmental problems to persist’ (Skoll, 2016).

This emphatic language is often shared by politicians and laypeople alike. US former president Barack Obama, at the 2015 Global Entrepreneurship Event, remarked that social entrepreneurs can help by ‘lifting people out of poverty, combating climate change, preventing the spread of disease’ (Obama, 2015). And virtually every social entrepreneur I met during this research embraces the belief that it is possible to “change the world” using entrepreneurial means. The underlying assumption is that the enterprise may provide the framework to pursue the maximisation of common happiness. A form of economic thought and action is so combined with ethical and social responsibility, and sponsored as the best solution to the most pressing issues of our world.

### The revival of ethics?

Social entrepreneurship is not the only current phenomenon distinguished by the effort to integrate social and ethical conduct with the production of economic value. The reintegration of a social dimension in the production process has been at the centre of various experiments, with equally various political connotations. One of the most relevant concerns the case of peer to peer production. The Open Software movement has been

praised by a number of scholars as the ideal of 'common based peer production': i.e. a mode of production and distribution based on a seemingly non-hierarchical collaboration and driven by motivation that exceeds monetary rewards (see, for instance, Benkler 2006; Bauwens, 2005). More recently, some of the principles of collaborative peer production have been incorporated into and structured by the so-called sharing economy, which makes direct interaction with service providers (e.g. Uber drivers or Air BnB hosts) the building block of a new mode of production, distribution and consumption, which narrates itself as one that puts 'people' at the centre of the economy (Botsman and Rogers, 2011).

William Davies notes that after a few decades in which the term 'social' suffered from a stigma that made it sound superfluous at best, today it seems to have experienced 'something of a revival' at least on a discursive level (Davies, 2015: 2). He goes on by enumerating the fields that have been rebranded by means of the prefix 'social': 'social marketing', 'social return on investment', 'social valuation', 'social analytics' 'social network' and, of course, 'social entrepreneurship' (Davies, 2015: 2)<sup>4</sup>. In a similar vein, Adam Arvidsson, in his book *The Ethical Economy*, systematises the various tendencies towards a mode of economic production that is oriented towards and motivated by ethical values and social conduct (Arvidsson and Peitersen, 2013). Although he recognises the purely promotional nature of some of these initiatives (especially when taken by big corporations), he also signals an authentic growth of the demand for 'social consciousness' on the part of the public opinion<sup>5</sup> (Arvidsson and Peitersen, 2013).

This is also reflected in the rise of ethical consumerism, proved by the increasing number of brands that position themselves as ethical, and by the rise of CSR investments on the part of big corporations (Egan-Wyer *et al.* 2014). Although it is far from granted that

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<sup>4</sup> Davies interprets these phenomena as attempts to constitute a sphere of action and thought that exceeds the logic of both the state and the market, but he is pessimistic about their true radical potential (Davies, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> More optimistically than Davies, he speculates on the possibility of a new ethical economy paradigm that involves the development of a way of measuring value that accounts for the ethical sentiment of the public (Arvidsson and Peitersen, 2013).

actors in the market can be in a position to really promote ethics over profit (Bertillsson, 2014), and although ethical consumers' behaviour can emerge as a form of 'delegation' and 'illusion' (Waltz *et. al.* 2014), these phenomena still reveal a re-birth of ethics in contemporary economy and culture.

Following these considerations, I contend that social entrepreneurship can be seen as a crucial case study for the understanding of a wider phenomenon that sees the attempt to integrate social and ethical dimensions within the sphere of economic thought and action. I set out to explore how the spheres of ethics and sociality are re-defined by their close intertwining with entrepreneurship; and if this very intertwining can translate into a new political paradigm.

#### What is social in social entrepreneurship?

As I will further illustrate in Chapter II, the fact that entrepreneurship is a form of thought and action that connects and combines diverse orders of values and logic, is something that emerges from the classic literature on the matter. Hence, the capacity of bringing together different domains is not an exclusive prerogative of social entrepreneurship, but rather a feature of entrepreneurship itself. Since its earliest formulation by Jean Baptiste Say and Joseph Schumpeter, entrepreneurship has been characterised by its inherent ambiguous character. Schumpeter uses the category of entrepreneurship to account for the 'creative destruction' that produces change and innovation (Schumpeter, 1989). Frank Knight pinpoints that entrepreneurship exceeds the domain of pure economic calculation and belongs to that of inherent uncertainty (Knight, 2006). And David Stark, building on Schumpeter and Knight, argues that entrepreneurship exploits uncertainty to create opportunities, and recombines multiple evaluative principles (Stark, 2009).

I maintain that entrepreneurship is substantially ambiguous and functions as a kind of Kantian schema to connect diverse orders of values and logics. Kant used the notion of

schema to account for the ways in which our sense impressions can be related to, and translated into intellectual categories (Kant, 1781). A schema is a double headed Janus, that can connect separate orders of values and logic. Entrepreneurship has the function of a schema in connecting the economic with the personal. This ambiguity is a necessary condition to understand contemporary discourses on social entrepreneurship. It is because of this inherent ambiguity that entrepreneurship can be thought of as a means to act for a variety of objectives, with a variety of resources. However, this condition, while necessary, is not sufficient to account for contemporary discourses on social entrepreneurship.

The meaning in which the term 'social entrepreneurship' has been used in the last two decades indicates something beyond the fact that entrepreneurship unfolds within a social sphere, recombines social resources, involves creative human agency and have social externalities. It rather signifies that the enterprise, the social enterprise, has as its main purpose that of ameliorating society, making up for its inequalities. Contemporary discourses on social entrepreneurship, building on the ambivalent character of this category, produce and are produced by a cultural phenomenon that sees a growing number of people actualising and expressing their own values and virtues by means of a business. Indeed, while the fact that entrepreneurship works across a range of logics and orders of values is part of the established theoretical *corpus* on the topic, the idea that the enterprise is the best means to express individuals' inner ethical values and virtues may be less obvious. The adjective 'social' here communicates the motivations of the entrepreneurs and the core business of the enterprise.

Following from these considerations, I use the term social entrepreneurship to refer to a cultural redefinition of social responsibility and ethic, and to signal the attempt on the part of neoliberal entrepreneurialised subjects to take full responsibility for a social,

ethical and political dimension<sup>6</sup>. Importantly, such a definition allows to focus on the subjectivity of social entrepreneurs and the regime of truth that they embrace and articulate. This perspective positions this research within the scholarship of cultural studies and critical theories of subjectivity and work in neoliberal societies.

### Social entrepreneurship and neoliberalism?

Within the literature on subjectivity and work in neoliberal societies, the ambiguity of entrepreneurship emerges to function as a dispositive of economic reductionism. The enterprise has been widely interpreted as the building block of neoliberal governmentality, precisely because it produces and is produced by competition, hence inequality, therefore eroding the possibilities of social cohesion and ethical conduct (Lazzarato, 2009; McNay, 2009; DuGay, 1996; Donzelot, 2008; Dilts, 2011). Therefore, the fact that ethical values can be expressed through an enterprise, and that the collective interest can be pursued by individual entrepreneurs, comes out just like a blunt oxymoron.

As William Davies put it: to argue in favour of competition and competitiveness is necessarily to argue in favour of inequality, given that competitive activity is defined partly by the fact that it pursues an unequal outcome (Davies, 2014: 36). And the enterprise is the basic unit of the dynamics of competition, for it articulates the character of a form of life that acts within a space of autonomy and uncertainty and whose actions are evaluated according to their success and efficacy, which, in turn, is measured in economic terms.

This implies the atomisation of the individual who, in so far as s/he perceives herself or himself to be an entrepreneur, will have 'only competitors' therefore equally unequal rivals (Donzelot, 2008: 30). Neoliberal governmentality is defined exactly by the process of de-solidarisation and de-ethicalisation of individuals and society, which is effected by

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<sup>6</sup> The features of this redefinition will be the object of Chapter IV, V, and VI respectively

remodelling people and services in the form of the enterprise. This implies a profound economic reductionism that *de facto* results in the subsumption of ethics and politics into the sphere of calculus and measure. Davies refers to this process as the neoliberal 'disenchantment of politics', i.e. the 'deconstruction of the language of the 'common good' or the 'public'" (Davies, 2014: 3). He argues that:

If liberalism treated the 'economic', the 'social' and the 'political' as separate spheres, with their own discrete modes of evaluation, neoliberalism evaluates all institutions and spheres of conduct according to a single economic concept of value (Davies, 2014:20)

In this scenario, the idea of acting for the collective good by means of the enterprise sounds, at the very least, ambiguous. In principle, entrepreneurial ethos should lead the subject towards a kind of conduct that cannot consider other factors besides the maximisation of individual profit. Indeed, within an economic interpretation, private interest is the only criterion on which to assess the value of one's actions: the social, ethical and political dimensions transcend its limits and are therefore irremediably excluded.

At least, this is what has been argued by a number of prominent ethical scholars (Lazzarato, 2009; McNay, 2009; Donzelot, 2008; Dilts, 2011). For instance, Maurizio Lazzarato notices that the entrepreneurialisation of the self and society will undermine the conditions for social cohesion (Lazzarato, 2009: 111). McNay, drawing on Baumann (2001), Lynch *et. al.* (2009) and McDermont (2009), infers that the 'normalizing effects of the enterprise [...] erodes conceptions of the public domain', and 'the orchestration of individual existence as enterprise atomizes our understanding of social relations, eroding collective values and intersubjective bonds of duty and care at all levels of society' (McNay, 2009: 65)<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> In chapter II I will discuss this literature at length.

Social entrepreneurs openly challenge these statements. The very fact of assuming entrepreneurial means are appropriate for the construction of a more equal and democratic, as well as more efficient, society entails a reworking of the neoliberal regime of truth according to which the market dynamic is substantially aimed at the accumulation of wealth. Indeed, as I will illustrate throughout this thesis, social entrepreneurship discourses and practices imply and indicate a decoupling between the market system (in particular, the entrepreneurial economy) and the ethics of profit. It looks as if the *homo oeconomicus* entrepreneur of the self has become able to co-operate.

Of course, social entrepreneurs' claims could be seen as discursive and affective dispositives of neoliberal governmentality that hijacks ethical feelings towards economic actions, ultimately reducing the first to the latter. It is not my intention to argue against these hypothesis, indeed they sound quite likely considering that social entrepreneurs, as a matter of fact, operate in neoliberal post-crisis societies. Yet, I believe they still signal the attempt and desire to express and actualise ethical feelings and social responsibility. The 'common good' may be misunderstood by them, but it is not altogether 'invisible'. And while they might not be able to reach social cohesion, they do regard it as a value. In other words, an affective attachment toward a form of responsibility towards the others, is at stake, although it may be not fully consistent and formalised.

For this reason, I propose to take seriously the inner ambivalence of social entrepreneurship that, like a double headed Janus, points to the subsumption of the social within the market logic, and to the decoupling of the market and the logic of profit. It enacts an 'assemblage' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) within the heterogeneous elements of competition, individualism and profit on the one hand, and solidarity, collectivity and social engagement on the other. Rather than resolving this ambivalence through a dialectical movement, this thesis represents the endeavour to investigate it.

To do so, I conduct an exploration of the main traits of social entrepreneurship discourses in so far as they reverse – at least on a rhetorical level – the relationship between ethical and economic thoughts and actions, deciphering the two as directly proportional. The questions from which such a reflection has originated are relatively simple, yet essential, and can be considered as the main thesis questions. These are: How can something like a social enterprise be thinkable? How does one have to redefine entrepreneurial tools so as to think of them as adequate for a social ethical and political action? And what kind of sociality, ethics and politics are at stake?

### Methods and Arguments

In this thesis, I foster a focus on the selfhood to explore how social entrepreneurs embrace social entrepreneurship discourses, how they think them through, and what vision of sociality, ethics and politics are entailed. I investigate how embodied social entrepreneurs think about social entrepreneurship, and what kind of subject this thinking makes of them. I want to analyse how they negotiate with the discourse of social entrepreneurship at the level of the self, not in a personal way, but in as much as this thinking process may produce a certain subjectivity. I contend that this perspective is particularly appropriate for the analysis of a phenomenon where a certain subjectivity – that of the entrepreneur – appears to be so central.

To conceptualise this intellectual objective, I use a Foucauldian theoretical framework and formulate it in terms of an attempt to deduce the regime of truth of social entrepreneurs, i.e. 'the types of discourse 'that social entrepreneurs 'harbour and cause to function as true' (Foucault, 1977: 12-13). These are the kinds of discourse that an individual has to hold as true to develop a social entrepreneurial subjectivity. Indeed, the acceptance of a regime of truth is related to a process of subjectivation. The individual who holds as true certain statements, performs and develops a certain subjectivity, which in its turn is characterised by subscribing to a set of beliefs and values about what is true and false,

wrong and right. At stake there is an ethical process, in the Foucauldian sense of a process of self-fashioning (Foucault, 2000). Using such theoretical framework enables a study of discursive regimes for how they translate into a specific subjectivity. In other words, it allows to combine the abstract level of discourse, with the modes in which embodied individuals make sense of them, and identify with them.

To study the social entrepreneurship regime of truth and processes of subjectivation I conducted an 18-month ethnography (from June 2011 to December 2012), in London and Milan – with secondary data coming from informal interactions and interviews in Florence - in the context of which I deployed an inventive mixed methodology. This was the result of an attempt to overcome two major issues that I faced when confronted with the task of studying an deterritorialised and individualised workforce. Firstly, the lack of a sharply delimited field, due to the absence of a specific workplace; and secondly, the need to study a process of self-fashioning, which (as I will show) is crucial to the career advancement of entrepreneurs in general, and social entrepreneurs in particular.

Confronted with these obstacles and needs, I experimented with a multi-sited, mobile and experiential methodology, in which I used my own self as the main instrument of research. In Chapter III, I will discuss at length the opportunities and costs of this methodology; now it suffices to provide a synthetic description. During the fieldwork, I followed the participants in their fluid lives, doing ethnography at a variety of events (workshops, roundtables, seminars, conferences, lectures, networking sessions and so on), and tried to engage with them at a personal level. Most of the data on which the following pages build come from informal interactions: a chat on the tube, a conversation over dinner, a debate while having tea in a coworking space, or drinking a glass of prosecco after a seminar.

Over time, and by means of an action research project, I engaged in a process of subjectivation that gave the research a pronounced reflexive character. This is to say, I became the social entrepreneur I would have become, turning my skills (teaching) and values (education and critical thinking) into a potentially saleable practical project (workshop) to be delivered autonomously (without any institutional support, guidance or obligation), i.e. an entrepreneurial project<sup>8</sup>.

In this doctoral dissertation, combining thick descriptions and theoretical analysis, I present the main findings of this research. My argument unfolds in three stages, which correspond to the three empirical chapters of this dissertation. Firstly, I show that social entrepreneurs engage in a sociality that is both instrumental for accessing career opportunities, and characterised by an ethical burden. This is a form of social interaction that is fully part of one's work, and that involves the embodiment and enactment of a set of ethical values. Secondly, I argue that social entrepreneurship re-embedding of ethics with entrepreneurialised conduct is effected by re-defining social responsibility as part of an individual's self-expression, and deciphering entrepreneurial tools as ethically neutral. Thirdly, I contend that social entrepreneurs enact and embody what I define as a post-political subjectivity. This is distinguished by discourses and actions whose scope and significance are restrained within the bounds of an individual's experience and influence. What remains necessarily excluded from this understanding of politics is the opportunity to formulate a systemic analysis of social issues (I discuss these matters more in detail in Chapter VI).

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<sup>8</sup> As Faubion explains, a process of subjectivation unfolds in the idiosyncrasies between what is peculiar of a certain individual (her or his temperament, cultural background, race, gender, and so on...) and the technologies of the self he or she uses to transform him or herself (Faubion, 2011). I will dwell on these topics at length in chapter III.

This thesis originates from the belief that the cultural significance and symbolic power of social entrepreneurship is to be found in this conceptual nucleus. It comes as no surprise that scholars, practitioners, politicians and sympathisers enthusiastically promote it. This data is indicative of the increasing popularity of social entrepreneurship, and its potential to reach a wide audience. In this respect, studying social entrepreneurs is particularly significant to aid the understanding of contemporary society and culture.

### Chapter Outline

This thesis is divided into six chapters. **Chapter I** offers a brief overview and literature review of social entrepreneurship. It presents some of its main actors, discusses the prominent currents of thought in the new-born academic field of social entrepreneurship studies, and analyses some examples taken from popular literature. The function of this chapter is to set the context for those that follow. Importantly, my work does not directly refer to, or draw on, most existing studies on social entrepreneurship. These are mostly conducted by business and economic scholars who approach the subject with different objectives and analytical categories from those which I deploy. Yet, this body of research is fundamental to understanding how social entrepreneurship constitutes itself as a field of thought and action, and what its main narratives are. The analysis of social entrepreneurship's academic as well as popular literature will lead to the identification of its conceptual core: the idea of doing good – even 'changing the world' - by means of a business.

**Chapter II** sets out the theoretical background of this thesis. Starting from an understanding of social entrepreneurs as subjects who express ethical feelings and political values by means of work, I contextualise my enquiry in the field of cultural and critical studies of subjectivity and labour. To begin with, I engage with the concept of entrepreneurship to outline its inherent ambiguity. Then, drawing on Foucault, I trace the neoliberal genealogy of the enterprise, focusing on the main traits of the subjectivity of

the entrepreneur of the self: an individual who conceives of herself or himself as an enterprise. After that, I delve into the individualised character of the entrepreneur of the self, in relation to the broader post-modern tendency towards individualisation. In particular, I highlight the anti-ethical and apolitical consequences of neoliberal individualisation and entrepreneurialisation.

Then, I move on to consider empirical studies of entrepreneurialised workers, especially in the paradigmatic field of the culture industry, to indicate their ambivalent position as both capitalists and proletarians, caught in the spiral of self-exploitation, and motivated by the urge of passion. Work has become the royal road for happiness and realisation; but also the activity where the individual is required to give all of herself or himself. Within this frame of reference, social entrepreneurs emerge as neoliberal entrepreneurs of the self who try to re-embed a social and ethical dimension to their activities, and consider work the best way to express their values and virtues.

Following this line of thought, I define my research as a study on how the neoliberal subject *par excellence* – the entrepreneur of the self – tries to retrieve and reclaim her social responsibility, ethical sentiments and political agency, and what the implications and limits of this endeavour are. In the last part of the chapter, I clarify my understanding of the terms sociality, ethics and politics. This is a provisional account. In the three empirical chapters - dedicated to sociality, ethics and politics – I provide a more exhaustive definition of these terms. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the concepts of regime of truth and process of subjectivation and explains the extent to which they can be profitably applied to the study of social entrepreneurship.

In **Chapter III** I present my research methodology, which I define as an ethnography of a process of subjectivation; and ethnography as a process of subjectivation. I argue that such methodology can be applied to the study of entrepreneurialised workers in casualised and deterritorialised work environments, where the self and its social interaction provide the structure and platform of work. Firstly, I assess the value and function of the interview for the study of entrepreneurialised subjects in a promotional culture. I argue that in this context the interview is a limited method for it is often taken by participants as yet another occasion for self-branding. Moreover, it is increasingly difficult to be conceded an interview as entrepreneurial workers are very busy, and tend to act according to a strategic rationale for which spending time with a PhD researcher may not be considered a valuable opportunity. Secondly, I discuss the potential of ethnographic 'deep hanging out' (Geertz, 1998), and focus on the necessity for the ethnographer to come to see the world as participants do (Blumer, 1998). Thirdly, following the study of Clifford (1997, 1992), Urry (2007) and Marcus (1995), I challenge the spatial metaphor of the fieldwork and advocate for a mobile and multi-sited ethnography. At this point, I introduce Impact Hub, an expanding international network of coworking spaces dedicated to social entrepreneurs<sup>9</sup>. Impact Hub Milan and Westminster were the fieldwork platforms: the places and networks that enabled me to meet the participants, observe their conduct, and eventually get to know them and follow them also away from Impact Hub boundaries. Then, I present Alfredo, my main research participant, and discuss how our relationship was the most valuable research tool used. Finally, I discuss the advantages of this methodology for the study of entrepreneurial work in neoliberal societies.

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<sup>9</sup> I will provide further details on Impact Hub in due course. For now, to have an impression of its scope, the reader may consider that, opened in 2005, nowadays it includes more than 15.000 members in 5 world regions. Impact Hub Net (2016).

**Chapter IV** is the first of the three empirical chapters that constitute the core of the thesis. It regards the sociality of social entrepreneurs at Impact Hub. After having offered a brief overview of coworking spaces in general and Impact Hub in particular, with a special focus on the social aspect, I begin the analysis of the nature, significance and function of Hubbers' social interactions. Building on interview excerpts and fieldwork notes, I argue that social entrepreneurs engage in a compulsory and opportunistic sociality. To establish new 'friends' emerges as essential to further ones career: as a mandatory task. Such a task, to be successfully fulfilled, requires the development of a specific ethos, therefore a process of self-fashioning: an ethical process. This dynamic can be seen as a form of work organisation in which the production of the self is the condition of existence of a professional social status. In turn, this is vital to gain a valuable market position. But what kind of "self" is produced? What are the main traits of the ethos that an individual has to embody if s/he wants to become a social entrepreneur?

**Chapter V** tackles the questions that emerged at the end of chapter IV. It is concerned with the analysis of the ethics of social entrepreneurship. After having provided evidence of the ethical motivations of social entrepreneurs, I proceed to investigate what forms of ethics they produce. I argue that the regime of truth of social entrepreneurship entails an individualised ethics, where ethical needs are deciphered as part of the self to be actualised, and in this way reintegrated within an entrepreneurialised and individualised conduct. This implies a private notion of 'change', rooted in the utopia of a world where everyone is a social entrepreneur. Moreover, this 'change' is thought to happen by means of the enterprise, a business organisation that needs to be profitable to survive in the market. This last assumption involves the redefinition of entrepreneurial means as ethically neutral and therefore appropriate to the achievement of a variety of objectives – from private wealth to the common good. This work of redefinition, which advocates for the distinction between 'good' and 'bad' profit, is one of the main tasks and aims of social entrepreneurship. However, it is problematic. To consider any tool as ethically neutral, therefore deprived of any peculiar agency, is *naïve*, to say the least. Tools have

their agency and ethics in so far as they enable specific visions of the world, and actions in the world, while excluding others. The question of world vision and action enabled by the enterprise emerges as a crucial question for a critique of social entrepreneurship. The last empirical chapter deals with this.

As just mentioned, **Chapter VI** analyses what types of actions and thoughts produce, and are produced, by entrepreneurial means. Drawing on the previous chapters, I maintain that social entrepreneurs display an evident ethical drive, and actualise it by means of business, motivated by their belief in their ability to 'change the world'. They are concerned with the creation of a future, of a collective future and they claim the responsibility and right to actualise it. In this respect, I consider them as political subjects. They are political subjects whose weapons seem to be business plans, cash flows and branding strategies. What does this imply? What do these tools make possible and what do they conceal? I argue that social entrepreneurship produces and is produced by a form of post-political action and thought, with a prominent asystemic and experiential character. Indeed, the enterprise can only enable local actions, confined within the sphere of individual influence and experience. While this can be an efficient way to tackle the effects of social issues, it will hardly allow us to deal with its deeper causes. In the conclusion of this thesis, I speculate on the significance and consequences of this.

### Conclusion

In this introduction, I have presented the topic, questions, methods and arguments of this research, as well as a brief outline of its structure. Before proceeding, I wish to underline once more that my intention is not to assess the authenticity of social entrepreneurs' discourses. Nor has it been to emanate a final verdict on social entrepreneurship's value and success. Rather, I am interested in exploring the modes in which an entrepreneurialised and individualised subject – i.e. the entrepreneur of the self – can think of acting for the common good, and of taking responsibility for something that

exceeds his or her personal interest. It is the very thinkability of this apparent oxymoron that I find interesting - its inherent ambivalence. I contend that it may represent a form of social cohesion, ethical feeling and political action after what post-Operaist scholars called the 'real subsumption of capital', that is the cooptation by the capital of every aspect of life (Negri, 1991). After all, if sociality, ethics and politics, are subsumed by the logic of capital, the enterprise is one of the few forms that are left to express them. The critical junction is the vision of the world enabled by the enterprise, instead of the sheer dismissal of the whole phenomenon based on its ideological stance.

## Chapter I – SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP: A LITERATURE SEARCH

### Introduction

This chapter offers an overview of social entrepreneurship's actors and academic literature. Importantly, the literature that I review in the following pages does not constitute the theoretical framework of this research. It is rather instrumental in setting the context and providing an insight into the discursive atmosphere that constitutes the field. Put differently, I approach social entrepreneurship's literature not solely to the extent that it describes a phenomenon, but mostly in so far as it helps to create the object of the analysis. This thesis, rather than adding to the discursive construction of social entrepreneurship, provides a critical reading of it, starting from this very first chapter in which I critically review both the main reflexive narratives and the academic theories of social entrepreneurship.

A further objective of this first chapter is to introduce the perspective of this thesis. This stems from the verification of a simple but central fact: despite the manifold nature of social entrepreneurship, a common conceptual core can be identified: this can be provisionally synthesised as the assumption that society can be improved by means of a business. Such a way of thinking is often expressed in the oversimplified yet telling formula 'make money and doing good'. In conducting this research, I have been driven by the will to unpack this statement, and to explore its practical and theoretical implications.

This chapter is divided into three main parts. To begin with, I offer an overview of some of the main actors in the scene of social entrepreneurship, in order to give the reader an idea of its complexity, variety and significance. Then, I examine the academic literature on social entrepreneurship: firstly, I consider the pre-paradigmatic status of the field and the

difficulties that this causes to social entrepreneurship scholars (Nicholls, 2010); secondly, I analyse two prominent currents within social entrepreneurship scholarship: the European and the Social Innovation schools of thought; thirdly, I consider what may be called 'alternative' or even 'post-structuralist' approaches to social entrepreneurship, whose objective is to shed light on the 'social' side of the matter, which has been often overlooked in favour of the 'entrepreneurial'. I maintain that this stream of research moves relevant critiques to social entrepreneurship mainstream discourses, yet I approach the matter with a different conceptual toolkit and method.

After that, I will focus on both academic and popular narratives on social entrepreneurship to highlight the prominence of a discourse that builds upon the assumption that 'doing good' and 'making money', far from being mutually exclusive, can be directly proportional. I argue this is the conceptual thread that runs through and unites the numerous empirical manifestations and theoretical definitions of social entrepreneurship. It is on this, and on the cultural discourses and practices that it entails and produces, that this research will concentrate. In this respect, this chapter can be seen as a necessary prologue to the empirical research in so far as it serves to identify its object of study.

### Social entrepreneurship: a brief overview

In the last two decades, there has been a growing interest for what is called social entrepreneurship, on the part of policy makers, the media, business people, academics and civil society. Social Entrepreneurship is a growing phenomenon, which is attracting the interest of a variety of actors: from politicians to successful business men and women, from academic institutions to third sector associations, from venture capitalists to charities. Social entrepreneurs are promoted across a range of media, from Forbes, which in 2015 presented the 30 social entrepreneurs under 30 as those who are 'leveraging

business tools to solve the world's most pressing social problems' (Forbes, 2016), to the Guardian that hosts a social enterprise blog (Guardian, 2016).

National governments have supported social entrepreneurship, promulgating campaigns and designing ad hoc legal statuses. One example is the Big Society programme, launched by the British Conservative government in 2010, which puts social enterprises, charities and voluntary bodies at the centre of a public sector reformation. On 6th June 2013, at the Social Impact Investment Forum, UK Prime Minister David Cameron claimed that 'Government needs to be more creative and innovative – saying to social entrepreneurs: "if you can solve the problem we'll give you money"' (Cameron, 2013). He then added that Big Society Capital has already committed £56 million to 20 different intermediaries, is already supporting 23 frontline organisations and creating 13 new social investment intermediaries' (Cameron, 2013). US former President Barack Obama is no less enthusiastic, during his speech at the 2015 Global Entrepreneurship Event, he remarked that 'helping social entrepreneurs mobilize and organize brings more people together to find solutions' for the 'challenges' that 'no country can meet by itself' such as 'lifting people out of poverty, combating climate change, preventing the spread of disease' (Obama, 2015).

Influential business people have established foundations to celebrate and support the field, the most famous example being Jeff Skoll, the first president of EBay, who in 1999 founded the Skoll Foundation to incubate, promote and support social innovators and entrepreneurs. Its website claims that it 'quickly became the world's largest foundation for social entrepreneurship, driving large-scale change by investing in, connecting, and celebrating social entrepreneurs and other innovators dedicated to solving the world's most pressing problems' (Skoll Foundation, 2016). At the time of writing the Skoll Foundation has invested about \$400 million worldwide. In 2003, Jeff Skoll, in partnership

with the Said Business School (University of Oxford) launched the first academic centre dedicated to social entrepreneurship: The Skoll Centre for Social Entrepreneurship.

Since then, universities on both sides of the Atlantic have designed and delivered academic courses on the topic. A few examples are Harvard, Yale, Duke and Columbia, in the US; Goldsmiths University and University of East London in the UK; Bocconi and Cattolica University, in Italy; the Copenhagen Business School, in Denmark; the University of Liège, in Belgium, and many others. In the last fifteen years a number of scholars, mainly from business schools, have taken the first steps towards the establishment of Social Entrepreneurship as an academic discipline, a subfield of Entrepreneurship Studies, which in turn have sprung from Management Studies. A few academic journals dedicated to this subject have been launched: e.g. *The Journal of Social Entrepreneurship* in 2010 (Routledge Publishers), and the *International Journal of Social Entrepreneurship* in 2011 (Inderscience Publisher).

Private citizens have founded associations and international networks to implement social entrepreneurship practices. A significant example is Impact Hub (which I will discuss at length in Chapter IV), an international network of more than 80 coworking spaces, comprising of more than 15,000 members, and explicitly targeted towards social entrepreneurs. Ashoka is surely another important actor in the field: a global association of 3,000 fellows in over 70 countries, supporting, promoting and building infrastructures for social enterprises. Its main slogan is 'everyone is a changemaker', and it is supposed to communicate the vision of a world 'where leadership and teamwork are used to take on any challenge or opportunity' (Ashoka, 2016). Ashoka's founder, William Drayton, has made a huge contribution to the definition and diffusion of social entrepreneurship culture. His name will appear again in the course of this thesis.

Overall, the scene of social entrepreneurship seems to be mostly composed of a variety of think tanks, associations and networks that – through a variety of initiatives, e.g. conferences, research, events, awards etc. – promote, communicate and help to constitute their object. Two relevant UK based examples are Social Enterprise UK, Nesta, and Unltd. Social Enterprise UK was founded in 1992 as the National Trade Body for Social Enterprise. It runs campaigns for the members and lobby on their behalf; moreover, it conducts research in the field, and facilitates business partnership building networks and raises the profile of social entrepreneurs (Social Enterprise UK, 2016).

Nesta – previously NESTA – was founded by David Putnam in 1998 as the National Endowment for Science Technology and the Arts, and has played a pivotal role in funding, researching and promoting British creative Industries during the years of the New Labour government under the leadership of Tony Blair. In 2012 NESTA became an independent charity and changed its name to Nesta. From then on, under the leadership of Geoff Mulgan, Nesta has focused on innovation in the fields of arts, health, education and public services (Nesta, 2016). Its flagship event FutureFest each year brings big names (from Vivienne Westwood to Edward Snowden) and a crowd of enthusiasts to experience two days of workshops, talks and performances about a more innovative and sustainable future (FutureFest, 2015)<sup>10</sup>.

Unltd (Unlimited) is a lottery funded charity that offers small grants to emerging entrepreneurs. Unltd invest directly in individuals, and its programme provides mentoring and support alongside a financial prize. Since it was founded in 2002, Unltd has given 13000 awards (Unltd, 2016). Furthermore, it is committed to producing knowledge on social entrepreneurship, and to constantly communicating and disseminating the results and findings of its activities.

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<sup>10</sup> In the conclusion of this thesis I discuss ethnographic data gathered at the *FutureFest* 2015 to elaborate the wider implications of my arguments.

The Italian landscape, although inferior in its scope, shows similar features: it is composed of several events, festivals, workshops, on-line platforms, associations, incubators etc. An example is the RENA festival, established in 2014 and branded as 'the festival of change' which features debates ranging from bit-coins to common goods (RENA, 2016). Another example is the WIS, International Workshop on Social Entrepreneurship, which has run every year since 2003, and is organised by Iris, the national network of research institutes on social entrepreneurship. Iris is another important actor in the Italian scene, its aim is to gather, produce and communicate knowledge and experience on social entrepreneurship (Iris, 2016).

This brief overview, although by no means exhaustive, reflects the manifold character of the scene of social entrepreneurship. Also, it has the function of introducing some actors, most of whom will return throughout this thesis. In the following section, I focus on the academic literature on social entrepreneurship. In doing so, I evidence how scholars are struggling to find a common definition. After having considered existing studies, I will clarify what I regard as the core of social entrepreneurship: i.e. the assumption that one can positively impact on society by means of business enterprise.

#### Social entrepreneurship: a pre-paradigmatic field

Alex Nicholls, lecturer and researcher at the Skoll Centre for Social Entrepreneurship (University of Oxford) and editor of the peer reviewed *Journal of Social Entrepreneurship*, draws on Thomas Khun and states that social entrepreneurship is in a 'pre-paradigmatic state of development as a legitimate field of 'scientific' study' (Nicholls, 2010: 1). A pre-paradigmatic status is characterised by considerable suspicion over its academic legitimacy, lack of consensus over key research questions and methodologies, and lack of evidences in support of central hypothesis. Nicholls acknowledges that 'for some, social entrepreneurship is merely a fuzzy construct .... A projection of Baudrillan simulacra' (Nicholls, 2010: 1). Yet, this 'challenging context' (Nicholls, 2010: 2) makes social

entrepreneurship a field demanding further explorations, and enhances its potential as an interdisciplinary research area (Seanor et al, 2011; Mair, 2011). Indeed, social entrepreneurship is a growing academic field, with more than 400 scholarly articles on the subject published between 2000 and 2010 (Hill et al, 2010: 5). More rigorous empirical and theoretical research is much encouraged through the literature (Dees, 1998; Borzaga and Solari 2001; Haugh, 2005; Light, 2006), in order to free social entrepreneurship from its 'intellectual and resources constraints' (Nicholls, 2010).

The difficulty in crystalising social entrepreneurship is reflected in the on-going debate over its defining features. Diverse definitions proliferate, variously situating social entrepreneurship between the no-profit/for-profit spectrum (Dees, 1998; Dees and Anderson, 2006), at the cross-roads of market, civic society and governments (Nyssens, 2006), in relation to the exceptional nature of social entrepreneurs, their skills and motivations (Dees, 1998; Leadbeater, 1997; Drayton 2002), or even as a 'force creating society' (Steyaert and Hijort, 2007; Hijort 2011; Hjiort, 2013). Considerable effort has been made to catalogue and synthesise such a variety of interpretations (Hill et al., 2010; Mair, 2011; Brouard and Larivet, 2011; Zeyen et. al, 2012). These undertakings propose slightly different classifications according to different criteria of analysis, ultimately confirming the lack of clearly defined disciplinary boundaries and conceptual architecture.

Arguably, one of the constraints academic research suffers from is the absence of reliable statistics. Those who need to determine its scope as an economic sector or social phenomenon may encounter serious difficulties. Indeed, as Mair put it: 'social entrepreneurship means different things to different people. It also means different things to people in different places' (Mair, 2011: 16). Furthermore, actual social enterprises adopt different legal formats in different countries. As a result, national and international surveys and comparisons are mostly unreliable (Haugh, 2005). In this regard, the 2011 GEM (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor) report on social entrepreneurship clarifies that:

[...] social activities manifest themselves in different ways - from a pure non-profit model to organizations that marry philanthropy with business models. Furthermore, social entrepreneurs themselves vary in their demographics (age, gender, education, current work status) and motivations (GEM, 2011: 3).

Coherently with such premises, GEM considers social enterprises those organisations that have an 'explicit or implicit' social mission, and includes not-for-profit that adopt 'innovative' processes, hybrid model enterprises (mix of grants, investments, and revenue) and for profit enterprises (GEM, 2011: 3). In this research, I have followed a similar viewpoint in so far as I have not selected the research participants on the basis of the legal status of their activities, but rather on their claim to have a 'social mission' (the actual meaning of such a vague formula is one of the objects of the research). Indeed, most of the research participants were in the idea-generation phase of their projects when I met them, therefore they did not operate within an established enterprise. Besides, as it become clearer through the thesis, even the most experienced ones, who were already running a social enterprise, did not show any particular concern about its legal status.

I maintain that the definition of pre-paradigmatic status offered by Nicholls has the benefit of expressing social entrepreneurship's unstable, manifold character. However, it implies that eventually it will be formalised and find a secure collocation. It could be argued that social entrepreneurship will not be crystallised in a coherent, stable paradigm. Its pre-paradigmatic status could be its imminent status. Put differently, perhaps social entrepreneurship will resist a fully-fledged formalisation, taking various forms and traversing various fields. Indeed, if one looks at social entrepreneurship as a cultural phenomenon – rather than a sector of the economy – then the need to find a fixed definition is replaced by the will to decipher its conceptual, aesthetic and ethical elements to see how they create a different cultural assemblage (in the next Chapter, I will expand on this point).

### European and US narratives

Despite the 'messiness of identities and boundaries' (Seanor et al. 2011: 5) quite a few scholars (Salamon, 2004; Nyssens and Defourny, 2010; Spear, 2011; Ridley-Duff and Bull, 2011) distinguish between European and US understandings of social entrepreneurship, while recognising the mixed landscape of the UK. This categorisation is rooted in a historical and genealogical analysis that acknowledges the role of context-specific factors in shaping social entrepreneurship discourses and practices. However, conceptual bridges have been created - notably by Mair et al. (2006), Nicholls (2006), Mulgan (2006) and Steyaert and Hijort (2006) – and as a matter of fact not every voice in the debate can unambiguously fit the EU/US categorisation. To be sure, different criteria can lead to different ways of classifying trains of thought (see, for instance, Hill et. al. 2010; Zeyen et. al. 2012; Lehner and Kansikas, 2013). Moreover, the actual phenomenology of social entrepreneurship does not follow any sharp and stable distinction. On the contrary, different discourses often intertwine in the experiences and discourses of social entrepreneurship scholars and practitioners. Despite these limitations, I still consider it useful to compare and contrast European and US narratives for a number of reasons: firstly, for the sake of clarity of exposition; secondly, because it allows us to shed light on the relevance of historical and geographical factors; thirdly, and most importantly, because it unveils the cultural and ethical elements that compose social entrepreneurship as a composite cultural phenomenon.

The so-called European School of Thought is promoted mainly by EMES, a major research program funded by the European Commission in 1996 and comprising of scholars coming from all EU member states (Defourny and Borzaga, 2001). EMES frames social entrepreneurship within the Third Sector and Social Economy areas of inquiry. Social enterprises are defined by 'their social purpose and the limitation on the distribution of profit that they impose upon themselves' (Defourny and Nyssens 2008: 6).

Social entrepreneurship's origin is identified with the birth of the social cooperative, i.e. in 1991, when the Italian parliament promulgated a law creating a specific legal format for these organisations. This genealogy builds upon the important function of third sector organisations (i.e. cooperatives, non-profit and mutual societies) in most European countries. These have had the function of compensating for ineffective or insufficient public policies, providing social services either as a counterbalance to liberal policies, as in the UK; or to supply to an underdeveloped welfare system, as in Italy (Salamon et al., 2004). Within this stream of literature, particular efforts have been made to clarify the position of social entrepreneurship amongst markets, public policies and civic society; to analyse its differences and convergences with cooperatives, associations and mutual societies; to define adequate legal formats and public policies (see Nyssens, 2006).

In the US the roots of social entrepreneurship can be found in the 'use of commercial activities by non-profit organisations in support of their mission' (Nyssens and Defourny, 2010: 38). This practice gained relevance in the late 1970s and 1980s, when the downturn in the economy led to a significant reduction in welfare and federal spending, depriving non-profits of the huge funds they had benefitted from since the launch of the Great Society programs in the 1960s (Kerlin, 2006). This school of thought has been referred to as the Earned Income School of Thought, and has focused on the 'strategies for starting a business that would earn income for a non-profit organization' (Nyessens and Defourny, 2010: 40, drawing on Massarsky, 2006). A similar broad and 'market oriented' definition was deployed in the UK (Nyessens and Defourny, 2010: 41), when, in 2001, a 'Social Enterprise Unit' was created within the Department of Industry and Trade. The Earned Income school of thought stresses the business side of social enterprise and in its broader version embraces all businesses that 'trade for a social purpose' (Haugh and Tracey, 2004).

Dees and Anderson (2006) see a further division within the US narrative, and identify the 'Social Innovation' school of thought. Its birth can be traced back to the foundation of Ashoka, in 1980, by William Drayton, one of the ideologues and leaders of social entrepreneurship. Other foundations, such as the Skoll Foundations and Schwab<sup>11</sup>, play a central role in promoting and funding social enterprises in the US. Differently, in Europe, the state is still social enterprises' main promoter.

Compared to the European one, The Social Innovation School of Thought is less concerned with issues of governance and policies, and more focused on the outcomes and motivations of social entrepreneurs' actions. Coherently, it is interested in individuals' stories (see, for instance Bornstein 2007), which are meant to inspire the general public. Within this literature, most authors openly advocate social entrepreneurship as a solution for the world's most pressing problems (Nicholls, 2006; Drayton, 2006) and glorify social entrepreneurs as contemporary heroes (Bornstein, 2007).

As can be noticed, the Earned Income School implies a substantial division between commercial and social activities. Indeed, although the first is meant to serve the latter, the two remain distinct. What constitutes the object of this thesis is the extent to which social entrepreneurship (in some, if not all, of its manifestations) produces and is produced by the intertwining of the economic and social dimension, i.e. the extent to which entrepreneurial means are re-defined as adequate to positively intervene, transform and organise society. For these reasons, I will leave aside the Earned Income School of Thought, and focus on European and Social Innovation.

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<sup>11</sup> The Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship was established in 1999 by Klaus and Hilde Schwab, with the purpose of promoting entrepreneurial solutions and social commitment with a clear impact at the grassroots level. Klaus Schwab is also the creator of the World Economic Forum, which he set up in 1971 as a not-for-profit foundation. The Schwab Foundation and the World Economic Forum cooperate very closely indeed. Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship, *History* [online] Available at: <http://www.schwabfound.org/content/history> (Accessed 1 Jun. 2016).

### The European School of Thought: Bureaucracy

Both Social Innovation and the European narrative construct a discourse where a managerial mentality is applied for meeting societal needs that have been left unsatisfied by governments and markets. Yet the two differ greatly, for they belong to two separate and to some extent even antithetical discursive regimes. Using a Weberian parlance, it can be argued they reveal a bureaucratic and charismatic ethos, respectively.

The bureaucratic ethos enacted by EMES is embedded in its focus on governance as a legal guarantor of the social mission, and in the attention given to the 'dynamic of institutionalisation' (Nyssens, 2006: 11). Defourny and Nyssens make this clear:

In Europe, specific governance structures of the social enterprise are put forward with a twofold objective. First, a democratic control and/or a participatory involvement of stakeholders reflect the quest for more economic democracy, in the tradition of cooperatives. They therefore add to constraints on the distribution of profits with a view to protecting and strengthening the primacy of the social mission, which is at the very heart of the organization. Secondly, those two combined guarantees (often involving a strict non-distribution constraint) often act as a 'signal' allowing public authorities to support social enterprises in various ways (legal frameworks, public subsidies, fiscal exemptions, etc) (Defourny and Nyssens, 2010: 49).

The relevance assumed by elements such as 'governance' and 'public authorities' to secure the 'social' aspect of social entrepreneurship reflects the aim of achieving rationalisation and predictability. 'Social change' is neither left to the uncertainty of entrepreneurship (Knight, 2006), nor to the creativity of individual entrepreneurs (e.g. Dees, 1998; Drayton, 2006.) The attempt is rather to institutionalise patterns of social change, and make them part of a rational economic regime. This can be thought of as bureaucratic in a Weberian sense for it aims to build what the German sociologist defined as: 'a durable structure with a system of rational rules ... designed to satisfy calculable continuing demands by means of a normal routine' (Weber, 2009: 245). This 'normal routine', assured by legal constraints, monitored and organised by public authorities, is meant to act as a guarantor of the non-capitalistic ethos and practices of social enterprises:

Without these two guarantees, the risk would be greater that public subsidies just induce more profits to be distributed among owners or managers. In turn, such public support often allows social enterprises to avoid purely market-oriented strategies, which, in many cases, would lead them away from those who cannot afford market prices and nevertheless constitute the group that they target in accordance with their social mission. Public policies are also supposed to avoid that the neediest groups depend primarily on private philanthropy (Defourny and Nyssens, 2010: 49).

This discourse builds on the antithesis between the profit-driven logic of the market and the ethics of a social mission. Because of this assumed heterogeneity between the two terms of the label 'social enterprise' a synthesis cannot be achieved without a further element operating as a regulator of the oxymoric relation. This element is governance, a legal structure that is meant to place the 'social' and the 'entrepreneurial' in the correct reciprocal position. Legal structure acts as the necessary condition for social entrepreneurship's assemblage of social mission and managerial mentality. In practice, it is expected to function as a 'constraint' to profit, and thus to 'strengthen' and 'protect' the 'primacy of the social mission'. Also, it is supposed to prevent social entrepreneurship from drifting towards 'purely market-oriented strategies'. Thus, governance functions as a protection for social commitment and the ethics of social enterprises, which would otherwise be jeopardised by market logic. It follows that social entrepreneurship is not conceived of as fully part of the market sphere. Yet, it is participating in the market as it engages in risk-taking activities (Defourny and Nyssens, 2010: 45).

These assumptions are partially challenged by authors that can be considered as part of European scholarship. One example is Bellanca, who conceptualises social entrepreneurship within the framework of the Other Economy (Bellanca, 2011). The Other Economy can be described as the attempt to recompose the gap between economic and social behaviour in a perspective of environmental sustainability (Pianta, 2009). Other Economy's actors can be identified also within for-profit enterprises, as long as they have a social mission at the core of their business. The 2009 Obi-One report of Italian Other Economy proposes to not define the social dimension of an enterprise only on the basis of its governance. Drawing on Gui (1991) and Ben Ner and Gui (2000) Obi-One argues

that the limit imposed on no-profit enterprises actually do not fully impede the distribution of profit, for indirect distribution can be done indeed. This means that even though profits cannot be distributed amongst shareholders they can be used to reduce prices (distribution towards the users) or to increase salaries (distribution through the workers). Then, so the argument goes, forms of profit limitation offer a negative protection that while preventing undesirable behaviour does not guarantee desirable ones (Obi-One 2009). For this reason, Obi-One proposes including into the Other Economy umbrella mission-oriented organisations, i.e. companies whose core business is related to social activities aimed at the improvement of citizens' well-being. In this case, Obi-One points out, specific governances do not matter. Examples are enterprises dealing with renewable energy or open source software.

On a similar trail, Bellanca offers a definition of social enterprise that, while including social co-operatives, also embraces those enterprises that provide services for common and merit goods. Bellanca defines commons as resources that are non-produced, shareable and free. The first character, he argues, is the most important, for it underlines the fact that commons cannot be the outcome of an individual production process, but are rather part of the ecosystem (e.g. water, or land) or of a myriad of individual contributions (e.g. the internet). Therefore the commons are goods to be shared. Yet, while no one can own the commons, their use and distribution has to be regulated and organised (Bellanca, 2011).

Merit goods are conceived as socially necessary goods, such as health and education, that can be produced by both private and public enterprises and that are inadequately provided through the mechanism of prices. The identification of a merit good may depend upon paternalistic justifications, public deliberation (Rawls, 1993) or the prevalence of a political opinion (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2006). Building on this, Bellanca argues that an enterprise can be considered as non-capitalistic even though it

generates profit, in so far as it is committed to offer services for the commons and merit goods (Bellanca, 2011). In this respect, Bellanca proposes a view of social entrepreneurship more akin to that offered by the Social Innovation School of Thought, which does not consider profit to be a final criteria to distinguish between social and non-social enterprises.

### The Social Innovation School of Thought: Charisma

Differently from a considerable part of European narratives, the Social Innovation School of Thought denies the antithesis between the 'social' and the 'entrepreneurial', rather attempting a substantial reconciliation of the two. Scholars within this current generally advocate for social enterprises as fully-equipped market actors – albeit they recognise that a sheer market logic is unable to grasp the value produced by social enterprises (see, for instance, Dees 1998). Overall, the Social Innovation discourse, rather than relying upon a bureaucratic structure as ethical guarantor, enthusiastically confides in the charisma of social entrepreneurs. This current has sharply informed the popularisation of social entrepreneurship and corresponds more closely to the mode of thinking of the social entrepreneurs I met during my fieldwork. This comes as no surprise, for it is the one that focuses more closely on the cultural aspects of social entrepreneurship; meaning that it is concerned with describing and promoting a certain conduct and set of values.

One of the first books to deal with the character and practices of social entrepreneurs is *The Rise of the Social Entrepreneurs*, published in 1997, written by Charles Leadbeater – a well known New Labour consultant who played a pivotal role as a Tony Blair advisor during the New Labour era. In this work, Leadbeater defines social entrepreneurs as 'one of the most important sources of innovation'. He states that:

Social entrepreneurs identify under-utilised resources – people, buildings, equipment – and find ways of putting them to use to satisfy unmet social needs. They innovate new welfare services and new ways of delivering existing services (1997: 2).

Following a similar line, Gregory Dees, in his 1998 seminal article, claims that: 'social entrepreneurship describes a set of behaviors that are exceptional', because they are a 'rare breed' (Dees, 2011: 4). Social entrepreneurs are described as charismatic 'natural leaders' that may operate in every field. Bill Drayton insists on this:

The defining quality of leading social entrepreneurs is that they cannot come to rest until they have changed the pattern in their field all across society. Their life vision is this new pattern (Drayton, 2006: 45)

The ideal social entrepreneur is supposed to be led by the need to positively impact on society. S/he is described as a visionary, almost a fool, someone who is able to follow an idea up to the point this idea becomes true. Drawing on the Weberian notion of charisma, it can be argued that social entrepreneurs are often constructed as charismatic 'natural leaders' who 'have been deemed possessors of particular physical and spiritual gifts' (Weber, 2009: 245). As a matter of fact, they are often placed within a typology of individuals that includes those who have 'practiced their arts and ruled by virtue of this gift (charisma) .... by virtue of the divine mission embodied in that charisma' (Weber, 2009: 246). An excerpt from *How to Change The World: The Power of Unreasonable People*, the David Bornstein best seller published in twenty countries, can provide evidence for this claim:

Social entrepreneurs have existed throughout the ages. St. Francis of Assisi, founder of the Franciscan Order, would qualify as a social entrepreneur, having built multiple organizations that advanced pattern changes in his field (Bornstein, 2007: 4).

The aim of these kind discourses is not to define and delimit a specific field of practices, but rather to build a discourse that focuses on some subjective traits that can pertain to different people engaged in different activities, in different space-time contexts. The analogy with religious movements is striking, because it implicitly excludes the economic and bureaucratic aspects from the picture, focusing more on the ethical, I would say even the spiritual, side.

Perhaps it not a mere coincidence that two of the most prominent ideologues and promoters of social entrepreneurship, such as Geoff Mulgan and Bill Drayton (CEOs of NESTA and Ashoka, respectively) had gone through a period of spiritual initiation before becoming advocates of social entrepreneurship. Mulgan trained as a Buddhist monk in Sri-Lanka, while Drayton followed Bahve, a disciple of Gandhi. Apparently, Drayton, referring to Bahve, once claimed: 'I saw him as a living saint. Today I would probably see him as a social entrepreneur' (Drayton, quoted in Bornstein, 2007: 53).

The centrality of individuals' exceptional character is complemented by the marginality of issues related to governance, legal status, and the role of governments as well as of the market. Alex Nicholls, in the introduction of one of the first and more complete edited books on social entrepreneurship, i.e. *Social Entrepreneurship New Models of Sustainable Change*, makes this clear when he asserts that 'social entrepreneurs and their networks demonstrate an unrelenting focus on systemic social change that disregards institutional and organizational norms and boundaries' (Nicholls, 2006: 10). An excerpt from the Ashoka website underlines the same point, focusing on the ability of social entrepreneurs to bypass both public and private sectors, to finally find those 'solutions' that nobody had found before:

Rather than leaving societal needs to the government or business sectors, social entrepreneurs find what is not working and solve the problem by changing the system, spreading the solution, and persuading entire societies to take new leaps [...] Social entrepreneurs often seem to be possessed by their ideas, committing their lives to changing the direction of their field. They are both visionaries and ultimate realists, concerned with the practical implementation of their vision above all else (Ashoka, 2016).

What distinguishes social entrepreneurs for these authors is exactly this power of ideas – the 'vision' - over the stiff mechanisms of bureaucratic government and the purpose-less activities of the private sector. These 'innovative' ideas can potentially take any possible form, any form of governance, any legal status, they can be part of any possible field of activity. Michael Young, British founder of the Young Foundation and a hugely

inspirational figure, states that:

what is new and most distinctive about social entrepreneurship is not the particular organizational forms that are used but the entrepreneur's continual pursuit of greater social or environmental impact (Young, 2006: 59).

Dees asserts that social entrepreneurs do not even necessarily run a business; and that vice versa not every business is run by a social entrepreneur (Dees, 1998). Furthermore, he claims, social entrepreneurs explore all resource options, from pure philanthropy to the commercial methods of the business sector; and they are not bound by sector norms or traditions (Dees, 1998: 5). This being outside 'norms and tradition' is typical of charismatic authority, which 'by contrast to all sorts of bureaucratic or official organization ... knows nothing of a form or of a regular procedure' (Weber, 2009: 246).

Although recently there have been attempts to attenuate the individualistic perspective of these views (see, for instance Collaborative Changemaking: Oxford innovation Communities Project, launched in 2013 and supported by the Skoll Centre<sup>12</sup>), or at least to avoid a heroic narrative (Nicholls, 2013), most of the authors of the Social Innovation School of Thought identify social change as springing from the values, skills and spirits of individuals, rather than from the development of specific public policies and legal frameworks<sup>13</sup>. On the contrary, EMES conceptualises social entrepreneurship as a collective, community based endeavour (Defourny and Nyssens, 2010), in open opposition to individualistic accounts that 'reflect a shift towards focusing on individuals and away from traditional emphasis on the community and collective, found in community development and the co-op movement' (Grenier, 2003: 4).

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<sup>13</sup> Then, in line with Weber account of the dialectic between charismatic and bureaucratic authority (Weber, 2009), there is the attempt to formalise charisma and turn it into a replicable method, what I will call a 'technique', (Chapter V). Most of these efforts get channelled into research on viable managerial strategies (e.g. Santos, 2012), the development of sustainable business model (e.g. Peredo, 2005) and the definition of 'social opportunities' as opposed to merely entrepreneurial opportunities (e.g. Sharir Lerner, 2006).

The importance ascribed to collectivity and communities is not an exclusive prerogative of EMES network scholars. In fact, the individualistic approach fostered by Social Innovation School of Thought has been criticised by many scholars who do not strictly belong to the EMES network. For instance, Light criticises Ashoka's definition of social entrepreneurs – i.e. 'individuals with the committed vision and inexhaustible determination to persist until they have transformed the entire system' and who 'go beyond the immediate problem to fundamentally change communities, societies, and the world' (Ashoka, quoted in Light, 2006: 48) - he argues that:

By focusing so much on visionary change agents, prominent advocates of social entrepreneurship have excluded large numbers of organizations that deserve the financial support, networking, and training now reserved for individuals who fit both the current definition of social entrepreneurship and the prevailing model of the self-sacrificing entrepreneur (Light: 2006: 48).

Overall, I agree with these criticisms, indeed in the course of this thesis I will dwell at length on the individualistic characters of social entrepreneurs' discourses. Yet, I also consider these attempts to draw a profile of the social entrepreneur as a contemporary hero to be of great interest from a cultural studies perspective. Indeed, any ideal type, any mythical character, how ever unrealistic or exaggerated, and even theoretically or morally wrong, is revelatory of a mode of thinking, of a world vision. Moreover, as a matter of fact, most of the research participants hold an understanding of social entrepreneurship that replicates some of the fundamental elements mobilised by the Social Innovation School, namely: the focus on individuals' virtues and skills, and the will to act beyond institutional barriers of any kind. Hence, to a certain extent, this thesis can be understood as an empirical investigation of the idealised social entrepreneur, an exploration of how certain discourses on social entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurs are embodied and enacted by flesh and bone individuals.

### Looking for the social

Besides the variations in the underlining assumptions and worldviews, social entrepreneurship scholarship has focused mostly on how to define, formalise, replicate, scale-up, measure, manage, and organise social enterprises. Some scholars have explored issues related to governance (Spear and Bidet 2005; Spear, 2006) or entrepreneurial management, opportunities and risks (Jarvis and Tracey, 2007; Pezzini and Zandonai, 2004); others have investigated suitable business models (Alter, 2006), or public policies (Mulgan, 2006). Helen Haugh identifies eight themes that permeate the current research on social entrepreneurship:

...defining the scope of social entrepreneurship; the environmental context; opportunity recognition and innovation; modes of organisation; resource acquisition; opportunity exploitation; performance measurement and training education and learning about social entrepreneurship (Haugh, 2005: 1)

In line with Haugh auspices, on both sides of the Atlantic efforts have been directed towards the identification and implementation of social enterprise models. This is not surprising, considering that most social entrepreneurship scholars come from a business and management background, and social entrepreneurship courses are mostly run in business schools. As Hjiort notices, 'this inevitably contributes to the re-description of the social as a form of the economic, whereby managerial tools become much more applicable and the managerial role correspondingly more central' (Hjort, 2007: 7). As a result, social entrepreneurship 'conventionally underplays the social side of entrepreneurship, making room primarily for the economic' (Hjort, 2013: 35).

Scholars such as Nicholls and Drayton have attempted to decipher the habitus, ethos and culture embedded in social entrepreneurship - the effort to draw the figure of the ideal social entrepreneur can be understood in this light – yet, they have done so in a prescriptive and performative way. Important questions about the content of the much advertised 'change', about the meaning of the world 'social' when coupled with

entrepreneurship, about the ambiguities and tensions that mark social entrepreneurship practices and discourses, have been dramatically overlooked. In short, the discourses over social entrepreneurship are mainly normative or positivist.

Dey and Steyaert critique this tendency, and deconstruct what they identify as the 'grand narrative' of social entrepreneurship: a dominant discourse that 'presents social change as a harmonious process relying on a messianic script' (Dey and Steyaert, 2010: 88). Hjort building on his previous works (Hjort, 2003, 2005) and on the intellectual endeavour he has shared with Steyaert (Steyaert and Hjort 2003, 2006; Hjort and Steyaert, 2003) proposes the notion of 'public entrepreneurship' as opposed to the prevalently managerial understanding of 'social entrepreneurship' (Hjort, 2013). Starting from a definition of entrepreneurship as a 'sociality-creating' process, he suggests thinking of it as enacting a 'desiring social-change' that cannot be reduced to managerial problem solving. Rather, it must be understood as related to art, for it creates new possibilities of life (Hjort, 2013). I quote at length a passage from his 2013 article Public Entrepreneurship: Desiring social change, creating sociality:

In an attempt to place more weight on the social productivity of entrepreneurship, we inquire into the entrepreneurship-society relationship, affirming desire for social change (Steyaert and Hjiort, 2006), and seek a new concept for thinking and expanding future possibilities of this life. We will use public entrepreneurship (PE) to make this differentiation. Our emphasis on entrepreneurship as a desire to create (novelty), which in turn is seen as what sets it apart from management's focus on utilizing resources efficiently, relates to art, as a practice sharing this effect upon the social... Art and entrepreneurship create affect and intensity (Hjort, 2013: 35).

Drawing on Foucault, Rancière and Deleuze, Hjort tries to redefine entrepreneurship as completely unrelated to individualism. He conceptualises it in a vitalistic and post-structuralist fashion, as a sort of 'energetic' that creates new assemblages, new forms of life. The Danish scholar advocates for a vision of public entrepreneurship rooted in the actions of citizens (as opposed to consumers) that create 'sociality' in a process of 'actualisation of virtualities' (Hjort, 2013: 47-48).

While I maintain Hjort's critique to social entrepreneurship scholarship, I would argue the (openly acknowledged) performative character of his theoretical construction prevents the formation of concepts that can be used to undertake a rigorous critique of the ambiguities and tensions inherent to the relationship between the social and the entrepreneurial. Put differently, although it is true that social entrepreneurship's grand narratives overlook the social, Hjort's theory seems to deliberately leave aside the economic. By conceptualising entrepreneurship as a process, a power of creation, he makes it practically indistinguishable from any other human activity. Moreover, the focus on desire and affect *in sé* does not answer the question of their specific contents.

Overall, the deployment of Deleuzian terminology seems to be done in a normatively positive manner, ultimately replicating the epistemological faults of the main theories of the field, which, as Hjort himself has shown, avoid posing fundamental questions and engaging in a consistent critique (Steyaert and Hjort, 2006; Hjort, 2011). For a metaphysics of entrepreneurship to be of interest, it also has to be grounded in the specifics, the singularities, of the phenomenon. Deleuzian concepts such as desire, affect, virtuality, are meant to function as 'devices' to think through, to connect singularities according to an overall conceptual atmosphere, not as labels to be attached to any sort of phenomenon. They are not political in themselves, but they are meant to think the political, the very same way as Kantian categories are not meant to carry positive or negative judgments but to exercise our faculty of reason. To be sure, to claim something is the cause of something else, does not say anything on the particularities of the specific cause and effect, neither on their positive or negative consequences. Analogously, to argue that entrepreneurship creates the social, does not say anything about how and what is created. Moreover, I contend that the Foucauldian notions of discourse and genealogy, aptly used to move beyond an ideological perspective (Hjort, 2013: 34) and to analyse social entrepreneurship's 'grand' narratives (Hjort, 2013: 38-42), are then

somehow 'betrayed', for the outcome of the analysis is a performative, rather unproblematic, account that prescribes, instead of analysing the subject matter.

I consider Albert Cho's appraisal of social entrepreneurship literature better suited to pave the way for a more critical and grounded analysis. Cho argues that the predominant discourses in the field are tautological and monological, for they leave the social undefined, as if there was an indisputable consensus about what it means to be social. This acritical notion of the social is responsible for the depoliticisation of social entrepreneurship because it sets the conditions for the question of the 'common good' to be evaded. In fact, this is an unavoidable question for a field that claims to deal with solutions for social problems (e.g. Nicholls, 2006) and affirms to be better equipped to do that than national and international institutions (e.g. Alvord et al., 2004; Thompson, 2002; Fayolle and Matlay, 2010). As Cho correctly put it: social entrepreneurship 'by its very nature is always already a political phenomenon' (Cho, 2006: 36). Indeed:

When entrepreneurs organize their actions around values they have identified as 'social', they have already made demanding epistemological and political claims about their ability and entitlement to articulate what lies in the public interest (Cho, 2006: 42).

Starting from this, he underlines the need for a 'dialogical' analysis of the values animating social entrepreneurs, one that can acknowledge the 'social' as a field of struggle, and that can dwell into the 'persistent conflict over values and ends' (Cho, 2006; 53). Scholars such as Barinaga and Seanor, and Bull and Baines have made preliminary but important steps in this direction, by conducting empirical qualitative analysis of social entrepreneurs' discourses and rationalities (Barinaga, 2013; Seanor et. al. 2011).

This thesis can be conceived of as a further effort to understand social entrepreneurship by means of a qualitative analysis. In particular, it will approach the matter from the perspective of cultural studies and critical theory rather than analysing social entrepreneurship from a managerial or legal point of view. I will look at how it produces a

specific culture, whereby by 'culture' I refer to a specific way of life, characterised by the mobilisation of a set of values about what is right and wrong, good and bad. In other words, I am interested in social entrepreneurship in so far as it produces and is produced by a mode of thinking, a vision of the world. What I hold as extremely significant about such mode of thinking is the attempt to combine ethics and the economy, the 'social' with the 'entrepreneurial'. In the next section I start to unpack this cultural combination in order to better formulate the question that has driven my enquiry.

### Make Money Doing Good

I argue that, despite the multi-faceted nature of the phenomenon, the conceptual core of the notion of social entrepreneurship can be identified in the idea that entrepreneurial means can be used effectively to tackle social problems. Indeed, most definitions of social entrepreneurship build exactly on the idea that market forces of competition and innovation, embodied by entrepreneurship, can be appropriate tools for achieving social justice. Fayolle and Matlay, editors of the *Handbook of Research on Social Entrepreneurship*, state that:

Entrepreneurship can be an important way to restore a better balance between economic purposes and social well-being. Indeed, entrepreneurship can be a great source of economic value creation, but it can also be (or at least should be) a means to contribute to greater social justice. (Fayolle and Matlay, 2010: 1)

The particular mode of thinking articulated by social entrepreneurship discourses proposes using economic, specifically entrepreneurial, tools to intervene in the organisation and improvement of society.

Social entrepreneurship aims to better accommodate a social dimension within traditional economic behavior, to take into consideration social problems, countries' and communities' contexts and situations, and the plight of socially challenged or disadvantaged individuals... It is in this way that entrepreneurs can contribute to the development of humanity and social progress – and social entrepreneurship appears to be a unique method that helps us rethink, reformulate and resolve human problems on the path to social progress (Fayolle, Matlay, 2010: 3).

In this paragraph, Fayolle and Matlay clarify that the objectives of social entrepreneurs should be 'social problems' and that the target of their small businesses, their 'customers', to use a business terminology, should be 'socially challenged and disadvantaged individuals'. Albeit the contextual interventions in 'countries' and 'communities' are autonomous and local in characters they are supposed to contribute to the overall 'development of humanity'. Entrepreneurship in this respect is conceptualised as an instrument, a 'method', well equipped to 'solve problems'. While 'normal' entrepreneurship has been developing in capitalist economies as aimed at meeting consumer-driven needs, or even to create new needs in order to open new markets, social entrepreneurship is thought of as a technique to resolve problems. These problems, moreover, are conceived to be not merely economic but predominantly social, or even 'human'.

Reflexive narratives of social entrepreneurship revolve around the same assumptions. An endless list of how-to books feature titles that boldly reflect the very notion of changing the world by means of a money-making activity. A few examples are: *Your chance to change the world*. *The no-fibbing guide to social entrepreneurship* (Dearden-Philips, 2008); *The power of unreasonable people: how social entrepreneurs create markets that change the world* (Elkington, 2008); *The social entrepreneur revolution: doing good by making money, making money by doing good* (Clark, 2009). The latter, especially in its subtitle: *doing good by making money, making money by doing good*, perfectly epitomises the promise and utopia of social entrepreneurship, the very core around which its mode of thinking revolves: a directly proportional relationship between profit and ethics – the money and the good.

Micheal Gordon, Professor at the University of Michigan and author of the book *Design your Life Change The World: your path as a social entrepreneur*, articulates this very clearly when he claims: 'I hope to show my students each day, that you don't have to make a choice between making a living and making the world a better place. The same

applies to organizations and business'. The target of the book are 'the dozens, if not hundreds, of students ... who want to address these issues and live lives of relative comfort' (Gordon, 2016).

This thesis' objective is to propose a critique of social entrepreneurship and innovation, which I consider as a cultural phenomenon that produces a discourse that combines private wealth – making money – and an ethical, social and political claim – doing good. More precisely, I want to look at how the social, the ethical and the political are re-defined since they are closely intertwined with the sphere of entrepreneurship<sup>14</sup>. In turn, I also want to explore how entrepreneurship itself is redefined by its conception as an instrument for social, ethical and political action. As a matter of fact, these questions are mostly overlooked by both the academic and popular literature on social entrepreneurship. In this regard, this doctoral dissertation aims to fill a gap in the existing research in the field.

### Conclusion

In this chapter I have offered an overview of the main actors in the scene of social entrepreneurship; of the main current of thoughts in the academic field of social entrepreneurship studies; and on the main narratives emerging from social entrepreneurship popular literature. This has had the function of setting the stage for the chapters that follow, by presenting how the field of social entrepreneurship is discursively produced. After that, I have identified the conceptual core of social entrepreneurship in the notion of 'making money' while 'doing good'. This eidetic nucleus, which moves and changes its borders therefore assuming different shapes and occupying different places, is what I consider the cultural substance, the underlying insight, and the philosophical horizon of social entrepreneurship. In the next chapter I clarify the theoretical background against which I analyse this in the course of my thesis.

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<sup>14</sup> In the next chapter I will expand on what I mean by sociality, ethics and politics, and discuss their relevance in the context of this study.

## CHAPTER II - THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE SELF AT WORK IN NEOLIBERAL SOCIETIES

### Introduction

In the previous chapter, I reviewed the literature on social entrepreneurship, which is emerging as an academic sub-discipline of entrepreneurship and management studies. For the most part, these studies aim at positioning social entrepreneurship in a well-defined economic sector. Efforts are directed towards the identification of best practices and replicable business models, as well as towards the formulation of the ideal-type social entrepreneur. Importantly, the main currents of the new-born academic field of social entrepreneurship have been outlined not only in so far as they portray a phenomenon, but also, and mostly, for how they constitute the field of discourse they are concerned with. In other words, their function has been to provide the reader with an understanding of the main discursive formations that produce and are produced by social entrepreneurship's culture.

The aim of this dissertation is to investigate how these discourses are thought of and negotiated at a subjective level by young social entrepreneurs and social entrepreneur aspirants. I refer to social entrepreneurs as individuals who express their ethical and political values and virtues – i.e. the will to 'change the world' – through work. Following this line of thought, I contextualise this enquiry within the fields of cultural studies and critical theories on the changing nature of work and subjectivity in neoliberal societies. The objective of this chapter is to offer an overview of this context, clarifying the theoretical framework of this thesis. In particular, I concentrate on research that has explored the centrality of the self at work, and its social, ethical, and political implications.

This chapter is structured as follows: Firstly, I review the definition of entrepreneurship offered by Joseph Schumpeter, Frank Knight, and David Stark, in order to flag up its inherently ambivalent character. Secondly, I discuss Michel Foucault's *Birth of Biopolitics* to trace the neoliberal genealogy of the enterprise society and the entrepreneur of the self. With this, I want to highlight the neoliberal origin of the notion of work as a means for self-expression, and to flag up the main traits that characterise the entrepreneur of the self as the neoliberal subject *par excellence*. After this, I concentrate on the work of a few key authors – namely: Maurizio Lazzarato, Lois McNay, Jacques Donzelot, and William Davies – who, drawing on Foucault, have reflected upon the social, ethical and political consequences of the entrepreneurialisation of the self and society. Next, I review the empirical literature on the lives of entrepreneurialised workers to offer an overview of the lifestyle of entrepreneurialised individuals.

Then, I sum up the main findings emerging from the literature to pinpoint the contradiction between entrepreneurialisation and ethical conduct. I frame social entrepreneurship as challenging this assumption, in so far as it attempts to re-embed a social and ethical dimension within entrepreneurialised and individualised discourses and conduct. Moreover, social entrepreneurship may also signal the attempt to retrieve a political dimension. As a matter of fact, the claim of 'changing the world', regardless of its emphatic and vague character, indicates the dimension concerning the analysis of 'what we are willing to accept in our world – to accept, to refuse to change – both in ourselves and in our circumstances' (Foucault 2007: 152), therefore they participate in the sphere of politics, understood as the sphere regarding the subject's political thoughts and actions. In this respect, my research can be viewed as a study on how the most representative subject of neoliberalism – the entrepreneur of the self – tries to reclaim her social responsibility, ethical sentiments and political agency, and what are the implications and limits of this endeavour.

### The ambiguity of entrepreneurship

The tension marking social entrepreneurship is not to be considered unprecedented. On the contrary, it is an inherent feature of entrepreneurship as such, one that provides the conditions of existence of social entrepreneurship. Indeed, the fact that entrepreneurship is an ambivalent form, characterised by the recombination of different domains, is not something entirely new. In fact, since its earliest formulation by Jean Baptiste Say in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (1821), entrepreneurship has been characterised by its ability to connect and combine different orders of value and logics of thinking and acting.

Several economists and economic sociologists have used the notion of entrepreneurship to move away from a view of the market as an abstract system, independent from the social; and of the economic actor as a purely rational subject. Joseph Schumpeter, in his classic *The Theory of Economic Developments* (published in German in 1911 and translated into English in 1934) introduces the figure of the entrepreneur to build a vision of the economy rooted on the potentialities of unexpected changes and innovation within the capitalist system. In so doing, he argued against neo-classical economic theories that proposed a model based on the necessary equilibrium of supply and demand, and on a conception of economic actors as fully predictable rational individuals.

The entrepreneur is a creative subject defined by her/his ability to operate new combinations, which are not the result of a gradual and consequential development of existing conditions, but rather are originated by means of a quantum jump (Schumpeter, 1989). This should not be interpreted as a form of personalism: what is at stake is an abstract process – a ‘mechanism’, but which unfolds in actual societies by means of individual actions. The individual functions as ‘the bearer of the *mechanism of change*’ (Schumpeter, 1989: 61, emphasis on the original).

To account for entrepreneurs' force of 'creative destruction' Schumpeter coined the term *Unternehmergeist*, literally: the entrepreneurial spirit. The introduction of a spirit - i.e. something, transcendent, which exceeds calculative reason - at the heart of economic theory opens the room for a reflection on economy as a human enterprise marked by risk, creativity and unexpected turns. Postulating the unpredictable and creative human agency at the base of economic development, Schumpeterian theory connects the social and human dimensions to the economic, breaking with a mainstream thinking that treats economy as a fully autonomous discipline, independent and separable from the whole of human activities<sup>15</sup>.

Schumpeter's idea of the entrepreneur has a strong inspirational potential, rooted on the creative act engrained in the entrepreneurial undertaking, which makes it the source of radical and revolutionary change<sup>16</sup>. This inspirational character is at the core of contemporary social entrepreneurship's discourses. Social entrepreneurs are described as exceptional change agents. They are a 'rare breed' (Dees, 2001: 4), who are 'possessed by their ideas' (Ashoka, 2017), and 'persuade entire societies to take new leaps' (Drayton, quoted in Kois, 2013: 188). To a certain extent, they can be well thought of as agents who actualise the Schumpeterian spirit.

Yet, differently from Schumpeter's entrepreneurs - who are 'bearer' of a process in Mark I theory and become actors within large firms in Mark II theory (see footnote 16) - social entrepreneurship's discourses portray social entrepreneurs as exceptional individuals,

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<sup>15</sup> This connection emerges clearly in the very first pages of the second chapter of the *Theory of Economic Developments*: 'Economic development is so far simply the object of economic history, which in turn is merely a part of a universal history, only separated from the rest for purposes of exposition. Because of this fundamental dependence of the economic aspect of things on everything else it is not possible to explain economic change on the basis of economic conditions alone. For the economic state of a people does not emerge simply from the preceding economic conditions, but only from the preceding total situation' (Schumpeter, 1989: 58).

<sup>16</sup> I am here referring to what has been named Schumpeter's Mark I theory, developed in *Theory of Economic Development* (1911). Mark I theory stresses the importance of the entrepreneurial spirit embodied by charismatic individuals. Mark II theory, presented in *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (1943), envisage innovation and entrepreneurship as more routinized process within large firms.

who do not only enact a spirit of history that exists before, in a logical and ontological sense, but make history happen. They are depicted as self-aware actors who claim the right and power to 'forge' the spirit of history and to consciously produce it. Furthermore, most of the times they are described as fiercely opposed to corporate and institutional culture. In this regard, the human agency that Schumpeter put at the core of his theory of entrepreneurship at a phenomenological and historical level (individuals actualise principles whose origin is beyond their agency and will), becomes a "ontological" feature of social entrepreneurs' subjectivity, an attribute that defines their very being. What is at stake then, is a very humanistic, as well as individualistic, vision of historical processes and societal change.

The recognition of human agency, social dimension, and transcendent origin as creative forces of the economic domain, opens the space for the introduction in the economic mechanism of something that goes beyond purely economic calculation. This aspect has been emphasised by Chicago School's economist Frank Knight, who has insisted on the non-quantifiable nature of entrepreneurship. In his book *Risk Uncertainty and Profit* (1921) he argues that entrepreneurship cannot be insured, therefore it is a matter of uncertainty (non-quantifiable) rather than a matter of risk (quantifiable). Positioning entrepreneurship beyond measure is telling of the ambiguous character of this notion: although being a form of economic conduct, entrepreneurship appears to belong to the domain of the non-quantifiable.

The characterisation of entrepreneurship as a technique to intervene in the social sphere was first formulated in the Eighties, by Peter Drucker. It is worth quoting a passage from his book *Innovation and Entrepreneurship* that, published in 1985, has become a classic of management scholarship:

Innovation and entrepreneurship are thus needed in society as much as in the economy, in public-service institutions as much as in businesses. It is precisely because innovation and entrepreneurship are not "root and branch" but "one step at a time", a product here, a policy there, a public service yonder; because they are not planned but focused on this opportunity and that need; because they are tentative and will

disappear if they do not produce the expected and needed results; because, in other words, they are pragmatic rather than dogmatic and modest rather than grandiose—that they promise to keep any society, economy, industry, public service, or business flexible and self-renewing. They achieve what Jefferson hoped to achieve through revolution in every generation, and they do so without bloodshed, civil war, or concentration camps, without economic catastrophe, but with purpose, with direction, and under control. (Drucker, 2006: 254)

Drucker defines innovation and entrepreneurship as tools for a reformation of society that is supposed to finally achieve those ideals of freedom and efficiency that revolutions and interventionist policies had failed to realise. What is important is that in this way entrepreneurship becomes an omni-comprehensive technique that can be taught and learn. The Schumpeterian *Unternehmergeist* is democratised and politicised. As I will show, this perspective on the entrepreneurship as a very accessible and democratic replacement of public policies is a marking trait of contemporary social entrepreneurship's discourse. Also, it further evidences the "tentacular" nature of the category of entrepreneurship, which allows to define it as a means for the management of virtually every aspect of life.

More recently, the economic sociologist David Stark, drawing on Schumpeter and Knight, defined entrepreneurship as the 'ability to keep multiple principles of evaluation in play and to benefit from that productive friction' (Stark, 2009: 6). Stark shed light on the ambivalence of entrepreneurship. The term ambivalence has to be understood in its Latin meaning of *ambigere*: to conduct to two or more sides, to indicate that the form of the enterprise refers to diverse orders of worth, in this respect causing a 'sense of dissonance' (Stark, 2009).

Stark's notion of ambivalence can help to understand the marking tension of social entrepreneurship, which is characterised by the conjunction and entanglement of two different domains. It is this ambivalence that makes the enterprise the ideal form to connect the social and human dimensions with the economic. It is what makes it work as a category the connects different domains. The enterprise is not only the unit for the cold

mechanism of competition to function, but also a form that involves the active participation of the human being, of the very individual in his or her very human and personal traits.

While this thesis will draw mainly on a Foucauldian understanding of entrepreneurship - which is more consistent with its focus on the entrepreneurial selfhood – the studies presented so far are useful to point at the inherently ambivalent nature of the category of the enterprise. I argue that this is what provides the condition of existence of the discourse of social entrepreneurship. Indeed, an organisation of the social based on the application of the notion of entrepreneurship does not bear the alienating traits of an adhesion to the market that sees individuals as interchangeable and atomised actors. These traits emerge with clarity in Foucault's analysis of the neoliberal entrepreneurialisation of society and subjectivity, to which the following sections are dedicated.

### Enterprise and neoliberalism

Foucault's analysis of the entrepreneurialisation of the self and society, offers the possibility to look at entrepreneurship to the extent that it articulates a certain regime of truth, and for how this translates into a specific subjectivity. Here the ambiguity of the enterprise functions as a dispositive to shape the subjectivity of individuals and the organisation of society, with the alleged result of eroding the possibility of social cohesion and ethical responsiveness.

In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, a series of lectures given at the *Collège de France* in 1978-79, Michel Foucault traces a genealogy of neoliberal governmentality that, starting from the recognition of the neoliberal political economy as a principle of limitation of the state power, indicates the production of an entrepreneurial society and subjectivity as its logical outcomes. It is striking that, almost three decades ago, the French philosopher and historian had already grasped the significance that the category of the enterprise will

have acquired in every aspect of life. Going through his analysis, I want to highlight both the neoliberal origin of social entrepreneurship, and the extent to which it might challenge neoliberal governmentality.

According to Foucault, what typifies neoliberalism is the conception of the market as a system whose conditions of efficiency have to be constantly produced. For this reason, neoliberal governmentality differs from liberal governmentality, which in its declination of *laissez-faire*, and since the Physiocrats, was rooted in the view of the market as a 'natural mechanism', which the state only had to supervise and control. For the liberals, the natural mechanism of the market was supposed to be based on 'exchange', an activity among equal partners, and regulated by the self-ruling mechanism of prices. Quite differently, neoliberalism understands the market as regulated by competition (Foucault, 2010: 118).

Competition is not a 'natural given', on the contrary it is a dynamic that needs to be constantly produced and reproduced. To conceive of the market as a mechanism of competition implies thinking of it as constantly changing and evolving and therefore in need of input from the social sphere to continue functioning. It follows that the role of governmental reason should be that of producing, at the level of the social, the conditions for the market to function. As Donzelot puts it: 'the role of the State is to intervene in favour of the market rather than because of the market, in such a way that the market is always maintained and that the principle of equal inequality produces its effect' (Donzelot, 2008: 124). In other words, since the market is thought of as rooted in the mechanism of competition, *laissez-faire* is not an option any more.

It is worth quoting at length the passage where Foucault explains this epochal shift:

[...] This is where the ordoliberals break with the tradition of eighteenth and nineteenth century liberalism. They say: Laissez-Faire cannot and must not be the conclusion drawn from the principle of competition as the organising form of the market. Why not? Because, they say, when you deduce the principle of laissez-faire from the market economy, basically you are still in the grip of what could be called a "naive natural-ism,"[...] For what in fact is competition? It is absolutely not

a given of nature. [...] Competition is an essence. Competition is an *eidos*. Competition is a principle of formalization. Competition has an internal logic; it has its own structure. Its effects are only produced if this logic is respected. It is, as it were, a formal game between inequalities; it is not a natural game between individuals and behaviors. [...] This means that pure competition is not a primitive given. It can only be the result of lengthy efforts and, in truth, pure competition is never attained. Pure competition must and can only be an objective, an objective thus presupposing an indefinitely active policy. Competition is therefore a historical objective of governmental art and not a natural given that must be respected. (Foucault, 2010: 120).

The social is no longer seen as a remedy for the inequalities caused by the market, rather it becomes the very 'factory' of inequalities, the 'historical objective' of governmental art, which must create the formal and material condition of inequalities so that competition can be produced and reproduced. As Donzelot put it: 'In short, social policy is no longer a means for countering the economic, but a means to sustain the logic of competition' (Donzelot, 2008: 124).

Foucault identifies in the form of 'entrepreneurship' the building block of competitiveness. The regulation and organisation of a society that is able to produce successful conditions for the competitive market to function finds in the 'enterprise' its basic unit. By Foucault's analysis, the effects of the political economy are to be judged against the market, which then acts as a *litmus test* of government efficiency. Foucault argues that since the mercantilistic era, the market has become the 'site of veridiction', of 'verification', of the action of the government. This implies that it is the understanding of the market, of its ontological substance, which determines governmentality. Therefore:

The society regulated by reference to the market that the neoliberals are thinking about is a society in which the regulatory principle should not be so much the exchange of commodities as the mechanisms of competition. It is these mechanisms that should have the greatest possible surface and depth and should also occupy the greatest possible volume in society. This means that what is sought is not a society subject to the commodity-effect, but a society subject to the dynamics of competition. Not a super-market society, but an enterprise society. [...] What is involved is the generalization of forms of "enterprise" by diffusing and multiplying them as much as possible, enterprises which must not be focused on the form of big national or international enterprises or the type of big enterprises of a state. I think this multiplication of the "enterprise" form within the social body is what is at stake in neoliberal policy. It is a matter of making the market, competition, and so the enterprise, into what could be called the formative power of society (Foucault, 2010: 144-148).

The line of reasoning is elegant: if governmentality has to be judged and limited according to the functioning of the market, and if the market's substantial principle is competition, then governmentality will have to deploy a set of dispositives to produce competition. Competition is based on the manufacturing of freedom, a particular type of freedom, that is, the freedom to organise and manage resources so as to be well equipped to partake in the 'formal game of inequalities'. Such freedom is an entrepreneurial freedom, is the liberty to acquire the capabilities of using resources so as to actualise projects in an autonomous and financially sustainable way. The enterprise is the form of this freedom: freedom to compete and to capitalise on one's skills, talents, passions, etc.

### The entrepreneur of the self

The subject that epitomises, embodies and enacts neoliberal political economy, culture and society is the entrepreneur of the self. Foucault deduces and discusses the figure of the entrepreneur of the self through the analysis of Gary Becker's notion of human capital, in which he sees the most exhaustive disclosure of neoliberal philosophy. He claims that American neoliberalism, which finds in the concept of human capital one its most comprehensive theories, overcomes the ambiguity of the German ordoliberalism since it enacts an 'absolute generalization' of 'the form of the market' (Foucault, 2010: 243). For the ordoliberals the enterprise society functions to counterbalance the coldness of the market, while for the neoliberals there is no longer such a gap between the social and the economic.

What the idea of human capital implies, Foucault explains, is to look at labour from the point of view of the worker. This is the fundamental perspective shift of Becker theory, and of neoliberalism in general, for it recognises labour as a practice, and the worker as an active economic subject. According to Foucault, the neoliberals insist on this point, charging both classical and Marxist economic theories to consider labour only in terms of

quantity and price. Instead, they suggest regarding it as an activity in which the worker uses her or his skills to get an income. Within this conceptual framework, an individual's set of abilities – manual, cognitive, technical, and creative – are conceived of as human capital: they are 'human' for they are inseparable from the person who possesses them, and they are deployed as a form of capital since it is by putting them to work that the worker gets an income. From the viewpoint of the worker, then, income is a return on investment.

Importantly, this way of deciphering labour implies a reconceptualization of workers' subjectivity for they are required to think of themselves as possessing certain attributes that have to be managed in a profitable way. Therefore 'the worker appears as a sort of enterprise for himself' (Foucault, 2010: 225), she or he embodies the form of life of a *homo economicus* as the entrepreneur of the self:

...*homo economicus* is an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself. This is true to the extent that, in practice, the stake in all neoliberal analyses is the replacement every time of *homo economicus* as partner of exchange with a *homo economicus* as entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of his earnings (Foucault, 2010: 226).

At stake, there is a redefinition of the meaning and objective of one's life and identity, since it is one's own life to be deciphered through the category of the enterprise. Whence the conception of individual life as a form of 'permanent and multiple enterprise' (Foucault, 2010: 241). Each skill, thought, desire, passion can possibly become – they must become – the 'material' of the enterprise, something that can be put to work. The self becomes an investible quality, and its monetary return the *litmus tests* of one's value. What is at stake is an absolute generalisation of the form of the enterprise:

American neoliberalism still involves, in fact, the generalization of the economic form of the market. It involves generalizing it throughout the social body and including the whole of the social system not usually conducted through or sanctioned by monetary exchanges (Foucault, 2010: 243).

Foucault claims that American neoliberalism suppresses the ambiguity of the enterprise (Foucault, 2010: 243). However, it could be argued that this is even more for it is precisely the ambiguity of the enterprise that allows the production of an extreme form of economic reductionism. It is the enterprise's ability to describe both an economic, rational action, and a quasi-spiritual, heroic, human endeavour, which makes it a suitable category for the conjunction of an economic dimension within the social, ethical and political spheres. Because of this, it can function as a dispositive to anchor the individual to her or his environment (Foucault, 2010: 242).

Here the category of the enterprise functions as a sort of Kantian schema that translates the domain of the economy into that of the self, turning the first into a form of capital, and the latter into a self-actualizing and self-producing activity. Indeed, it could be argued that the philosophical core of neoliberalism, which is fully embedded in the notion of enterprise and in its various declinations, e.g. entrepreneurial market, self and society, is the 'possibility of giving a strictly economic interpretation of a whole domain previously thought to be non-economic' (Foucault, 2010: 221). The entrepreneur of the self is the subject for whom the translation of the self into a form of business shall spontaneously follow from the very perception of his or her being. An entrepreneurialised subjectivity can be thus described as that for which competition and uncertainty, investment and profit, are not only economic but also existential categories. For the entrepreneur of the self *res oeconomica* and *res existentialis* fully coincide.

#### Entrepreneurs of the self and the death of the collective

Foucauldian critical scholars have reflected upon the social and cultural consequences of the economic reductionism implied in the limitless generalisation of the form of the enterprise. What emerges from this body of research is that the subjectivity of the entrepreneur of the self implies a necessary repression of any form of value and objective that exceeds individual profit. Collapsed in an economic interpretation of her or his own

being, the entrepreneur of the self cannot be other than an atomised subject who refuses to subscribe to any kind of social contract.

Dilts describes the entrepreneur of the self as the individual who 'pursues his own interests' and 'who must be left alone to pursue those interests' (Dilts, 2011: 131). Lazzarato claims that the entrepreneurialisation of the self will have a destructive impact on social bonds, undermining the conditions for social cohesion (Lazzarato, 2009: 111). And McNay describes the life of the entrepreneur of the self as rooted in a 'relation to the self based on a notion of incontestable economic interest (McNay, 2009: 56).

The organisation of the self and society in the form of the enterprise ultimately corresponds to a cooptation of instances of freedom and autonomy within a mechanism of discipline and control. The redefinition of work as a means for the individual to capitalise on her own self leads to the subsumption of individual freedom into the mechanism of the market. Therefore, the values and practices of freedom and autonomy cease to hold radical<sup>17</sup> potential since they get expressed and actualised in the form of the enterprise. The ideology of self-realisation is depoliticised and oriented towards market success. Its objective is no longer to free one's desires from the constraints of bourgeois discipline, but to realise those desires in the very material forms of money, career advancement and worldly success. As McNay put it:

The remodelling of the subjective experience of the self around an economic notion of enterprise subtly alters and depoliticises conventional notions of individual autonomy. Individual autonomy becomes not the opposite of, or limit to, neoliberal governance, rather it lies at the heart of disciplinary control. This inevitably challenges the perception of resistance, freedom and political opposition, which often invoke a notion of individual autonomy as an absolute block or challenge to the working of power (McNay, 2009: 62).

According to this line of thought, the antithesis between 'entrepreneurship' and 'non-egoistic action' cannot be solved. Considering that the entrepreneurial form is the form of a private endeavour aimed at the creation of profit, and is rooted in the individualistic

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<sup>17</sup> With the term 'radical' I refer to an action or thought that profoundly challenges a given political, social, economic and cultural system.

mechanism of competition, every kind of social solidarity, every action that takes into account something that exceeds the limits of the individual interest is automatically removed from the realm of possibilities. Inequality, as Lazzarato observes, 'has the capacity to sharpen appetites, instincts and minds, driving individuals to rivalries' (Lazzarato, 2009: 116). William Davies refers to this phenomenon as the neoliberal 'disenchantment of politics by economics', a process that involves a 'deconstruction of the language of the common good' or the 'public' (Davies, 2014: 4).

As McNay effectively put it: 'the wider consequences of organized self-realization are a fragmentation of social values and a process of 'social desolidarization' expressed in elevated levels of depression and mental illness, and the emptying out of any meaning to the achievement principle other than maximization of profit' (McNay, 2009: 65). Within an economic interpretation private wealth and interest are the only criteria of judgment and evaluation. Hence the social, ethical and political dimensions, which all exceed the boundaries of the individual, are irremediably removed from the sphere of thought and action of the entrepreneur of the self.

### The self at work

In the last three decades, a significant number of studies have explored the implications and effects of entrepreneurialisation of the self and labour in neoliberal societies (e.g. DuGay, 1996; Sennett, 1998; Ross, 2004; McRobbie, 2001, 2002; Thrift, 1998, 2005; Adkins and Lury, 1999; Gill and Pratt, 2008; McRobbie, 2015). What emerges from these accounts is the shifting meaning of work. Previously perceived as the site of alienation, of repetitive tasks to be performed with no personal investment, work has been re-defined and re-organised as 'part of that continuum along which 'we' all seek to realize ourselves as particular sets of person-outcomes, self-regulatory, self-fulfilling individual actors' (Thrift, 2005: 34). As Nigel Thrift explains:

... we talked of structures and their systems, of inputs and outputs, of control devices and of managing them, as if the whole was one huge factory. Today the language is not that of engineering but of politics, with talk of cultures and networks of teams and coalitions, of influence and power rather than of control, of leadership not management. It is as if we had suddenly woken up to the fact that organisations were made up of people after all, not just 'heads' or 'role occupations' (Thrift, 2005: 33).

In a similar vein, Paul DuGay argues that this 'humanisation' of the workplace has been central to the endeavour of management scholars in the last five decades, their concern being how to effectively encourage employees to work autonomously, take responsibilities, develop problem solving skills, while acting in the interest of the firm (DuGay, 1996). As he put it, regardless of the differences between different schools of thought, management scholars have been united by a focus on 'the production and regulation of particular work-based subjectivities' (DuGay, 1996: 59).

The core of the managerial shift revolved around making the self a space of intervention, something to be produced in accordance with the needs of the company. Employees started to be encouraged to express themselves, to be independent, to engage in activities of self-assessment and reciprocal feedback (Newton, 1995). In the most successful cases, they are seen as providing valuable inputs, catalysing innovative practices and spreading their charisma, for the benefit of the company. In other words, they adopt an entrepreneurial conduct within their role as dependent worker. As DuGay, drawing on Rose (1989, 1990) and Gordon (1987) puts it: 'excellent companies seek to cultivate enterprising subjects – autonomous, self-regulating, productive individuals' (DuGay, 1996: 60).

The fashioning of the self becomes part of the tasks to be fulfilled at work, and a significant part of workers' selling propositions. In this respect, the process of self-fashioning, far from being a spontaneous act of self-expression, resembles more a set of skills that must be learnt and deployed. Indeed, as Lazzarato put it 'to be employable one

must conduct oneself and have a lifestyle which is in harmony with the market' (Lazzarato, 2009: 127). In such context, 'being oneself' becomes a command, instead of a principle of freedom. One's lifestyle and identity – if in harmony with the market needs - can become a unique selling proposition of the entrepreneurialised worker. This process of commodification of the self has been encapsulated in practices and discourse around self-branding: one's brand serves as a device for the management and communication of one's identity and value in the job market (Hearn, 2011; Marwick 2013; Bandinelli and Arvidsson 2013; Arvidsson et. al. 2016). At the same time, the failure to own, promote and sell - in one word: to brand - one's identity, can cause one's exclusion from or marginalisation in the job market (see, for instance, Adkins and Lury (2006) for a gender perspective on this matter)<sup>18</sup>.

Upon closer inspection, being oneself is a formula that entails the production and performance of a specific self, i.e. the entrepreneurial self. As Rose puts it: 'The enterprising self will make a venture of its life, project itself a future and seek to shape itself in order to become that which it wishes to be' (Rose, 1990: 6). One substantial feature of the entrepreneurial subjectivity is precisely an understanding of the self as something to be fashioned: s/he is one who is able to reform and perform his or her identities continuously and in accordance with the changing environment of the neoliberal flexible and casualised job market (Sennet, 1998; Adkins and Lury, 2006; DuGay, 1996 ).

Post-Operaists scholars have stressed the exploitative character of the entrepreneurialisation of the self. Since the self is what needs to be produced within the

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<sup>18</sup> The centrality of the production of subjectivity at work applies not only to highly skilled, managerial or the so-called 'creative' jobs, but also in the service economy, which has been rebranded as 'experience economy'. Emma Dowling's self-ethnography of waitressing is exemplar in this respect. Drawing on her ten years' experience as a waitress, and offering thick descriptions of a period of eighteen months of full time employment in a top-quality restaurant, Dowling shows how, in order to produce and deliver the 'dining experience', she was required to engage in affective activities – being 'enthusiastic', entertaining the customers, anticipating their desires etc. – leveraging on her own being, i.e. 'being herself' (Dowling, 2007: 120).

capitalist system, it becomes subsumed into its logic (Lazzarato, 1996; Virno, 2005; Berardi, 2009). Maurizio Lazzarato, in his analysis of Post-fordist labour, argues that self-expression is the very basis of capital exploitation. As Lazzarato puts it:

What modern management techniques are looking for is for the worker's soul to become part of the factory. The worker's personality and subjectivity have to be made susceptible of organization and command (Lazzarato, 1996: 133).

This passage elucidates both movements of expression and exploitation. The subject becomes the core of production in as much as it is a unique subject, with a unique 'soul': there is hence a process of valorisation of the self, of self-valorisation. However, since this subject has to produce value within a capitalist economy his or her expression must be subjugated and commanded. The entrepreneurialised subject is then caught into an ambivalent condition: it simultaneously occupies the position of both his or her manager and his or her slave, being 'capitalist and proletarian' at the same time (Lazzarato, drawing on Deleuze and Guattari, 2009: 126).

### Individualisation

The concept of the self as something to be acted upon, something to be created rather than something given, has been recognised as a mark of neoliberal post-modernity and explored both in so far as it opens up spaces of emancipation and desires, and to the extent that it gives rise to new forms of exploitation and anxieties (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 2007; Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994; Lasch, 1991; Illouz, 2007).

Social theorists - Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Scott Lash, amongst others - have described this paradigmatic shift in the philosophical, sociological and cultural appreciation of the self through the notion of 'individualisation'. Within this stream of thought, 'individualisation' does not coincide with the neoliberal egoistic individualism promoted by neoliberal governmentality. Rather than indicating solely political and

ethical disenchantment, it points at the 'process of becoming an individual' (Lash, 2002:3) and at the 'individual creativity' which is released through it (Beck, 2002: xxi).

Beck defines this as 'institutionalised individualism', a formula that encapsulates the fact that individuals become the main 'social structure of second modernity society' (Beck, 2002: xxii). This comes as a result of the process of de-traditionalisation and de-institutionalisation that marks what Lash and Urry have defined as disorganised capitalism (Lash and Urry, 1987). Indeed, exploring individualisation equates to tackling the question: 'which new modes of life are coming into being where the old ones, ordained by religion, tradition or the state, are breaking down?' (Beck, 2002: 2). These modes of life are defined by the space of action that individuals can enjoy and must deal with when confronted with their lives. An individual life is no more something relatively planned and predictable, constricted within the institutional limits of traditional society, rather it becomes an 'elective biography', 'reflexive biography', 'do-it-yourself biography' (Beck, 2002: 3).

I want to point out that the neoliberal and sociological significance of individualisation are not mutually exclusive. They rather attempt to grasp the same phenomenon from different perspectives and, as a matter of fact, describe the same cultural processes. Undoubtedly, the notion of 'institutionalised individualism' leaves more room for investigating spaces for resistance and 're-invention of the political' (Beck, 2002: 18). However, as Zygmunt Bauman claims, this is ultimately compulsory in character, and its disaggregating effects may cause the fading-out of the notion of common interests (Bauman, 2002: xvi). Lazzarato follows the same trail and argues that individualisation 'does not aim to insure individuals against risks, but to constitute an economic space in which individuals individually take upon themselves and confront risks' (Lazzarato, 2009: 118).

To account for this dialectical relation between freedom and power, it is useful to turn again to Foucault. In his last works, he has stressed the fact that technologies of power

are always in relation to 'technologies of the self', and the notion of governmentality is to be found at the crossroads of these two (Foucault, 2000). This means that individuals are always in the process of negotiating and resisting, as well as reproducing and enacting, instances of power<sup>19</sup>. One should then resist the temptation to dismiss every individualised subject as a passive product of neoliberal governmentality. In this respect, I maintain Angela McRobbie's warning against a too-simplistic intellectual manoeuvre that collapses individualisation into neoliberal governmentality (McRobbie, 2001).

Through the thesis, the terms 'individualisation' and 'individualism', as well as 'entrepreneurship' and all its derivatives, are used in all their ambivalence and ambiguity, more precisely because of their ambivalence and ambiguity. In other words, they are used to indicate the complex intertwining of emancipation and exploitation, freedom and cooptation, passion and anxieties, that mark contemporary neoliberal subjects.

#### Individualisation as lived

The complexity of the relations between work and subjectivity emerges with clarity in empirical cultural studies of work in neoliberal societies; a scholarly endeavour to which this thesis belongs in so far as it draws on ethnographic data to study social entrepreneurs' understanding of their work identity. These studies indicate that on the one hand, work is perceived as something creative, and passionate (McRobbie, 1997, 2001, 2002, Arvidsson et al. 2010). Angela McRobbie observes that for some sections of the population it 'has become an important source for self-actualization, even freedom and independence' (McRobbie, 2002: 518); and aptly notes that 'there is a utopian thread embedded in this wholehearted attempt to make-over the world of work into something closer to a life of enthusiasm and enjoyment' (McRobbie 2002: 521).

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<sup>19</sup> I will return to this point in the last sections of this chapter, where I discuss the Foucauldian notions of the regime of truth and the process of subjectivation; and in Chapter III, where I discuss the notion of ethnography of a process of subjectivation in relation to the field of Anthropology of Ethics.

On the other hand, for the sake of self-actualisation, and in the name of passion and creativity, workers accept the renunciation of any form of welfare, security and political representation. As a matter of fact, the imperative of being an entrepreneur of the self, while it is felt as empowering in so far as it allows a high degree of independence, also implies that one is obliged to take all the risks and responsibilities for the success or failure of her or his career (McRobbie, 1998, 2002; Arvidsson et al. 2010; Ross, 2004, 2008; Sennett, 1998; Bauman 2000, 2006).

The disappearance of trade unions and other institutional forms of politics of the workplace puts individuals in a situation in which they have to become their own structure. While this can be a source of enjoyment for the high degree of independence it entails, it also has its repercussions. Indeed, individualised and entrepreneurialised workers have only themselves to blame if something goes wrong (McRobbie; 2002, drawing on Bauman; 1999). In other words, they are obliged to find autobiographical, personal, solutions to systemic problems (Beck, 1997; McRobbie, 2002).

What is at stake is a highly individualised workforce who engages in increasingly de-spatialised working practices, and who must make up for the lack of structural organisation and security by developing multi-tasking skills and adapting to the casualisation of the job market. Such de-spatialisation, coupled with the absence of traditional institutions such as trade unions, results in the depoliticisation of work. 'Maybe', McRobbie argues, 'there can be no workplace politics when there is no workplace' (McRobbie, 2002: 521-22).

Social entrepreneurs' replicate the traits of workers in the culture industries: they conceive their work as the royal road for the expression of themselves; and embrace the belief that work can become a source of pleasure and enjoyment. The 'utopian thread' indicated by McRobbie seems to be even more evident in social entrepreneurs' narratives, which make of work the way improve not only personal lives, but also society as such. Also, social entrepreneurs operate in a de-territorialised and de-institutionalised and urban

economies, where they have to do the work of the structure themselves, mostly by means of networking activities. As the majority of independent knowledge workers they are deprived of any for of job security and politics of the workplace.

### Social entrepreneurs: between re-embedding and subsumption

The studies reviewed so far demonstrate that during the last thirty years neoliberal governance has actually deployed the concept of entrepreneurial self – with its corollary of freedom and self-actualisation - as a dispositive for the conduct of conduct (Rose, 1999). This has been functional for the production of a self-employed, self-exploiting workforce, composed of individual workers who, practically deprived of collective forms of political organisation and representation (e.g. trade unions), existentially collapsed into their own individuality, and emotionally marked by precariousness and anxiety, have provided the necessary labour power for an increasingly deregulated and casualised work environment (McRobbie, 2001, 2002; Ross, 2004, 2008; Christopherson 2008). Overall, values of solidarity and social justice have been overlooked or dismissed in favour of an exaltation of individuality articulated in the narratives of ambition and success, which have been the soundtrack of the culture industry both in the US and UK (McRobbie, 2001, 2002; Ross, 2008; Gill and Pratt, 2008).

Although such neoliberal modes of governance still subsist (Crouch, 2011) social entrepreneurs' claims seem to exceed this scenario and, by explicitly coupling entrepreneurship with the adjective 'social', propose again, and in an extreme way, the question of its constitutive ambivalence. To this extent they seem to challenge the observation that 'speed and risk negate ethics, community and politics' (McRobbie, 2002: 523). Or at least they signal what might be left of those.

As I have argued in my unpublished Master dissertation, this discourse could be interpreted as merely ideological, and analysed in so far as it subsumes the social into a mode of the economic (Bandinelli, 2009). It could also be argued that social entrepreneurship is nothing more than a brand to glamourize a post-welfare social policy

that attempts to reorganise the public sector as a network of individual, localised and financially autonomous enterprises, bringing to the extreme what Beck described as the tendency to find 'biographical' solutions to systemic and structural problems (Beck, 1997). Yet, even if all of this was uncontrovertibly true, we would still be witnessing the attempt on the part of a fully individualised neoliberal subject to explicitly re-embed an ethical, social, and political dimension.

As I will further illustrate through this thesis, social entrepreneurs claim to be driven by the need to positively impact on society, and do not perceive their entrepreneurial activities as an obstacle, but rather as the most adequate means to pursue this objective. In this respect, social entrepreneurs enact a specific subjectivity that does not fully coincide with that of the entrepreneur of the self, for it reintegrates – at least discursively - social justice and solidarity with individualism and entrepreneurialism. In a sense, they are entrepreneurs of the self who value other achievements besides profit, namely: social justice, solidarity, equality.

Dismissing the phenomenon as yet another form of capital cooptation would therefore prevent an analysis of the specificities of social entrepreneurship discourse, ultimately leading to the tautological argument that people living in neoliberal societies act and think in neoliberal ways. Instead, the objective of this thesis is to delve into the paradoxical character of a fully individualised entrepreneur of the self who acts for the collective good in a neoliberal society, where the collective good is supposedly invisible (Foucault, 2010: 282) and where individuals are in structural competition with each other. In this respect, I aim at offering a critique of social entrepreneurship which is not reducible to a 'fault-finding' (Williams, quoted in Butler 2002: 1) practice nor to the objective of formulating a judgment. On the contrary, it moves exactly from the suspension of judgment as a methodological premise to open the space for a practice of analytical understanding (Butler, 2002).

For these reasons, the pages that follow will be led by the question of how neoliberal subjects can reintegrate in a social, ethical and political dimension, and what such processes imply and exclude. In other words, it will focus on the subjective viewpoint of social entrepreneurs to explore how they actualise, enact, make sense of and think about the re-embedding of a social, ethical and political dimension within their entrepreneurial practices.

### Understanding social entrepreneurs' subjectivity and regime of truth

To conduct this type of enquiry I deploy the Foucauldian concepts of 'regime of truth' and 'process of subjectivation'. These two inter-related concepts offer the opportunity to think both in abstract and in empirical terms, for their relationship highlights the correspondence between subscribing to a certain mode of thinking and becoming a certain kind of subject. In the 1977 interview 'The Political Function of the Intellectual', Michel Foucault explains that the expression 'regime of truth' means a number of related things: (1) 'the types of discourse [society] harbours and causes to function as true'; (2) 'the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true from false statement' and (3) 'the way in which each is sanctioned'; (4) 'the techniques and procedures which are valorised for obtaining truth'; (5) 'the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true' (Foucault 1977, p. 12-13).

While I do not follow these prescriptions in an orthodox manner, I do take the concept of regime of truth to indicate that a given mode of thinking is constructed over some basic assumptions that, while rarely expressed, constitute the foundation of a certain vision of the world. Analysing the regime of truth of social entrepreneurship involves exploring the assumptions on which it is built. It involves asking the simple but essential questions: what vision of the social and the entrepreneurial is implied in something like a 'social enterprise'? What vision of 'change' is implied in social entrepreneurs' claims of 'changing the world'? What notion of ethics is at stake in the 'doing good' of social

entrepreneurship? In a nutshell, it means exploring how social entrepreneurship is thinkable. In a sense, I use the notion of regime of truth in as much as it offers an analytical methodology, i.e. it functions as a frame to indicate a certain approach to the topic.

The same applies to the notion of subjectivity. With this concept I want to indicate the fact that thinking certain thoughts makes of someone a certain person. This is to say that those who embrace the regime of truth of social entrepreneurship become social entrepreneurial subjects. In his 1979-80 Lectures at the Collège The France: *The Government of The Living*, Foucault argues that the acceptance of a regime of truth is related to a process of subjectivation. Since I accept [*je m'incline*] a regime of truth, I self-qualify in a certain way, constituting myself as a specific subject, by means of the application of a number of technologies of the self (Foucault, 2014). As Lorenzini puts it: 'this acceptance takes the form of a subjection (*assujettissement*) or of a subjectivation (subjectivation), since every regime of truth asks the individuals who are implicated in it for a specific self-constitution' (Lorenzini, 2013: 3).

This focus on the self is particularly appropriate for the analysis of a phenomenon in which the stress on a particular subject – the social entrepreneur – is so prominent. Moreover, it permits to approach the analysis of social entrepreneurship's regime of truth not in abstract terms, but rather to pinpoint its embodied nature, the modes by which it is enacted, spoken and produced by living individuals. Indeed, although Foucault has never conducted empirical, ethnographic research, his analytical methodology can well be applied to living, embodied subjects. In this regard, this research resonates with Ian Hacking's purpose of combining Foucault 'top-down', 'pure descriptions of discursive events' – with the actual speakers, or writers, 'left out or presented only by implication' – with Goffman 'bottom-up' interests in 'concrete conversations' between embodied individuals (Hacking, 2004: 278). Even if I do not draw specifically on Goffman himself, I

do combine a Foucauldian theoretical framework and analytical methodology with ethnography. At stake there is the attempt to bring Foucault “down to the self”.

This is not an isolated attempt. Besides Hacking, this type of research has been carried out by the anthropologists of ethics. Starting from Foucault’s definition of ethics as a process of subjectivation, anthropologists of ethics have pursued ethnographic research to investigate how individuals constitute themselves as particular subjects (see, for instance, Ladilaw, 2002; Pandian, 2010; Faubion, 2001, 2011). In the last years of his life and research Michel Foucault closely explored the means, ends, and significance of the process through which individuals create themselves as subjects, tracing the origin of this process back to the ancient Greek notion and practices of *epimeleia heautou*, the care of the self (Foucault, 2005). As he stated in a 1983 interview, this intellectual endeavour can be thought of as a ‘genealogy of ethics’ (Foucault, 2000: 266) where the term ethics refers to ‘the kind of relationship you ought to be with yourself, *rappor a soi*’ (Foucault, 2000: 263). Therefore, ethics – regardless of the particular moral systems that may originate from it in different historical contexts – is a form of continual work on the self, a perennial activity of ‘self bricolage’ (Rabinow, 2000: xxxix). As Laidlaw aptly notices, this concept of ethics is far ‘wider than the following of socially sanctioned moral rules’, for it ‘includes our response to invitations or injunctions to make oneself into a certain kind of person’ (Ladilaw, 2002: 321-22).

The diverse dispositives which ‘permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state’ are named by Foucault ‘technologies of the self’ (Foucault, 2000: 225). In other words, technologies of the self are those with which the individual can ‘act upon himself’ (Foucault, 1988:16). As such, they necessarily produce an ethos, they are *ethopoios*, which means that they ‘possess the quality of transforming ethos’ (Foucault: 2005:237).

Importantly, this notion of ethics as a project of self-fashioning unfolds between the two extremes of freedom and domination: individuals exercise their freedom by effecting operations so as to transform and craft themselves, through processes of subjectivation, but these practices of the self 'are nevertheless not something invented by the individual himself [sic]. They are models that he finds in his culture and that are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society his social group' (Foucault, 2000: 291). To put it another way, processes of subjectivation unfold always in relation to 'games of truth' and 'practices of power' (Foucault, 2000: 290). Therefore, the kind of freedom exercised by the ethical subject who is crafting himself or herself, is never of an absolute kind, rather it is defined by a web of power relationships and regimes of truth.

It is at the crossroads of technologies of domination and technologies of the self that Foucault individuates the field for the study of governmentality (Foucault, 2000: 225). As explained by Agamben, 'processes of subjectivation bring the individual to bind himself to his own identity and consciousness and, at the same time, to an external power' (Agamben, 1998: 5). This implies that the subject is never a stable, simple, substance, but rather a composite form that is not 'always identical to itself':

You do not have the same type of relationship to yourself when you constitute yourself as a political subject ... and when you are seeking to fulfil your desires in a sexual relationship. Undoubtedly there are relationship and interferences between these different forms of the subject; but we are not dealing with the same type of subject. In each case, one plays, one establishes a different type of relationship to oneself (Foucault, 2000: 290)

Drawing on this parlance, the following pages can be read as an attempt to analyse the relationship that some embodied individuals establish with themselves in so far as they constitute themselves as 'social entrepreneurs'. Doing that implies analysing how they produce and are produced by the social entrepreneurship regime of truth. Such an analytical toolkit has at least two great advantages. Firstly, it creates the space for analysis that does not collapse into the neoliberal dominance of individuals' thoughts and actions. To put it another way, it permits us to effect an analysis at the crossroads between power

and resistance. Secondly, in so far as it allows to explore the process of self-constitution, it provides a method with which to approach the production of subjectivity that characterises work in neoliberal societies, in this case, to tackle the question ‘how does an individual constitute herself as a social-entrepreneurial subject’?

In short, the objective of this research is to decipher and analyse the discursive and material procedures and techniques that are mobilised so as to produce social entrepreneurship as a sphere of thoughts and actions that create truths and subjectivities. As I will show through the thesis, the regime of truth produced by social entrepreneurship involve specific conceptions of sociality, ethics and politics.

Social entrepreneurs’ understands social entrepreneurship as political in its objectives, ethical in its underpinning values, social in its organisation, and is characterised by the use of entrepreneurial means.

### Sociality, ethics, and politics

I will now provide more details about the meaning of the terms sociality, ethics and politics. At this stage, I offer just an orientative definition. A more detailed account of these terms is provided at the beginning of each empirical chapter. First of all, I want to clarify that I use the terms sociality, ethics and politics as heuristic devices. This is to say that rather than providing a positive definition, they delimit a field of enquiry, functioning as bench-marks around which variations and differences can be situated. Indeed, the aim of my research is precisely that of deducing the notions of ethics, sociality, and politics at stake in social entrepreneurs discourse and practices. For these reasons, they will acquire a more concrete meaning over the following chapters. For now, I just offer a synthetic description of the field of enquiry that they indicate.

With the term sociality, I broadly refer to the characters and functions that human interaction acquires in a specific context. In particular, I draw on studies of sociality at work to investigate the meaning that on-line and off-line social interactions acquire in the

sphere of work (Lazzarato, 1997; Wittel, 2001; Gregg, 2007, 2011; Marwick, 2013). Therefore, an analysis of social entrepreneurs' sociality can be seen as a case study of the impact, scope and significance of social interactions in the organisation of work for entrepreneurialised subjects operating in neoliberal economies and society. More specifically, it concerns the issue of social entrepreneurs' re-integration of a social dimension in their discourse and practices.

In this thesis, the signifier 'social' is used in three interrelated meanings. The first refers to a cultural discourse around the activity of certain individuals who identify themselves as social entrepreneurs: individuals whose declared objective is to tackle social issues by means of the enterprise. In other words, it is the label 'social' attached to the 'enterprise', and it indicates the topic of this study. The second refers to the organisation of work in neoliberal societies, which is rooted on the production and exploitation of social relationships (Hardt and Negri, 1999; Lazzarato, 1996; 2009; Wittel, 2001; Gregg, 2007, 2011). In this sense, the term 'social' indicates a specific understanding of the neoliberal organisation of labour and refers to a certain literature, which I will further discuss in Chapter IV. The third relates to the specific sociality of social entrepreneurs, the features of which emerge from the analysis of ethnographic data proposed in Chapter IV. As stated above, the sociality of social entrepreneurs can be seen as an instantiation of the broader assimilation of work and social relationships typical of neoliberal modes of value production.

I use the term ethics to refer to two intermingled dimensions. The first concerns a value horizon against which individuals assess their actions and thoughts to the extent that these are adequate for the pursuit of maximum collective happiness. As can be noticed, this definition echoes Aristotle's notion of ethics as *eudaimonia*, which he develops in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Importantly, this is not a prescriptive definition, e.g. it is not concerned with specific norms of conduct that point at a specific morality.

Rather, it concerns the analysis of the values and virtues that can lead to living a good life with others. Following this, I define an investigation of social entrepreneurs ethics as an analysis of how they reintegrate a collective dimension within an entrepreneurialised and individualised subjectivity. The second is the Foucauldian meaning that I have discussed in the previous section: it involves the processes of subjectivations in which the individual embarks so as to make of him or herself a certain subject. In this latter meaning, ethics is a hermeneutic of the self.

The meaning of politics that I use in this research exceeds the domain of the state, and looks at the analysis of 'what we are willing to accept in our world – to accept, to refuse, to change – both in ourselves and in our circumstances' (Foucault 2007: 152). Drawing on Foucault, I conceive of politics as the dimension of discourses and actions that involve the will to act in order to alter the order of things, to impact and improve on the ways in which society is structured, organised, and managed. Hannah Arendt's definition of political discourse and actions is helpful to further specify this concept of politics. According to the German theorist, politics has to do with the discourse and actions dealing with change, with the future, and therefore with the unforeseeable and unpredictable (Arendt, 1998). At stake is an anthropological notion of politics that concerns individuals' political feelings, thoughts and actions. Within this framework, analysing social entrepreneurs' politics represents an attempt to understand the significance of the notion of 'change' that they mobilise, and how this is redefined by its intertwining with the form of the enterprise.

## Conclusion

This chapter I have engaged with the theoretical notion of entrepreneurship to highlight its inherently ambiguous character, which I argue provides the condition of existence of the discourse of social entrepreneurship. Then, I have offered a review of the literature about work and subjectivity in neoliberal societies. In so doing so, I have provided a theoretical framework for this thesis and indicated the extent to which my research relates to existing works in the field of critical theories and cultural studies. I have combined two related streams of literature: Foucauldian studies on neoliberal governance, and cultural studies on creative and cultural labour. Starting from Foucault, I have traced the neoliberal genealogy of the entrepreneur of the self, and remarked its individualistic character. Drawing on Lazzarato, Donzelot, McNay and Dilts, I have drawn attention to the impossibility for the entrepreneur of the self to be concerned with the common good and interest. Then, I have reviewed empirical studies on independent workers in neoliberal societies, and discussed the depoliticisation of labour in relation to the processes of casualisation and individualisation.

Drawing on this literature, I have argued that social entrepreneurs partially challenge the main interpretations of the subjectivity of the entrepreneur of the self in so far as they express a desire that goes beyond private profit. Yet, they express this desire by means of work, and through the individualised form of the enterprise. In this regard, they occupy an ambivalent position in relation to neoliberal governmentality. Whence, the theoretical question that drives this research: how can entrepreneurialised and individualised subjects re-embed a social, ethical and political dimension? And with what limits and implications? Can this open the space for emancipatory politics, or is it yet another instance of capital cooptation? Or, perhaps, even both?

In the last part of the chapter, I have clarified the perspective of this analysis, stressing the intention to refuse the too-easy outcomes of superficial exaltation and sheer condemnation. What I want to do is to understand and analyse how social entrepreneurs think of social entrepreneurship, and to unpack the underlying notion of sociality, ethics and politics. In this respect, my research may be regarded as an ethnographic study on how the neoliberal subject *par excellence* – the entrepreneur of the self – attempts to retrieve and reclaim her political and ethical agency, and what the implications and limits of this endeavour are. To effect such analysis I deploy the analytical categories of the regime of truth and processes of subjectivation, which I have discussed in the last section of the chapter. Next chapter, reviews and examines the research methods I used to collect the empirical data that inform this work.

## Chapter III – METHODOLOGY: ETHNOGRAPHY AS A PROCESS OF SUBJECTIVATION

### Introduction

Social entrepreneurs' bold claim and ambitious desire is to 'change the world' by means of entrepreneurial tools. In the last chapter, I argued that they embody a type of subjectivity that does not fully coincide with that of the entrepreneur of the self described by Foucault (2010) and by many critical scholars after him (e.g. Lazzarato, 2009; and McNay, 2009). Indeed, while operating in a neoliberal society and economy and fostering a highly individualised conduct – the entrepreneurial conduct– they seek to have a 'positive impact' on society, to 'make a change'. However vague the words 'change' and 'impact' may be – I will explore this matter in the following chapters – they surely signal the attempt to reconcile – at least discursively – entrepreneurialism and social responsibility. To this extent, social entrepreneurship may represent a socio-cultural formation characterised by an inherently ambivalent position in relation to the neoliberal political economy. The aim of this work is to explore and problematise such ambivalence, by analysing the forms in which social entrepreneurship discourse integrates entrepreneurialism, therefore an individualising and competitive conduct, with the quest for social justice.

To achieve this objective, I have been seeking to deduce social entrepreneurs' regime of truth, i.e. 'the types of discourse' that the social entrepreneur 'harbours and causes to function as true' (Foucault, 1977: 12-13), the kind of discourse that an individual has to hold as true to develop a social entrepreneurial subjectivity. As Foucault argues, the acceptance of a regime of truth is related to a process of subjectivation (Foucault, 2014). Therefore, the analysis of the regime of truth of social entrepreneurship includes a

hermeneutic of the social entrepreneurial subject. At stake there is the question of how the aforementioned reconciliation between ethical objectives and entrepreneurial means takes place at the level of the self, how it becomes thinkable and do-able for social entrepreneurs. To tackle this question, I conducted an 18-month ethnography - from June 2011 to December 2012 - in the context of which I deployed an inventive mixed methodology.

With the adjective 'inventive' I explicitly refer to Celia Lury's and Nina Wakeford's understanding of 'inventive methods' as heterogeneous devices that 'variously enable the happening of the social world – its ongoingness, relationality, contingency and sensuousness – to be investigated' (Lury and Wakeford, 2012: 2). As can be seen, with this definition Lury and Wakeford stress the open-endedness, relatively unpredictable and essentially singular character of a methodology of research that aims to engage with the unpredictable and singular character of its field of research. Unpredictability and singularity are to be seen as inner features of the social world, of its contingent manifestations, its particular opacities, its complex web of relationships. Inventive methods respond to this aspect of the social and emerge as contingent and always partially insecure solutions to some specific problems and obstacles (Lury and Wakeford, 2012: 7). In defining my methodology as inventive, I want to stress its genealogy as an assemblage of solutions to overcome some obstacles, and to highlight the uncertain nature and character of my fieldwork, which I consider to be not accidental but to actually be a research device in itself. As Boeher, Gaver and Boucher write, I value 'uncertainty as a productive state for exploration rather than a condition to be resolved' (Boeher, Gaver and Boucher, quoted in Lury and Wakeford, 2012: 10).

As just mentioned, my methodology, which I define an ethnography of a process of subjectivation and at the same time ethnography as a process of subjectivation, has emerged out of a few crucial obstacles that I encountered. In a sense, this chapter can be

seen as the account of how I overcome them. I concentrate on the difficulties of studying a de-spatialised, individualised, highly performative and networked workforce for which work is a means of self-actualisation and self-production. Such a field of study challenges some traditional assumptions regarding the value of formal interviews, the time-space coordinates of the fieldwork, and the very position of the researcher.

This chapter is structured as follows: firstly, it offers a reflection on the potential and limits of interviewing entrepreneurialised workers in neoliberal societies. Secondly, it focuses on a too often taken for granted term in ethnography, i.e. fieldwork. I argue that social entrepreneurs' de-territorialised and fragmented work conduct challenges its spatial metaphor. Following this consideration, I define my fieldwork as multi-sited and mobile, therefore inherently experiential and uncertain. Thirdly, I introduce Impact Hub, an international network of coworking spaces for social innovators and entrepreneurs, and explain that its London Westminster and Milan branches have functioned as platforms for my ethnography. I then proceed by addressing the issues of access peculiar to a networked culture where relationships are commodified and an opportunistic conduct prevails. I stress the need for the researcher to embody and perform a specific subjectivity, an ethos, in order to be able to access the participants' social world.

After this, I explore the methodological implications and potentialities opened up by the encounter with Alfredo, who became my main research participant, and who allowed me to reach a deep involvement in the scene of social entrepreneurship. I argue that to concentrate on one individual is a particularly adequate methodology for the study of a society where individuals have become their own microstructure and engage in a process of production of the self to build their careers.

The successive part of the chapter focuses and expands on this point. Drawing on Foucault and on the recent field of anthropology of ethics, I contend that an ethnography of social entrepreneurship can be thought of as an ethnography of the process of subjectivation through which individuals develop a social-entrepreneurial self. Following on from this, I tackle issues of reflexivity and participation. Relying on Bourdieu (1999) and Wolf (1996), I maintain that the ethnographer is also always an object of study herself: she is at the same time the one who observes and the one who is observed.

Finally, I describe this condition as the experience of becoming a participant and theorise it as a process of subjectivation by which I developed my own social-entrepreneurial subjectivity. To conclude, I consider the potential critiques to this methodological choice, which could imply the risk of 'going native'. Making use of Narayan (2003) and Rosaldo (1989) - I respond articulating a concept of ethnography as a research process that leads the researcher to exhibit a 'multiplex subjectivity'.

### Beyond interviews, towards ethnography

Interviewing is probably the most used method in qualitative social research, for it allows the researcher to access directly what participants think and feel, gathering a whole range of data that would have been impossible to collect otherwise. In this respect, it is also more economic than observation, as it may represent a shortcut for the interviewer to observe and listen through the eyes and ears of the interviewee. Important research in the field of cultural studies has been conducted using formal interviews as a main method, e.g. McRobbie, 1998; Forkert, 2013; Arvidsson et. Al., 2010. However, as Becker and Geer (1957) have argued, the analytic status of interviewing data is problematic. Quite simply: participants may lie, more or less consciously, or omit certain topics while focusing on others.

The issue regarding the analytical status of interviews' data is particularly relevant in neoliberal economies and society, where part of the job tasks for entrepreneurial workers is that of producing and performing an adequate identity. In this context, the interview has acquired an increasingly performative value for young professionals in general, and for social entrepreneurs in particular. During the fieldwork for my MA thesis (2009), I realised that most of the participants during scheduled interviews would simply replicate the text of their websites. In other words, the interview was mostly used as an occasion to perform one's brands.

As mentioned in chapter II, self-branding is a distinctive feature, indeed a sheer necessity, for an entrepreneurialised, casualised and precarious workforce that has to play upon the uniqueness of the self to attract potential employers or investors (Marwick, 2013; Hearn, 2008; Arvidsson et. al., 2016). In an economy where possessing certain technical skills and competence is merely a entry card – to paraphrase Heckscher and Adler (2006) – creating a successful personal brand by promoting one's very own way of thinking and behaving as an individual is what is likely to make a difference. Social entrepreneurs are no exceptions. As I argued elsewhere, they heavily rely upon personal branding to acquire enough social and cultural capital to be then in the right position to attract investment, to the point that branding oneself as a 'changemaker' may be a necessary condition to actually becoming one (Bandinelli and Arvidsson, 2013).

In this respect, interviewing social entrepreneurs has been a way to explore the connotations of their branded self, but it could not be a tool to explore social entrepreneurs' process of subjectivation. Indeed, a process of subjectivation is marked by complexities, and moments of negotiations, while what the branded discourse shows is only its most polished outcome, which generally replicates the dominant narrative of the field.

To be able to investigate the modes in which social entrepreneurs think of their practices and identities I have chosen to conduct ethnographic fieldwork. I was in need of a method that could allow the researcher to understand what participants think, feel and experience, coming to 'see their objects as they see them' (Blumer, 1998: 51). The particularity of ethnography as a research method is exactly to study people in their everyday environment, trying to avoid any kind of artificiality. The ethnographer's aim is to document the world in terms of the meaning and behaviour of the people in it, by means of a variety of techniques that includes 'genuinely social interaction in the field with the subject of study [...] direct observation of relevant events, some formal and great deal of informal interviewing, some [...] counting, [the] collection of documents and artefacts, and open-endedness in the direction the study takes (McCall and Simmons, 1969: 1).

If, as Goodenough, quoted by Geertz put it, a culture 'consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members' (Geertz 1973: 5), it follows that the researcher needs to immerse herself in a cultural group on an informal level, to be able to grasp and personally experience what are the conducts, thoughts, feelings, values and desires that characterise and define that culture as such. Hence, I have been trying to achieve what Geertz, drawing on Clifford, defines as a 'deep hanging out', to engage in a process of participatory observation that involved my presence in the group for long informal sessions (Geertz, 1998). This process has allowed me to reach a deep understanding of the ways participants think, feel and perceive of themselves in relation to their identity and profession as social entrepreneurs or social entrepreneur aspirants.

### The uncertainty of the field(work)

The key term in ethnography is surely 'fieldwork', a concept that is too often taken for granted. In fact, it is not so obvious to determine what the field is when researching social entrepreneurs. Indeed, a key issue I was confronted with is that of researching a work conduct that exceeds the spatial and temporal frame of the office and signals the extreme blurring of the barriers between work and social life (Lazzarato, 1996; Donzelot, 1991; DuGay, 2009; Gill and Pratt, 2008). Many important studies on the culture industry are ethnographically conducted in the workplace, e.g. Andrew Ross's study of Razorfish (2004) or Georgina Born's book on the BBC (2004). But this kind of study was impossible to effect on my field of enquiry.

Firstly, social entrepreneurs compose a de-territorialised, de-spatialised workforce, that engages in non-linear working practices in a fragmented space-time framework (Lash, 2002; McRobbie, 2002). <Social entrepreneurs handle multiple projects at the same time, and do their work in a myriad of places and situations. One can work as a freelance graphic designer while being part of a start up in its early phase, and at the same time doing a few shifts in a restaurant to be able to pay the bills. Their typical daily schedule involves different 'meetings' that can take places in cafes, at coworking spaces, at home, or on Skype. They may be working while having a seemingly informal dinner with friends or acquaintances, or even on their journey on the tube, where they can possibly have a crucial insight for their business model. Analogously, they can relax at a coworking space, which provides comfy sofas and a fairly wide choice of books, magazines, hot and cold drinks.

This non-linear, fragmented working conduct represents a difficulty for it makes it impossible to sharply delimit the field. Moreover, as I have discussed in Chapter I, social entrepreneurship cannot be reduced to a specific economic field or job description, it is rather an *eidos*, a particular set of values, a virtuality, to use a more philosophical jargon, that then gets actualised in a myriad of forms. Hence the methodological questions: how

to identify the field for the research of working lives that unfold without a definite workplace and scheduled working times? How to study a cultural phenomenon that takes different forms and travels across different milieux?

The reflection of James Clifford on the meaning of fieldwork provides direction to think through this issue. He wonders: 'what specific kind of travel and dwelling (where? how long?) and interaction (with whom? In what languages?) have made a certain range of experiences count as fieldwork', and goes on by observing that the term 'field' actually implies a spatial metaphor that indicates an ideal of centrality and stability (Clifford, 1992: 99). According to this commonsensical view, a 'field' is a space, and fieldwork is an experience of a given space that lasts over a determined and linear period of time. This notion - while obviously drawing on classical anthropological research, in which the anthropologist would set his or her tent in the fixed space of the village over a period of several months - denies the very fact that culture travels, that it is fluid and mobile. Consequentially, an ethnographic research of contemporary culture could rarely be defined by Newtonian spatio-temporal coordinates. To overcome this limit, Clifford proposes conceiving culture as travel and ethnographers as travellers (Clifford, 1992: 103).

George Marcus has elaborated on similar grounds and advocates for multi-sited ethnography as a method to study disorganised, postmodern societies. Post-modern, fragmented culture and society pose new problems to ethnography, as he put it: 'ethnography moves from its conventional single-sited location ... to multiple sites of observation' (Marcus, 1995: 95). A similar intuition is at the basis of what has been referred to as the 'mobility paradigm' (Urry 2007; Cresswell 2006, 2009), a mode of thinking that puts mobility at the core of societies and cultures, reconstructing - theoretically and methodologically - the 'social as society' into the 'social as mobility'. It

follows that an adequate analysis will be one that 'also moves along with people, images, or objects that are moving and being studied' (Urry, 2007:6).

Celia Lury, Luciana Parisi and Tiziana Terranova have gone further and elaborated on the notion of topological culture to account for a subject of research that is intrinsically mobile and changing, and therefore cannot be grasped and constrained within the rigid logic of an immutable structure. Lury, Parisi and Terranova describe contemporary culture as marked by immanent and continuous change, by the opportunity to traverse and occupy diverse positions across over-lapping and ever-changing cultural spaces.

Increasingly organized in terms of its capacities for change: tendencies for innovation, for inclusion and exclusion, for expression, emerge in culture as a field of connectedness, that is, of ordering by means of continuity, and not as a structure based on essential properties, such as archetypes, values or norms, or regional location (Lury *et. al.*, 2012: 5).

Thinking culture in topological terms means to think of cultural phenomena as characterised by immanent change and movement. That does not mean that they move in a linear mode, as if from A to B, their essence remaining unaltered. Rather, it is the very essence of culture that is in movement, that can change shape. In philosophical terms, movement and change become substantial instead of accidental. In this perspective, mobile and multi-sited fieldwork is a method that is consistent with its object of research. Importantly, movement and change have to be considered as essential methodological devices, rather than attributes of a more traditional methodology. A mobile method is a method that may change in its movements, leaving the research open to structural uncertainty.

Indeed, my fieldwork has been a highly unpredictable experience. In following the participants, travelling with them across different spaces, in diverse places, and in a highly flexible time schedule, I found myself in a variety of situations that I could never have foreseen. Attending a workshop, I could meet a social entrepreneur aspirant willing to talk, with whom I could feel a degree of affinity, and then we could go for dinner and

have a long conversation. That person could invite me to an event the week after, where I could find myself having a discussion with four or five people over a glass of wine, or where I could just sit silently, observing the others' movements because I could not grab the interest of any of the guests. Planning was often just impossible, and to 'go with flow' was the only alternative to fully engage in the mobile and flexible conduct of social entrepreneurs. Such a degree of unpredictability, coupled with the informality of most of the interactions between me and the participants, conferred a pronounced experiential and fluid character to the fieldwork.

Amongst the most relevant studies on works that draw on a fluid, experiential and semi-autobiographical methodology are Richard Sennett's *Corrosion of Character* and *Craftman* (or, at least, this is what transpires when reading his books - it could also be the case that a more formal method assumes a fluid, narrative form in the writing phase). Sennett's studies include fieldworks but these are rarely contextualised; rather, they seem to emerge from the sociologist's everyday routine. He frequents certain places, bars or local shops, or he does certain activities, i.e. going to conferences or attending cuisine classes (Sennett, 2009) and he reports what has happened, the interactions he has had with the people around, and the theoretical thinking related to them. An attentive conduct and a sharp observational spirit are the professional skills needed to carry out this kind of research. Personal skills such as the ability to communicate with people and lead them to speak openly, or simply a certain charm, which results in easily gaining access and trust, are equally necessary. Indeed, the personal and the professional are totally melted, and so are the experiential and the theoretical.

Although inspirational, such methodology is not replicable, as it is too closely intertwined with the personal and professional skills, reputation and conduct of the researcher. Also, its very structural experientiality, evenementiality, and fluidity necessarily escape the formalisation into a 'model'. Yet, it may be a point of reference for research that rather

than fearing to blur the barriers between personal and professional life, seeks to achieve such intertwining; and that instead of aiming at a well-planned research schedule, goes after unpredictability and follows casual chances. At stake there is not an approximate conduct, nor a naive trust in chance; but rather the quest for a full consistency between the ontology of the object of study and the methodology adopted. Mobility and uncertainty are substantial qualities both of my research method and of the lives of those under study. In this respect, the notion of uncertainty defines both entrepreneurship and the ethnography of entrepreneurship.

#### Impact Hub as a platform

Mobile and multi-sited fieldwork needs a point of departure, a crossroads from where to see different trajectories, where to meet potential participants to follow, and observe objects and spaces. Impact Hub, in particular its Westminster and Milan branches, have provide this 'point of departure' for my research. It would be inaccurate to state that 'I did my fieldwork at the Impact Hub', so as to imply it as a sort of determined space with clear and definite boundaries where I spent a linear period of time. Instead, I argue that Impact Hub Milan and Westminster may be thought of as the fieldwork platform: something whose borders are meant to be exceeded by the very activities emerging and originating from it. I will expand on this soon, but firstly, let me give some more details about Impact Hub and the time I spent there.

Impact Hub is an international network of coworking spaces for social entrepreneurs and innovators. At the moment of writing (e.g. June 2016) there are over 81 Impact Hubs in the world and 17 in the making. Overall, there are more than 15000 "hubbers" in 5 regions of the world. Impact Hub qualifies as an appropriate place to begin fieldwork in the scene of social entrepreneurship for a number of reasons: firstly, it is a successful growing business – therefore it has an economic relevance; secondly, it is a coworking

space, and as such articulates and expresses the culture and sociality that characterises entrepreneurial careers - thus offering an interesting perspective for a cultural sociology of work; thirdly, it is built on a strong ethical claim, that of enabling people to 'change the world', and this makes it pertinent for the study of a process of subjectivation.

From November 2011 to March 2012 I worked two days per week as a member host (an Impact Hub membership formula I will explain shortly) at the Impact Hub Westminster. From April to June 2012 I did the same at Impact Hub Milan. The Impact Hub Westminster and Milan were the foundations for my fieldwork to the extent that 'hanging out' there I had the chance to meet many people who were involved in various ways and to different degrees in the scene of social innovation and entrepreneurship. Following a few of them, I participated in a series of events, workshops and informal meetings that were not strictly related to Impact Hub, meaning that they were not organised by and for Impact Hub, and that the people involved were not necessarily Impact Hub members.

I define the function that Impact Hub Westminster and Milan had for my fieldwork as that of platforms. With this definition, I want to highlight their role as the grounds and structures from which the fieldwork trajectories originated. The term platform, which derives from the French *plate-forme*, is related to a dense web of meanings. The basic is 'a raised level surface on which people or things can stand, usually a discrete structure intended for a particular activity or operation'; more specific connotations refer to politics and computing: 'the declared policy of a political party or group' and 'a standard for the hardware of a computer system, which determines what kinds of software it can run' (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016). Here I propose thinking of a platform primarily as a space to be traversed, a space where many different people and things can stand.

By standing on a platform people are enabled to do something. In the basic notion of platform they are able to be better seen or heard, exactly because they stand on a –

metaphorically or not - 'raised surface'. In what way they are enabled depends on the type of platform they stand on, the very same way as hardware and software depend on each other. In this respect a platform can be conceived mainly as an enabler: a space for opportunities to emerge, and simultaneously the condition of existence and construction of these opportunities. In short, I am using the term in its figurative meaning of 'the ground, foundation, or basis of an action, event, calculation, condition' (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016).

Interestingly, Celia Lury uses the term platform to define the brand. She argues that the brand is 'not itself fixed in time or space in terms of presence or absence, it is a platform for the patterning of activity, a mode of organising activities in time and space' (Lury, 2004: 1). Impact Hub shows similar features in so far as it can be defined only by means of the activities it enables. These activities, although originated and catalysed by Impact Hub, may well exceed its physical boundaries. In this respect, Impact Hub can be seen as a brand in so far as it is a cultural object that has the power to create and manage a network of relationships and activities, it is a 'ubiquitous managerial device' (Arvidsson, 2006: 7). In a sense, the very act of being at Impact Hub allows me to use it as a device to organise the fieldwork, especially the relationships with research participants. Therefore, it can be argued that I have exploited the operational power of Impact Hub, in a way that is not dissimilar from the Hubbers' one (I will expand on this in the next chapter).

### Fieldwork in a network sociality

In October 2011 I began the London fieldwork, which had as its platform the just opened Impact Hub Westminster.<sup>20</sup> There, I spent two days per week over a period of five months, working as a member host. The 'member host' is a membership formula that allows the use of the space and facilities at Impact Hub in exchange of working as a host for a few hours each month. The host duties vary according to different Impact Hubs, they might include cleaning, administration, networking, or even working on projects related to the Hub community. At Impact Hub Westminster my tasks were limited to answering the phone, tidying the kitchenette, answering occasional questions (mostly re-directing the enquirers to more experienced members) and making sure the lights were turned off at the end of the day.

Therefore, I had plenty of time to just sit down and observe. Due to its recent launch, not many people were there, especially during evenings and weekends, when most of my shifts were scheduled. For a few weeks, I concentrated on the space and objects rather than on the human beings inhabiting the Hub. Almost every day I would walk around and observe the improvements in the furniture, or the addition of a new book in the library, a new appliance in the kitchenette. Also, I observed the traces left by hubbers in more busy days, such as the writing on blackboards, or even on the wide window glasses overlooking the city of London. Keen to explore the materialised cultural meanings that traverse the space of social innovation and entrepreneurship, I took several pictures, and shot a video. This data turned out to be crucial for the analysis of the ethopoietic character of the space and objects within the scene of social entrepreneurship (I will expand on this in the next chapter).

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<sup>20</sup> Impact Hub Westminster is the most recent Impact Hub of London - the first, in Islington, opened in 2005, the second in King's Cross in 2007 - and was inaugurated on 28 October 2012; this date represents the official beginning of the London Fieldwork, to which I got access thanks to Sian Prime, the course convenor of the MA in Creative and Cultural Entrepreneurship at Goldsmiths College.

While it was relatively easy to observe and analyse the objects at Impact Hub, it was much more difficult to get to talk to the hubbers, and to schedule formal interviews. Indeed, although the occasions to talk were increasingly frequent, I found myself ill-equipped to attract hubbers' attention. These difficulties became clear from the time of the launch party of Impact Hub Westminster. Everyone was busy discussing new funding opportunities, possible business models, interesting examples of best practices, or even common friends and acquaintances. I tried more than once to approach some of the guests, but I simply had nothing to say to attract their attention. Overall, they seemed mostly reticent to disclose their ideas to a young researcher.

In truth, despite the informal atmosphere, the music, and the organic cocktail bar serving cosmopolitans, everyone was quite occupied networking, establishing useful contacts, catching up on the latest news, meeting potential partners. This conduct prevailed in pretty much any occasion of socialisation, therefore, being an outsider on the scene, and having no social capital (let alone financial) to offer, I found myself relatively marginalised. Trying to organise formal interviews presented the same difficulties: hubbers were likely to claim they had no time to dedicate to an interview for academic purposes.

I argue these specific difficulties of access can be thought of as peculiar of ethnographies in a network sociality and culture. Andreas Wittel is one of the first to have dedicated empirical and theoretical attention to the rise of networking. He claims that, for a growing number of knowledge and cultural workers 'working practices become increasingly networking practices (Wittel, 2001: 53). These entail getting in contact with people who may be useful for the advancement of one's career, and managing a contacts portfolio so as to be ready to introduce the right people to each other, and to be introduced in turn, so as to constantly accumulate social capital.

As Wittel notices, at stake there is a commodification of relationships, for these are made into material to be exchanged. This gets deeply merged with a 'playful' conduct, context and atmosphere, for the majority of networking events involve leisure activities such as consuming alcohol or listening to music. Networking, remarks Wittel, is also deeply related to individualisation, for it is the very personality of the individual, his or her charisma, his or her social and cultural capital, that must be effectively expressed to be a successful networker. As Virno pinpoints, at stake there is a opportunistic 'emotional tonality' (Virno, 2003) that makes the individual very strategic in choosing how to invest his or her time: valuable contacts, i.e. those who can get to a new job or partnership, are obviously preferred, and time is rarely dedicated to interactions that do not add value to one's career.

These circumstances pose a limit to the ability of the researcher to access the field as s/he will not find herself or himself in a position to attract participants' attention, unless s/he finds a way to present her or his work as somehow beneficial for their career. Angela McRobbie acknowledges the obstacle, and overcome it by devising a 'reciprocal action research' in which she 'embarks on a project' with participants. Also, she recognises the importance of giving something back to the participants, for example writing reviews and curatorial notes for the artists she interviews, or committing to promote and diffuse their work in various ways (McRobbie, 2015). I was not in the position to offer any useful services to social entrepreneur aspirants, whence the initial difficulty to schedule interviews as well as to engage in informal interactions. At the same time I was aware of the necessity to establish a reciprocal relation with them, therefore I had been actively seeking to overcome issues of access.

Alice Marwick, who did her ethnography within the tech start-ups of Silicon Valley, perfectly captures the essence of networking practices and the difficulties this can create for a young researcher:

Go up to someone you don't know, say hello, exchange business cards, explain what you do, determine mutual interest or some sort of networking possibility, and move on to the next person. As a doctoral student who had just started fieldwork, I lacked an "elevator pitch." This is a short (one- to three-minute) summary of your company or project which you can rattle off to others. Successful VC's (venture capitalists), recruiters (who look for "talent," aka developers and engineers), and CEOs are extraordinarily effective at this. By the end of fieldwork, I had become very good at it, as well as the small talk and questions that are necessary to network successfully. But at this event, I stumbled over my words and lost the attention of my co-networkers (Marwick, 2010: 54).

Quite similarly to Marwick, at the beginning of the fieldwork I found myself ill-suited to attracting the attention of participants. As soon as I would say I was a 'PhD student' their interest dropped inevitably. Admittedly, a PhD student would rarely be able to provide useful contacts or smart business tips. Yet, experiencing this kind of difficulties and trying to devise a research strategy to overcome them, made me reflect upon the importance of behaving, speaking, and thinking in a certain way to become a social entrepreneur. Or, to put it the other way round, it drew my attention to the fact that social entrepreneurs deploy a certain behaviour, speak a certain language and value certain things. To get access to the field, I needed to learn specific conduct, to engage in a process of subjectivation as a social entrepreneur, for I could not just deploy my identity as a researcher.

This may be seen as just another way to formulate the main challenge of the ethnographer who, as Blumer put it, 'if he [sic] wants to understand the action of participants, has to come to see their objects as they see them (Blumer, 1998: 50)' and 'to place oneself in the position of the actors he wants to study. ... to take the role of others' (Blumer, 1998: 51).

### An ethnography of the self

A prominent trait of social entrepreneurs is the high investment of their selves in their professional activities. As discussed in chapter II, entrepreneurs of the self operate in a de-institutionalised environment, in what has been named 'dis-organised capitalism', they have to 'do the work of the structures by themselves' (McRobbie, 2002: 158). Social entrepreneurs, especially when they are the founders of one-person enterprises, (as is often the case in the first phases of start-ups), represent this very structure in a precise way. Notably, the reflexive narrative of social entrepreneurship draws heavily on the idea that the enterprise must emerge spontaneously from the self. This poses a fundamental methodological question: how to study the self as structure? The self in so far as it is constantly produced and reproduced so as to create and run an enterprise? How to account for the phenomenon that sees personal emotions and thoughts becoming the very substance of work?

Working on the self has been one of the pillars of westernised modern and post-modern culture, which – highly influenced by the psychoanalytic vulgate (Illouz, 2007) – has posed self-scrutiny, interpretation and construction as both inevitable and desirable practices. The conception of the self shifted from 'something given' to something that must be created, from an object of discovery to an object of craft. This process of self-fashioning is one defining trait of entrepreneurial subjects in general and social entrepreneurs in particular.

An ethnography of entrepreneurial subjects in neoliberal societies must comply with the need to study how individuals fashion themselves. In the case of this research it involves the analysis of the process by which an individual makes of him or herself a social entrepreneur. In Foucauldian terms, this shall entail the study of the 'technologies of the self' by which individuals perform a series of operations on themselves so as to become that certain type of person that is a social entrepreneur.

The question leading this research is indeed related to the formation of a social entrepreneurial subjectivity, in comparison and contrast with the neoliberal 'entrepreneur of the self'. For this reason, and as anticipated before, what is at stake is not merely the external conduct of the individual, but mostly his or her 'internal' conduct, that is: what she or he is making with herself or himself.

This endeavour resonates with the relatively new field of anthropology of ethics (Faubion, 2011, 2001; Laidlaw, 2000; Pandian, 2010). A stream of research whose aim is to study 'the project of remaking oneself as a moral being: the practical techniques through which individuals and collectives may engage their own acts, desires, and feelings as objects of cultivation and transformation' (Pandian, 2010: 65). As Laidlaw claims:

Wherever and in so far as people's conduct is shaped by attempts to make of themselves a certain kind of person because it is as such a person that, on reflection, they think they ought to live, to that extent their conduct is ethical and free. And to the extent that they do so with references to ideals, values, models, practices, relationships and institutions that are amenable to ethnographic study, to that extent their conduct becomes the subject matter for an anthropology of ethics (Laidlaw, 2000: 327)

While my research does not fall within the field of anthropology of ethics, it does take from it the methodological suggestion to effect an ethnographic study of 'selfhood as an arena of transformative labour' (Pandian, 2010: 65). To effect such ethnography it may be useful to focus on a single participant, so as to reach the depth necessary to investigate his or her process of self-fashioning. To focus upon individual lives is a fairly established practice in anthropology (e.g. Biehl 2005; Crapanzano 1980; Desjarlais 2003), and acquires a specific value when the object of study is a process of subjectivation. Both Faubion and Pandian propose ethnographies of single individuals to pursue an anthropology of ethics (Faubion, 2011; Pandian: 2010).

I have pursued a close ethnography of one individual: Alfredo. I met Alfredo at Impact Hub Westminster on November 8<sup>th</sup> 2011. From that grey afternoon onwards, Alfredo was

the one to whom I asked all the questions that were on my mind , and with whom, eventually, I disclosed my anxieties as an academic, and my perplexities in regard to social entrepreneurship. Alfredo was always keen to talk, and involved me in many activities (workshops, conferences, talks, projects etc...). He was always up to date and his perennial name-dropping gave me the opportunity to gather information on the most popular actors on the scene.

I followed Alfredo in his activities and eventually collaborated with him on a project for his start up SEI (Social Enterprise Italy). Following the individual is one of the main methodologies in a mobile multi-sited fieldwork (Marcus, 1995). Formulated in relation to migration studies (e.g. Willis, 1981; Foley, 1990; Rouse, 1991) this method has been used for a variety of research in urban contexts, for instance by Sopranizetti, who conducted a brilliant ethnography of taxi drivers in Bangkok (Sopranizetti, 2013). Although at a spatial level I did 'follow' Alfredo quite literally (we travelled together across London and then from London to Oxford, and even from London to Milan and Riva del Garda), I would contend that the verb 'to follow' ultimately fails to fully convey the complexity and potential of an ethnography of the individual. What I was actually studying while interacting with Alfredo was not only his spatial or temporal work conduct, but also - and most importantly - his process of subjectivation.

Over time our relationship developed from one between ethnographer and participant, to that between business partners, and eventually it also involved the dimension of friendship. Engaging and building a relationship, both professional and personal, with Alfredo I had the chance to reach a deep awareness of the ways in which the regime of truth of social entrepreneurship is constructed, and therefore of how social entrepreneurial subjectivity is formed. Engaging and building a relationship, both professional and personal (we became good friends, and we still are) with Alfredo was the main methodological tool to understanding how social entrepreneurs think, how they

make sense of their life in relation to their identity as 'changemakers', deal with the conflict between social responsibility and entrepreneurial conduct, relate to the neoliberal economy and politics and so on. It was mainly through our incomprehension, small conflicts, moments of agreement, and fruitful collaborations that I could identify and enter into dialogue with the main elements which comprise social entrepreneurial subjectivity.

Potential critiques of this methodological choice may stress that its findings cannot be generalised. However, as Faubion specifies 'the ethical subject, even when only an individual human being, is already always of intersubjective, social and cultural tissue. Its parts are never entirely its own [...]'. Therefore, an anthropology of ethics must be 'methodologically prepared to shuttle back and forth between phenomena of a relatively more collective and phenomena of a relatively more individual order' (Faubion, 2011: 121).

I maintain that studying a single individual does not mean to focus on an atomised entity but rather to explore the relationships of one person with its cultural, social, economic and political context. This is consistent with the Foucauldian remark that while individuals exercise their freedom by effecting operations so as to transform themselves, these practices 'are nevertheless not something invented by the individual himself [sic]. They are models that he finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society his social group' (Foucault, 2000: 291). To put it another way, processes of subjectivation always unfold in relation to 'games of truth' and 'practices of power' (Foucault, 2000:290). To study social entrepreneurship as a process of subjectivation thus means to study how an individual establishes a relationship with the regime of power and truth of social entrepreneurship in order to create him or herself as a social entrepreneurial subject. Whence, we note the utility and need to focus on a single individual.

## Ethnography as a dialogue

By trying to listen to and understand what Alfredo was saying, and having the opportunity to ask again if something seemed unclear or contradictory, I had the chance to reach a deep awareness of the ways in which the regime of truth of social entrepreneurship is constructed, and therefore of how the social entrepreneurial subjectivity is formed. This awareness was built over hours and hours of dialogue, where I put my own self and subjectivity to work, and in question. I will now report on an excerpt of my fieldwork notes to exemplify the type of dialogues and exchanges that have marked our relationship. In doing so, I hope to offer the reader a glimpse of the value of this research method and to introduce the next issue I want to examine: the self-reflexivity of the ethnographer.

Today Alfredo suggested that we collaborate on the first project of his new-born social enterprise, Social enterprise Italy. When I asked him what the core business of SEI was, he immediately opened his laptop and showed me a slide reading: 'Our mission is to create a supportive and responsive environment to help the Italian social enterprise ecosystem to develop, grow, succeed'. I interrogated him about the actual meaning of these words, and he replied using the same, to me, still obscure, language: 'the idea is to create an organisation that supports the introduction of new models of organisation in the ecosystem of social innovation, working for different stakeholders... think of it as a platform'. I kept on asking for clarification as I could not figure out what sort of activities may have satisfied these general guidelines. He tried to explain: 'Our role is to find change makers in Italy, and then help them, offering them services, and then create the conditions so that they can eventually promote these very services'. 'For example?' I asked, still quite confused. 'For example' he began 'let's say we do a project in Bologna, we find the social entrepreneurs, we identify the ambassadors and then with them we come to the sale of services'. It was not easy for me to relate to this lexicon. I struggled to understand what, in practice, Alfredo had in mind. 'The point is that SEI will offer a series of services in different areas: innovation, education, network creation... I mean SEI will be a platform that could be used by a variety of stakeholders, and there will be many different services, but all functional to the maximisation of the social impact'. While listening to these words I could not help but wonder what sort of stakeholders? How do you think of a stakeholder? What sort of services? What does 'social impact' means? How can you devise a service to maximise it?

Over the months we worked together, I often asked Alfredo these sorts of questions. He would reply to my doubts by suggesting that I soften my critical conduct and adopt more 'positive' thinking. This tension between critical and positive thinking emerged quite a few times. Sometimes he would get upset by my questions, always directed towards the ethical, political, and sociological aspects of his ideas, rather than the evaluation of and

contribution to their entrepreneurial success. Once he told me: “if you always criticise things, you will never be able to do anything!”.

Inspired by these kinds of exchanges, I introduced the same topics when discussing these subjects with other social entrepreneurs or social entrepreneur aspirants. It was not rare to be asked questions such as: ‘so, when will you start really doing something to make a change?’. When relating to the regime of truth of social entrepreneurship, its values, its world view, I was often puzzled. My subjectivity as a researcher could not offer me the technologies to fully understand the field. The incomprehension between Alfredo and I served the purpose of highlighting and identifying these issues, which then become theoretical and empirical topics of the study.

It is important to underline that to be able to reach such a high degree of depth and spontaneity in researcher-participant interactions, there needs to be a strong relationship of trust, and power asymmetries must be minimised. I argue that what allowed Alfredo and I to establish such a relationship was our social proximity and generational empathy. As a matter of fact, we shared the condition of Italian immigrants in their late twenties and, although in different fields, we were both beginners: I was undertaking my first serious piece of research, and he was trying to set up his first business. We were becoming adults in the same neoliberal society where we were trying to realise our ambitions, and we were experiencing it from a very similar position.

As Bourdieu explains, social proximity provides the condition for a non-violent form of communication and significantly reduces the risk of objectification, for the interviewer and interviewee shared the same premises and are, to some respect ‘interchangeable’. For this reason, social proximity leads to the analysis assuming the character of a double socio-analysis, as the researcher cannot cut himself or herself out of the picture:

Social proximity or familiarity provides two of the conditions of “non-violent” communication. For one thing, to the extent that the interviewer and interviewee are interchangeable... For another thing, one finds that in this case we can be assured of immediate and continuously confirmed agreement on the presuppositions regarding the content and form of the communication [...]. Even the most brutally objectifying questions have no reason to appear threatening or aggressive because the interviewer is perfectly aware of sharing with the interviewee the core of what the question induces the other to divulge, and of sharing, by the same token, the risks of that exposure. And similarly no interviewer can ever forget that objectifying the respondent means objectifying oneself... in every case, the questioning quite naturally tends to become a double socio-analysis (Bourdieu, 1999:210).

Bourdieu’s description perfectly captures the character and methodological value of the relationship between Alfredo and me. Through our process of constant exchanges in which both of us had the freedom to ask even ‘brutal’ questions, to fully express our doubts, and reciprocally criticise each other, I myself ‘quite naturally’ became an object of research. The open and, I would say, authentic, relationship with Alfredo triggered a process of self-reflexivity through which, while analysing the social entrepreneurship regime of truth, I also inevitably reflected on my own subjectivity as a researcher, stimulated by Alfredo’s impressions and opinions of my behaviour and thoughts. The analysis then become, as Bourdieu put it: a ‘double social analysis’.

The contentions between Alfredo and I can be interpreted as conflicts between two different subjectivities, two different regimes of truth and power. And it was by comparing and contrasting his to mine that I started to fully understand social entrepreneurship core values. Because can there ever be an understanding of the other that is not also an understanding of oneself? Wolf, quoting Karin, aptly explains this reciprocal and reflexive process of analysis, as she puts it: ‘researchers ... deal with two kinds of reflexivity—the self as both object and subject and the other as observed and observer’ (Wolf 1996: 35).

### Reflexivity and ethical dilemmas

The practices of reflexivity described above, and my gradual involvement in Alfredo's activities, led me through a process of subjectivation as a social entrepreneur. Dealing with social entrepreneurship's games of power, regime of truth and technologies of the self, I gradually developed a social entrepreneurial subjectivity that eventually granted me a higher degree of access to the field. In more traditional terms, I progressively moved from the position of observer to that of participant<sup>21</sup>. From this shifted position, I could access social entrepreneurs more easily, as I was recognised – at least partially – as a member of the scene.

I realised this dramatic change the day I accompanied Alfredo to the Oxford Jam. Oxford Jam is a festival for young social entrepreneurs, a three-day event where social innovators can meet and discuss subjects in conferences, seminars and workshops. Held in a modern building in the centre of Oxford, the Oxford Jam was packed with under-thirty outgoing social entrepreneurs and innovators from various parts of Europe. Enthusiasm and positive thinking set the vibes. Free colourful badges were distributed by smiling girls wearing orange t-shirts. Everyone was talking to someone, indeed, between and during the workshops a never-ending networking session was taking place at the cafe.

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<sup>21</sup> The first occasion I had to be in the field as a participant observer was to accompany Alfredo during the first SEI project, The Share and Learning Trip: a two days trip in London during which Alfredo and I brought three Italian social entrepreneurs to visit three of the most important actors in the social entrepreneurship ecosystem: Social Enterprise London (SEL), Nesta, and Unlimited (Unltd). The trip involved also one day in Oxford, to participate to the Oxford Jam, the fringe festival of the Skoll World Forum on Social Enterprise. The first day of our trip, I chaired a seminar at SEL with a few London based international social entrepreneurs. From the viewpoint of the research, this served as a focus group, for I was in the position of triggering and following a debate with a group of participants. Towards the end of the seminar SEL CEO, Allison Ogden-Newton, joined us for a Q&A session. I did her a mini-interview, asking few questions on the culture of social entrepreneurship, her view on profit, and her idea of 'social impact'. At Nesta, we participated in a round table with a five members, who informed us about the projects they were working on. During this, I asked a number of questions on the meaning of innovation and entrepreneurship, and on its social and cultural implications, provoking a debate that lasted for about half an hour. Finally, at Unltd, we were offered a presentation on its methods and programme to support young social entrepreneurs. We went through the Unltd toolkit, and we were provided with a wide range of examples to illustrate what are the sort of projects that Unltd fund, and what the main obstacles that a young social entrepreneur may encounter.

During the lunch break I tried unsuccessfully to ask a few people (about 10) to be interviewed for a doctoral research project. I carefully selected my potential interviewees amongst those who were sipping a coffee, or scrolling their smart-phone screen, or having a seemingly laid-back chat. Despite appearances, everybody declared themselves to be too busy. At the end of the day, during the wine reception I tried again, this time though, I approached my interlocutors presenting myself as part of a social enterprise, I talked about SEI's activities, and then asked more general questions. This method proved to be much more successful, as I managed to interact with participants effectively and to collect valuable data. For ethical reasons, I made sure to always mention my doctoral research, but no-one was interested in that aspect of my activities, what people wanted to know from me was what the Italian social entrepreneurial scene was like, what our goals as Social Enterprise Italy were, what business model we had etc.

Actively taking part in the social entrepreneurship scene allowed me to access a greater number of participants, and to attend exclusive events to which I would not have otherwise been invited. While surely valuable for the purpose of data collection, this ambiguous position between a participant and an observer raised a number of dilemmas and a certain degree of discomfort. In this intermediary part of the fieldwork, I felt somehow split between the distinct subjectivities of the academic researcher and the social entrepreneurship sympathiser and actor in the making. On the one hand, I fostered an analytical, detached viewpoint, and was developing a critique of the scene, while on the other hand I was coming to see the world from the participants' viewpoint. This tension between 'participant' and 'analytical' perspective (Hammersley, 2006) is a marking feature of ethnographic research, probably the one that best encapsulates its phenomenology. Martin Hammersley offers a precise description of this kind of experience:

As ethnographers, we typically insist on the importance of coming to understand the perspectives of the people being studied if we are to explain, or even to describe accurately, the activities they engage in and the course of action they adopt. At the same time, there is usually an equal emphasis on developing an analytical understanding of perspectives, activities and actions, one that is likely to be different from, perhaps even in conflict with, how the people themselves see the world (Hammersley 2006: 4).

Especially during the middle part of my fieldwork, the coexistence of these two aims would sometimes radicalise to assume the character of an antithesis between two polar opposites. On the one hand, I felt different from the participants: I could not share their sheer enthusiasm for social entrepreneurship, and was highly sceptical about their claim to 'change the world'. In particular, the almost complete absence of open and radical criticism against the current neoliberal political economy, the fact that the term 'neoliberalism' was never uttered, would truly upset me to the point that at times I experienced a strong anger, which of course I could not fully express, and that undermined my lucidity. On the other hand, I was also beginning to appreciate the efforts and deeds of many participants, and I genuinely admired quite a few of them, who were running interesting and ambitious projects with an evident will to improve "society", or at least a small part of it. I began to admire the positive conduct of young social entrepreneur aspirants and to question my own epistemological assumptions, according to which, critical thinking is more valuable than positive thinking.

As Skelggs observes, in a reflexive ethnography 'the fantasy of the "other" ... becomes part of the construction of one's self' (Skleggs, 1995: 84); so I inevitably interiorised the gaze of social entrepreneurs. Thus, I started to deeply analyse and fiercely challenge my own position as a researcher, feeling uneasy with my identity as an 'academic outsider'. McAllister's methodological reflection of her study on the afterlife of a Japanese-Canadian internment in New Denver, offers a precise description of the emotional status and frame of mind I am referring to. Regarding the role of her research gatekeeper, Takana, she notices how he made her 'question' her 'authority' and lead her to look for a different position:

I sought a position, an identity, that did not place me primarily in authoritative relation to whatever I observed, automatically fitting data into predefined categories, reordering everything according to established theories and ideologies (McAllister, 2011: 26).

Similarly to McAllister, I began feeling partially touched by participants' criticism of my refusal to adopt positive, entrepreneurial thinking, and of my tendency to apply a theoretical framework to activities I had not experienced at first hand. Alfredo had told me so many times that I should become more entrepreneurial, probably as many times as I had suggested to him that he should become more critical! Eventually, I decided to try to expose myself to his environment, and took a fully active role in Alfredo's start up, Social Enterprise Italy. This is how, for a few months, I became a participant myself.

### Ethnography as a process of subjectivation

In April 2012, I started actively collaborating with Alfredo. Rather than following and helping him with projects he had already designed, I designed a project myself. I planned and structured a workshop - Dive In - intended for Italian BA students and aimed at encouraging a critical reflection on social entrepreneurship<sup>22</sup>. I delivered Dive In three times. The first was a pilot, and was held in July 2012 at the Impact Hub Milan, with the participation of some students from the University of Milano Statale (where I was working as a visiting lecturer at the time). The second took place in September, at Teatro Dell'Elfo (Milan), during the 'Giornata su Impresa e Innovazione Sociale e Culturale' [The Day for social and cultural innovation and entrepreneurship]. The third and last was held a few

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<sup>22</sup> The workshop was structured as follows: in the first part, I asked the students to give me some adjectives to define the two terms 'social' and 'entrepreneurship'; in the second, I evidenced the continuities and discontinuities of the semantic fields that emerged in part one; in the third phase, through a debate, we constructed our own understanding of 'social entrepreneurship'. The fourth and last part of the workshop constituted an idea-generation brainstorming I designed drawing on Unltd toolkit (Unltd<sup>22</sup>) This consisted of a number of passages: 1) Identifying a social problem 2) identifying one's skills 3) identifying the ways in which each skill could help to tackle the social issue at stake 4) briefly outline an idea of a solution 5) thinking of how it could be made financially sustainable. Finally, I invited the students to briefly present their ideas.

days later at the Fuori WIS, a fringe to WIS, Workshop Impresa Sociale [Workshop Social Enterprise], a three-day event in Riva del Garda (Milan).

The circumstances in which I delivered Dive In provided very favourable conditions to conduct ethnographic fieldwork. For instance, at the Fuori Wis I recorded two in-depth interviews with Italian young social entrepreneurs, and engaged in several informal conversations with various actors of the Italian scene. Moreover, I spent a couple of days in a flat-share together with Alfredo, three men and one woman in their late twenties-early thirties, all differently involved in the scene. This gave me the opportunity to have many long and informal conversations, supported by my role as a participant as well as by the good degree of social proximity with my flatmates.

Over that intense week in Milan and Riva del Garda, I realised I had developed a social entrepreneurial subjectivity. As should be clear by now, this does not mean I mocked participants' behaviour, pretending to be a social entrepreneur. In other words, I did not develop an instrumental, 'fake', habitus to get access to the field. Rather, by relating to the social entrepreneurship regime of truth, games of power, and technologies of the self, I inevitably engaged in a process of subjectivation that gave the research a pronounced reflexive character.

As Faubion explains, a process of subjectivation unfolds in the idiosyncrasies between what is peculiar to a certain individual (her or his temperament, cultural background, race, gender, and so on...) and the technologies of the self he or she uses to transform him or herself (Faubion, 2011). Indeed, I became the social entrepreneur I would have become, turning my skills (teaching) and values (education and critical thinking) into a potentially saleable practical project (workshop) to be delivered autonomously (without any institutional support, guidance or obligation), i.e. an entrepreneurial project.

This research process and method could be criticised on the basis that I went 'native', meaning I lost my analytical perspective to fully adopt the participants' view, therefore compromising the detachment necessary to effect a rigorous critique. I have already partially answered this critique, arguing for a reflexive ethnography where the researcher is both the object and subject of the inquiry, and advocating a feminist approach that refuses a 'hygienic' mode of research to take into full account its human, personal and emotional aspects. If such purposes are taken seriously, the researcher will inevitably become – to some extent – a participant. But by no means does this cause the loss of her researcher perspective. I rather contend that developing a participant subjectivity can enrich the researcher's one, and vice versa, for there is not a mutually exclusive relationship between different modes of subjectivation.

Following Narayan ([1997] 2003) I argue that the distinction between native and non-native is reductive, and that all researchers exhibit 'what Rosaldo [(1989)] has termed "multiplex subjectivity" with many cross-cutting identifications ... which facet of our subjectivity we choose or are forced to accept as defining identity can change, depending on the context and the prevailing vectors of power' (2003: 291). Therefore, rather than attempting to justify and define my positionality between the spectrum observer/participant, I maintain Narayan's conclusion:

I argue against the fixity of distinction between 'native' and 'non-native' anthropologists. Instead...I propose that...we might more profitably view each anthropologist in term of shifting identifications amid a field of interpenetrating communities and power relations. The loci along which we are aligned with or set apart from those whom we study are multiple and in flux. Factors such as gender, sexual orientation, class, race or sheer duration of contacts may at different times outweigh the cultural identity we associate with insider or outsider status. Instead, what we must focus our attention on is the quality of relations with the people we seek to represent in our texts. (2003: 285-286)

## Conclusion

I define the ethnography I conducted within the scene of social entrepreneurship ethnography of a process of subjectivation, and ethnography as a process of subjectivation. I argue this methodology can provide useful insights for studying individualised cultures in post-modern societies. Indeed, it allows the researcher to reflexively and empirically investigate processes of self-fashioning. Importantly, the notion of ethnography as and of a process of subjectivation is consistent with traditional views of ethnography. Classic metaphors such as the ethnographer as 'traveller' and 'student' can be conceived as entailing a process of subjectivation on the side of the researcher for there cannot be a real learning or understanding of the 'strange' and 'unfamiliar' without a process of subjectivation, a process in which the researcher comes to see the world as participants do.

Discussions on the reflexive aspects of ethnography point to the same issue, highlighting the impact that ethnographic fieldwork has on the subjectivity of the ethnographer. As for the notion of ethnography of processes of subjectivation, it has been recently theorised and practiced in the field of anthropology of ethics. While any ethnography of culture entails (or should entail) an analysis of the conduct, values, and beliefs of a given social formation, the specificity of an ethnography of processes of subjectivation is to focus on the active role of the individual in interpreting and negotiating with social, cultural and economic values that are (also) external to herself or himself.

It is my conviction that this can provide an adequate approach to understanding the production of subjectivity not only in so far as it is the result of technologies of power, but also as the outcome of technologies of the self. Far from being a naïve take on individual freedom, this represents a necessary endeavour to study neoliberal governmentality beyond a simplistic perspective that sees the individual as merely manipulated and subjugated by dispositives of power.

In line with this intellectual project, this dissertation is not the story of me becoming a participant, nor it is a single-individual ethnography or an account of a multi-sited, mobile fieldwork. Rather, I have used these methodologies so as to be able to collect the necessary data – and the necessary subjective experience - to articulate a theory of social entrepreneurship in relation to existing theories of entrepreneurship and neoliberalism. In the following chapters, I use this data so as to provide evidence in support of the theoretical reflections I want to propose. In other words, the writing of this study aims at representing in a written form a close dialogue between theories and empirical data, a dialogue from which a new theoretical account emerges.

Essentially, this writing style can be conceived as an attempt to reproduce in written form the process of subjectivation I embarked on by negotiating between the academic and social-entrepreneurial regime of truth, in the purpose of making myself an intellectual expert of the field. In this respect, I fully acknowledge the inherent partiality of my account, and embrace a view of method as contributing to the construction of reality. As Clifford wrote in his introduction to the seminal book *Writing Culture*: 'ethnographic truths are ... inherently partial – committed and incomplete' (Clifford 1986:7), therefore:

Ethnographers are more and more like the Crée hunter who (the story goes) came to Montreal to testify in court concerning the fate of his hunting lands in the new James Bay hydroelectric scheme. He would describe his way of life. But when administered the oath he hesitated: "I'm not sure I can tell the truth. . . . I can only tell what I know."(Clifford, 1986: 8).

In the following chapters I will tell you what I know of the regime of truth and processes of subjectivation of social entrepreneurship.

## Chapter IV – IMPACT HUB AND THE SOCIALITY OF SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS

### Introduction

In the previous chapter I explained the aim and method of this research. I argued that to analyse the regime of truth and process of subjectivation of social entrepreneurs I deployed an inventive mixed methodology. I participated in and observed social entrepreneurs' activities over a period of eighteen months in what I defined as a mobile and multi-sited fieldwork, which had as its platform Impact Hub Milan and Westminster. I also followed a research participant, Alfredo, to explore more closely the modes in which an individual engages with the regime of truth of social entrepreneurship. Importantly, I collaborated with Alfredo in the idea generation and piloting phase of his social enterprise start-up.

I have argued that this close involvement in the field under study allowed me to negotiate with the regime of truth of social entrepreneurship at a personal level, hence to develop a social entrepreneurial subjectivity. In this respect, this research has a strong reflexive nature, for the findings on social entrepreneurs' process of subjectivation came also from my own process of subjectivation. To summarise the overall character and objective of the methodology I used, I defined it as an ethnography of a process of subjectivation, and ethnography as a process of subjectivation.

In this chapter, drawing on the data collected during the fieldwork, I illustrate the main traits of social entrepreneurs' sociality at Impact Hub. I frame this enquiry within the study of sociality at work in neoliberal societies, with a focus on recent researches on coworking spaces. The analysis sheds light on the ambivalent character of social entrepreneurs' sociality, which combines markedly ethical elements – those that belong to the dimension of the 'other than itself' (Ricoeur, 1994), hence exceeding sheer individualism – with

opportunistic and compulsory ones – which are indicative of its neoliberal genealogy. I argue that Impact Hub functions as the provider of a series of material and discursive devices to engage in social interactions through which individuals learn how to become social entrepreneurs. The organisation of work, in this respect, is concerned with the development of a specific subjectivity. After all, in an era where the very subjective traits of individuals are considered as assets within a de-structuralised economy of reputation, it comes as no surprise that the organisation of work results in the organisation of the self and its interactions.

This chapter is structured as follows: to being with, I offer an overview of some contextual elements that constitute the performative scenario in which the research participants engage. Although the thesis focuses heavily on how social entrepreneurs produce discourses on themselves and their practices, without concentrating on the tangible outcomes of their activities, an overview of the general context in which they operate is useful to grasp the character of the ecosystem in which the processes of subjectivation takes place.

I proceed by contextualising such an enquiry within the studies of sociality of work and at work. As I mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, the sociality of social entrepreneurs at Impact Hub can be considered as an instantiation of neoliberal sociality of and at work. Next, I focus on existing researches on coworking spaces to show the prominence of the idea of ‘sociality’ within coworking spaces’ reflexive narratives and academic literature. Then, I analyse one of the most relevant environments that, as I argue, provide the context and technologies to undertake a process of subjectivation as a social entrepreneur, namely: the coworking space Impact Hub. Coworking spaces are one of the key places that provide the material and social conditions for social entrepreneurs and social entrepreneurs aspirants to build their subjectivity. Crucially, they offer the opportunity to engage in forms of sociality that are instrumental to starting a career.

After that, I provide a brief description of Impact Hub in general, and of its Milan and Westminster branches in particular. In this section I begin to build my argument. This is divided into three parts, each of which includes descriptions of scenes from the fieldwork that led to and provided the material for the theoretical analyses that follow. The first part shows the compulsory and opportunistic nature of social entrepreneurs' sociality. The second demonstrates that this is regulated by a specific code of conduct, which individuals have to learn and enact. The third and last part proposes to interpret this form of sociality as leading to and articulating a process of subjectivation. This is to say that individuals who go to Impact Hub, engages in certain social interactions that result in the production of a certain ethos, i.e. a way of behaving and thinking. The development and performance of this ethos is instrumental to open career opportunities. To put it simply, one has to behave and be recognised as a social entrepreneur, before actually being able to carry out specific actions as such. It is only by embodying and performing a specific subjectivity, therefore an *ethos*, that individuals can access career opportunities.

Importantly, my own involvement in Impact Hub depended on my capacity to establish relationships with its members. Hence, I engaged in the sociality of Impact Hub myself. As explained in Chapter III, most of the data of the fieldwork come from informal interactions, rather than from scheduled formal interviews. To account for this, and to offer a scratch of the type of interactions that marked the fieldwork, I will contextualise interview quotes with the aim of conveying the atmosphere of the social encounters.

Let me repeat that the main aim of the analysis of social entrepreneurs' sociality at Impact Hub Milan and Westminster is to highlight the importance of a process of self-fashioning that involves the acceptance of a set of values, and to provide evidence for the prominence and significance of social entrepreneurs' sociality for the formation of their subjectivities and the organisation of their working lives.

In the following chapter (Chapter V), I unpack the contents and technologies of social entrepreneurs' ethics, and in the last empirical chapter (Chapter VI) I discuss and assess their political significance in the context of contemporary neoliberal society.

### The performative context

The participants of this research are mostly young, well educated, middle class adults operating in urban contexts. They are an international crowd: most of them have moved to a big city – London or Milan – from smaller towns, or from another country, in the aim of getting a top-quality education, and building a successful career. Their lives in most cases involve a lot of travelling both for work and to catch-up with friends, family, partners.

Importantly, social entrepreneurs –especially in the early phase of their careers – may have to sustain themselves financially by means of part-time jobs in shops, restaurants or in the corporate world; while using their free time to engage in activities related to social entrepreneurship. Alternatively, they can leverage on their parents' resources, or on their personal savings, to afford working under-paid or for free for a period of time. As a matter of fact, it is not easy to make a living as an independent entrepreneur, and for most people social entrepreneurship remains a passion that never translates into a wage-earning activity.

At the time of fieldwork, most participants were in the idea generation phase of their projects: they were not established yet. Their work conduct was oriented towards the constitution of a network, to build a reputation in the field. As I argue elsewhere (Bandinelli and Arvidsson 2013), the first step to build a career as a social entrepreneur is to be recognised as such by other actors in the scene.

Trying to become part of a networked scene involve the participation to a variety of events: workshops, conferences, networking events, round-tables, festivals, with the aim of establishing connections, meeting potential investors or business partners. These conditions indicate the de-spatialised and de-territorialised character of social entrepreneurs' lives. their work schedule are unpredictable and nonlinear: they work the long hours in coworking spaces or cafes, or just at home. The most common activity is to be in a 'meeting'. Meetings can happen in cafes, at coworking spaces, pubs, restaurant, on public spaces (such as the Barbican or Southbank Centre in London), or at home, on Skype or in person. Typically, meetings last for a few hours and commonly involve people coming from different backgrounds, stories, countries.

To sum up, the conditions in which social entrepreneurs operate are those of well-educated precarious, independent workers in urban gig-economies. They have to constantly produce the infrastructure of their career, as part of their job tasks. This involve meeting people and develop a certain ethos so as to be recognised as part of the scene. As this chapter shows, sociality and self-fashioning are two interconnected parts of the job of becoming and being a social entrepreneur.

### Sociality and work

I frame the analysis of social entrepreneurs' sociality in the context of the studies of sociality at work in neoliberal economies. With the term sociality, I broadly refer to the forms of human interactions that produce, characterise, and are produced by a particular context. Therefore, to explore social entrepreneurs' sociality means to investigate the ways in which their interactions contribute to the constitution of the field as such. It also means to analyse the scope, significance, and weight of social interactions to understand how they are functional to, and part of, the identity of a social entrepreneur.

There has always been a degree of sociality in the workplace: to be sure, the office of white collar workers in the fifties was marked by certain social structures and social

practices (see, for instance C. Wright Mills' study on white collar workers, published in 1956). Yet, the neoliberal redefinition of work as a means of self-actualisation has implied that the way in which the self gets actualised in social interactions becomes a fundamental part of work. In other terms, sociality is no more just an externality, a 'desirable' part or an effect, but rather a substantial aspect of work. This is exacerbated by the tendency towards an ever-more extreme individualisation: since individuals have to do the work of the structure, their relationships with each other are what make up the structure at a macro level.

The functional character of sociality within entrepreneurialised and individualised workers has been observed and discussed by a number of scholars, mostly critical theorists, in particular post-operaists (e.g. Lazzarato, 1996; Hardt, Negri, 2000; Virno, 2003 Berardi, 2009) and cultural scholars (e.g. Wittel, 2001; 2004, Ross; McRobbie, 2001, 2002). Notwithstanding the different angles of these accounts, they all point out that the deregulation of the workplace, the fall of the barriers between work and life, and the increasing investment of the subjectivity at work have led to the deep intertwining between work and social life. Hence, the whole life of the worker becomes subjected to the production of value; as Hardt and Negri claim: 'the instrumental action of economic production has been united with the communicative action of human relations' (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 293). What has to be put to work, then, is one's ability to socialise. Maurizio Lazzarato makes this point clear when he defines work as 'the capacity to activate and manage productive cooperation' (Lazzarato 1996: 5).

Since social relations have become functional to work, their nature has changed. This dynamic has been notably described by Andreas Wittel in his 2001 article 'Towards a Network Sociality', in which he analyses the function and significance of media workers' social practices. Wittel's research illustrates the importance of cultivating 'friendships' and 'contacts' in order to maximise career opportunities, providing empirical confirmation to the well-known slogan: 'it's not what you know, but who you know'. As a result, social

relations are commodified: they become a form of capital, something that must be continuously produced, reproduced, and consumed (Wittel, 2001).

Angela McRobbie confirms these patterns and sheds light on the discriminatory mechanism at stake in such a sociality. She argues that in creative urban scenes to fall out of the loop can seriously threaten one's chances of success (McRobbie, 2001, 2002). And Alice Marwick, in her research on Silicon Valley, has offered further evidence on the role of engaging in a certain type of networked on-line and off-line sociality for the acquisition of status and reputation in the hi-tech scene (Marwick, 2013).

Melissa Gregg has concentrated upon the compulsory character of friendships in neoliberal societies. In a similar vein to Wittel, she notices that while a certain degree of socialisation has always been in place in work environments - e.g. the Friday office drinks (2010) – the rise of social media has made this practice more diffused, widespread and mandatory. What is at stake is not only engagement in polite informal interactions, but the creation of what is supposed to involve, at least discursively, a form of friendship. For this reason, Gregg claims, '...in neoliberal societies "friendship" is labour in the sense that it involves constant attention and cultivation, the rewards of which include improved standing and greater opportunity' (Gregg, 2007:5). In this regard, it seems appropriate to remember what Carol Stone, quoted in Wittel and named by newspapers as 'networking queen' and 'British best connected woman' states about friendships: 'Friends are made, they don't just happen, you have to work at it' (Stone, quoted in Wittel: 2001: 59, my emphasis).

Social entrepreneurs are no exception to this trend: the engagement in a certain form of sociality is part of their work; it is a means for the organisation and advancement of their career. To illustrate this point, I analyse social entrepreneurs' sociality at Impact Hub.

### The rise of coworking spaces: the social back to work

Coworking spaces represent a very timely and appropriate case study of the intertwining between sociality and work, and on the labour of sociality itself. Born in San Francisco in 2005, coworking spaces are a rising phenomenon, and one that is still understudied by academics (there are a few exceptions, for instance Spinuzzi, 2010; Gandini, 2015; Moriset; 2014). According to Deskmag, an online magazine dedicated to coworking spaces, in 2013 there were already 2498 open spaces, and the figure is rising, with nearly a 100% annual increase between 2007 and 2012 (Moriset, 2014). Most coworking spaces are located in so-called 'creative cities' such as London, Berlin, Paris, Milan, San Francisco and New York, but they are present also in Japan (129), Brazil (95), Australia (60), Russia (39) and are growing in China (Lindtner and Li, 2012). Commonly conceived as shared working environments, where workers hire a desk and a Wi-Fi connection, they actually seem to have the important function of re-socialising the work of independent workers. Indeed, they can be thought of as the territory where new forms of sociality that are instrumental to the organisation of work take place (Gandini, 2015).

As has been widely observed, independent workers have suffered from the consequences of working from home. They have been portrayed as isolated, self-absorbed and detached from any form of sociality (e.g. Gurstein, 2001; Kjaerulff, 2010; Kylin and Karlsson, 2008). At the same time, they are in need of developing a contact portfolio so as to pursue their freelance careers (Wittel, 2001; Gregg, 2007; Marwick, 2013). Coworking spaces can be seen as an attempt to provide a solution to these problems by offering what has been defined as a 'third way' of working: 'halfway between a 'standard' worklife within a traditional, well-delimited workplace in a community-like environment, and an independent worklife as a freelancer, characteristic of freedom and independence, where the worker is based at home in isolation' (Gandini, 2015: 195). In line with this approach, Moriset defines coworking as 'serendipity accelerators designed to host creative people and entrepreneurs who endeavour to break isolation and to find a

convivial environment that favours meetings and collaborations' (Moriset, 2014: 1). Clark, in his witty article 'Coworkers of the World Unite', points to the same concept when, with evocative language, he announces that 'for atomized freelancers sick of Starbucks and longing for human interaction, coworking offers plug-and-play collegiality' (Clark, 2007).

The idea of reintegrating a social dimension within the working practices of knowledge workers lies at the core of the so-called coworking movement. Alex Hillman, co-founder of one of the first coworking spaces in San Francisco – Indy Hall – affirms that coworking is all about 'bringing the social back into the workplace' (Hillman, quoted in Clark, 2007). Stuart Warshaw, the co-founder of Grind – a coworking space established in Manhattan in 2011 – embraces a similar line of thought and claims that 'Grind is a case study in collaboration across many disciplines and among established professionals' (Warshaw, quoted in Kreamer, 2012).

Collaboration is a key word in the coworking scene and indicates an ethos where cooperation is favoured over competition. Consistently, the coworking manifesto opens with the sentence: 'We have the talent. We just need to work together'. All value propositions listed in the manifesto point at this sense of 'togetherness', a few examples are: 'collaboration over competition; community over agendas; participation over observation; doing over saying; friendship over formality; boldness over assurance; learning over expertise; people over personalities; value ecosystem over value chain' (Coworking Manifesto, 2016). In this respect, coworking is not only proposing a different work organisation, but also a different work ethic: its objective being to re-embed social values into entrepreneurialised working lives. To this extent, the narrative that it articulates seems to challenge – on a discursive level – the neoliberal paradigm that – as I have discussed in Chapter II – revolves around the production and reproduction of competitive and individualised subjects.

This sense of 'togetherness' is often conveyed by the term 'community'. Indeed, the coworking manifesto defines its precepts as the 'values of the community'. As noted by Gandini, from a theoretical viewpoint the use of the term community in the context of coworking spaces is problematic (Gandini, 2015). In social theory, the term community denotes a social formation marked by stability, coherence, embeddedness and belonging, which involves strong and long lasting ties, proximity, and a common history or narrative of the collective' (Wittel, 2001:1). Quite differently, coworkers come from different backgrounds, countries and expertise, their membership may last just a few months and social ties can be constantly created and destroyed, for they depend on the temporality of project- based interactions.

As Gandini argues, the signifier 'community' in the context of coworking spaces has to be understood not in reference to traditional social theory, but rather as a discursive translation of the 'open source approach to work' aimed at facilitating collaborative practice that seeks to establish social relations among the member-workers (Gandini, 2015). Lange provides a similar description of coworkers and describes them as characterised by a 'collective-driven, networked approach to the open source idea translated into physical space' (Lange, 2011: 292). Therefore, despite not being a social group bounded by a common background and narrative, coworkers express the need to establish social relations in the context of a collaborative approach to work. Coworking spaces ensure opportunities for social integration to entrepreneurs of the self, who finds themselves detached from traditional socio-cultural nets, and overwhelmed by the myriad of possible biographies they could build. They function as post-traditional communities in which the common identity is projectual rather than historical and flexible rather than fixed (Bauman, quoted in Lange, 2006: 153).

These differences between coworking spaces' sociality and traditional communities do not seem to impact on the way coworkers perceive themselves as part of a community. As Clark observes, even though 'many see capitalism and community as diametrically opposed' for coworkers 'these new ties are just as valid as the old connections of blood,

proximity and race' (Clark, 2007). For better or worse, unlike earlier generations of activists, they attach no stigma to making a living while making new allies' (Clark, 2007). In fact, making new allies becomes vital for making a living. An article published in the Harvard Business Review highlights the fact that it is exactly for making allies and connecting with other people that individuals go to coworking spaces: 'connections with others are a big reason why people pay to work in a communal space, as opposed to working from home for free or renting a nondescript office' (Spreitzer et. al. 2015).

Colleoni and Arvidsson draw attention to the fact that these social activities have an instrumental aim for coworkers: i.e. the construction of a network of contacts and the acquisition of reputation in their professional scene. According to the data they present, a large majority of coworkers declare having expanded their network of clients (61%) and collaborators (62%). Also, an overall 52% of coworkers report that their earnings have increased since participating in coworking spaces (Colleoni and Arvidsson, 2014). The same research shows that 48% of Milanese coworkers explicitly relate to the need for a sense of community, and that 38% express the desire to engage in network activities (Colleoni and Arvidsson, 2014).

What emerges strikingly from the literature on coworking spaces, as well as from the reflexive narratives of the coworking movement, is that their main purpose is the production of a form of sociality defined by an ethos of collaboration and oriented towards a communal purpose. What existing research still fails to address are the particular features and mechanism of this sociality, which appears as unfolding between the polar opposites of entrepreneurialisation and cooperation. In the following pages, using Impact Hub as a case study, I aim to contribute to filling this gap. To begin the analysis, I provide a brief outline on Impact Hub in general, and its Milan and Westminster branches in particular.

### Impact Hub: A place where to meet

The first Impact Hub was opened in 2005 by Jonathan Robinson, Ety Flanagan and Mark Hodge, in a warehouse in the London borough of Islington, with the name of Hub ('Impact Hub' is a result of a major work of rebranding in 2013). A decade later, Impact Hub is an international network of coworking spaces dedicated to social innovators and entrepreneurs, branded by Impact Hub website as 'Impact Makers'. Impact Hub's network is expanding dramatically, proof that there is growing interest in coworking spaces and social entrepreneurship. At the moment of writing (2016) there are 81 Impact Hubs, and 17 in the making, for a totality of 15000 members (Impact Hub, 2016). Currently, in London there are four Impact Hub branches: Islington, King's Cross, Westminster and Brixton. In Italy, there has been an Impact Hub boom in recent years: the first to open was Milan, followed by Rovereto-Trento, Trieste, Roma, Bari, Siracusa, and Firenze. This data provides evidence of the scope and significance of Impact Hub as an attractive environment for many individuals.

Like most coworking spaces, Impact Hub offers a variety of membership formulae, whose fees vary significantly: the cheapest, £20 pm (£15 for start-ups) is a so-called virtual membership, which grants access to the mailing list and Impact Hub-Net (a social network, very similar to Facebook, which connects all Impact Hub members) and offers discounted prices for events and room booking; while the most expensive is the Hub Unlimited - £475 (£395 for start ups) and includes 24/7 use of the work space, complimentary tea and coffee, discounted rates for events and room booking, and virtual membership (Impact Hub, 2016). Moreover, the member-host solution offers the use of the space and facilities of Impact Hub for a number of hours, in exchange for voluntary work as a host. This flexible organisation is designed to respond to the needs of an entrepreneurial, independent and flexible workforce, whose demands and resources may vary greatly at different stages of their career.

Consistently with the discourse of the coworking movement, the value proposition of Impact Hub is to offer people with 'ideas' a 'place where to meet' and collaborate to turn ideas into impactful and financially sustainable projects (Robinson, quoted in Bachmann, 2014). Jonathan Robinson, co-founder of Impact Hub points this out emphatically in an interview for the Stanford Social Innovation Review: 'Everyone has ideas for making the world a better place... but where does one go to make them happen? .... What if these people could come together in the same physical space and have a place to connect?' (Robinson, quoted in Bachmann, 2014).

Liene Perkone, London Impact Hub's accountant and creator of Impact Hub Lab, recounts the same story, which assumes the traits of a myth of origin:

The four founders of the Hub came together and started thinking they are these young change makers and want to change the world and make it better... and then they thought many of these people are actually working from their bedrooms, from their homes or Starbucks cafes ... so they decided they could maybe create a space where all these people could come together, they could encourage each other, collaborate, come up with new ideas, also exchange experiences and knowledge, and actually change the world' (Perkone, 2012, min 00:09).

The words of Robinson and Perkone underline the high importance ascribed to coworking spaces' potential to connecting people. The idea of giving people 'a place where to meet', well exemplifies the extent to which Impact Hub has been thought of and designed as a place for socialisation. The opportunity for people to interact, i.e. to 'come together, encourage each other, collaborate, exchange experiences and knowledge' is considered the missing link between the existence of 'change makers' who 'want to change the world' and the very opportunity for them to 'actually change the world'. What is at stake is a regime of truth for which a certain type of interaction between certain individuals in a certain context has the power to allow these individuals to actualise their eidetic insights and turn them into grandiose actions, which would have been otherwise impossible.

As within the coworking movement in general, at Impact Hub the term mostly deployed to convey this idea is 'community'. For instance, at Impact Hub Westminster, the word 'Community' is distributed throughout the space: a sign giving instructions on how to use the kitchen facilities is entitled 'Welcome to the Community Kitchen!', and concludes by reminding hubbers that 'Together we Make Community'. A glass office used for meetings is decorated with big capital letters claiming 'This is Community' (fig. 1 and 2).



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Impact Hub 'community' is composed mostly of freelance workers, coming from different backgrounds and working in a variety of fields. For instance, according to Impact Hub Milan Community Mapping (2012), 50% of its members have a background in communications, 29% come from the creative industries, and 15% have a background in architecture and design. 47% of hubbers are working on projects that they label as 'social', and 36% on environmental projects. The majority of Milan hubbers, 76%, carry out projects in the field of communication, followed by 52% in creative industries. A notable percentage of hubbers (42%) work in consultancy, while only 7% in food and beverage, 5% in sport and wellbeing and 3% in finance (Impact Hub Milan, 2012). At Impact Hub Westminster I had the chance to observe a similar situation: members were working in a variety of fields such as technology and innovation, media and communications, art and design, architecture.

Such a picture prevents us from seeing clearly the relationship of social entrepreneurs to a specific economic sector. What defines hubbers is not a determinate field of activities, but rather a shared ethos. The discourse produced by Impact Hub revolves around the potential of gathering together a certain type of individual animated by a 'common purpose', and who may achieve that common purpose by working together. The significance and potential of Impact Hub exceeds the deeds of single hubbers precisely because it exists only in their relationships, affectivity and communication. As their tagline reads:

We believe a better world evolves through the combined accomplishments of creative, committed, and compassionate individuals focused on a common purpose.

.... We are you. We are the people you've been wanting to work with (Impact Hub, 2016).

This 'sense of community' may also attract some critics. Francesca, an Italian designer in her late twenties, graduated in London Central Saint Martin, has been called to participate (for free) to some idea-generation workshops at a very early stage of the Impact Hub Florence opening process, this is what she told me in that regard:

You know... they are a bit annoying sometimes, they think they can do everything and solve everything just because now they have this hub... ultimately it's the same bunch of people you would have seen around before... and they are kind of pretentious, they pretend they are open but they are not, they give each other jobs... like the kitchen of the Hub has been designed by the brother of the founder, guess why? Guess who is taking over the application for the last grant? The friend of another founder.

Giulio, an economy graduate who founded a social cooperative in 2002, and who co-founded Impact Hub Florence in 2014, replies to these sort of critiques as follows:

The Hub has a strong brand that communicates strongly this idea of community to attract many diverse people to stimulate their creativity through the projects that take place both at a local level and within the global network, so in this sense we are open. But, from the outside, we are indeed perceived as somewhat a close community... Surely, once you get into the Hub, you feel like in a family, hence if you are not 'connected', if you are not part of the club by paying at least 20 euro plus VAT, you are out indeed... (Fieldwork Notes, February, 2014)

What single individuals buy when subscribing to Impact Hub, is not mainly a shared desk, or the complimentary tea and coffee you get with the full membership option, rather they

buy a 'sociality'. This implies the collapse of the barriers between the act of production and consumption in a quite radical way, for what people pay for (or offer free labour in exchange of) is to be enabled to produce social relationships; what is consumed is this very productive ability.

At this point, a number of questions emerge: what is the character of such sociality? How can we describe the nature of these interactions? What are the main ways in which individuals at Impact Hub are supposed to 'socialise'? In the next sections I tackle these questions.

### Compulsory friendship and opportunism

One warm evening in June, after having spent the afternoon at Impact Hub Milan, I went to have a drink with Anita, an Italian woman in her early thirties. She was wearing denim overalls, red Doctor Martens, and a flowered cotton t-shirt. In her curly dark hair, a pink headband, a bit of make up on her eyes. Anita was born in a small village on the border with Switzerland and had studied maths and piano. She was raised by rather conservative parents, in an upper-class environment. "I did not share their values" she said "I was looking for something a bit more authentic, something that differs from the status quo". This is why she decided to leave her parents' place at the age of eighteen (quite young for the Italian average) to move to Milan, where she studied design at Politecnico to follow her "passion".

After she graduated she found out about Impact Hub: "I went to a couple of events at Impact Hub and realised that there were a lot of interesting people, who were doing very interesting things" she told me with a shrilling voice, sipping her glass of white wine. "After uni I was looking for a job, but didn't want to go for a corporate one, so I decided to become a hubber" she explained after a while, her glass half empty. I asked why and how Impact Hub is the right place to look for a job. She replied as follows:

Being a hubber is like building a career... you are in an informal environment so they can really see who you are and which skills you have... Basically, you become friends, and then you may find a job, you know? Like, there was this guy working on a project and they needed a graphic designer, so he asked me, as we were already friends, and we knew we were sharing the same values. This is how I got my first job!

Giancarlo, a tall and thin man with a passion for photography born in the Tuscan countryside 34 years ago, has chosen to become a member of Impact Hub Florence for similar reasons. Over dinner at my place in South East London he told me:

I am thinking of becoming a hubber as I have just quit my full-time job to start a career as a freelance photographer. And, you know, if you want to be a freelancer the first thing you need is to build a contact portfolio... And I am not good at PR, I am pretty shy. I know Impact Hub Florence 'cause the people I used to work for are amongst their co-founders, and sometimes they would send me there to do things, or for meetings... And what I've realised is that that place is basically a place where you can meet a lot of people, and then you make friends, so if they have a job to do they'll offer it to you, a friend, rather than someone else...So I think I'll become a hubber... I may give it a go!

The words of Anita and Giancarlo evidence two main elements: 1) the necessity and the willingness to establish friendships; and 2) the need and desire to advance in one's career. These are inter-related to the extent that the first is considered as a necessary condition for the latter. The process of becoming friends is described as a natural outcome of being a hubber, as what is enabled by Impact Hub itself: "that place is basically a place when you meet a lot of people, and then you make friends". What apparently makes Impact Hub a friendship enabler is its informal environment, one that allows individuals to express themselves: "you are in an informal environment, therefore they can see *who you really are*" (my emphasis) claims Anita, confidently.

Impact Hub is emphatically described as a place for self-disclosure, and self-disclosure is considered to be pivotal to establishing a mutual bond of affection that can lead to career advancement. In this regard, making new friends is instrumental. Both Anita and Giancarlo pinpoint the fact that it comes before finding a job, both logically and chronologically: "you become friends, so if they have a job they'll offer it to you: a friend". From a socio-economic perspective, this equates to the systematic acquisition of

social capital. This is evident in what Giulio, Impact Hub Florence cofounder, says about the reasons that have led him and his colleagues to open one branch of Impact Hub:

Well... having an Impact Hub will give us a huge return in terms of visibility ... Impact Hub is a powerful tool for communication, which can enable us to gather social capital. This why we can benefit from a strong means of communication and visibility, with which we may attract new clients...

With "us" Giulio refers to himself and the two former university classmates with whom he opened a social cooperative in 2007, which is still active now. Basically, Impact Hub serves as a social capital collector for the social cooperative, it provides it visibility, and potential clients.

The sociality at Impact Hub is mostly instrumental to the development of business, being it an organisation – such as Giulio's cooperative - or even a single entrepreneur of the self – as in the case of Anita. I argue that what is at stake is a compulsory and opportunistic sociality. It is compulsory because it is demanded, one could not be at Impact Hub without making friends (or, more precisely, one could, but then he or she would not be in the position to benefit from the membership); and it is opportunistic because it is subdued to the need to find work opportunities, therefore it is a means to an external end rather than an end in itself.

Opportunists, Paolo Virno claims, are those who are confronted with a socialisation characterised by 'a flow of ever-interchangeable possibilities, making themselves available to the greatest number of these, yielding to the nearest one and then quickly swerving from one to another (Virno: 2005: 86). To be opportunist, Virno continues, is a professional quality, a skill which is acquired in a socialisation that is increasingly connected with work. The sociality of social entrepreneurs at Impact Hub is instrumental to work to the point that it becomes a modality of work: a task to be done as part of one's job, so as to be enabled to do one's job. Impact Hub can be thought of as a place for this opportunistic and compulsory sociality to be produced, reproduced and consumed.

## Sociality to be learnt

A further element that distinguishes Impact Hub sociality is the importance ascribed to an evident ethical dimension. The connection between social relationships and ethical values is due to the fact that one of the requirements for establishing relationships is to display and prove the willingness to have a 'positive impact' - in other words, to be an 'impact maker' as Impact Hub brands its members, therefore to show a virtuous character. As I have argued elsewhere, the barriers of inclusion and exclusion from the scene revolve around the embodiment of a number of ethical principles that are thought to characterise and distinguish social entrepreneurial subjects (Bandinelli and Arvidsson, 2013).

Impact Hub's tagline reads: 'We are a network of collaborators focused on making a positive impact in our world' (Impact Hub, 2016), pointing at how the element of socialisation - being 'a network of collaborators' - is related and functional to an ethical objective 'making a positive impact in our world'. In order to successfully engage in Impact Hub sociality the individual has to embody a certain ethos. What takes place at Impact Hub is the production of this ethos, which is effected by means of practices that I define as devices for the subjectivation of members/workers. These are implemented in every Impact Hub across the world and constitute a core service that Impact Hub offers its members. Each of these practices can be thought of as producing an ethos based on the values of collaboration and sharing which, as previously shown, make up the core of coworking movement narratives. To illustrate this point, I consider three examples: business clinics, 'skills-sharing' sessions, and weekly lunches (now called 'Sexy Salads').

Business clinics are workshops in which various themes related to business modelling are explored. These are conceived as a way to get on-the-spot help and advice from fellow hubbers. As Vita, Impact Hub Milan manager told me: "we offer this service called business clinics to give our members of the community the chance to get advice for their business plan". What is produced is a dispositive for hubbers to embody and the principle of collaboration and sharing, in this case sharing business advice.

Skill-sharing sessions revolve around the same ethical principle. They may take various forms but they all originate from the assumption that knowledge is something to be shared. At Impact Hub Westminster there is a running project called the Academy at the Hub that involves weekly classes on topics related to entrepreneurship. Each class costs about £10/£20 and they are meant to be independent from each other. The description of these classes mobilises the idea of sharing and exchanging as ways of learning: 'participants are coming to sessions as much to meet other participants and share experiences as to hear from the presenter. Teachers are offering their time in exchange for the opportunity to speak and to mingle with our community and the amazing ideas coming from it' (Impact Hub Academy, 2016).

Finally, so-called Sexy Salads are weekly lunches in which everyone is encouraged to bring an ingredient to collaborate in the creation of a dish. Business clinics encourage hubbers to give and take business advice, skill-sharing sessions to share their knowledge and ideas, while Sexy Salads is about sharing food. By participating in these events individuals have the chance to embody a certain ethos by fostering a specific conduct, the one of those who 'share'. The signifier of sharing is central to the coworking movement and Impact Hub proposal, as it encapsulates the idea of collaboration.

Importantly, such a process of embodiment may also be unsuccessful, and this demonstrates how the production of a certain conduct is based on the development and deployment of a number of non-written norms. For instance, Alfredo once recounted an episode when he brought the wrong ingredient to a Sexy Salad:

I love the idea of Sexy Salads, and I was looking forward to participating in my first one, it's a shared meal, it's a great occasion to meet people! But I brought some Sainsbury chicken, I thought it was ok, I mean... I eat chicken... but the others were almost disgusted, you should have seen their faces! They said it politely, the Brits way, but I could tell they felt almost offended... Well... I apologised and left... I guess I've learnt you cannot bring meat to a sexy salad...I think next week I'll bring some pumpkin seeds or quinoa....

This anecdote demonstrates that the invitation to 'share' and collaborate in a common project, in this case a salad, is subjected to some non-written rules. Alfredo broke one of these and therefore felt not welcome, but rather judged severely. Such a mistake, a misunderstanding of what the principles of sharing include and exclude in the context of Impact Hub, caused him to lose the opportunity to socialise, as he could not get the opportunity he was looking forward to: i.e. 'to meet people'.

A further example of the inherent code of conduct of sociality at Impact Hub regards the deployment of a certain language. Using a particular vocabulary is essential to attracting the attention of fellow hubbers, and therefore to socialising with them. To illustrate this point I will draw on my personal experience at Impact Hub Westminster. It took place during the first weeks of fieldwork, when I was making the first attempts to get to know hubbers. As I explained in the methodology chapter, that was not easy at the beginning. Without an elevator pitch it was difficult to successfully socialise. Quite soon I realised that language was a barrier. I realised that deploying an academic discourse, one that focuses on formulating questions and critique of a current state of affairs, was ineffective.

Therefore, to attract hubbers' attention I tried to re-think the way in which to present my project. Finally, I decided to suggest that a few hubbers organise a seminar in which they would have the opportunity to voice their view about social entrepreneurship so as to arrive at a shared definition. I added that that definition could eventually be useful for the 'movement'. The collaborative character of the seminar, and the formulation of a common objective seemed to be more akin to the ethos of hubbers. The substance of the activities had not varied that much, in the end I wanted to get the chance to ask social entrepreneurs their opinion on social entrepreneurship, its ethical and political character, yet I used a different language. Eventually, this proved to be only partially effective.

Below is an excerpt of my fieldwork notes recounting this attempt:

Today I got the opportunity to approach Alfredo and Sophia in the Hub kitchenette. I have already engaged in a few discussions with Alfredo, and I know he is working on a project with Sophia, a French woman working part time for an IT corporation and using her spare time to 'understand more about social entrepreneurship'. I greeted them, smiled, and asked them how their projects were going. I knew Alfredo was in the idea generation phase of his start up. Alfredo told me he had had a meeting with a famous social entrepreneur and that he had agreed to be an SEI ambassador. I did not fully understand what this meant, but refrained from asking further questions. Sophia said she was organising a workshop on community development. She invited me to join and I said that I would. Then I told them about my idea of 'organising a seminar' for social entrepreneurs to discuss their ideas on the politics and ethics of social entrepreneurship, and pointed out that 'to have a coherent idea of the political function of social entrepreneurship could be vital for the strength of the movement'. Alfredo stayed silent for a bit. Sophia continued preparing her organic filtered coffee. Then Alfredo said 'Do you mean something like a pop-up think tank?'

In the end, we never organised either a seminar or a pop-up think tank. But this episode demonstrates well how the use of certain jargon, which reflects a modality of thinking, a value horizon, is central to the sociality of social entrepreneurs. Failure to deploy a given terminology, and to frame ideas and projects in a certain way, impedes the process of socialisation from taking place; to use hubbers' vocabulary, it prevents friends from being made, and therefore jeopardises the opportunity to find new work.

These examples show that Impact Hub is a place where ethically-burdened socialisation is produced. What Alfredo broke, indeed, was an ethical rule: to shop in a big supermarket and to eat meat is considered wrong. What I failed to do, was to deploy certain language, therefore to express, by means of words, a series of specific values. The ability of the individual to establish relationships, those relationships that are a necessary condition for her to advance in her career, is subjected to the ability to learn and enact a certain ethos.

What I want to flag up is that to engage in a process of socialisation at Impact Hub one has to learn and deploy a certain ethos that reproduces a certain set of values and beliefs, a certain regime of truth. For example, one has to learn what can be shared or not shared, what can be consumed, where to shop, and what language to use when expressing ideas. Impact Hub sociality is produced based on these norms, and Impact Hub is the place

where these norms, this code of conduct, is produced and reproduced. To use Foucauldian parlance: Impact Hub is *ethopoios* for it 'possesses the quality of transforming ethos' (Foucault: 2005:237)<sup>23</sup>.

### The production of the self

My argument is that the function of Impact Hub as a coworking space for social entrepreneurs is to offer the opportunity to develop an ethos via engaging and learning a modality of socialisation that is mandatory for furthering a career project in the scene of social entrepreneurship. In other words, being a hubber entails and demands the development of a certain subjectivity, which is instrumental in entering the job market, and unfolds in a specific form of sociality. To further support this point, in this last section of the chapter I present a case study regarding Giancarlo.

Giancarlo, who I have already mentioned in this chapter, has always had self-confidence's issues "I could never fully test myself, I was too scared of failure" he admitted during one of our first conversations. Eventually, he started working full time for a social cooperative that is one of the most influential actors in the Italian social entrepreneurship network. Giancarlo immediately recognised the ethical burden of sociality and used to feel deeply uncomfortable about it: "All this buzz about changing the world etc." he told me, with the tone of one who is talking about something so ephemeral and impossible that does not even require further clarification: "They really wanted me to buy into it" he continued "but I couldn't fully believe in this story..." At the time, he was motivated by a different set of reasons: "I was working there cause I needed the money, and okay, it was better to

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<sup>23</sup> The notion of a sociality to be learnt may resonate with the concept of 'community of practice'. Communities of practice, as defined by Wenger, are 'groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly' (Wegner-Trayner, 2015:1). To an extent, social entrepreneurs at Impact Hub could be seen as a community of practice. However, they are marked by the performance of a discursive regime through which they develop a specific subjectivity. This focus on discourse and subjectivity is absent from the concept of community of practice, which addresses more the practical learning of community members. Moreover, as I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, I find the term community misleading when applied to the context of coworking spaces.

work for some good guys than for the corporate sharks, but still... I just did not feel like I was changing the world or anything like that, I did not feel part of them. And this made me suffer, I felt excluded”.

Giancarlo’s story demonstrates how the embodiment of an ethos is necessary to do one’s job. To work in a given field he had to foster an ethos, to promote and communicate a set of values. Eventually he felt so frustrated he resigned, to embark on a freelance career. But at that point things took an unexpected turn. Indeed, while he was considering this move, Giancarlo started hanging out at Impact Hub Florence, which had been founded by the cooperative he worked for just a few months before. At first he felt uncomfortable there as well, for pretty much the same reasons that had made him feel uneasy at the cooperative. But eventually he changed his mind. This is how he recalls this change:

At the beginning I didn’t like Impact Hub, I went there just to find useful contacts... But then I sort of experienced a change in myself... I realised it while I was talking to my brother the other day, I was telling him about my career project as a freelance photographer and he replied with something like ‘oh this is too risky, how can you really believe you can do it etc..’ and do you know how I responded? I said: look, if you really want to do something, then you can. And this is thanks to the Hub, I mean, it’s a matter of confidence in the end, isn’t it? And I think I sort of learnt it being there, as you are surrounded by people saying it, and at first you’re like ‘this is bullshit’ but then eventually you start thinking ‘maybe it’s not that wrong...’

For Giancarlo, frequenting Impact Hub resulted in a change in his approach towards his career, and therefore in his mode of thinking about himself and his future. Before being a Hubber, he thought differently about his opportunities and what was possible. Engaging with Impact Hub sociality, he developed a specific subjectivity, and fashioned himself in a certain way.

This case highlights the productive nature of Impact Hub sociality. What is produced is a certain subjectivity, one that subscribes to a certain regime of truth. An ethical endeavour is involved: a process by which one makes himself or herself a certain subject and that includes our response to invitations or injunctions to make oneself into a certain kind of person. Social entrepreneurs’ sociality at Impact Hub involves a process of self-fashioning

that is essential for them to enter the scene and, eventually, the market.

After a few months Giancarlo told me: “Now I can say I am a hubber, as I think like an hubber, but also I must admit that I had to become one, I had to believe certain things if I wanted to expand my portfolio!” This quote highlights the inherent connection between the compulsory, opportunistic, and ethical character of social entrepreneurs’ sociality at Impact Hub. To put this connection in a schematic way: individuals subscribe to Impact Hub to meet other people who can offer them career opportunities by means of partnerships and/or collaborations; to get these opportunities one has to establish relationships with other individuals, therefore to engage in a process of socialisation; this process is regulated by a set of values and can effectively take place only if one learns and embodies a certain ethos; this process of learning and embodiment may be interpreted as a process of subjectivation. Following this, I argue that coworking spaces can be interpreted as devices for the production of a subjectivity that is instrumental to work. In this respect, they articulate a formalisation of the process of the investment of the self that is peculiar to entrepreneurialised individuals in neoliberal economies.

### Conclusion

To sum up, the argument outlined in this chapter is that Impact Hub’s forms of sociality entail a process of subjectivation that is essential and instrumental to one’s career. In other words, the production of subjectivity is the condition of existence of a social status that, in its turn, is vital to gain a valuable market position.

I have built this argument through a series of steps: firstly, I have shown that sociality lies at the core of the coworking movement and that it is the main reason for individuals subscribing to Impact Hub. Secondly, I have interpreted this sociality as compulsory and opportunistic - for individuals at Impact Hub must produce and engage in specific forms of sociality in order to build their career – and as characterised by a series of technologies that allows individuals to learn a code of conduct, an ethos. Thirdly, I have claimed that

the process of learning how to engage in Impact Hub's compulsory and opportunistic sociality can be thought of as a process of subjectivation thorough which individuals develop an ethos that is ultimately instrumental to surviving in the job market.

The socialisation's process, origin, and objective can be described as follows: a) one has to meet potential work partners or employers b) one has to establish relationships of mutual affection on the basis of a supposedly authentic disclosure of the self (making friends) with these potential partners; c) to do that one has to perform and embody a specific ethos. This process indicates a combination of a functional type of socialisation with an ethical nature.

The function of coworking spaces in general, and Impact Hub in particular, is to provide the discursive and material forms of organisation for these elements to profitably combine. Indeed, going to Impact Hub, individuals engage in a sociality that leads them to accumulate ethical and social capital, which on their turn are functional to capture market opportunities. This sociality can be seen as a form of work organisation. This resonates with the network sociality described by Wittel (2001) and of course does not escape the exploitative dynamic described by critical theorists and cultural scholars (McRobbie, 2001, 2002; Ross, 2004; Sennett, 1998; Lazzarato, 1996). Yet, it shows the unprecedented prominence of an ethical stance. Indeed, while the production of subjectivity and identity have always been at the core of work in neoliberal societies (DuGay, 1999; Adkins and Lury, 1999; Dowling, 2007; Lazzarato, 1996), for social entrepreneurs this seems to have become a very much organised and formalised process.

This ethically charged sociality reflects the ambivalence of social entrepreneurship, for it is built upon a combination of individualistic and ethical elements. But what are these ethical elements, what is the regime of truth that individuals accept when engaging in a process of subjectivation as social entrepreneurs? How does this subject combine ethical values with inherent individualism? This is the topic of next chapter.

### Introduction

In the previous chapter I investigated the significant features of social entrepreneurs' sociality through an analysis of how this is produced in the context of Impact Hub, a coworking space for social entrepreneurs and innovators. Such analysis has revealed the compulsory and opportunistic nature of social entrepreneurs' sociality at Impact Hub, as well as its prominent ethical stance. I have argued that to successfully engage in a form of sociality that is functional to their career, social entrepreneurs have to acquire and behave according to a certain ethos. In other words, they have to engage in a process of subjectivation that revolves around the acceptance, production and reproduction of a particular regime of truth.

In this chapter, I examine those discourses and assumptions that social entrepreneurs must hold as true to develop a social entrepreneurial ethos. More precisely, I focus on the regime of truth of social entrepreneurship in so far as this is rooted in the belief that ethical values can be actualised by means of the enterprise. I argue that the regime of truth of social entrepreneurship unfolds between two main pillars: an individualised notion of ethics, for which ethics is part of the spectrum of individuals' expression of the self; and a conception of entrepreneurial tools as ethically neutral, therefore potentially appropriate for the achievement of the most diverse ethical objectives. These two conceptual elements are interrelated, for only an individualised conception of ethics can be thought of as actualisable by means of entrepreneurial, and hence individualised, conduct.

This chapter is structured as follows: to begin with, I offer a definition of the term 'ethics'; secondly, I analyse how the combination of ethical feelings and entrepreneurial values and conduct is interpreted at the level of the self. Thirdly, I investigate the peculiarity of social entrepreneurship ethics. Finally, I explore the role and significance of entrepreneurial tools in social entrepreneurs' discourses. In the next chapter, I will explore the theoretical and practical consequences of such assumptions, as well as their political value and limits.

### Ethics

I use the term ethics both with its Foucauldian significance of *rappor a soi* and in its Aristotelian meaning of *eudamonia*, which I interpret drawing on Paul Ricoeur's notion of responsiveness towards the other rather than itself (Ricoeur, 1994). For Foucault, ethics is the dimension concerning 'the kind of relationship you ought to have with yourself, *rappor a soi*' (Foucault, 2000: 263), therefore a form of continual work on the self, a perennial activity of 'self bricolage' (Rabinow, 2000: xxxix). In chapter IV, I argued that social entrepreneurs engage in a similar process, a process of subjectivation, in order to develop a certain ethos, a regime of conduct based on a set of beliefs and values. Now I want to focus on these beliefs and values in so far as they concern an ethical sphere, a sphere that concerns the achievement of collective happiness and involves responsiveness towards others. To better clarify what I mean by these expressions, I now focus on a few constitutive traits of Aristotle's understanding of ethics.

Aristotle's meaning of ethics is encapsulated in the notion of *eudaimonia*, which means 'happiness', 'living and doing well'. In reference to Aristotle, Ricoeur defines 'ethical intentions' as 'aiming at the "good life" with and for others in just institutions' (Ricoeur, 1994: 172). According to the Aristotelian tradition, the notion of 'good life' occupies a central position in the discussion of ethics. But if the objective of ethics is to 'live a good

life', then what is this 'good'? Ricoeur notes that in Aristotle there is not any prescription as to what the 'good' is. Indeed, what 'doing good' is, has to be figured out in praxis; it will depend on contingent circumstances. As Ricoeur put it:

In Aristotelian ethics, it can only be a question of the good for us. This relativity with respect to us does not prevent the fact that the good is not contained in any particular thing. The good is rather that which is lacking in all things. This ethics in its entirety presupposes this nonsaturable use of the predicate "good." Is the discussion threatened, once again, by vagueness? Not at all. The first great lesson we receive from Aristotle is to seek the fundamental basis for the aim of the "good life" in praxis (Ricoeur, 1994: 172).

As this passage makes clear, ethics is not about defining what is good, but about posing the 'good' as an objective to be achieved in practice. Ethics here is a horizon, rather than a well-marked path. As Ricoeur puts it, this is a teleological vision of ethics, rather than a deontological one. This is to say that it is concerned with 'what is considered to be good' and not with 'what imposes itself as obligatory' (Ricoeur, 1994: 170). This is the main difference to Kantian ethics, based on a universal categorical imperative, as well as to Plato's ethics, based on an abstract idea of good. In Aristotle, it is down to the single individual to understand what is the virtuous thing to be done at any given situation.

In the second book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle clarifies that ethical virtues derive from one's habitus: acting in a certain way, men and women (in fact, for Aristotle, only free men) can shape their souls so as to develop a virtuous ethos and in so doing they can contribute to achieving *eudaimonia*. *Eudaimonia* can be pursued by thinking virtuous thoughts and doing virtuous actions. In other words, it is obtained by modelling one's soul activity on virtues (in Greek *arête*, excellence). As Julia Annas explains in her book *Intelligent Virtue*, *eudaimonia* is the inspiring goal of virtuous actions, and indicates an ethical vision in which the achievement of happiness is closely bounded to the

actualisation of individual virtues (Annas, 2011)<sup>24</sup>. Importantly, virtues are not abstracts or inborn realities. Rather, they can be acquired by acting on one's thoughts and actions. Ricoeur describes this process in more modern terms and within the hermeneutic tradition. He conceives of this as:

An unending work of interpretation applied to action and to oneself that we pursue in the search for adequation between what seems to us to be best with regard to our life as a whole and the preferential choices that govern our practices (Ricoeur, 1994: 179).

Starting from these considerations, Ricoeur proposes an understanding of ethics as a matter of responsibility of the self towards the 'other than itself'. It is a conception of ethics that is deeply rooted in the selfhood and in the narrative identity that links the self to the other. This relationship is encapsulated in the complementary notions of 'other as oneself' and 'oneself as another' (Ricoeur, 1994: 194). The ethical narrative of a life is constituted by the instances of its responsiveness to others, or of failure to respond to others. The self who responds, the responsive self, is concerned with others, therefore exceeding its limits, the limits of self-interest. And it does so with the aim of 'living a good life' with others (Ricoeur, 1994: 165–68)

As it can be seen, the Aristotelian vision of ethics, with its focus on the shaping of a habitus, and its Ricoeurian elaboration, rooted in the notion of selfhood, identity and narrative, are both remarkably compatible with the Foucauldian understanding of ethics as a process of self-fashioning. In this respect, the two meanings of ethics that I deploy in this thesis are far from being mutually exclusive, but rather present many continuities<sup>25</sup>. After all, Foucault draws the Greek notion of the 'care of the self' (*epimeleia iatu*) from the Greek world, and the hermeneutic conception of selfhood proposed by Ricoeur springs from the same historical and philosophical atmosphere.

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<sup>24</sup>Julia Annas is a pre-eminent exponent of virtue ethics, a philosophical approach to normative ethics that puts the emphasis on virtues, in contrast to the approach which focuses on duties or rules (deontology) or that which emphasises the consequences of actions (consequentialism (Hursthouse, 1999)).

<sup>25</sup>For an analysis of Foucault in relation to virtue ethics, see Levy (2004).

Of course, there would be many more aspects to be considered, and reflections to be articulated, to cover Aristotle's ethics, its Ricoeurian reading and elaboration, and the continuities and discontinuities with Foucauldian's care of the self. It is well beyond the scope and objective of this thesis to exhaust such discussion. What matters for this research is to establish a meaning of ethics so as to be able to affect the analysis of social entrepreneurs' discourses on how they express and relate to this sphere of significance. A sphere that, drawing on Aristotle, Ricoeur and Foucault, I define as: the dimension concerning the creative act that the individual carries out so as to make herself or himself a virtuous subject, i.e. a subject who is responsive towards others, in the aim of living a good life with others. In the pages that follow, I use this definition as a heuristic device, to firstly assess the ethical nature of social entrepreneurs' narratives and discourses. I investigate the ways ethical narrative and identity are re-embedded within an entrepreneurial individualised subjectivity.

### Individualised ethics

The 8th of November 2011 was the first day on which I worked as a host at Impact Hub Westminster. It was also the day on which I met my main research participant, Alfredo<sup>26</sup>. Alfredo is an Italian guy; at that time he was in his late twenties and had moved to London about a year and half before to study an MA in international Management at Imperial College. When he had finished the MA, he decided to dedicate all his time to founding a social enterprise, named SEI, Social Enterprise Italy. To start with, he subscribed to the newly-opened Impact Hub Westminster.

On that afternoon, we had a tea and a long conversation. He sat in front of me at the host table. He wore a tartan shirt, blue jeans and a pair of blue suede desert boots. I was keen on exploring the chain of events that led him to leave his (incidentally, also my) country

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<sup>26</sup>See Chapter III for more details on Alfredo's role in this research.

and his job to come to London and try to become a social entrepreneur. Alfredo was willing to talk, and told me that in Italy, before leaving, he was working for a big corporation, earning quite a lot. But he could not continue, because the routine of a job that did not reflect his values was damaging his mental health:

I had an MA in Economics, and was working for American Express, earning a high salary. I also had a girlfriend of six years, we were in love, I guess. Plus, of course, there was my family. On the surface my life was just perfect. But I was depressed. Really depressed. Because the job I was doing...I didn't care about the money and the security and all those things.... I was so down I needed to take some drugs as I couldn't bear to think of living all my life doing things that go against my values, just forgetting who I am... I wanted to change things! I wanted to improve other people's lives!

Alfredo could probably have lived a more comfortable life in his native city, with a high salary and a stable relationship. Yet, he felt an intolerable discomfort in seeing himself as someone who was not doing anything for others, i.e. 'changing things'. He wanted to take on an active role in the quest to improve the circumstances in which humanity lives, and he renounced financial and - to an extent- emotional comfort, to pursue this objective. When I met him, he was earning no money at all, investing all his savings in the dream of becoming a social entrepreneur and changing "how things are". What is evident in his words is how ethical motivations come to prominence and outweigh financial ones.

Noemi, a thirty-year-old woman from Sardinia, currently running a social enterprise dedicated to urban regeneration projects in Milan, had a very similar professional biography. While eating finger food at a conference drinks, she told me her story. We were in a touristic, upper-class, small town in the North of Italy. It was chilly, though it was early September. "I had been working for a consultancy company for 5 years. I earned quite a lot. So, financially speaking, nothing to complain about" she told me, sipping her glass of prosecco. "But I was not doing anything I really believed in, I was not being myself... Eventually I just gave up and started this social enterprise project... I started a year ago and haven't earned a cent yet...zero". I ventured an apparently simple question:

“Why are you doing it then?”. She replied with an equally simple answer: “Well... I might sound naïve, but I am doing it because I want to change the world!”.

The story of Sara shows many similarities with that of Noemi and Alfredo. Sara is an Italian woman in her mid-thirties, she comes from a rather disadvantaged area in the south of the country, and talks about her life as divided into two: before and after becoming a social entrepreneur. I interviewed her during lunch in an organic restaurant in central London. This is how she began talking about her journey towards social entrepreneurship:

I had a very good job and was earning a lot of money. I was the CEO of a major bank so, as you can imagine, money was not a problem... But, you know, I was not doing anything to improve the world, anything which corresponded to my ideals... This was just not good for me.

I asked her why: “I wanted to do something to innovate! To change people’s behaviour!” She said. Following this feeling, she decided to quit her job, and after having volunteered for a few months in Asia, she came back home to set up a social enterprise that offers work to female prisoners and produces shopping bags from recycled fabric wastes. She accounted for this move as a dramatic life-changing decision. To describe this change she described her relationship with money and ethical values:

You know...since I have become a social entrepreneur I have earned no salary, and I have invested almost all the money that I had... but I don’t mind, I quite like not having much money... Before, in my “previous life” – ‘cos yes, I have had two lives! - I was going to parties, wearing my pearl necklace, now when I go to see those friends from my “previous life” they are like: where are your pearls? Well... you know... I just forget to wear them! I feel I am doing something good for the world, who cares about pearls?

Sara has a soft, hoarse voice. A twinkle in her eyes. She looked tired and content. Of course, her question was purely rhetoric. To the fetishism of commodities, well exemplified by luxurious jewellery - the pearl necklace - she claims to prefer the ethical burden of social responsibility. Material satisfaction is here represented as ephemeral in comparison with the gratification of ‘doing something for the world’.

What emerges strikingly from the discourses of Alfredo, Sara, and Noemi, is that ethical motivations are ascribed a primary role in shaping one's working life, to the point that they outweigh the importance of personal profit. Indeed, virtually every social entrepreneur I met mobilised a narrative whereby financial security is abandoned to follow ethical drives. "I had a paid job, so what?" said Alfredo; "I quite like not having much money", echoes Sara; "I am not doing it to earn money" declares Noemi. Such claims indicate that ethical reward is generally preferred over financial security and individual wealth, which are considered insufficient. Becoming a social entrepreneur is described as primarily an ethical choice, a choice that is done in the belief of "doing good" not only for oneself, but also for other people, even for the whole "world", in the most emphatic cases. For Alfredo, to "not be contributing in any way to society" was "unbearable", and Naomi happily accepted earning no salary for the feeling of doing something to "change the world".

Although these are quite vague and hyperbolic expressions, they signal the presence of an ethical ambition and articulate an ethical discourse that exceeds the private dimension of individual profit. To "change the world" may mean many different things, but it surely indicates the attempt to care for the other than itself. In this respect, the narratives deployed by social entrepreneurs revolve around responsiveness towards the other, and are indicative of the attempt to turn entrepreneurship into an ethical practice, i.e. a practice aimed at maximising collective happiness. To this extent, social entrepreneurs challenge the notion of the narrowly self-interested entrepreneur of the self, who is structurally incapable of social solidarity and responsibility. On the contrary, their subjective narrative is built upon moments of responsiveness towards an ethical call. In this regard, social entrepreneurs enact a highly ambivalent subjectivity, one that is marked by the interweaving of individualism and ethics.

My argument is that the ambiguity between the individualising character of entrepreneurial subjectivity on the one hand, and the ethical nature of its motivations and objective on the other, is bridged by an interpretation of the latter as part of the first. The responsiveness to the other is incorporated within the sphere of self-realisation and self-expression. Such a regime of truth obliterates the contradiction between common good and private interest. The individual must face the choice between self-realisation and ethical responsibility no more. In fact, ethical responsibility is included within the sphere of private interest. In this way, it is made possible and thinkable within an individualised subjectivity.

Social entrepreneurs articulate an individualised form of ethics, in which ethical discourses and actions become a matter of projecting one's own personal values, desires and beliefs on the world. Typically, the failure to do that, results in individual emotional conditions – depression, dissatisfaction – rather than in a moral sense of inadequacy, or in suffering for the circumstances of the others to whom one has failed to respond. “I was depressed” claims Alfredo; “that was just not good for me” remarks Sara, “I was not being myself” says Noemi. These formulae express a form of ethics which is therefore acted out at the place of the personal, it becomes a form of ‘care of the self’, a question of actualising individual qualities and aspirations perceived as authentically emerging from the self. Failure to respond to an ethical call becomes mostly and foremost a failure in self-expression, an individual failure.

Zygmund Bauman has written extensively on the consequences of individualisation, in his essay ‘Individually, Together’, preface of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's *Individualization*, he affirms that this necessarily excludes and closes up the space for social responsibility:

The individual tends to be lukewarm, sceptical or wary of 'common good', 'good society' or 'just society'. What is the sense of 'common interests' except allowing each individual to satisfy his or her own? Whatever else individuals may do when coming together portends constraint on their freedom to pursue what they see fit for themselves and won't help such pursuits anyway (Bauman, in Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: xviii).

The subjectivity of social entrepreneurs shows how the imperative to freely pursue what individuals see 'fit for themselves', can reintegrate the common good within its ends if it redefines this as part of individual expression. Social entrepreneurs who claim to pursue the common good (epitomised in the phrase 'changing the world') do not contrast this with their own personal satisfaction; rather: the two are made to coincide. Their discourses reveal a regime of truth in which the dimension concerning the other-than-itself is reintegrated in a fully individualised subjectivity, for it is deciphered as belonging to the sphere of self-interest. Therefore, while social entrepreneurship proposes a discourse whose objective is the common good, the character and origins of this remain constrained within the limits of the individual self.

#### Changing the world? A matter of the self

The discourses mobilised by Alfredo, Sara and Noemi (and by many others participants) evidence the private nature of ethical drives. Changing the world is conceived as a matter of self-disclosure. Since ethics depends upon the actualisation of the self, the implied notions of 'impact' or 'change' rely upon a process of self-fashioning: if 'changing the world' is an ethical objective that springs from individuals' will to express their own selves, it follows that, for the change to actually happen, a growing number of individuals have to develop a certain kind of self. In this respect, social entrepreneurship is first and foremost an identitarian movement, for it produces a mode of being.

This is evident in social entrepreneurship literature. For instance, William Drayton, founder of Ashoka, the largest global association supporting social entrepreneurship, makes this clear by arguing that when everyone is a changemaker, the problems can no longer outrun the solutions (Drayton, 2006a, 2006b). Ashoka mission, indeed, is expressed in the trademark slogan 'Everyone is a Changemaker™'. In the Global Education Magazine, Drayton writes that:

The first step to an "Everyone a Changemaker™" world is believing that you can make lasting change and acting on your belief. Identify a problem in your community and give yourself permission to overcome it. Once you enact change, once you internalize that you are a changemaker, you grow in confidence to tackle bigger problems. Each new problem is an opportunity for you to express love and respect in action at the highest possible level. Our world will transform as a result (Drayton, 2012).

Drayton's words articulate a discourse in which the change has to be acted by individuals on themselves: you have to believe that 'you can make lasting change' acting on this very belief. The successful actualisation of this belief is conceived of as depending again on the action of the individual on her or his self. It is a matter of 'giving yourself permission'. Once this first step has been taken the changemaker identity gets internalised. At that point 'changing the world' becomes an opportunity to 'express' your virtuous feelings of love and respect. The world will then become a better place, 'as a result'. From this perspective, global change depends upon changes in an individuals' subjectivity. What emerges is a vision in which 'change' is a result or a sort of osmosis or "virality" that will make everyone a social entrepreneur. Drayton writes that:

As the number of local change makers increases, barriers are replaced by support institutions and respect, which encourages yet more family, friends, and neighbours to step up and take on other challenges (Drayton, 2007: 49).

Social entrepreneurship ethical proposals are dependent upon the ability to produce an increasing number of social entrepreneurial subjects, or changemakers, as Ashoka labels them. The logic is cogent: since changing the world depends upon changing individuals' subjectivity, it is this very subjectivity that must be multiplied, as if in a sort of

democratisation and ideologisation of Schumpeter's entrepreneurial spirit<sup>27</sup>. The Richard Florida utopia of a society where 'everyone is creative' (Florida, 2002), seems to have been replaced by one where 'everyone is a changemaker'.

Evidently, the claim that 'everyone is a changemaker' implies that there must be a way for everyone to become such, to 'become who s/he is' (to draw on a psychological new age parlance where 'becoming' is a matter of expressing one's authenticity). What is involved is the process of 'unleashing', 'untapping' 'releasing' that has characterised the discourse about self-actualisation in neoliberal societies<sup>28</sup>. This process is essential for the individual to be able to set up a social enterprise. Indeed, before having an 'impact' on society, one must act upon himself or herself<sup>29</sup>. Through this reflexive action social entrepreneur aspirants are meant to develop the correct subjectivity from which the social business can arise. This discourse implies the imperative entailed in Becker's notion of human capital, for it reflects the 'possibility of giving a strictly economic interpretation to a whole domain previously thought to be non-economic' (Foucault, 2010: 219).

In this regard, social entrepreneurship can be interpreted not only as technique to act in society – to have an 'impact', to use its jargon – but also for the production of the self. The two are closely inter-related in as much as it is through the free actions of a virtuous, ethical individual that society is supposed to be improved. As explained in Chapter II, a technology for the construction of the self is one that leads the subject towards finding and constructing his or her self in a certain way. Foucault conceives of technologies of the self as be part of an hermeneutic of the subject whose roots can be found in the Greek principle '*epimelesthai sautou*', i.e. 'to take care of yourself', 'the concern with self', 'to be

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<sup>27</sup> See Chapter II for a discussion of Schumpeter's theory of entrepreneurship.

<sup>28</sup>In Chapter II I discuss at length the genealogy and implication of self-realisation in the field of work in neoliberal societies.

<sup>29</sup>I have developed a similar argument in the article 'Brand Yourself a Changemaker' (Bandinelli and Arvidsson, 2013)

concerned, to take care of yourself' (Foucault, 1988: 17). Social entrepreneurship produces and is produced by a certain form of hermeneutic of the self.

### Social entrepreneurship as a hermeneutic of the self

During eighteen months of fieldwork, I observed that the fashioning of the right subjectivity is the first step one has to take if s/he wants to become a 'changemaker'. A process of self-awareness seems to be widely recognised as the initial stage of engaging in social entrepreneurship; a condition *sine qua non*. Working on the self is a necessary step for a career in which the very features of the self are considered as a form of capital to be invested. A series of dispositives serve the purpose of guiding social entrepreneurs aspirants towards the translation of the self into a form of enterprise.

Whether one enrolls for an MA in Social Entrepreneurship, or makes enquiries to an important association in the field, or just buys a how-to book, one will be faced with a series of more or less explicit questions that are designed for him or her to understand what it means to be a social entrepreneur and how to start this way of life, this mode of being. Generally, these questions are modelled on topics such as 'how it feels' to be a social entrepreneur, what social entrepreneurs think, which kind of life they want to live. Social entrepreneurs aspirants are led through a process of self-consultation, in order to discover whether they have the right attitude, values and drives to fulfil the expectations of social entrepreneurship (which are quite grandiose, as illustrated above).

For instance, Unlimited (Unltd) - a pioneering UK association that since 2000 has funded young social entrepreneurs' projects - released a free toolkit that is designed to give guidance to social entrepreneurs at a very early stage. The first chapter is dedicated to taking them through a sort of quality-check of their reasons for seeking change. It is not enough to want to 'avoid a corporate job' or to 'become rich', or to 'change the world', it is essential to be totally clear about one's objectives and the way to achieve them:

Starting an enterprise requires that you need to decide for yourself what you want to achieve, what you consider to be a success and what it is you hope to achieve in the short as well as the long term. This applies to both you and the enterprise that you are thinking of starting (Unltd, 2016)

While this is true of entrepreneurship in general, it is even more important for social entrepreneurs in particular, as they face an even harder challenge:

As a social entrepreneur, you will be expected to generate profits, prove that you are creating measurable positive change and improving the planet, or at least not damaging it – otherwise known as the 3 P's: Profit, Planet and People (Unltd, 2016: 3).

By means of this prescriptive advice, a social entrepreneur aspirant is encouraged to examine his/her objectives and to assess them in relation to the expectations of making profit and 'improving the planet'. These two goals, whose coupling defines social entrepreneurship as such, imply the need to develop an entrepreneurial personality and then to deploy this in order to solve social problems.

'How-to' books on business modelling adopt an analogous pedagogical approach. The best seller *Business Model Generation*, in full sight in Impact Hub Westminster's library, begins with a set of questions that lead through a process of self-assessment. Again, before embarking on the journey of business modelling, one should make sure s/he possesses the right personality:

Are you an entrepreneurial spirit?

Yes \_\_\_ No\_\_\_

Are you constantly thinking about how to create values and build new businesses, or how to improve or transform your organisation?

Yes \_\_\_ No\_\_\_

Are you trying to find innovative ways to do business to replace old, outdated ones?

Yes \_\_\_ No\_\_\_

(Osterwalder and Pigneur, 2009: 7)

These questions are of the kind that impose and imply the right answer. To be sure, the following page reads: 'If you have answered "yes" to any of these questions, welcome to our group!' (Osterwalder and Pigneur, 2009: 8). Social entrepreneurs aspirants would better find out that they are 'entrepreneurial spirits', hence entitled to be welcomed to the 'group' - a group that is supposed to be populated by 'visionaries, gamechangers and challengers' (Osterwalder and Pigneur, 2009: 8).

Academic discourses may replicate this pattern. As part of my preliminary fieldwork, I attended the first lesson of the *Entrepreneurial Business Modelling* module for the post-graduate course in *Social Entrepreneurship* at a well-known London University college. The course convenor opened the lecture stating that: 'First of all, the individual has to understand why she is the right person to run a business'. For that purpose, students were asked a set of pivotal questions, such as:

What sort of environment do you want to work in?  
What sort of skills do you have?  
What sort of skills do you need to improve?  
What are your values?  
How do you want me to see you?  
What is your ambition?

What is involved is the production, which has to be felt of as a discovery, of the entrepreneurial self. Enabling the production of the entrepreneurial self is the function of how-to-books and of books on the ideal type of social entrepreneurs in general. Reading these books, social entrepreneurs aspirants acknowledge they should be: 'innovative, resourceful, practical and opportunistic', motivated not only by achieving the "deal" but also the "ideal" (Elkington, 2008: 3). Also, they are expected to be 'very serious about learning from, and applying business experience and ideas to social questions.... Fundamentally interested in what works in practice and how you scale up ideas to achieve effective growth ... Very focused' (Mawson, 2008: 7). Also, they would have to think of themselves as considering 'the world differently' and seeing 'opportunities where others

see challenges' (Ashton, 2010: 4). In other words, they have to be able to 'transform their dreams into fledgling programmes' (Boschee, 2006: 356).

Such practice of self-interrogation can be thought of as a technology of the self: a series of dispositives with which the subject effects operation on herself or himself so as to transform herself or himself in order to acquire a certain status, to access a certain truth (Foucault, 2005; 2000). In the case of social entrepreneurship, the hermeneutic of the self is a method that is meant to reveal which parts of the self can be successfully actualised, objectified, into the pragmatic idealistic ethos of the archetypical social entrepreneur; an activity in which the subject has to engage in order to discover her or his 'entrepreneurial self'. This discovery is actually a hermeneutical production: the subject has to shape his or her self, activating the right aspects of character. Indeed, even the very fact of being required to answer a set of questions establishes the necessity to construct the answers, to 'find' them, through a sort of introspection that will ultimately highlight just some parts of the self, while obscuring others.

These flamboyant descriptions of social entrepreneurs are meant to be a source of inspiration. Translated into more theoretical language: to indicate the pathways which one has to go through in the hermeneutic process. This means that readers are supposed to be affected by this discourse so as to be encouraged to act upon themselves. Descriptions of social entrepreneurs' characters become technologies of the self, dispositives through which individuals can operate so as to produce a certain ethos. They are *ethopoios*. The transformation of the self has to be actively performed by individuals, for they do not only have to let material and discursive technologies affect them, but also to consciously apply them to themselves. They should answer the questions in the right ways, so as to unveil the correct social entrepreneur hidden in themselves.

This implies that the self has to be interrogated, consulted. Ideally, the enterprise will emerge out of a process of self-enquiry. Then, ideally, once it has been unveiled the enterprise will be created almost automatically. To be sure, the process of setting up a social enterprise is often narrated as a personal adventure, which culminates in the transformation of the self. In this regard, I quote Debora Szebeko, founder of Think Public - a London-based social enterprise<sup>30</sup> – who, while giving a power point presentation about the journey she has gone through to finally set up her enterprise, marked the moment of success with an exemplary slide declaring: ‘Now you are a business!’.

This is indicative of the dialectical relationship between the business and the self, where the first originates from the latter and vice versa. Hence, it must emerge spontaneously out of an inherently creative self. But if ‘everyone is a changemaker’ and every individual can develop a business by actualising his or her self, it follows that there is supposed to be a business for every self. Social entrepreneurs aspirants have to judiciously identify the core business that suits their own personality: ‘The world abounds with noble causes, and there is one that is just right for you’ as a popular book claims (Scofield, 2011:5).

Importantly, the discourses that produce and glorify the ideal-type of the social entrepreneur, might also be experienced as rather patronising. Karina is a Polish woman in her mid-twenties with a background in social work. At the time of the fieldwork she was studying an MA in Social Entrepreneurship in London. During one interview, she recounted the negative affect that a supposedly ‘inspirational’ guest lecture had on her:

There was this speaker, one who wrote a very famous book on how to be a successful social entrepreneur, I don’t remember the title now... Well, he was saying a lot about how you should be, like you should be brave, and take risk, and be confident, and brand yourself... But I felt so bad! Because I am rather shy, and don’t know if I am brave enough, and I kind of hate self-branding...

Saanvi is an Indian woman in her late twenties, she is one of Karina’s classmates. Before

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<sup>30</sup> Think Public is a social enterprise whose ‘mission’ is to find ‘creative solutions to big social challenges’, and which lately has specialised in service design for the NHS (Think Public, 2016).

coming to London, she worked in India for an NGO supporting victims of forced marriage. I met her at Impact Hub Westminster, where she was doing an internship as part of her degree. Her feelings are similar to those of Karina. She told me that “all this talk about how social entrepreneurs should be is just so annoying. They make me doubt of myself in a way that is discouraging... Can I just be who I am? Or do I have to become someone else to be a social entrepreneur?!”.

The experiences of Karina and Sara evidence that a supposedly inspirational narrative can be perceived as discouraging and annoying. To be sure, different individuals negotiate with the discourses of social entrepreneurship in different ways, and may well challenge or refuse them<sup>31</sup>. Yet, both Karina and Saavi recognised the importance of developing a certain attitude in order to be taken seriously as potential entrepreneurs. This is what Karina said in a subsequent interview:

I don't know if I am the right person to be a social entrepreneur, but if there is something that I learnt during this MA is that, at least, I must to pretend. And now I have started to... Like I go to people and say “I am a social entrepreneur, I am working on this project etc...” And in a way, it is working, like the more you say these things the more you end up believing in them.

Saavi remarked:

After all, what they are teaching us is how to turn what we like and want to do in a business plan, which is not very easy, but I guess is what one needs to do to clarify her ideas, and also to convince other people of the value of these ideas.

These examples are indicative of the fact that a guided process of adaptation of the self to the form of the enterprise, is part of the education of social entrepreneurs aspirants. This is supposed to bring the individual towards the identification with an ideal ‘social entrepreneur’. This might be questioned by social entrepreneurs aspirants, but they tend to recognise its strategic value, and the potential benefits in terms of self-confidence and credibility.

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<sup>31</sup> As discussed earlier (see Chapter II) a process of subjectivation is a process in which individuals negotiate with certain discourses that are ‘proposed, suggested, imposed’ on them by their ‘culture’ (Foucault, 200: 290).

To develop an entrepreneurial personality means to be capable of bringing forth those parts of the self in a way that they can be framed in the form of the enterprise. The formulation and formalisation of a set of questions to be answered and of criteria to be met are meant to lead the individual to identify, highlight and articulate the parts of himself or herself that can be actualised in the form of the social enterprise. Practically, it corresponds to being able to translate and formalise personal values and virtues into a business plan. In this regard the economic reductionism that Foucault ascribed to the theory of human capital (Foucault, 2005) is here taken to the extreme: the self is not only reduced to economics but it is actually produced by economics.

#### Private wealth and ethical feelings

The coexistence of virtuous, ethical behaviour and economic conduct is not something new in itself. In fact, even Adam Smith, widely recognised as the father of classic economics, maintains that:

Howsoever selfish man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it (Smith, 2006: 51).

As Amartya Sen points out, although Smith's notion of self-interest has been by far the most influential and discussed, the Scottish thinker also considered other drives in economic conduct, and human behaviour in general. Indeed, the idea of prudence cannot be entirely reduced to a blind and ruthless pursuit of self-interest and it is rather composed of the 'union of the two qualities of 'reason and understanding' on the one hand, and 'self-command' on the other .... Self interest and self-love form a substantially narrower motivation than prudence' (Sen, 1986).

Yet, social entrepreneurship does not only concede to ethical sentiments to counterbalance, limit, or even guide economic conduct. Notably, it assumes economic conduct to be the high road to actualising them. Virtue, thus, does not originate from the invisible hand of the market (as in the liberal doctrine), neither from putting a limit on it. Rather, the regime of truth of social entrepreneurship makes virtues the very material of entrepreneurial endeavours. It considers the business as originating from ethical aspirations, as the form through which these can be properly and successfully catalysed and activated.

Following the very same logic of the discourse of the culture and creative industries - a logic that wants ideas, talents and passions as the main material of work (which has been defined as cognitive, passionate and affective), the regime of truth of social entrepreneurship postulates ethical feelings and virtues to be put to work. In this respect it points to a form of economy that is led by virtues, a virtues-led economy: an economy that capitalises on virtues and whose objectives are virtuous. What is involved is not just ethically responsible economic actors, but actors who express ethical responsibility through economic activities. For this assertion to be thought through and accepted, the antithesis between profit and ethical feelings must be suppressed: the first must be reterritorialised within a virtuous system, with substantial reciprocity between ethics and economics.

More than a hundred years after the *Wealth of Nations* was published, one of the founding fathers of sociology published a long essay on the inherent intertwine between capitalism and ethics that will become a masterpiece. Of course, I am referring to Max Weber and his *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*. It is my contention that it may be helpful to turn to Weber to further elaborate and grasp the significance of social entrepreneurship's combination of ethics and the economy, for at least two reasons. Firstly, it highlights that the combination of ethical vocation and profit is not an

unprecedented endeavour, but has rather been identified at the very roots of capitalism. Secondly, it flags up that the reintegration of ethics on the part of social entrepreneurs, far from retrieving any form of transcendental belief, is grounded in the mundane sphere.

Weber argues that the prominence assumed by work in capitalistic societies is related to the core of protestant ethics, especially Calvinism, which sees mundane success as a sign of the calling. This belief establishes a profound correlation between labour and calling (which in German have the same signifier *beruf*). It follows that the accumulation of private wealth is not in antithesis with ethical aspirations (in this case the aspiration to God) - as in the Catholic doctrine - but becomes its *litmus test*. As Weber put it, labour is conceived of 'as the best, often in the last analysis the only, means of attaining certainty of grace' (Weber, 2005: 121). This peculiar relation between religious and moral calling, and private pecuniary interests, is what has marked the mode of thinking of bourgeois women and men since the very beginning of capitalism:

A specifically bourgeois economic ethic had grown up. With the consciousness of standing in the fullness of God's grace and being visibly blessed by Him, the bourgeois business man, as long as he remained within the bounds of formal correctness, as long as his moral conduct was spotless and the use to which he put his wealth was not objectionable, could follow his pecuniary interests as he would and feel that he was fulfilling a duty in doing so (Weber, 2005: 120).

The capitalist system at its dawn produced and was produced exactly by this new mode of thinking of moral duty and obligation, a mode that considers the pursuit of individual economic interests to be part of this very moral obligation, to be a sign of the grace of God. Eventually this relationship between the accumulation of private wealth and religious calling was lost. Labour, from being a means to an end, became an end in itself:

The capitalist system so needs this devotion to the calling of making money, it is an attitude toward material goods which is so well suited to that system, so intimately bound up with the conditions of survival in the economic struggle for existence, that there can today no longer be any question of a necessary connection of that acquisitive manner of life with any single *Weltanschauung*. In fact, it no longer needs the support of any religious forces, and feels that the attempts of religion to influence economic life, in so far as they can still be felt at all, to be as much an unjustified interference as its regulation by the State (Weber, 2005: 33-34).

The attitude towards the accumulation of profit is therefore released from any ethical objective, from any transcendental calling, to become an objective in itself, whose reasons are no more discernible and whose reproduction becomes an unavoidable imperative. As Weber notes: 'The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so' (Weber, 2005: 123).

Social entrepreneurship operates in a different context to that discussed by Weber. Indeed, it is a phenomenon that has to be understood in the frame of contemporary neoliberal capitalism. However, turning to Weber can be beneficial to further examine the conceptual nucleus of the regime of truth of social entrepreneurship, i.e. the combination of ethics and economics. Social entrepreneurship indicates an ethical-economic paradigm that, to an extent, restores the moral objective of wealth, making the accumulation of money not an end in itself, but a means to achieve ethical objectives, to test and develop one's virtues and ability to be actively responsive towards the other. As I have shown, social entrepreneurial subjectivity is characterised by the aspiration to change the world by means of a profession, which becomes again a calling. But the objective of this aspiration is not transcendental, as at the dawn of capitalism, but a very worldly one. Not a religious one, but rather political, for it is concerned with the achievement of social justice and sustainability, with how things are within the earthly world of humans (I will expand on this in the next chapter).

"I am investing everything I have, I am not doing anything else. After all, you cannot change the world part time!" claimed Alfredo, depicting himself both as a foolish contemporary hero, someone engaged in a heroic enterprise, and as a very serious person, someone who works a lot, who works full time. Enea, a London based Italian man in his mid-thirties, shares a similar vision. After completing an MA in Environmental Design, he started volunteering for charities and associations, mainly in the field of waste

collections and upcycling. During this time, he could afford working for free because he inherited a good sum of money when he was in his early twenties. After a couple of years, he started feeling lost, and in need to find a proper job. He wanted to feel he was “useful to society”. Then, he enrolled to an MA in Social Entrepreneurship to “learn how to find a job that can allow to have an impact”. During an informal interview in a maker-space in Peckham (south-east London), he told me that: “I have now found my motivation. If by means of work I can do positive things, then I am willing to work, to build a career. It’s like a calling for me!”. Alfredo and Enea’s accounts encapsulate the concept of work as a means to express an ethical and political calling, and - in turn - the concept of this very calling as a form of work.

#### The ethical neutrality of entrepreneurial means

For entrepreneurship to be thought of as a means to express one’s ethical virtues, profit must be redefined as something other than a sign of private wealth. What social entrepreneurs challenge is exactly the idea that engaging in entrepreneurial activities is inherently incompatible with an ethical vocation. For this statement to be embraced, entrepreneurial means and profit have to be redefined as ethically neutral. As long as the latter is perceived as the result of competitive and individualised conduct, something like a social enterprise remains unthinkable. Social entrepreneurs are well aware of that. Indeed, the redefinition of profit is one of the distinguishing traits of the social entrepreneurship scene.

During a round table organised by Alfredo, I had the chance to ask a few questions about the role and notion of profit in social entrepreneurship to Amber, the CEO of one of the largest UK networks of social enterprises. Amber is a British woman in her forties. Her hair well-groomed, she wore a blue suit and a white silk shirt. Her style was classic, well suited to reflect her position of power. On that occasion she declared that:

One of the most difficult things to change is people's vision of profit, they tend to think that if you make profits then you cannot make good. But things work the opposite way... yesterday, at a conference, I met a lovely lady from a quite well-known social enterprise, she took it over last year and it was broke, but she is still giving money every year to charities so as to increase the impact... so it was a mess, she went bankrupt, she fired everybody, she stopped funding the charity etc.... so basically now she has no impact whatsoever. Had she made it profitable she would have still been doing good things... if you don't get financial things sorted you cannot get the good things sorted... people should be out and proud to be profitable!

Amber's discourse unfolds around two main points: the recognition of a certain common sense that sees 'profit' as antithetical to 'good', and the will to radically transform this belief. Profit, Amber explains, is essential for 'doing good', it is what makes it possible. Cristina, a social entrepreneur from Argentina who participated in the same round table expressed a very similar view: "The more the profit, the more the social! I don't understand why it is so difficult to get... where does this difficulty come from? It's business with a social aim, that's all it is..." she said. And she said it with the slightly annoyed tone of who is obliged to keep on stating the obvious.

Within the regime of truth of social entrepreneurship, profit is redefined as instrumental to ethics, as what enables ethical actions to be taken. The ethical opposition between a profit-making activity and an action directed towards the achievement of the common good is suppressed by the social entrepreneurship regime of truth through the definition of entrepreneurial tools as instruments to be possibly applied to a variety of objectives. Cristina made this point clear when, during the round table, she claimed that: "The fact that contemporary capitalism has used entrepreneurship in a way that has exacerbated social inequalities does not mean that entrepreneurship is bad, it means that it has been badly intended and used so far".

A similar opinion was expressed by Paul, a lecturer in Social Entrepreneurship who I met at the Oxford Jam (the fringe festival of the Skoll World Forum on Social Entrepreneurship). While we were having a beer in the pub, I asked him how he would

define a social entrepreneur. He replied as follows: "Entrepreneurship can be good or bad depending on the entrepreneur. A social entrepreneur will make social things with entrepreneurial tools!"

These two interviews excerpts make the point clear: entrepreneurial tools are thought of as neutral *in sé*, therefore as mere instruments with no ethical agency: they can be 'good or bad', or 'badly intended', they can be used to make good or they can be used maliciously. In this perspective they are constructed just as enablers. What is enabled, what gets realised, are the needs, values and desires of individual entrepreneurs. For an enterprise to be social, then, it has to be the dispositive through which a virtuous individual expresses his or her ethical desires.

The alleged ethical neutrality of entrepreneurial means and the private nature of ethical actions are closely related and together form the two pillars of the social entrepreneurship regime of truth. Indeed, it is only by postulating the ethical neutrality of entrepreneurship that this can be thought of as the ideal actualiser of all the possible ranges of an individual's values and virtues. Analogously, it is only by thinking of ethical actions as descending from individual's values and virtues that the autonomous and extra-institutional character of entrepreneurship can be conceived of as functional for the realisation of ethical ideals.

Such assumptions cannot be taken for granted. An evident critical juncture concerns the nature and agency of entrepreneurial means, and leads to the question: what happens when virtues have to be translated into business plans? The complexity of such a process of translation is often removed by social entrepreneurship discourses, but it actually represents an essential critical juncture that concerns the question of the agency of entrepreneurial tools. I propose to turn to Heidegger in order to better grasp the value of this point. Although this is not the place for an exhaustive treatment of this matter, a brief

synthesis can still be very helpful to grasp the inherent flaws of a vision that conceives of entrepreneurial means as ethically neutral.

In his essay *The Question Concerning Technology* he eminently explains that there is no such thing as a merely neutral technique. Drawing on Aristotle's notion of *techné*, he overcomes the 'instrumental' and 'anthropological' definition of technology, which states that technology is a human activity that consists of using a set of means to an end (Heidegger, 1977: 5). For the German philosopher, Aristotelian *techné* 'belongs to bringing forth, to *poiesis*; it is something *poietic*'. Together with *episteme*, it is a name for 'knowing in the widest sense' (1977: 13). Hence the concept of technology is a mode of revealing, of unveiling some part of the being:

...technology does not go back to the *τεχνη* of the Greeks in name only, but derives historically and essentially from *τεχνη* as a mode of *αληθευειν*, a mode, that is, of rendering beings manifest. (Heidegger, 1993: 242).

Technology, in this respect, is a form of epistemology, a way of knowing. In Heideggerian terms it is a *Gestell*, an enframing. It provides the architecture of knowledge, the "shelves" upon which we order our knowledge of the world.

This philosophical theorisation of technology, with its critique of mere instrumentality, can be useful in opening up space for a critical approach of social entrepreneurship as a technique: an approach that can help to unveil the agency of entrepreneurial tools and their inherent ethics. What is involved is the analysis of what kinds of actions are made possible by entrepreneurial tools, and what are suppressed. In other words, what is involved is the investigation of the agency of the enterprise. This is the central topic of the next and last chapter.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have unpacked social entrepreneurship's ethics, and focused on its connections with entrepreneurial's conduct and means. I have argued that social entrepreneurial subjectivity is characterised by a regime of truth that considers entrepreneurial tools as ethically neutral, and that devolves the realisation of a better society to the values and virtues of individuals who act autonomously.

Firstly, I have shown that social entrepreneurial subjectivity is marked by the reintegration of an ethical dimension within individualised and entrepreneurialised conduct. I have argued that this reintegration is effected by means of deciphering ethical ambitions as part of the individual's expression. I have argued that this way of thinking indicates a notion of change that is rooted in a process of hermeneutic of the self. Therefore, social entrepreneurship underlying utopia emerges as one that wants everyone to engage in a process of subjectivation as a social entrepreneur. As I will further discuss in the next chapter, this is an individualised utopia, which relies upon individual's desires and suppresses any form of collective will. Hereof, social entrepreneurship well reflects its neoliberal origins for it radicalises the ontologisation of professional identity and the election of the self as a universal unit of measure.

Secondly, I have demonstrated that the regime of truth of social entrepreneurship conceives of entrepreneurial means as ethically neutral. My argument is that the alleged ethical neutrality of entrepreneurial means and the private nature of ethical actions are closely related and together form the two pillars of the regime of truth of social entrepreneurship. Finally, I have problematised these two inter-related assumptions by challenging the supposed ethical neutrality of entrepreneurial tools. Finally, drawing on a Heideggerian understanding of technology, I have identified the need for an analysis of the enterprise agency, i.e. of the specific ways of knowing, thinking and acting that it enables.

### Introduction

In the previous chapter, I analysed the main assumptions and discourses concerning ethics that have to be held as true to develop an entrepreneurial subjectivity. Drawing on Aristotle, Ricoeur, and Foucault, I have described these as ethical in two interrelated senses: 1) in so far as they are produced in a process of self-fashioning 2) because they are concerned with the other than itself. I have argued that the main conceptual pillars on which the regime of truth of social entrepreneurship is built are the notion of ethics as an individual's skill to be expressed, and the concept of entrepreneurial tools as the adequate and effective actualisers of the individual's ethical beliefs. I have specified that such a conception implies the understanding of entrepreneurial tools as an ethically neutral technology. In the conclusion of the chapter, drawing on Heidegger's theorisation of technology, I have formulated the question about the agency and inner ethics of entrepreneurial means, arguing that, like any tool, they are not ethically neutral, but they rather imply and construct a specific world vision, and while they enable a certain kind of action and understanding of the world, they necessarily exclude others. In this chapter I analyse the character of the action that entrepreneurial tools enable. I will focus on the political aspect of such action.

My argument is that social entrepreneurs produce and are produced by a regime of truth that redefines political action as a matter of direct and immediate experience. Since business tools have – at least partially - replaced other modes of political action - for instance, the party or social movements – the dimension of politics becomes experiential in that it finds its origin and limits in the experience of individuals. I refer to this form of politics as post-politics, to signal its sharp discontinuity with more “traditional” forms of politics such as party politics, or extra-parliamentary political activism. Importantly, such

re-definition of politics necessarily excludes the structural analysis of social issues. This chapter shows that the critique of neoliberal political economy is too often excluded from the discourses of social entrepreneurs, who are instead concerned with treating its effects at a local level. This is not to suggest that social entrepreneurs are not aware of the role of a given political and economic system, but their entrepreneurial action seems to be constitutionally inadequate to consider it. Moreover, The application of a problem solver managerial mentality to society concentrates on finding intelligent solutions to particular problems; these will prove effective only if they survive the competitive mechanism of the market, i.e. if they attract enough capital and customers. This highlights a further implication of social entrepreneurs' politics: the fact that the market is the site of veridiction of political endeavours.

This chapter is structured as follows: to begin with, I offer a brief digression on the meaning of politics, and its intertwining with work in neoliberal societies. Then, I draw on interviews' excerpts to highlight the political character of social entrepreneurs' discourse and actions. After that, drawing on theoretical as well as empirical data, I concentrate on the conception of entrepreneurship as an effective method to intervene in the organisation of society. Finally, I formulate my argument on the experiential and a-systemic character of the politics of social entrepreneurship and I indicate its implications.

### Politics

Most social entrepreneurs tend to refuse the adjective 'political' to refer to their identity and actions. Indeed, as will become clear in the pages that follow, they instead display a harsh scepticism in regard to the mechanisms of representative democracies in contemporary western societies. In particular, they express a fierce resentment towards political parties, to which they ascribe a series of historical failures. This reasoning reflects a wider mentality that devalues any form of bureaucratic apparatus in favour of localised and autonomous actions (I cover this in more detail in the following sections).

Therefore, if by the term politics, we mean the legislative and executive actions of a government within the institutions of the State, carried out by means of associations of people who are supposed to represent the interests of citizens, then social entrepreneurs can be surely defined as subjects who do not express a form of politics. As a matter of fact, they do not find themselves represented in any party, and neither do they actively participate in forms of extra-parliamentary politics, as for example social movements. Of course, it is impossible to fully generalise, but virtually every research participant I met showed a similar mode of thinking about this matter, and the narratives of the field – as illustrated in Chapter I – articulate a quite dismissive attitude towards what may be referred to as traditional politics.

Nonetheless, social entrepreneurs mobilise a discourse concerned with 'impact' and 'change', assuming the right and responsibility to act with the aim of transforming and improving society. I contend that this discourse regards the dimension of politics. I deploy this term in its anthropological significance, which leaves aside the institutional character of politics in favour of an understanding that focuses on a more subjective dimension. Put differently, I use the word 'politics' to refer to a specific sphere of thinking, feeling, and doing. Drawing on Foucault, I define it as the dimension concerning the analysis of 'what we are willing to accept in our world – to accept, to refuse, to change – both in ourselves and in our circumstances' (Foucault 2007: 152). It is an understanding of politics as a mode of thought and action, and bypasses the operations of the state. In this regard, it resonates also with the Arendtian conception of politics as the experience of beginning something again, of dealing with the unforeseeable and the unpredictable (Arendt, 1998). In these terms, social entrepreneurial subjectivity is certainly political for it produces discourses and practices concerned with how to effect a 'change', operating in the uncertain domain of the future. Notably, social entrepreneurs are often referred to as 'changemakers' or 'impact makers', and celebrated as those who can suggest a future path for a more just society.

Yet, what is involved is a very distinctive form of political subjectivity, for politics is made to be served by entrepreneurship. Paolo Virno's analysis of the depoliticisation of the multitudes as a consequence of the politicisation of labour can be useful to fully appreciate the significance of the fact that business and politics overlap in social enterprises. Drawing on Arendt's notion of politics as 'the human experience of beginning something again, an intimate relationship with contingency and the unforeseen, and being in the presence of others', he claims that labour in post-fordist society has assumed the traits that are peculiar to politics (Virno, 2005: 51).

The paradigmatic example of this tendency is the culture industry. Virno argues that labour in the culture industry is 'production of communications by means of communications' (Virno, 2005: 56), thus it is a virtuous production. Drawing on both Marx and Arendt, Virno defines virtuosity as an activity without an end product, which finds its fulfilment in itself, and has its condition of existence in the presence of others (Virno, 2004: 52). The culture industry worker is the 'virtuoso' *par excellence* because, similarly to Arendt's political subject, s/he works with 'linguistic experience as such' (Virno, 2004: 56); engages in a production without a definite, tangible, end product; 'needs a publicly organised space' for his/her work and depends 'upon others' (Arendt, quoted in Virno, 2004: 53). Such hybridisation, continues Virno, makes politics seem redundant as a space for self-expression: a 'superfluous duplication of labor' (Virno: 2004: 51). Put differently, since a wage-earning activity has coopted the desire for self-disclosure and virtuosic performance, the individual cannot feel any need to express these parts of herself or himself through politics. This, according to the Italian philosopher, has disastrous consequences for it submits to capital exploitation the creative power, transformative desire, and radical potential of the multitudes.

Social entrepreneurs can be seen as embodying this tendency to an extreme degree. As shown in Chapter V, for them the enterprise is exactly the space to disclose their virtuous character and contribute to build a better society, a better future. Differently from cultural workers theorised by Virno and researched and described by a number of scholars (e.g. McRobbie, 1997, 2001, 2002; Arvidsson et. al., 2010; Ross, 2004), the political aim of social entrepreneurs is explicit. As this thesis has demonstrated so far, they cite the achievement of a more just society as the primary objective of their activities. For this reason, they represent an explicit reintegration of political aims and objectives within the sphere of labour.

Cultural workers, in the majority of cases, do not deploy an overtly political narrative, rather they mobilise a discourse rooted in self-expression and authenticity, somehow dismissing the question of how individuals' self-expression will eventually impact on the collective good (see, for instance, McRobbie, 2002; and Ross, 2008). This regime of truth is encapsulated by the concept of 'creativity', which has been promoted as a universal device by means of which individuals are enabled to express their inner qualities, especially 'passions' and 'talents'.

Of course, by defining self-actualisation as normatively positive<sup>32</sup>, an amelioration of society is conceived of as a somehow logical implication. Yet this is by no means central, but rather seen as a welcome externality. Cultural and creative workers are meant to concentrate on actualising themselves by expressing their talent, and not their political and social virtues. The positive impact of such expression is somehow regarded as a natural consequence. The inner assumption is that if everyone was able to truly express her or his self then everyone could be happy and healthy. Hence, it can be said the 'culture' produced by cultural workers does not have an explicit ethical and political dimension, i.e. a dimension that involves the need to act for 'changing the world'.

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<sup>32</sup> For an interesting cultural account of the ideology of self-actualisation see Illouz (2007)

Social entrepreneurs conceive of work not only as a means for expressing talents and passions but also (and mostly) values and virtues. Their thinking is built on joining individual's virtues and values with positive social impact. As Chapter V has illustrated, entrepreneurial means are conceived of as a sort of bridge between the two, as the tools for the actualisation of private virtues in the public sphere. <entrepreneurship is also a way to make a living out of one's passions and virtues, to live for and off one's cause, thus creating the condition for vocation and profession to coincide. What social entrepreneurship shows is the spectacular and paradoxical marriage between political ends and business means.

Following these considerations, I maintain Albert Cho's claim that even though social entrepreneurs mostly neglect the political character of their discourse, social entrepreneurship 'by its very nature is always already a political phenomenon' (Cho, 2006: 36). Therefore, a number of questions emerge: What kind of politics is at stake? How is politics - intended as the will to 'change the world' - redefined since it is actualised by means of entrepreneurship? How can this form of political action be described and defined? What are its substantial characteristics? And what are its wider practical and theoretical implications? This chapter tackles these questions.

### The political passion of social entrepreneurs

I met Miranda in Hoxton Square, in one of the most gentrified boroughs of London. She is a British woman in her late twenties, who moved to London from the north of England, when she was 19. When we met, she wore a loose, coloured jumper and super skinny jeans that leaves her ankles just uncovered. Miranda is an Architecture graduate but has never looked for a job in a studio. Drinking a banana and strawberry juice whose label promises it does not contain any preservatives, she explained to me:

Why continue to design ever higher buildings? What for? In the end, it's just a thing to nourish the architects' ego. I am not interested in designing galleries or museums to show off how skilled I am... I rather want to use my expertise to improve the world, not to make it worse with yet another skyscraper!

In 2005, after years of struggle, working part-time in pubs and restaurants, and volunteering to build her portfolio, Miranda funded her business which had only one employee: herself. Now she still runs that business, and has four employees. She designs and delivers participative design projects in various disadvantaged areas: e.g. a small abandoned park, a council estate community room, a footpath that runs across council estates. Like many of the social entrepreneurs whose voices are part of this thesis, her motivations exceed the sphere of self-interest and they originate from the will to intervene in society to fight inequalities:

I did not want the life of people to be determined by their post code. If you grow up in a disadvantaged area you are surrounded by poor buildings and ill-designed spaces, and spending time in poor housing or in low quality schools creates a huge psychological barrier that prevents people getting access to better spaces. It's about equality, and equal opportunities...

Miranda explicitly told me that when she felt the need to play a "role in society" to have a "positive impact" she thought of becoming an entrepreneur. Her objective - i.e. to reduce inequality - may be regarded as political but Miranda denies any affiliation with party politics. She does not believe in the democratic mechanism of representation and considers entrepreneurship a much better tool to achieve a more just and equal society:

I am neither for Labour nor for the Tories, I don't believe in left and right, I don't believe in political parties. But for sure I want to reduce inequality and give everybody equal opportunities, that's why I set up my business!

Caterina has a different background and nationality from Miranda, but she shares a similar vision. She designs, produces and sells shoes, and to explain her motivations for doing it, she mobilises a narrative that combines the need for self-expression with the will to have a positive impact on society. On a hot July afternoon, she welcomed me to her studio, in an upper class residential borough of Milan. It used to be her mother's accounting studio, but now it's her own. Caterina has long dark hair, braided in a tress. She is about to turn

thirty, she told me while she turned off one of the three Apple computers on her desk. She offered me a small cup of red berries and a cigarette. "I need to quit smoking" she said. Her atelier was bright and spacious. I am not an expert on architecture, yet I commented "it's a very nice space!". As if to offer justification for the elegant space she occupies, she smiled and declared: "I do all of this because I like it... to express myself!" As has been shown, when it comes to social entrepreneurs, self-expression goes along with the will to 'change the world'. In the case of Caterina, the world of fashion:

When I was studying fashion design for my MA, I couldn't stand the idea of fashion held by my professors and fellow students! A fashion made of unwearable clothes, cheap garments, things that you end up throwing out after a few months! And on top of this, everything is produced in developing countries, basically exploiting their labour force! This is unacceptable, totally unacceptable and must change!

To actively contribute to achieve this change, Caterina tries to do "things differently": "Everything I produce is made in Italy, I give work to Tuscany leather artisans, I produce a shoe that lasts for years, that goes against consumerist ideology!". She claims that she feels part of a "bigger movement" of young people who do not want to live in "the consumerist society" because "it is a way of living that is dying, that is not sustainable and must change". Caterina makes shoes with this big picture in mind, it is not only about business, but also about being part of "a yet to come revolution".

Sara, who the reader may remember from chapter V, set up a social enterprise that offers work to female prisoners and produces shopping bags by recycling fabric waste. For her, the issues to be tackled are waste, integration and education. This is how she frames her decision and describes her activities:

I had been volunteering in Asia for a month. I was working in a community house, we organised distance adoptions, I saw a striking reality: all these kids... and I was helping them... then I thought well, how can I act for the common good? Once back to Italy I thought: female prisoners and waste products, because the state treats inmates as human waste... These people spend twenty hours in a cell, to the citizens they cost 400 euro per day, and when they get out they are angrier than before, and they have not learnt anything. Then I imagined the amazing number of

free hours...., free hours that become endless, and then they take drugs to sleep... and it's crazy because the Italian law condemns them to 3 years for theft, and 15 years for five thefts... for a theft we pay 400 euro per day for three years, and when she gets out, older and angrier... god knows what she'll do then! I have a woman who works for me, with the salary she receives she got a mortgage to buy a house, she is able to send her kid to school... When she comes out of prison she'll have a house and a son who's integrated in this country.... You know.. paradoxically, from inside prison she's helping those outside... And then I also help all of those textile warehouses that need to get rid of fabric waste... They are so happy because they dispose of waste, and make donations, so we all win!

The discourses of these young women are indicative of a huge dissatisfaction with the way in which society is organised, and they take into account some of the issues that are an integral part of the political debate: inequality, exploitation, discrimination. Miranda is fully aware that the property market and urban planning of the UK creates structural inequality, Caterina fiercely criticises the mode of production of the global fashion industry, and Sara's thinking is built on the recognition of a fault within the legal system of her country.

Miranda, Caterina and Sara are concerned with an aspect of society that they consider unjust, unsustainable and unethical. With their businesses, they want to impact on some structural, long-term, very complex social issues, i.e. inequality, the organisation of labour in the fashion industry, and the judicial apparatus that regulates punishment. The end of their action is neither reduced to the design of a service or product, nor to a monetary return. In fact, these originate from an (individualised) ethical sensitivity and get actualised to concretely fight some social issues. Let me repeat that in this respect they show a political subjectivity: marked by the will to change how things are.

### Experiential a-systemic politics

One of the last of Miranda's projects concerned the transformation of a "forgotten corner" of a Catford school for children with disabilities "into a new outdoor learn and play area". She worked very closely with the school staff to plan a set of lessons in the existing space in order to observe how children engage with it. Through participant observation she developed the idea of a set of coat hangers which can be used to transform the space into "any theme for any learning objective". Miranda has responded to the issue of structural inequality in neoliberal cities acting in a specific borough, in a specific school, with a very limited group of people.

Caterina is part of a growing number of fashion designers who fiercely dislike the mainstream mode of production in the industry. She refuses the idea of fashion as mere consumerism; in fact, she claims she wants to fight consumerism itself. By means of her enterprise, Caterina reacts to this thinking by producing high quality and long lasting shoes in a sustainable manner. Certainly, in her small business, she does not replicate the patterns that she wants to fight in society, but ultimately her reach is limited: she employs an average of two people, on a freelance basis, and produces shoes, one kind of the massive numbers of goods that circulate in neoliberal free markets. Sara, who aims to change the system of re-education and reintegration of female prisoners and to reduce waste, is able to employ no more than ten inmates and to recycle a very limited quantity of fabric.

What I want to flag up with these observations is that small and medium enterprises can achieve only localised, circumscribed actions. Their agency is limited to specific phenomena, in specific places, involving specific people. To very big structural problems correspond localised and fractional actions<sup>33</sup>. What is striking is the relationship between

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<sup>33</sup> Big corporations have an impact that may well be global and involve a large number of people. However, this does not apply to the social entrepreneurs who are part of this study, whose means and resources are limited. Also, there is a problem with the scalability of social enterprise, as when an enterprise grows it is much more difficult to combine the economic and social aspect. Scalability is a much-discussed topic in academic as well as popular literature (Dudnik, 2010; Smith et. al., 2013; Gabriel, 2014) and one of

a discourse that includes the vision of 'changing the world', and addresses very complex, deeply eradicated, social issues, and an action that is necessarily localised. The form of action that social entrepreneurship carries out is inevitably limited to the sphere of immediate experience of individual entrepreneurs themselves. Consistently, it originates from the need to express the virtuous self, and the will to have a personal, possibly measurable, impact as an individual.

I argue that what emerges is a form of experiential politics that disregards the systematic analysis of society to become an expression of individual virtues in the form of localised entrepreneurial action. I want to highlight that such action and discourse exclude the systemic and structural analysis of the causes of social issues. Instead, the regime of truth of social entrepreneurship tends towards the isolation of the specific effects of a given political and economic paradigm. These effects get assessed in themselves rather than in relation to the wider geopolitical and economic matrix. In other words: the analysis and critique of neoliberal political economy that produces social inequality is virtually absent from the discourse of those who are tackling its symptoms by devising local solutions.

The young fashion designers who, like Caterina, are against consumerism and exploitation, would hardly embark on an analysis of the mode of production and division of labour in the financial globalised economy. They experience some consequences of it, in a rather immediate way, and in an even more immediate manner try to intervene in their sphere of influence. Caterina may well sell durable hand-made shoes to express her dissent with the mainstream fashion industry, but this form of intervention cannot address the global distribution of power and the global price of labour that are the structural causes of the problems of the fashion industry she wants to tackle in the first place. These exceed her sphere of immediate experience and direct intervention and therefore cannot be addressed by means of an enterprise.

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the main concerns of the more established social entrepreneurs I have met (for instance, during a round table at Social Enterprise London, organised to bring together social entrepreneurs from Italy and the UK, the issue of scale emerged strongly).

The same applies to those who, like Miranda, try to tackle inequality. She does this by acting within the scope of her personal experience: dealing with its effects in a local school. The fact that following her intervention that school has new coat hangers that permit children to express their creativity, and has involved them in a process of co-design that increased their confidence, is surely a valuable output. Nonetheless, it will hardly change, or impact upon, the politics of education in the UK. Analogously, a co-design project that involves the community in the amelioration of a local park in a disadvantaged South London area is inadequate to intervene in the politics of the property market and urban planning in the UK capital. This is to say that most probably, despite the inner quality of Sara's local interventions, the rent in London will keep on skyrocketing, gentrification will push the poor out of the city, and a growing number of people will end up living in disadvantaged areas.

It is not that social entrepreneurs do not use data and value analysis at all, but their analysis is acted out by means of business, in the market field. In a market the use of data is about finding effective solutions to specific problems, which can survive only if they prove to be financially sustainable, i.e. by attracting enough customers and capital. Sara's critical reflection on the way in which the Italian legal system punishes thieves, and on how the organisation of life in prison does not serve the purpose of the re-education of inmates, ultimately takes the form of a business model. Social problems translate into market opportunities. This, in the most successful cases, may even lead to the attenuation of some of the effects that the problem causes, but the context of that problem, the conditions of existence of 'the market' itself, and the structural causes of the social issue addressed, can be ignored. Such causes, e.g. structural inequality or labour market bargaining power, cannot be immediately experienced, but require for their conception a consciousness that has been augmented by means of social, economic and political science analysis.

The function of these disciplines, and of every kind of science, is exactly that of translating particular facts and personal feeling into abstract, universal categories. This is not to suggest that every person who wants to be politically engaged should obtain a degree in politics or related disciplines. What I want to underline is that the dissatisfaction of social entrepreneurs and their will to change how things are do not get the form of an action that is based upon a systemic analysis of the current structures of power that produce and are produced by a certain political economic paradigm. Rather, it takes the form of an action that tackles a particular effect of that paradigm.

In this respect, social entrepreneurship is a form of politics that is entirely acted out at the place of the personal. It is through the experience of the direct effects of one's action that social entrepreneurs seem to perceive themselves as having an impact. Therefore, it cannot deal with the abstract categories that serve the analysis of structural social mechanisms. Politics becomes a matter of sheer experience. The straightforward recompense of immediate impact becomes the sign of an action that matters. Importantly, this experiential conception of politics is closely related with the conception of social and political change rooted upon individual, personal change (see Chapter V). To the hermeneutic of the subject as the main instrument of change corresponds to an experiential notion of politics.

Deciphered as a political paradigm, this implies a notion of change and of political action that is totally dependent upon the utopic assumption that a very large number of individuals will eventually decide to set up similarly ethical businesses. This means that the world cannot change unless all fashion designers design ethical garments. Unless in every prison there are enough social enterprises to employ each and every inmate. Unless something like an army of architects re-design the entire suburbs of contemporary urban centres with the help of the community. As stated in Chapter V, the not-so-hidden utopia of social entrepreneurship is that everybody can (and will, and wants to) be a 'changemaker'. This structural change depends upon individual's thoughts and actions.

What we are confronted with is an idea of change as a sort of osmotic mimesis, which can be thought of as a form of virality: change is thought to happen through a gradual and subtle absorption of a mode of being and thinking that is supposed to spread rapidly by means of people communicating with each other.

### Individuals of the World Unite!

The individualism of the politics of social entrepreneurship is evident in that what is suppressed is any form of trust or subjugation to any collective organisation. Immediate experience acquires its importance because of, and in reaction to, the fading-out of the belief in any form of general will, social contract and – I would add – social and political science. This distinctive character of social entrepreneurship's politics is evident when compared with the political engagement that distinguished the party, an organisation that up until the sixties was considered by most a well-equipped instrument to effect social change.

In this regard, the autobiography of the British historian and lifelong communist Eric Hobsbawm may provide a useful term for comparison. Indeed, it can help to further grasp the significance of social entrepreneurship as revelatory of a shift in the mode in which political passion is conceived of and exercised. What emerges from Hobsbawm's accurate and passionate account is the position of the individual in relation to the party. The party was the One through which individuals believed it was possible to achieve a change in society. It was through submitting to the party line that people felt able to have an impact.

The Party (we always thought of it in capital letters) had the first, or more precisely, the only real claim on our lives. Its demands had absolute priority. We accepted its discipline and hierarchy. We accepted the absolute obligation to follow 'the line' it proposed to us, even when we disagreed with it, although we made heroic efforts to convince ourselves of its intellectual and political 'correctness' in order to 'defend it', as we were expected to (Hobsbawm, 2002: 201).

This almost unconditional submission was necessary and legitimate as the party was thought to be the only organisation powerful enough to address large scale social facts (e.g. inequality or the balance of the world economy) and therefore to obtain structural change on a grand scale. Such a degree of submission to the party is well encapsulated in the famous sentence of Enrico Berlinguer: 'men [sic] can make mistakes, but the Party never does'. Bianca Berlinguer, his daughter and established journalist, comments on these words as follows:

We need to remember that this sentence is indicative of the fact that the party appeared as ... a superior entity ... because it represented the tool to pursue a project, an ideal, a dream... a collective project in which both the leaders and the militants would identify completely because the fundamental principle of militancy was that individuals' redemption happened through the collective's ... To the party, people would dedicate their life... (Bianca Berlinguer, 2015: min 06:00).

While Eric Hobsbawm's and Enrico Berlinguer's engagement with the communist party might be extreme examples, they are revelatory of a mode of political being that distinguished most modern politics. The focal point is the understanding of individuals' political action as necessarily going through collective action. Social entrepreneurs act out a reversal of this relation: it is collective action that must go through an individuals' one. If, in modern politics individuals' will must pass through subjugation to the collective will (e.g. the will of the party), contemporary social entrepreneurs bear the traits of a politics where it is collective will that must pass through individuals' will to be eventually realised.

Paolo Virno's analysis of the multitude may help to conceptualise this shift in the relationship between the individual and the collective. In his short and brilliant book *A Grammar of the Multitude*, he provides an account that rejects the simplistic alternatives of enthusiastic exaltation or sheer condemnation in regard to individualism. Rather, he offers a nuanced and complex account that faces, instead of hiding, the inner ambiguities of the contemporary subject. He defines contemporary forms of life through the concept of multitude. Drawing on Hobbes, a fierce critic of this notion and advocate of its

opposite, i.e. the 'people', he describes the multitude as the 'social and political existence of the many, seen as being many' (Virno, 2004: 22). This formulation highlights the constitutional incapacity of the many to converge into a One - e.g. the party, the state, or any other organisation whose function is to subsume individuals' will. It was the structural incapacity of the multitude to effect this 'transfer' that caused Hobbes' repugnance. Indeed, he saw it as what 'did not make itself fit into people' and 'contradicts the state monopoly of political decision making' (Virno, 2004: 24). While the 'people' are the form of life of representative democracy, the form of life that delegates to a supposedly superior organ the actualisation of their political and moral rights, the multitude refuses any form of subjugation to a 'sovereign' other than their very self.

This synthetic but precise description well defines the subjectivity of social entrepreneurs. What they are incapable of and unwilling to do is to subsume their passion, will, and desire, to a bigger entity. Their regime of truth is built on the affirmation of the failure of any action conducted by means of big political organisations<sup>34</sup>. Yet, Virno explains, the fact that the multitude does not converge into a One, does not mean that they got rid of the One. It rather implies a variation on the positioning of the One in respect of the many. Instead of being that into which the many converge, as was the case for the people, for the multitude the One represents a common point of departure. What is 'common/shared' is not a form of general representation of individuals' wills, rather their origin.

[...] we must conceive of a One which, far from being something conclusive, might be thought of as the base which authorizes differentiation or which allows for the political-social existence of the many seen as being many. [...] The multitude does not rid itself of the One, of the universal, of the common/shared; rather, it redefines the One. The One of the multitude no longer has anything to

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<sup>34</sup> Such negative conceptions of modern political organs constitute the core of the reflexive narratives of the field, and are supported by most of the academic literature on the topic (see chapter 1). For instance Gregory Dees, author of the seminal article *The Meaning of Social Entrepreneurship* states that: 'many governmental and philanthropic efforts have fallen far short of our expectations. Major social sector institutions are often viewed as inefficient, ineffective, and unresponsive. Social entrepreneurs are needed to develop new models for a new century (Dees, 2001: 1).

do with the One constituted by the State, with the One towards which the people converge. The people are the result of a centripetal movement: from atomized individuals, to the unity of the "body politic," to sovereignty. The extreme outcome of this centripetal movement is the One. The multitude, on the other hand, is the outcome of a centrifugal movement: from the One to the Many (Virno, 2004: 42).

I believe this further characterisation of the multitude may be valuable to comprehending the subjectivity of social entrepreneurs. What they are united by is their social entrepreneurial subjectivity. Their One is the acceptance of a common regime of truth that embraces a form of individualised ethics, and the notion of entrepreneurial means as an effective method to intervene in society (see chapter V). The reader may remember that at the end of Chapter IV I quoted Impact Hub Milan manager when she said that what unites social entrepreneurs is a 'value-filter', a common ethos, that ultimately coincides with the will of 'changing the world'. The common thread that unites social entrepreneurs is the tautological evidence of having/developing a social entrepreneurial self. Then, the modes in which this gets actualised, the modes in which ethics becomes politics, are diverse and independent from each other in their content and focus.

#### Entrepreneurship as a method

So far, I have argued that social entrepreneurs' post-political action is marked by its inherent experiential, local and individualised character. It is a form of politics that emerges out of two defining features of neoliberalism: 1) the disbelief in the modern political party system and in the current form of representative democracy; and 2) the rise of a corresponding individualism that sees the self as the depositary of skills, talents, and passions to be actualised. The modern age was characterised by the grand-narratives of the -isms, and by the contention that political parties are the best instruments to achieve change. Social entrepreneurs reject this form of politics: they fully express the idea of acting for the common good beyond institutions, political parties, big associations etc.

Federica, a woman of Italian and Swedish descent who lives in Milan, is working on an online platform for the crowdfunding of political causes. She is graduated in Media and Communication in a prestigious university in Milan, and has always been active in the feminist movement. Over a veggie burger on her terrace she told me that after having tried other ways of being involved in the politics of her city - i.e. participation in social movements and activism in the left-wing party (or what is left of it) - she finally decided to become an entrepreneur: "I wanted to have an impact, you know? And while entrepreneurial tools are quick and independent, traditional politics is caught up in bureaucracy and after a while of trying to deal with it, it just kills any enthusiasm".

Cosimo, an economics graduate from Milan in his early forties, confirms this vision. He had worked for many years in an NGO, before funding a social enterprise consultancy firm in London. We had lunch together in a pub in Islington, famous for its roasts and delicious scotch eggs. While we were eating our big and tasty dishes we discussed the idea that social entrepreneurship could perhaps be seen as a form of politics, as a way of doing politics, although, of course, very different from traditional party politics. Cosimo said that if that was the case then at stake there would have been "a much better form of politics!". Recounting his experience at the NGO, he concluded that: "If you work in partnership with governments you are never free, you have to follow directives, procedures, a whole set of rules that most of the time compromise the success of whatever you're trying to do".

Federica, Paolo and Cosimo reproduce a discourse that characterises entrepreneurship as an opportunity to avoid state bureaucracy. The relationship between social entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial tools is configured as one between individuals who act beyond the 'obsolete' barriers of bureaucratic institutions and are driven by big ideals, and a series of effective means that represent a successful alternative to party politics and social movements. In this perspective, entrepreneurial means acquire the significance of effective enablers, of guarantors of efficiency and autonomy.

At stake there is the application of a managerial mentality of problem-solving, which stems from a perspective that focuses on effective and direct solutions and leverage on individuals' creativity, but avoids effecting a structural analysis of the systemic and historical roots of social problems. This ethos is reproduced in the many different idea-generations workshops that constitute part of the ecosystem of events typical of social entrepreneurship's cultural scene.

In winter 2011, I participated in one of these. It was organised by Think Public<sup>35</sup>, a London based social enterprise, and was addressed to recent graduates. I participated with Francesca, an Italian friend of mine, graduated in Communication Design from Central Saint Martin. With other eight people in their mid-twenties - seven British, two men and five women, and one Indian woman - we were invited to present a creative project with a social purpose, using the Pecha Kucha<sup>36</sup> format. After the presentations, the workshop facilitator – Angela: a British woman in her late twenties - invited us to take part in an idea-generation workshop, so as to experience part of Think Public's methodology.

For this purpose, we were divided in two groups of five people each, and were given ten minutes, a big paper sheet, and a dozen of colorful crayons and post-its. The task was to re-think the national higher education system. The first three minutes we were asked to write on our post-its what we "did not like about higher education". Then, for the following three minutes, we were asked to write what we liked. I asked Angela if she could further articulate the question as I could not fully understand how to interpret the word "like" in that context. She replied that we needed to think "freely" and

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<sup>35</sup> Think Public is a London based social enterprise that was born with the mission to help organisations to innovate and tackle social issues. At present, it focuses on healthcare (ThinkPublic, 2017).

<sup>36</sup> PechaKucha or Pecha Kucha is an increasingly popular presentation style in which 20 slides are shown for 20 seconds each.

“instinctively”, with no “judgment and constraints”. After that, Angela encouraged us to come up with “solutions” to what we did not like. Again, she invited us to listen to our “instinct”, “without thinking too much”.

Of course, social entrepreneurs do not think they can reform the higher education system in England in ten minutes, and just by following one’s “instinct”. But this is not the point. The point is rather to endorse the attitude and skills of an optimistic and fast problem solver to produce an innovative approach to social and political issues. Arguably, “thinking too much”, in this perspective, would lead to getting stuck in too many details, and to wasting time in a way that ultimately jeopardises one’s ability to invent “creative” solutions, and therefore to be able to “make a change”.

This web of meanings is often encapsulated in the signifier “making” that comes to denote everything that is effective and tangible, thus worth being pursued. This emerges clearly from the discourse of Paolo, a man just under forty who is based in Rome, and has become an opinion leader thanks to his blog and the problem-solving workshops he delivers across Europe. Previously, he was working for a telecommunication company, but then discovered his passion and started to do research on social entrepreneurship. The reasons why he considers entrepreneurship to be the most adequate means for achieving political ends do not differ much, in their substance, from those of Federica. During a long Skype call he stated that “if one has some good ideas to change the world, one just needs to prove them by making something out of them”. Curiously enough, Paolo’s main activities regard the production of discourses: he is a blogger, he writes interviews, he organises conferences, he delivers presentations, he leads workshops. In his opinion entrepreneurship is exactly what makes this “making” possible: “Ideas without their realisation are obsolete nowadays, and entrepreneurship allows realisation!” This attribute of entrepreneurship is contrasted with “traditional politics”, which “it is hard to access”, and even if you do “at one point of course you will just get lost”.

### Solutionism and neoliberalism

Social entrepreneurs' attitude towards social change seems to replicate the traits of what Eugeny Morozov calls 'solutionism'. In *To Save Everything Click Here*, Morozov analyses the ideology produced by technology and argues that it entails a mode of thinking that recasts 'all complex social situations either as neatly defined problems with definite, computable solutions or as transparent and self-evident processes that can be easily optimized' (Morozov, 2013: 30-31). Morozov uses the term in an 'unabashedly pejorative' fashion, to pinpoint its consequences:

Herein lies one hidden danger of solutionism: the quick fixes it peddles do not exist in a political vacuum. In promising almost immediate and much cheaper results, they can easily undermine support for more ambitious, more intellectually stimulating, but also more demanding reform projects' (Morozov, 2013: 38).

Moreover, he argues, solutionism, while addressing one problem, may well cause many others, to which its inherent approach is inevitably blind, for it is unable to focus on the modes in which 'problems are composed', inter-related, and ultimately functional in a wider system.

Social entrepreneurs' experiential and a-systemic post-politics can be regarded as an expression of the same ideology, an ideology that claims to be non-ideological, and supports this claim by focusing on the 'effectiveness' of the solutions, rather than on the elaboration of a systematic set of ideas on how a just society should be. This is evident in the claims about the effectiveness of entrepreneurship versus the ineffectiveness of political parties, as well as in the dismissal of left and right. Here the notion of effectiveness functions as the main ideological dispositive of the ideology of solutionism.

In this mobilisation of the ideological signifier of 'effectiveness' the neoliberal genealogy of solutionism reveals itself. Indeed, the replacement of any qualitative criteria of judgement (political, moral etc..) with measurable quantitative indicators is what characterised the neoliberal regime of truth.

As Davies put it:

This technocratic turn diverts the attention of the liberal away from moral or political philosophy and towards more mundane technical and pragmatic concerns. Prosaic market institutions and calculative devices become the harbinger of unspoken liberal commitments. (Davies, 2014: 7)

This description of neoliberal mentality and governmentality echoes what Foucault argued in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, when analysing the political economy as the main 'intellectual instrument' of neoliberal governmentality (Foucault, 2010: 13), he argues that:

Success and failure, rather than legitimacy and illegitimacy, are the criteria of evaluation of political economy [...] Political economy reflects on governmental practices themselves, and it does not question them to determine whether or not they are legitimate in terms of right. It considers them in terms of their effects rather than their origins [...] (Foucault, 2010: 13-15)

The exclusion of moral and political rights and values from the process of evaluation of social (and not only social) policies is what Davies refers to as 'the disenchantment of politics by economy' (Davies, 2014: 1), which I have already mentioned in Chapter II. Social entrepreneurs may be seen as reacting to this disenchantment by reintegrating political passions and ideas within their discourse and actions. As is evident in the frequent mobilisation of the emphatic formula 'changing the world', social entrepreneurs seem to be enchanted by the opportunity to be political actors. However, the ultimate adherence to the ideology of effectiveness forces them to submit their values the cold, final judgment of the market.

This analysis leads us to the second point I set out to explore, namely: the market as a site of veridiction of political actions. What determines the failure or the success of a social entrepreneur's problem-solving actions is the market. Basically, an enterprise is an entity that operates within the market, and that must survive in it. By translating political passion into business activities, the success of the latter becomes the only way to assess the value of the first. Quite simply, what if some very noble ideas turn out to be not financially sustainable? Bankruptcy or financial success becomes the ultimate criteria with which to judge the desirability and feasibility of ethical and political objectives.

Social entrepreneurs, as well as commentators and promoters of social entrepreneurship, are not unaware of this. The efforts made to formulate a quantitative indicator for qualitative benefits are the basis of the research about the SROI, Social Return on Investment (i.e. Zappala and Lyons, 2009; Nicholls *et. al*, 2009,; Millar and Hall, 2012; Maier *et. al.*, 2015) which Nicholls defines as 'a framework for measuring and accounting for this much broader concept of value; it seeks to reduce inequality and environmental degradation and improve wellbeing by incorporating social, environmental and economic costs and benefits' (Nicholls *et. al*, 2012: 8)

Social Venture Capital (SVC) funds, sometimes called Impact Funds, are supposed to invest according to these particular types of return. The world of SVC is growing. An article published in Forbes reads as follows:

Some estimate that the impact investment market could grow to \$3 trillion. And as the more socially-conscious millennial generation of entrepreneurs build impact-driven businesses, you can be sure the supply of impact investment opportunities will vastly expand (Cohen and Bannik (2014).

However, this is still insufficient to face and challenge the mainstream notion of economic value. It is beyond my expertise and the scope of this thesis to assess the actual impact of SROI, or of Impact Funds. What is interesting in the perspective of this analysis is to highlight that within a neoliberal regime of truth that makes the market the site of veridiction of ethical and political instances, the lack of a measure, and the related attempts to measure the immeasurable, to quantify the unquantifiable, are the symptoms of social entrepreneurship ambivalence. In the lack of a measure of so-called social impact, and in the efforts to design one, resides the objectification of the philosophical clash between the ethics of profit and the ethics of the social. Following this, it could be argued, alongside Arvidsson and Peitersen (2013), that for the economy to be ethical a new concept of value should emerge.

### Social Entrepreneurship as a post-political phenomenon

This chapter has demonstrated that for social entrepreneurs business enterprise assumes the role of traditional political tools as a means to change the world, i.e. to express and actualise one's political passion. In the regime of truth of social entrepreneurship, immediate impact has taken the place of structural change as a definition of what changing the world entails. Its entrepreneurial form imposes the translation of social analysis into a business model that turns social issues into market gaps to be addressed by means of a business. This has at least three inter-related consequences: the first is the individualistic dimension of the political action; the second is the vision of society as 'something to be fixed', and the consequent reduction of politics to an activity of problem solving; the third is that the market becomes the site of verification of political actions.

To account for these attributes of the politics of social entrepreneurship I have defined it as experiential and a-systemic. The first aspect entails the individualistic approach, for it signals that social entrepreneurship politics is delimited by the boundaries of individuals' experience and influence. The second aspect implies a form of solutionism for it substitutes structural with an action that focuses on partial effects. Moreover, the election of business tools as means for political actions de facto leads to an extreme form of economic reductionism.

These findings can be beneficially interpreted in relation to the debate on depoliticalisation and the post-political. Social entrepreneurship politics may be understood as a form of post-political thought. Indeed, its constitutional absence of systemic thought and analysis results in the dismissal of any form of traditional political ideology (e.g. the difference between left and right). Furthermore, the election of the enterprise as a method to devise effective solutions to social problems entails the acceptance that the market is the ultimate site of veridiction for political actions. The acceptance of the inevitability of capitalism, which produces and is produced by the

progressive deterioration of trust in democratic processes and institutions, is one of the defining features of the post-political spirit (Žižek, 1999; Mouffe, 2005; Rancière, 2006). Hence, to think of social entrepreneurship's politics in the light of the reflections on the contemporary post-political atmosphere can shed light on its significance and genealogy.

Post-political is a highly contested concept, but for the sake of argument it suffices to consider its fundamental meaning, regardless of the different interpretations it takes on in the work of its various theorists<sup>37</sup>. Indeed, what is useful for this analysis is to show that social entrepreneurship's politics reflects post-political *zeitgeist*. In order to substantiate this claim, I now provide a synthetic discussion of the main aspects of the post-political and highlight the extent to which social entrepreneurship politics articulates them.

Post-politics refers to the suppression of the political<sup>38</sup> in favour of a managerial logic that dismisses ideology to promote technocratic decision-making (Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014). The solutionism of social entrepreneurship reflects this vision in so far as it addresses social issues as problems to be solved, bypassing the discussion of the ideological genealogy of those problems, and therefore their political origin. One of the main traits of post-politics is indeed its post-ideological ideology, i.e. the ideological belief in the end of all ideologies.

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<sup>37</sup>For a synthetic and clear discussion of the main differences between the principal theorists of the post-political – i.e. Žižek, Mouffe and Rancière – see the introductory chapter of the book *The Post-Political and Its Discontents* (Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014).

<sup>38</sup>I am using the terms 'political' and 'politics' with two different meanings, in accordance with the main thinkers of the post-political (Mouffe, Rancière and Žižek). With 'politics' I refer to the contingent actions, practices and institutions by which a specific order is created and administered. With 'political' I mean the ontological dimension of politics, which refuses symbolisation and crystallisation. In Heideggerian terms, the 'political' corresponds to the ontological dimension, while politics refer to the ontic. In Lacanian terms, the political is the Real, that which cannot be subsumed into language, that which resists the Symbolic and the Imaginary, but on which these two somehow rely (Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014). The post-political is defined by the suppression of the Real of the 'political', which collapses it on politics: 'it is the lack of understanding of "the political" in its ontological dimension which is at the origin of our current incapacity to think in a political way' (Mouffe 2005: 9). The suppression of the political leads to its reappearance under the disguised and perverse form of pathological symptoms – namely, the ultra-right populist and racist parties that are thriving in Europe (Žižek, 1999).

As Slavoj Žižek put it:

post-politics thus emphasizes the need to leave old ideological visions behind and confront new issues, armed with the necessary expert knowledge and free deliberation that takes people's concrete needs and demands into account' (Žižek, 1999: 198).

What is erased together with the recognition of the ideological aspects of political thought and action is the inevitably antagonistic character of the political. As argued by Chantal Mouffe, this antagonistic character is indispensable for an understanding and practice of the political that is able to embrace and recognise the plurality of opinions, needs, and ideas within the democratic arena (Mouffe, 2005). The intention to go 'beyond left and right' to quote a famous book by Anthony Giddens – indeed one of the critical targets of Mouffe – ultimately results in the reduction of different worldviews to the allegedly incontestable level of utility (Mouffe, 2005). This way, political choice is *de-facto* eliminated and replaced by the perception of sheer necessity. A consequence of this, is the disenchantment of citizens, who lose confidence in their ability to change the status quo by means of their right to vote. An article in the Financial Times explains the situation in blunt terms:

European democracy has a new organising assumption. Citizens may still change their leaders from time to time, but only on the clear understanding that elections do not herald a change of direction. Left or right, inside or outside the euro, ruling elites are worshipping at the altar of austerity. Governments are permitted a tilt here, or a shading there. None dares challenge the catechism of fiscal rectitude (Stephens, 2012).

This excerpt sheds light on another fundamental aspect of the elimination of political antagonism for it reveals that it functions as a governmental device to sanction the dictatorship of the law of the market. As Rancière argues:

the disenchanted opinion spreads that there isn't much to deliberate and that decisions make themselves, the work proper to politics simply involving an opportune adaptability in terms of the demands of the world marketplace and the equitable distribution of the profits and costs of this adaptability (Rancière 1999: viii).

Social Entrepreneurs show a post-political sensibility to the extent that they express scepticism towards democratic political institutions, deemed as 'slow', 'bureaucratic' and 'ineffective'. Moreover, rather than challenging neoliberalism – especially where it elevates the market as the ultimate criterion of verification of ethical and political actions – they tend to distinguish between a 'good' and a 'bad' capitalism. This is evident in the attempt to redefine profit as instrumental for the achievement of the collective good (see Chapter V).

Within the solutionistic framework of social entrepreneurship, business tools acquire value in relation to their effectiveness, but this effectiveness is fundamentally decided by the market. If an enterprise is not able to survive the market, it fails. Therefore, it is not to be considered effective. To this extent, the action of social entrepreneurs does not articulate a radical perspective. Through the notion of post-politics this can be explained as an effect of the process of depoliticisation that, by eliminating the conflict of ideology, isolates effectiveness as the final and sole parameter for decision-making. This way, actions are evaluated on how they 'work well within the framework of existing relations' (Žižek, 1999: 199). But, as Slavoj Žižek, argues: 'the political act is not simply something that works well within the framework of the existing relations, but something that changes the very framework that determines how things work' (Žižek, 1999: 199). Ultimately, the regime of truth of social entrepreneurship produces and is produced by a post-political mode of acting and thinking that reduces politics to the administration of things, and that is unable to fully challenge the neoliberal market. Instead it makes it the litmus test of its success and value.

## Conclusion

This chapter has concentrated on the politics of social entrepreneurship. It has demonstrated that social entrepreneurs, although individualised neoliberal subjects, express a form of political passion in so far as they are concerned with the discourses and practices of change, in the aim of creating a better future. Importantly, they do so by means of business enterprise, which have replaced traditional political means – i.e. the party or the social movement – as a tool to transform and improve society. This replacement indicates a profound distrust in the functioning of the state and government, and a mutated political sensitivity which is rooted in and confined to the domain of personal experience and influence.

I have argued that what emerges is a form of post-political thought and action distinguished by an a-systemic and experiential character. Then, I have discussed these implications. I have pinpointed that social entrepreneurs' post-politics excludes the possibility of effecting a structural analysis of social issues, ultimately reducing politics to a form of solutionism. Also, I have highlighted that solutionism, with its ideological mobilisation of the notion of 'effectiveness', puts individual's ethical and political desires under the command of the law of the market. Social entrepreneurs – and a vast array of actors in the scenes of social innovation, social economy, third sector studies etc. are trying to bridge the heterogeneity between ethics and politics on the one hand, and the neoliberal economy on the other, while still operating within a neoliberal framework.

By mobilising the notion of effectiveness as the principal criteria of decision-making and rejecting the distinction between conflicting ideologies, they remain confined to a post-political dimension that precludes the emergence of proper 'political acts', i.e. those acts that can change social and economic systems. The theoretical and practical effects of such form of post-politics must be evaluated in future research, it is still too soon to empirically assess all its connotations. Moreover, social entrepreneurship is a culture in the making and any absolute claim in its regard would crystallise a reality that is *in fieri*.

However, some reflections can be made. In the second part of the conclusion of this thesis I expand on some points to further highlight how the analysis of social entrepreneurship can help us to better understand the contemporary neoliberal *zeitgeist*.

## CONCLUSION

### The thesis, in synthesis

This thesis has explored social entrepreneurship by looking at how it is perceived by social entrepreneurs and social entrepreneur aspirants. Rather than focusing on social entrepreneurship as a delimited economic field or as a set of well-defined practices, I have approached the subject in terms of its cultural connotations. More precisely, I have analysed its regime of truth and processes of subjectivation, i.e. the system of values and beliefs it produces and reproduces, and the modes in which individuals embody them, and negotiate with them. I have been concerned with the specific understanding of sociality, politics, and ethics that emerges from and is implicated by social entrepreneurs' discourse. Such an endeavour has sprung from the belief that social entrepreneurship produces and is produced by a re-definition of the social, ethical, and political spheres, in so far as they are thought of as closely intertwined with the sphere of entrepreneurship. Put differently, through the study of social entrepreneurship I have tackled the theoretical question concerning the role and significance of ethics, politics, and sociality in contemporary societies.

Based on an understanding of social entrepreneurs as individuals who perceive work to be a means for self-expression, I have contextualised this enquiry within the fields of cultural studies and critical theories on the changing nature of labour in neoliberal societies. To do the analysis, I have deployed a Foucauldian theoretical toolkit combined with an ethnographic inventive methodology: I have used the Foucauldian notions of a regime of truth and process of subjectivation to interpret the data collected during 18 months of fieldwork in the scene of social entrepreneurship. To indicate its focus on the hermeneutic of the self, as well as its reflexive character, I have defined my fieldwork as an ethnography of subjectivation as well as a process of subjectivation.

I have developed my argument in three stages, corresponding to the three empirical chapters of the thesis. To begin with, I have shown that social entrepreneurs engage in opportunistic and compulsory forms of sociality that function as dispositives for the organisation of work. Establishing relationships is a means through which independent entrepreneurial workers look for job opportunities, and put themselves in the best position to secure them. This opportunistic aspect of sociality is deeply entangled with an ethical trait, for it is only by embodying and mobilising a certain set of values that one can successfully build relationships in the scene of social entrepreneurship. Importantly, these relationships must be perceived as authentic, i.e. characterised by the disclosure of one's "true" self. Far from being a spontaneous act, self-disclosure must be carefully managed. The individual has to learn what parts of the self to nurture and display, and what aspects should be modified or concealed. As a matter of fact, failure to disclose the appropriate self may result in a dramatic decrease of one's opportunity to socialise.

The ultimate goal of these forms of sociality is to accumulate social and ethical capital. Social and ethical capital, in turn, are instrumental in gaining economic opportunities via a cultural conception of reputation as value. To be perceived as a social entrepreneur, hence to know how to embody and enact the social entrepreneurial self, is pivotal to being recognised as one, and therefore to being considered as a potential business partner, collaborator, employee. Impact Hub offers an environment in which to build the necessary capital, in so far as it provides the opportunity to engage in an ethically burdened sociality. Hanging out at Impact Hub, individuals engage in a process of subjectivation that leads to the development of a social entrepreneurial self. This sheds light on the identitarian character of social entrepreneurship, which can be seen as a set of discursive and practical dispositives for the hermeneutic of the social entrepreneurial self.

Secondly, I have looked at the ethics of social entrepreneurs and at the implications of its intertwining with entrepreneurship. I have argued that social entrepreneurial subjectivity is marked by an understanding of ethics as an individual need, and a set of skills to be actualised. The gap between ethical thoughts and actions on the one hand, and the individualism implied in the entrepreneurial conduct on the other hand, is bridged through a redefinition of ethics as part of the self to be expressed by means of work. In other words, ethics is perceived as something to be realised concretely by means of financially sustainable projects.

By implication, the making of a profit is no longer thought of as inherently linked with and leading to the pursuit of an individuals' interest. Instead, it is seen as the means by which collective interest and happiness can be pursued. Entrepreneurship is understood as an ethically neutral method, a dispositive to effectively actualise one's ethical desires. Such understanding builds on an understanding of entrepreneurship as a technique to turn immaterial contents into tangible projects; and it is fuelled by the belief that entrepreneurship is a guarantee of autonomy and independence from the bureaucratic state machine.

The underlying vision is that social change must happen via the change of individuals' selves: if everyone developed a social entrepreneurial subjectivity and expressed her or his ethical desires via means of a business, the world would actually change for good. "Changing the world" becomes a private matter, an objective concerning the individual considered in so far as it is an individual. It can be seen that the ethical character of social entrepreneurship is twofold: on the one hand it concerns the will to act for the collective interest and happiness; and on the other it involves a process of subjectivation, that is: an ethical process.

Finally, I have argued that social entrepreneurs enact and embody a post-political subjectivity. With the suffix 'post' I indicate social entrepreneurs' scepticism towards representative democracy. With the adjective 'political' I account for their will to impact upon how society is organised, and to take a leading role in its improvement and transformation. The post-political subjectivity of social entrepreneurs is distinguished by discourses and actions whose scope and significance are restrained within the bounds of an individuals' experience and influence. Indeed, these are the kind of actions enabled by entrepreneurial means. What remains inevitably excluded is the opportunity to formulate a structural analysis of social issues. As a matter of fact, by means of the enterprise one can implement solutions to some specific problems, but will hardly be able to tackle their deep roots.

In this concluding section I discuss the wider implications of the findings of this thesis. To begin with, I highlight the limitations of this research to clarify its field of competence, and to anticipate possible objections. Then, I indicate the extent to which this thesis connects with previous studies on work in neoliberal societies and suggest possible paths for future research. Finally, I speculate on the relevance of the social entrepreneurship notion of change to the extent that it can deepen the understanding of contemporary culture.

#### The limits and the focus

As with any research project, this study has its limitations. In this section I discuss four of them: the first concerns the fact that it does not provide material to assess the effectiveness and feasibility of social entrepreneurship; the second regards the absence of data for a study of policy making and political and economic infrastructure; the third involves the lack of a detailed discussion of national and international contexts; and the fourth sheds light on the many forms of social entrepreneurship that have been left aside.

For the last six years, I have been presenting my work in various academic and non-

academic contexts and one of the most frequent comments I have received has been: “So, do you think social entrepreneurship may actually work? What can be achieved by it?”. To these kinds of questions, I wish to reply that since the study was limited to social entrepreneurs’ discourses, it was not possible to evaluate the practical efficiency of social entrepreneurship. To properly assess the effectiveness of social entrepreneurship it would be necessary to ethnographically study the impact of social enterprises, following social entrepreneurs in the implementation of their projects and interviewing employers, customers, and stakeholders during and after their realisation. Moreover, one would need to decide how to assess the success of social entrepreneurship. Should it be evaluated in relation to decreases in inequality? Increased GDP? Reduced national welfare spending? The entrepreneur’s wealth? All of the above? The matter is very complex, and more research in this direction is needed.

Since this thesis is limited by the absence of data about economic policies to support social entrepreneurship it has been impossible to concretely determine the risks, opportunities and feasibility of social entrepreneurship. Although interesting studies already exist (and have been discussed in Chapter I), more research on national and international policies on the development of social entrepreneurship is needed. This brings to light a further limitation of my research, which is the lack of information on the urban and national contexts where the fieldwork took place. Indeed, I have not researched the specifics of London and Milan cultural economies and creative scenes, and the differences between the UK and the Italian systems. My intention has been to go beyond methodological nationalism (Beck and Sznaider, 2006), so I have approached the matter as an international cultural phenomenon, and the project has been concerned with the production of cultural discourses beyond and across national borders. In so doing, I have been consistent with the international scope of the social entrepreneurship movement in general, and of Impact Hub in particular, as well as with the global thinking of the social entrepreneurs I met.

A further weakness of this study is the absence of a precise demographic account of the social entrepreneurs who took part in the fieldwork. This would have allowed us to identify more precisely the type of social entrepreneurs that I have studied, who are by no means representative of all social entrepreneurs, or of all the ways in which social entrepreneurship is actualised in practice. For example, I have not considered older and more established social entrepreneurs, and have left aside the study of social enterprises in rural areas and developing countries. Instead, I have concentrated on young social entrepreneurs and social entrepreneur aspirants in international, creative cities. This decision was made based on the desire to effect a study of social entrepreneurship in relation to the evolution of cultural and creative work in urban economies. Moreover, the focus on young aspirant social entrepreneurs has been instrumental in the study of the process of subjectivation in social entrepreneurship: it is mostly during the first stages of one's career that the individual engages in a process of subjectivation to develop a certain identity.

I hope that any limits to this research, the ones I have addressed or any others that the reader may have identified, can be an inspiration for future studies. Before proceeding with the next section of this conclusion, I would like to add that the subjective and inherently partial character of the account I have given in these pages is not to be considered as an undesired limit but rather as an integral part of the reflexive methodology I have adopted.

### The ethical turn

The findings I have presented in this doctoral dissertation may contribute to the academic literature about the organisation and culture of work in neoliberal societies in two principal ways. Firstly, they strengthen the idea that young precarious and independent workers perceive work as a means for self-expression, and that the dynamics of exploitation and self-exploitation are deeply linked to an affective relationship with one's profession. As I have demonstrated, social entrepreneurs think of their profession as the activity through which they can disclose their inner self, and place in this activity the ultimate confirmation of their value as virtuous individuals. In this respect, this thesis is in line with empirical studies on the culture industries and can provide further evidence for critical studies on affective labour and neoliberal governmentality. Moreover, it can offer useful ethnographic and theoretical insights into the social forms of work organisation that unfold in coworking spaces in the context of post-crisis urban economies. Indeed, the data presented in this thesis highlights the importance of sociality for the structuring of independent and precarious workers' careers.

Secondly, the findings signal further developments in the perception and significance of work for entrepreneurialised workers, for they indicate that work is perceived not only as a means for the actualisation of talent and passion, but also as a means for the implementation of values and virtues. To this extent, this research evidences a significant variation in the neoliberal regime of truth and governmentality, namely: the reintegration of an ethical dimension within entrepreneurial conduct. The theoretical implications of this are ambiguous and problematic. On the one hand, it would be simply naïve to consider social entrepreneurship as a radical or autonomous action.

In Foucauldian terms, it cannot be light-heartedly defined as a form of counter-conduct. The notion of counter-conduct is used by Foucault to define the art of the government of free individuals: i.e. of individuals who are able to oppose the way in which they are governed. He states that government refers to 'the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed', or more precisely, to the attempt to 'act upon the possibilities of action of other people', to 'structure the possible field of action of others' (Foucault, in Lorenzini, 2016: 10). Counter-conduct refers to the 'individual's refusal to let him/herself to be conducted in this or that specific way' (Lorenzini, 2016: 10). Therefore, to engage in forms of counter-conduct means to act beyond or against the field of possible actions delimited by the government.

Within this contextual framework, it can be argued that social entrepreneurs do not act so as to counter the power of the government. Indeed, the entrepreneurialisation and individualisation of the self are two of the pivotal objectives of neoliberal governmentality. More simply, entrepreneurial conduct cannot be a counter-conduct in a system that needs competition to survive, for it is based on a competitive ethos. Moreover, as a matter of fact, social entrepreneurs need financial capital for their activities to be sustainable, thus it can be argued that rather than being adverse to capital, they depend on it. Social entrepreneurship's ethics and politics seem to emerge out of the space delimited by neoliberal governmentality, rather than to challenge its power. In this respect, social entrepreneurship can be interpreted as yet another dispositive for the implementation of a political economy based on the privatisation and entrepreneurialisation of the social sphere. In other words, social entrepreneurship may be used as a way to outsource social services in post-welfare societies (McRobbie, 2015). Arguably, it is in this light that huge investments in the field on the part of both national and international institutions can be explained.

On the other hand, the study would have been limited had it not examined the thoughts and actions of social entrepreneurs, and the attempt on the part of neoliberal subjects to escape from the iron cage of selfish economic conduct. The findings of this thesis are indicative of the growing impact of ethical motivations in the career choices of young adults. In this regard, they provide a new understanding of what Richard Florida called the 'creative class' (Florida, 2002). Indeed, social entrepreneurs, while adhering to the same ethos as creative workers – they value creativity, independency and self-expression – are eager to engage in collaboration and try to combine creativity and entrepreneurship with ethical action. Hence, social entrepreneurial subjectivity can be seen as an illustration of the current shift of the creative economy towards collaboration and sharing, which is characterised by the exploration of alternative economic perspectives, and the rise of forms of production, distribution, and consumption in which the process of valorisation is rooted in collaborative social processes (Gandini, *et. al.*, Forthcoming; Arvidsson and Peitersen, 2013).

A recent research report on creative professionals in London, Berlin, and Milan, provides further evidence of the rising impact of ethical motivation amongst creative entrepreneurs, who appear increasingly interested in the ethical aspects of their practices (McRobbie *et. al.*, 2016). This report shows that many young creative entrepreneurs seek a sort of ethical identity by means of her or his commercial practices. On a macro level this tendency is visible in a series of inter-related cultural instances: for example, the hype around the sharing economy, often enthusiastically narrated as the way to put 'people' at the centre of the economy (Botsman and Rogers, 2013); as well as the rise of collaborative practices such as coworking. In this perspective, this research can be considered as an exploration of the traits and implications of a re-birth of ethics that marks the subjectivities of economic actors in neoliberal urban economies. Such a process of reintegration, while signalling the attempt to go beyond neoliberalism, derives from neoliberalism most of its discursive as well as practical dispositives.

### Ethics as lifestyle?

It would be interesting to further research this ethical turn in terms of an emerging lifestyle in the context of entrepreneurialised urban scenes. A number of significant ethnographic insights of this thesis support the idea that social entrepreneurs share a certain lifestyle. More than once, I have referred to social entrepreneurs as living in culturally regenerated urban areas, or eating vegetarian food, or shopping in certain places, and I have underlined the importance for them of socialising with like-minded people. This data suggests that the scene of social entrepreneurship is characterised by the adherence to a series of consumer habits, cultural taste, and social inclinations.

Building on these insights, and allowing for a degree of speculation, it could be interesting to think of social entrepreneurs' ethical commitment as a form of lifestyle, and to relate it to the rise of the hipster culture. To be sure, the problem would be to define the hipsters, who refuse any label by definition: the 'real' hipster is one who would never accept such identification! (Greif, 2010). Despite this empirical obstacle, the Oxford Dictionary has a simple definition of the term: 'a person who follows the latest trends and fashions, especially those regarded as being outside the cultural mainstream' (Oxford Dictionary, 2016). Yet, authors such as Grier and Bonini demonstrate that 'hipster' is a world with a more complex meaning and tradition (Greif, 2010; Bonini, 2013).

Bonini warns that contemporary hipsterism is too often dismissed as superficial, while it should be more attentively observed, for it may reveal something about the generation of those who grew up between the 1999 Seattle WTO and the 2008 financial crack (Bonini, 2013). It is not by chance that Bonini chooses Seattle and the 2008 crisis as landmarks of the history of contemporary hipsterism: the first represents a political illusion, and subsequent delusion; while the second symbolises the crack of financial capitalism. In this view, hipsters emerge as the generation that has gone through the processes of depoliticisation and has survived economic failure. They represent a way of

embodying and reacting to these experiences. Following on from this, I would suggest that the cultural phenomenon of hipsterism could be studied in so far as it represents the attempt to reintegrate an ethical and anti-corporate dimension with a depoliticised and consumerist urban lifestyle.

This idea is supported by hipsters' preference towards allegedly healthier and less exploitative nutritional habits (veganism and vegetarianism), ecological means of transport (mostly cycles), and ethical consumerism (shopping at farmers' markets or purchasing second hand-clothes and furniture). These ethical inclinations have also a strong aesthetical character (the bike has to be a fixed-gear one), and are often expressed by means of consumer acts (purchasing certain brands), and in the context of big cities that epitomise neoliberal power (e.g. London and New York). Moreover, as opposed to the subcultures of the seventies and eighties, hipsters have been deemed as inherently apolitical or at least distanced from openly radical positions (Greif, 2010). In this regard, hipsters may be seen as embodying a (sub)culture of political and economic disillusionment, that enacts a revival of ethics by means of lifestyle. Within this framework, the data on social entrepreneurs' ethics can be useful to better understand this revival of ethics; while a study on hipster ethics may provide further data to grasp the significance and character of social entrepreneurship.

#### Postpolitical future: an emerging common sense?

During the six years I have spent studying social entrepreneurship, I have gradually realised that its main conceptual elements are present in many other cultural instances. The idea that the best way to build a better future is by means of individuals' actions conducted outside of the sphere of party politics seems to reach well beyond social entrepreneurship, and to permeate a wider cultural atmosphere. Hereof, the findings of this research can enhance our understanding of contemporary culture beyond the phenomenon of social entrepreneurship in itself. In this section I offer a speculative

digression on this matter. I suggest that the notion of 'change' typical of social entrepreneurs may be part of an emerging common sense concerning the contemporary perception of what the 'future' is, and the role of individuals in its realisation.

With the term 'common sense' I refer to the Gramscian notion of 'the spontaneous philosophy of the multitude' (Gramsci, 1971: 421). Common sense is made up of thoughts and beliefs that seem obvious, granted, while they actually imply and reproduce a regime of power, a cultural hegemony. The nucleus of this emerging common sense is the translation of the idea of 'change' into a series of acts by individuals aimed at improving society by targeting precise problems. Importantly, this is one of the current discursive formations that produces the idea of what the 'future' is, or should be, and how it is to be achieved. Of course, this is not a detailed, realistic, project, but rather a 'vision', a projection of what the future can look like and the role of the individual in it.

An example is offered by the phenomenon of gamification, whose narrative revolves around the idea that gamers can find immediate and measurable solutions to concrete problems (Fuchs et. al. 2014). One of the most important advocates of games as a means for 'change' is Jane McGonigal. In her book *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* (2011) she argues that gamers can use their problem-solving skills not only in the context of a digital game, but also, and more importantly, to effectively tackle social and political issues. As Fuchs et. al. put it:

Gaming, according to McGonigal's vision, could and should play a redeeming role. Game designers could become the new social entrepreneurs, and citizens become gamers. From this perspective, gamification thus becomes a technique for enabling greatly ambitious change (Fuchs et. al. 2014: 9)

As can be seen, this narrative replicates the substantial traits of the regime of truth of social entrepreneurship, for it presents social change as the result of a series of independent virtuous actions by individuals; in this case to be carried out through gaming.

A further instance of such a discourse is to be found in the field of fine arts. As Claire Bishop explains, since the 1990s there has been a surge in the number of artists that have engaged in projects of 'socially engaged art, community-based art, experimental communities, dialogic art, littoral art, interventionist art, participatory art, collaborative art, contextual art and (most recently) social practice' (Bishop, 2012: 1). This phenomenon has been produced and reproduced by a narrative that re-frames and re-evaluates the figure of the artist in relation to the social impact of her or his work, redefining what is "real" or "true" art in terms of its ability to change people's lives or to solve social issues (Bishop, 2012). What is involved is an idea of the future as the outcome of the independent actions of individuals conducted through a variety of means, for example, entrepreneurship, games, art practices.

Even political parties are gradually moving towards a similar notion of change and a different future. I had the chance to observe this when I attended FutureFest 2015, the Nesta flagship event that has taken place in London annually since 2013. The aim of the FutureFest is precisely to 'inspire people to change the world' (FutureFest, 2016). It features a series of talks, workshops, events and exhibitions starring the most eclectic range of guests: from Edward Snowden to Vivienne Westwood, from politicians to hackers, and even a 'food futurologist' and a 'future mixologist' (FutureFest, 2015). The common thread being that any means (from hacking to fashion design, but with a special focus on new technologies) can be deployed virtuously, in order to 'change' how things are, and to positively contribute to the pursuit of a better future. Spending two entire days at the FutureFest gave me a unique opportunity to effect an 'ethnography of the future', or, more precisely: an ethnography of the idea of the future embraced by the wider scene of social and technological innovation, which Nesta has successfully captured, promoted, and branded.

At the FutureFest 2015, I attended a number of debates in the section 'Politics'. For the purpose of this conclusive section, I concentrate on one that featured a debate between representatives of what was called the 'new politics', e.g. members of the Pirate Party, Podemos and the Five Star Movement; and representatives of the 'old' parties: Green, and Labour MPs, and a member of a Tory think tank. The frame of the discussion was built on the opposition between a 'new' and an 'old' political paradigm. The distinguishing feature of Podemos, the Pirate Party and the M5S – representing the 'new' politics - was the idea of the party as a platform to enable individuals to act and in this way to make an impact, while refusing any attachment to any notion of political ideology. When I interviewed the M5S MP on this matter he straightforwardly told me that "ideologies are dead" and that "we don't need ideologies but solutions". On a similar track, the member of Podemos remarked that "there are no more left and right, but bottom up and top down!". The reaction from the side of the "old" politics was surprisingly accommodating: the Labour MP humbly recognised that the old way of doing politics is actually dying, but that at the same time one should be careful to "not throw the baby out with the bathwater".

In lieu of the distinction between left and right the 'new' politics seems to articulate that between 'establishment parties' and 'people parties', where the first is understood as a residual of 'old' party politics, while in the latter is thought to lay the promise of the 'new politics'. The 'new' politics is narrated as grassroots, and promoted as a form of politics that does not put in place a hierarchy between politicians and the average citizen. As the M5S member said: "everybody can be a politician, everybody can write laws!". When Geoff Mulgan (Nesta CEO) launched a quick survey in the audience, asking who would stand in favour of one or the other concept, the results were strikingly in favour of the 'new' politics. Mulgan then, in a serio-comic manner commented: 'Well, I guess many of you are actually funding a new party, how many?'. At least five people raised their hands.

The 'new' politics articulates a paradigm based on the empowerment and responsibilities of individuals, and replicates the discourse that wants 'everybody to be everything' (e.g. 'everybody is creative', 'everybody is a changemaker', and so on) in a hyperbolic exasperation of the perception of the virtually infinite possibilities that characterises the post-modern soul. Furthermore, it dismisses any organised system of values and beliefs - i.e. ideology - in favour of practical and effective solutions.

The examples of gamification and participatory art, and the ethnographic data from the FutureFest, 'new' politics, provide evidence in support of the idea that the experiential and individualistic post-politics and ethics that constitutes the kernel of the regime of truth of social entrepreneurship pertains to domains that exceed social entrepreneurship to mark a wider cultural atmosphere. The contemporary spirit seems to be ever more inclined to identify in concrete solutions to specific problems a desirable form of political action. For this reason, the findings of this thesis could be used to further the understanding of contemporary ethical and political culture, especially in regard to one of the current visions of 'change' and 'future'. In the next section I venture a hypothesis about the nature of this vision.

#### Future after future

I would argue that the vision of change and future of social entrepreneurship is of particular interest in so far as it derives from and reacts to an underlying sense of loss of the future, which is visible in the scepticism towards planned long-term political actions. In other words, such ideas of future can be interpreted as a reaction to, or a result of, the cultural death of the future. Put differently, it occupies the only space left vacant by the collapse of the possibility of imagining a future. To this extent, it signals what is still possible to imagine, while indicating the context that has made this possibility possible, while making other possibilities impossible.

Such context is marked by two broad tendencies: depoliticisation, and the surge of the 'ecologies of fears' (Katz, 1995; quoted in Swyngedouw, 2010: 217). According to Erik Swyngedouw, depoliticisation and apocalyptic imaginaries are inter-related phenomena:

the presentation of climate change as a global humanitarian cause produces a thoroughly depoliticised image, one that does not revolve around choosing one trajectory rather than another, one that is not articulated with specific political programs or socio-ecological projects or revolutions' (Swyngedouw, 2010: 219).

Swyngedouw argues that the apocalyptic fantasies with which climate change is discursively constructed de facto remove the heterogeneities of society and of political subjectivities in favour of a universalised notion of Humanity, which is in danger and must be saved. Drawing on Žižek, he maintains that such a narrative suppresses all the particular political struggles and their complexities, and replaces them with a simplified universal struggle against what is presented as 'the end of the world' (Swyngedouw, 2010: 221).

This is a neurotic discourse, which puts the subject in an unavoidable impasse: s/he is divided between the fear of the end of the world; and the impossibility of doing anything to change it, as it is his or her own daily practices that ultimately will cause the world to end. In other words: it is because of human's lifestyles that humanity will purportedly end. The subject is then caught in a short circuit marked by the lacerating awareness that to ensure her or his own life s/he should stop living the only life s/he knows. This antithesis does not find a further development in a political dialectic, but has its sole resolution either in a vaguely transcendent or openly illusory hope of salvation, or in the fear of the apocalypse.

Swyngedouw points out that the peculiar trait of today's apocalypse is that there is no redemption, it is not 'apocalypse now' but 'apocalypse forever' (Swyngedouw, 2010: 219). Apocalyptic fantasies do not lead to imagining an alternative ethical and political horizon: the idea of the future collapses since the very possibility of a future is

endangered by every act in the present. To express it in terms of a vignette: the contemporary subject is stuck in the paradoxical and insoluble position of one who is watching a documentary on climate change, on a MacBook Pro assembled in China by exploited workers, eating a chicken breast full of hormones, which has been cooked using gas, and purchased in a supermarket that has been reached driving a car that needs petrol to work, and whose owners may well invest in toxic derivatives.

The feeling of the approaching apocalypse and the impossibility of imagining an alternative is the existential condition that typifies the contemporary subject. A condition that Frederic Jameson has brilliantly synthesised in his famous phrase: 'it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism' (Jameson, 2003: 73). In this context, it is highly significant to look at what is left of the idea of the future. Social entrepreneurs provide a case study to answer this question. They are brave enough to dare to talk about the future in an optimistic and enthusiastic manner, and to also show huge confidence in the success of their vision. But what is at stake seems to be the obsessive neurosis of a subject who keeps on acting on single issues, tackling individual effects, as a way to escape from the real political question: how to think of an alternative political and economic paradigm? How to think of the end of capitalism disjoined from the end of the world?

Social entrepreneurs are increasingly aware of that. In June 2016 I had the chance to present some of the findings of this research in Turin and Bologna, to an audience comprised mostly of social entrepreneurs. They talked openly about their struggle with the difficulties of surviving in the market, and their precarious financial conditions that leave them with little time and energy to engage in collective forms of action. Both presentations ended with a lively and passionate debate on how to break through the iron cage of neoliberal capitalism, and how to think through the ambivalence of social entrepreneurship to develop a more consistent political discourse. I do not have an answer to these questions, but I hope that this research can be of help in tackling them.

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