



The unbearable emptiness of entrepreneurship

Philip Roscoe

review of:

Campbell Jones and André Spicer (2009) *Unmasking the entrepreneur*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar. (PB, pp. 160, £19.95, ISBN 9781848448445).

In *Unmasking the Entrepreneur*, Campbell Jones and Andre Spicer set about producing a much needed critical account of the entrepreneur and its place in contemporary society. This is a project with which we should have much sympathy, and there are certainly important questions to be asked. How, for example, did the word ‘entrepreneur’ move from Cantillon’s original sense of an administrator grappling with uncertainty (Spengler, 1954) to a contemporary trope modelled on Gates, Jobs and Branson? How did a loose grouping of activities classed as ‘entrepreneurship’ come to be seen simultaneously as policy prescription and a social virtue? How did the word become an aspect of social identity and aspiration, replacing the banal but accurate term ‘small-business owner’? While the discipline of entrepreneurship research has done much to investigate the genesis of new firms, it tends, as Jones and Spicer note, to the instrumental and the uncritical. Jones and Spicer, by contrast, seek to *unmask* the entrepreneur – where the project of unmasking pays homage to an ancient Greek conception of truth, the revealing of things as they really are (4). They promise us a ‘theoretical journey *through* abstraction that keeps an eye on the dangers of theoreticism’ (6), clarifying existing concepts and building new ones through which they will examine what entrepreneurship might be (5). As readers we accompany them on their journey, hopeful that they will provoke and challenge our conceptions of what it means to be an entrepreneur.

Jones and Spicer’s argument makes some considerable demands on their readers. But it may be summarized as follows: the entrepreneur is an empty vessel set in the matrix of capitalist social relations, which, through the gratuitous dispersal of large sums of money gifted to him/her by way of these same social relations, becomes a tool of capitalist domination. As Jones and Spicer put it, entrepreneurship is ‘a placeholder in the history of the political and economic struggle over valuation and right to waste’ (70). They see entrepreneurship as inextricably linked with excess, and to be an entrepreneur necessitates excessive behaviour, characterized by the most wanton

dissipation: ‘throwing parties...and indulging in endless rounds of golf’ (68). The inevitable examples are Richard Branson, the late Steve Fossett (Branson’s rival and then partner in the race to circumnavigate the globe in a balloon) and US businessman-cum-spaceman-for-a-week Dennis Tito. Jones and Spicer theorise this golf-loving, party-going, and space-visiting ‘entrepreneurial’ excess through Bataille, positioning expenditure within the struggle and contestation of capitalist economies: the ‘real job description of the entrepreneur is... the management of wilful destruction’ (*ibid.*), while the day job of managing production (of being, for example, a small business owner) only commands a managerial wage. For Jones and Spicer, the entrepreneur’s excessive spending is not a by-product, or even a direct result, of the surpluses earned by entrepreneurial activity; the entrepreneur does not even *earn* that money. Instead, the entrepreneur ‘*attracts* such a massive amount of resources’ (*ibid.*) to spend on the promise that it will be spent excessively. The use of ‘attract’ allows the authors to pre-empt the objection that the accumulation of capital is a crucial part of the entrepreneurial process. In an *ex post* analysis, entrepreneurial rent has been gifted to the entrepreneur in return for complicity in the repression of labour.

Unfortunately for Jones and Spicer’s argument, the claim that excess *in itself* characterises entrepreneurship seems tenable only on the basis of a circular definition. Corporate men are also guilty of excess, and this does not make them entrepreneurs; alternatively, Jones and Spicer’s assertion may be seen off empirically by those more careful entrepreneurs working in charities, the third sector, or social organisations. It appears that excess is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for entrepreneurship, nor vice versa. Indeed, to concentrate attention on the excessive behaviour of entrepreneurs threatens to empty entrepreneurship research of much of its substantive content. Moreover, few scholars would deny that the narrative of the heroic entrepreneur is one of retrospective justification (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006); the notion of the entrepreneur as a uniquely special person has been questioned in mainstream entrepreneurship studies for many years (Gartner, 1988). Jones and Spicer quote Žižek: ‘Bill Gates is no genius, good or bad, he’s just an opportunist who knew how to seize the moment, and as such, the result of the capitalist system run amok’ (83). Žižek’s analysis reduces the agency of an entrepreneur and considers him/her, to some extent, the product of chance and dumb luck. Perhaps this is not so far from the vision of the Austrian school in economics: Kirzner is explicit in his account of entrepreneurship as a process of experimentation, where numerous entrepreneurs chip away at our ‘sheer ignorance’ (Kirzner, 1997). Inevitably most fail, while some reap extraordinary rewards. The difference is political: where Jones and Spicer revile the mechanism that rewards opportunity discovery and exploitation, Kirzner regards it as a social and political good.

Throughout *Unmasking the Entrepreneur*, Jones and Spicer make freely interchangeable use of ‘entrepreneur’, ‘entrepreneurship’, and ‘entrepreneurship discourse’. In the book, these terms all refer to the same sets of repressive social relations within the capitalist system, and it is from these social relations that a critical study will set us free. *Unmasking the Entrepreneur* therefore moves to a discussion of this nexus of social relations, the empty kernel/sublime object/Lacanian Real of entrepreneurship, terms that are also interchangeable and all point to a common (non)object. Jones and Spicer conclude that the ‘consistent and congenital’ (37) failure

of entrepreneurship research to define or identify the entrepreneur is a success in itself, a failure 'which by its very act of repetition, brings to light a deeper and more profound truth' (*ibid.*). Entrepreneurship itself is a 'paradoxical, incomplete and worm ridden symbolic structure which posits an impossible and incomprehensible object at its centre' (38). In the strictest Lacanian sense, entrepreneurship discourse does not exist (*ibid.*); on the other hand, it offers 'a narrative structure to the fantasy that co-ordinates desire...it points to an unattainable and only vaguely specified object, and directs desire towards this object' (*ibid.*). As Lacan reminds us, unattainability is a virtue, for if the desired object should ever be attained, it is 'changed inexplicitly into a gift of shit' (39). So would it be for the entrepreneur, Jones and Spicer imagine. One wonders in passing how this tragic apotheosis might be manifested to the entrepreneur; literally perhaps, as he wakes one morning to find that a passing rat-boy has crammed the door-handle of his Maserati with dog muck.

Such a highly theorised account of a non-existent and unattainable entrepreneurial discourse sits at odds with the prosaic range of activities that, for Jones and Spicer, constitute entrepreneurship: pimping, hustling, manoeuvring in the grey economy, and even begging. They quote Shaver and Scott's (1991) twenty year-old saw – 'Entrepreneurship is like obscenity: nobody agrees what it is, but we all know it when we see it' – yet go on to define an entrepreneur in naïve terms as someone who is 'willing to take extreme risks...aspirational ...able to perceive gaps in the market...able to persevere' (95). *Anyone* who takes risks (including risks to their person) and acts in a strategic manner to achieve a certain end should be considered an entrepreneur. Thus a pimp, a hustler, a cockle-picker, the homeless man on the book's cover, and a ballooning captain of industry are all entrepreneurs (86f). Jones and Spicer want to use the term to refer simultaneously to super-rich, decadent business people and economic outcasts. They exploit this tension in pursuit of their demonstration of linguistic exclusion; all of these people are entrepreneurs, but only those who are capable of wasteful and excessive consumption can lay legitimate claim to the title 'entrepreneur'. In Jones and Spicer's down-the-rabbit-hole-world, titles matter: it is the title that confers wealth and status, and not the other way round.

Here Jones and Spicer might have grasped the lifeline offered by entrepreneurship research, which, having struggled with definitions for many years, now concentrates on the entrepreneurial *process* and insists on a novelty of means-ends combinations as the defining feature of entrepreneurial activity (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000). It is worth noting that entrepreneurship research considers excessive risk taking to be characteristic of failure; entrepreneurship is often mundane, risk averse, calculative and organisational (Shane, 2003: 106). As Drucker (1999) points out, setting up yet another Mexican restaurant in an American suburb does not make one an entrepreneur, risky and difficult though it may be. The advantage of the Shane/Drucker/Kirzner position on entrepreneurship is that it gives us a rule with which to navigate the shifting sands of Jones and Spicer's argument: Not all economic actors, however risk taking and desperate, are entrepreneurs. While Jones and Spicer define cockle-pickers as entrepreneurs in order to claim that capitalist social relations prevent them from enjoying entrepreneurial super-profits, the Austrian position makes the much more straightforward claim that cockle-pickers do not enjoy entrepreneurial super-profits

because they are not entrepreneurs. The cockle-pickers are miserable victims of criminal exploitation, but this has nothing to do with entrepreneurship.

In order to explore further the boundaries of entrepreneurship, Jones and Spicer even consider whether the Marquis de Sade was an entrepreneur. They argue that de Sade is eligible for consideration as an entrepreneur on the basis of his unsuccessful attempts to transform the contemporary institutions of sexuality through his shocking writing (76).¹ The authors conclude eventually that de Sade is not, after all, an entrepreneur: He failed to achieve any institutional change, he was economically unsuccessful, and was cruel. This marks a change in the book's narrative: Whereas previously the authors campaigned for the admittance of excluded actors to the status of entrepreneur, de Sade is a different matter on account of 'his patent inability and even unwillingness to recognise the other'. They go on to make this point more generally, claiming that 'the lack of an account of ethics is one of the fatal failings of current work on social and institutional entrepreneurship' (84). Jones and Spicer are now beginning to talk about what they believe should be the core concerns of entrepreneurship and have *themselves* excluded Sade from the category of entrepreneur on account of his moral solipsism. So the book moves from a critical assessment of entrepreneurship discourse as a political placeholder where exclusion is repressive and unjustifiable, to a normative conception of entrepreneurship where exclusion is morally justified. Such a move is unfortunate for the pimps, thugs and hustlers who, wrongfully excluded from the category by the holders of capital, are likely to find themselves appropriately excluded on the grounds of their inability to empathise with the other, namely, the victims of their pimping, thuggery, and hustle.

In the closing pages of the book, Jones and Spicer reflect upon what entrepreneurship should entail. They claim (with some justification) that a Schumpeterian definition of entrepreneurship privileges the actor who combines factors of production (the labour of others) rather than the factors themselves (103). They suggest a 'general entrepreneurship' (following Bataille) that throws into relief the entrepreneurship of the Other (following Levinas) (107). Such a general definition would see creative capacity in all labour (following Negri), set against a 'restrictive definition' of entrepreneur as one who is able to capture, limit and close down the creativity and innovation of the other (108). Once again, the authors' concern with definition appears to centre on the possibilities for individual action afforded by the classification as entrepreneur. At the heart of their account lies an unspoken understanding that linguistic categories have a real and defining power over material outcomes. For Jones and Spicer, a reconstruction of the entrepreneurial enterprise must therefore come through a critique and rebuilding of the language that surrounds entrepreneurship. Granting that there is quite some truth in this claim (Hjorth and Steyaert, 2004), it is disappointing to see the authors fail to carry their assertion through to a meaningful conclusion. Instead, they conclude by expressing the hope that 'if you are an entrepreneur, this book might have helped you think about the vast array of things outside of you, and outside of your enterprise, that have made you and your enterprise possible' (115). That's a nice sentiment, and I truly

1 Interested readers will note that de Sade's prose is the 'sexual version of the complex architectural dishes produced by post-revolutionary French chefs such as Carême and his followers' (77).

hope that some of those ‘cruel and vindictive’ actors, ‘surveying the landscape from however tall an office or however elegant a jet’ (*ibid.*), will hear it.

Critical or otherwise, Jones and Spicer’s project of teasing out the concept of the entrepreneur seems fatally compromised almost from the outset, and this by one little fact: They simply have not done their homework. Of course, no one could accuse them of being narrowly read. In the bibliography, one finds Foucault, Lacan, Levinas, Nietzsche, Deleuze, Guattari, Žižek, Bataille, Negri, de Certeau, and de Sade, among others. But a reader cannot help but notice that, for a book that claims to be excavating the theoretical underpinnings of the entrepreneur and developing genealogies of entrepreneurial value, there is not much entrepreneurship literature here. Jones and Spicer’s commitment not to be bogged down by disciplinary categories does not free them from the need to engage with the disciplinary literature, if only to avoid looking foolish – and there are, on this point, some really glaring omissions. There is no sign of Ted Baker’s (2005) seminal study of entrepreneurial bricolage: Of making do, the crook, the hustler, the small time trader, the very things that Jones and Spicer claim are absent from entrepreneurship research. As they find functionalist approaches theoretically problematic, one might expect to see Sarasvathy’s (2001) concept of effectuation, or even Görling and Rehn’s (2008) account of accidental entrepreneurship. The problems of agency-led, individualistic approaches to entrepreneurs are well understood and discussed in the existing literature (Ucbasaran, 2008). Jones and Spicer lament the absence of accounts of ethics in entrepreneurship; interested readers can find the literature of entrepreneurship and ethics reviewed by Hannafey (2003). Finally, and most tellingly, Jones and Spicer assert that ‘the ancient activity of charity is now “social entrepreneurship”’ (10). Unfortunately, it is not: the ancient act of charity is now philanthropy, and the subject of an entirely different set of moral and social arguments. Social entrepreneurship quite specifically refers to the use of organisational forms familiar from business and the motor provided by profits in order to solve social problems (Dees, 1998). Social entrepreneurship sets itself against the very social relations that the authors condemn; it seeks to ensure a redistribution of wealth to the factors of production, and pursues social justice and moral goods. Social entrepreneurs invoke the discursive power of social relations in their *favour*: They take on and use of the title ‘entrepreneur’ to strengthen their confidence, their reputation, and their fledgling ventures (Parkinson and Howorth, 2008). Social entrepreneurship is on Jones and Spicer’s side, and yet the whole strand of literature is missing from the book.

While reading *Unmasking the Entrepreneur* one is reminded of Humpty-Dumpty: ‘When I use a word... it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less’. Throughout the book, it seems that Jones and Spicer can only sustain their arguments through the use of a naïve concept of entrepreneurship that invokes private jets, sports cars, designer clothes, endless golf, and all the other elements of conspicuous consumption. For entrepreneurship research, a focus on process (Steyaert, 2007; Ucbasaran, Westhead and Wright, 2001) and outcome (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000) has liberated scholars – and business people too – to consider entrepreneurship in a much broader and often more socially productive sense.

references

- Baker, T. and R.E. Nelson (2005) 'Creating something from nothing: Resource construction through entrepreneurial bricolage', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 50(3): 329-366.
- Boltanski, L. and L. Thévenot (2006) *On justification: Economies of worth*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Dees, J.G (1998) *The meaning of 'social entrepreneurship'*. Stanford University: Draft report for the Kauffman Center for Entrepreneurial Leadership.
- Drucker, P. (1999) *Innovation and entrepreneurship*. Butterworth, Oxford.
- Gartner, W. (1988) "'Who is the entrepreneur?" is the wrong question', *American Journal of Small Business*, 12(4): 11-31.
- Görling, S. and A. Rehn (2008) 'Accidental ventures - a materialist reading of opportunity and entrepreneurial potential', *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 24(2): 94-102.
- Hannafey, F.T. (2003) 'Entrepreneurship and ethics: A literature review', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 46(2): 99-110.
- Hjorth, D. and C. Steyaert (2004) *Narrative and discursive approaches in entrepreneurship*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Kirzner, I.M. (1997) 'Entrepreneurial discovery and the competitive market process: An austrian approach', *Journal of Economic Literature*, 35(1): 60-85.
- Parkinson, C. and C. Howorth (2008) 'The language of social entrepreneurs', *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development*, 20(3): 285-309.
- Sarasvathy, S.D. (2001) 'Causation and effectuation: Toward a theoretical shift from economic inevitability to entrepreneurial contingency', *Academy of Management Review*, 26(2): 243-263.
- Shane, S. (2003) *A general theory of entrepreneurship*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Shane, S. and S. Venkataraman (2000) 'The promise of entrepreneurship as a field of research', *Academy of Management Review*, 25: 217-226.
- Shaver, K.G. and L.R. Scott (1991) 'Person, process, choice: The psychology of new venture creation', *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 16(2): 23-45.
- Spengler, J.J. (1954) 'Richard Cantillon: First of the moderns', *The Journal of Political Economy*, 62(4): 281-295.
- Steyaert, C. (2007) "'Entrepreneurship" as a conceptual attractor? A review of process theories in 20 years of entrepreneurship studies', *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development*, 19(6): 453-477.
- Ucbasaran, D. (2008) 'The fine "science" of entrepreneurial decision-making', *Journal of Management Studies*, 45(1): 221-237.
- Ucbasaran, D., P. Westhead and M. Wright (2001) 'The focus of entrepreneurial research: Contextual and process issues', *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 25(4): 57-80.

the authors

Philip Roscoe is Lecturer in Management at the School of Management, University of St Andrews. He has been assistant professor in management at Sup de Co Montpellier, and a post-doctoral researcher in the entrepreneurship department of Lancaster University Management School. He has a PhD in Management from Lancaster University, an MPhil in medieval Arabic thought from Oxford University, and a BA in theology from university of Leeds. He has also been a journalist and small business founder, but sadly never an entrepreneur.
E-mail: pjr10@st-andrews.ac.uk