

13. In defense of the comfort zone: against the hegemony of creative destruction

Jerzy Kociatkiewicz and Monika Kostera

Creative destruction as permanent (dis)order

We are against entrepreneurship because it distorts perspective, foregrounding the unusual, the unprecedented and the unsettled, and obscures the humdrum sociality that enables all the processes of organizing, including entrepreneurial ones, to take place. While activities that might be¹ subsumed under the term entrepreneurship have, for a long time, constituted a part of the organizational and managerial repertoire, the emergence of entrepreneurship as a significant academic discipline can largely be dated to the last decades of the twentieth century. While it is possible to find some predecessors – for example, Michael Perelman (1995) champions the nineteenth century economist David Ames Wells – the generally agreed-on foundational basis for entrepreneurship research (and leading, eventually, to virtual beatification of the figure of the entrepreneur) is Joseph Schumpeter's analysis of business cycles culminating in *Capitalism, socialism and democracy* (1942). Schumpeter's work, while introducing terms and framings crucial for entrepreneurship studies, was firmly rooted in the author's home discipline of economics. Only since the late 1970s did the discipline emerge "from groups of isolated scholars doing research on small business to an international community of departments, institutes and foundations promoting research on new and high-growth firms" (Aldrich 2012, p. 1240). These days, the discipline's claimed domain tends to be much broader, and most decidedly not limited to business ventures. A recent literature review article described it as follows:

Entrepreneurship refers primarily to an economic function that is carried out by individuals, entrepreneurs, acting independently or within organizations, to perceive and create new opportunities and to introduce their ideas into the market, under uncertainty, by making decisions about location, product design, resource use, institutions, and reward systems. (Carlsson et al. 2013, p. 914)

Bearing in mind the increasingly expansive usage of the term "market," any creative, novel, or simply new activity (within or outside organizations) can be seen as a valid area of interest for entrepreneurship studies. We would not see it as particularly objectionable or even noteworthy (boundaries between academic disciplines are, and should be, extremely porous), if not for the set of problematic assumptions dominating much of entrepreneurship writing. According to modern classics, such as Bengt Johannisson (2005), entrepreneurship relies on transgressing boundaries and challenging structures and institutions. Entrepreneurship is a dynamic and vigorous lifestyle, a playful and creative approach to life and work (Johannisson 2005; Hjorth et al. 2003). The entrepreneur engages in creative destruction (Schumpeter 1949), questions the old and received, is nonplussed by tradition. He or she is always ready to test the boundaries of what is real and possible, to explore new grounds and perhaps establish something new and unique in place of what is or is becoming obsolete in his or her energetic

¹ Or, as we hope to demonstrate, might more usefully not be.

presence. Entrepreneurship is a paradoxical activity: a kind of anarchic organizing, a revolution and evolution at the same time, both a vision, as well as action, alone and with others, dependently and independently, making use of activity and reflection (Johannisson 2005). Even the description of entrepreneurial processes needs a new approach, getting rid of old notions and definitions. Old management books prove to be insufficient to embrace the immediacy, spontaneity, creation and playfulness that are at heart of the entrepreneurial engagement (Hjorth 2001). Indeed, the old fashioned terms emphasizing structure and strategy need to be replaced with a dictionary based on vocabularies ready to hold such ideas as passion and transcendence (Johannisson et al. 1997). Nothing is regarded as stable or given: even resources, the usual object of care of management, are not something given but can be extended, even created. The environment does not impose limitations like in traditional management thinking, but provides an endless space of possibilities (Johannisson 2005). Being entrepreneurial means engaging in the interplay between the agency of the individual, of the event and of the environment. This interplay is powered by innovation and renewal, affirmative of identities in the making. Everything about it is creative. It is both a perfectly emergent and immanent process of organizing. The process becomes a result and, at the same time, the medium for its emergence: bringing together of individualities and collectivities. Johannisson envisages the entrepreneur as a bricoleur, assembles and puts together new forms from the given, using things, processes, ideas and people as her or his building material. She or he can also be regarded as an organizational artist: transgressing constantly the known, seeking the original, needing a free space where they do not have to put up with the controlling social institutions.

The entrepreneur not only makes new realities happen around him or her but works actively to convince others to adapt to their vision (Johannisson 2005). The vision has to become a necessity for them, and where destruction and creation merge into organizing. It is, however, not a stable kind of organizing, but reliant on the unpredictable and subject to incessant change in time. Everything must nowadays be *entrepreneurial*, from ordinary employment (Fleming 2017) to the university (Connell 2019). Entrepreneurship replaces production, argues Wendy Brown (2017), putting investment capital itself before any of its productive uses and employments. The person has become entrepreneurialized and disconnected from context and even meditation has been turned into an entrepreneurial fashion, as Ron Purser argues in his book on mindfulness, aptly titled *McMindfulness* (Purser 2019). It is clear that entrepreneurship has become mythologized (Kostera 2008), and it has become so in order to serve as a neoliberal mindset (Purser 2019), a glamorous make-up of the stark reality of precarization (Standing 2011) and a sleek legitimization of growing social inequality and misery (Bauman 2011).

Such conceptualization, coupled with the understanding of entrepreneurship as a positive force in society, underpins, or at least parallels, the more popular imperative of stepping (or being pushed) out of one's comfort zone. The ascendance of narratives vilifying the comfort zone accompanies the transformation of global society which Zygmunt Bauman described as a passage from solid modernity towards liquid modernity (2000) and interregnum (2012): a world where structures are not only transient and fluid, but also dysfunctional and unreliable. In this light, we see the discourse of entrepreneurship as detrimental to finding the necessary collective structural solutions to the multiple social and environmental crises challenging contemporary organizations and societies. We ground our argument in a longitudinal study of alternative organizations focused on the common good, and their participants concerns, difficulties and solutions regarding the possibility of offering the participants a sense of home and the comfort of belonging. Interestingly, one of us applied (successfully) for funding for one

of this project's phases (the second, most extensive phase research-wise) framed as a study in of ecological entrepreneurship (ecopreneurship)². The label was soon abandoned, as the social actors were usually distancing themselves in rather categorical words from any kind of "entrepreneurship", while reacting more neutrally to "management" and completely positively to "organization" and "organizing".

Method

The empirical material derives from a multi-sited study of alternative organizations conducted by one of the authors. Organizational ethnography allows the researcher to gain insight from the perspective of the social actors in the field, thus acquiring local knowledge, but also being able to understand the development of wider processes and their cultural meaning thanks to an immersion in the field (Van Maanen 1988; Watson 1994; Kostera 2007; Pachirat 2018). The entire study we refer to in this text has been in progress for seven years at the time of writing and concerns several layers of structure and culture construction in the field. The study touches several topics, including the theme of home which we are addressing in this chapter.

The initial phase took place in Polish work organizations and later several UK based ones were added. Many of them are cooperatives, but the collection also contains small and family businesses, informal organizations and public organizations. The contact developed through gatekeepers and networks and in the most intense phase, made possible thanks to a EU Marie Curie grant that one of us held, the number of studied organizations included 18 UK and 16 Polish organizations. Later 12 were selected for more prolonged contact and currently the number is down to one UK based and three Polish. The field, albeit consisting of organizations holding a common central characteristic, i.e. being value driven and not focused on profit as their first and fundamental goal³, displayed many differing social goals and organizational forms, which enabled the maximum variation case selection approach (Flyvbjerg 2011).

The main methods used were dependent on the phase of the study. In the first phase, in-depth recurrent interviews with a limited number of key informants from each organization were the dominant method, along with brief non participant and direct observations (Kostera 2007; Czarniawska 2014). In the second phase formal transcribed interviews were still the dominant method, however, instances direct observation were now more extensive and longer. In the third (current) phase, the prevalent method are informal (non-transcribed) interviews, complemented by direct and participant observations. All the names presented in this text are pseudonyms, as we were concerned about the privacy of the social actors in our field and, following an ethnographic tradition, did not want to publicize their identity.

The material was, for the purpose of this chapter, analyzed by means of narrative methods (Gabriel 2000; Goodall 2000). We were looking for plots and metaphors pertaining to the idea of home and homeliness. The theme occurred spontaneously and was one of the fundamental metaphors often used both in formal and informal communication by the social actors in the field. It appeared in many of the interviews and conversations. We selected a few of the occurrences that we consider either typical or interesting and illuminating. By focusing on

² European Union Marie Curie Fellowship Programme: FP7, 627429 ECOPREN FP7 PEOPLE 2013 IEF

³ More about this study in Kociatkiewicz et al. (in review).

stories, we were both looking for ways of knowing (Gergen 1994) in the field, as well as aiming at gaining insight into the modes of sensemaking and sense-giving in the studied organizations (Weick 1995).

The entirety of the field can be described as alternative organizations, which recently are gaining increasing interest among organization scholars. Parker et al. (2007, 2014) call for a study of organizations outside of the managerialist mainstream, to better understand both the diversity and the alternatives to the limited textbook population. Among the publications addressing this gap are: “real utopias” or democratic workplaces (Wright 2010), social movements (Reedy et al. 2016), differing management styles and modes (Gibson-Graham et al. 2013), the re-introduction of the commons in management practices (Łapniewska 2017), and many others.

Comfort zone creativity

While ideas of adventure, heroic tales and notions of creation and creativity were very strongly present in the collected material (Kostera 2017), another, equally prominent motif emerged, often and sometimes very intensely, in many of the studied organizations: that of homeliness. Building a non-antagonistic relationship between “home” and “work” was a common concern among the employees, with a widely spread belief that the workplace should be a kind of a home for the members of the organization. Thus, the issue of homeliness appeared often in discussions and in interpretations of work practices provided by the workers, introduced into the discourse almost invariably by the employees rather than as a result of managerial initiative. Many organizations provided space for the workers where they could keep their private belongings and spend time together or alone. Sometimes they also encouraged them to use the space originally prepared for customers; for example, the employees of a vegan bar, The Vegan Place, tend to occupy some of the tables in the bar area, at times of less intense customer traffic but sometimes also at busy times. It was not unusual for customers to look somewhat askew at the happy company of cooperants chatting away at a table, while they had to wait at the door for some of the other lunch consumers to finish and leave their place for the next hungry person.

Some organizations depicted themselves as providing a kind of a home not only for the workers but also for the local residents. Thus, the employees of The Good Cooperative, a cooperative grocery store, prided themselves in the fact that the customers often struck up conversations among each other, while waiting in the queue. This was supported by the observations in the store. People often seemed happy to chat among each other, as well as with the employees (much more often than is the norm in Polish shops). On several occasions the cooperative deliberately provided their customers with cosy spots such as chairs and marked outdoor spaces where they could socialize after they have finished shopping. Several times, The Good Cooperative organized bigger and more formalized parties for customers and employees alike. On one occasion, it took place in the street outside the shop, and on others in spaces borrowed or rented from other alternative organizations. This organization also regularly held parties for the employees, either in its main office or in a space provided by another cooperative. On these events, people assembled to talk and socialize, but also to listen to lectures, take part in seminars and cook food together.

Premises utilized by many of the studied organizations, including the offices used for some time by The Good Cooperative, consisted of minimally adapted apartments. Consequently,

these often included empty or underutilized spaces such as a sofa room or a bathroom with an actual bath as part of a small administrative office. These were often used by off-duty employees (and sometimes their acquaintances unaffiliated with the organization) to rest, sleep, or take a shower. Such usage was rarely contested: for the most part, everyone involved seemed happy enough to share. The Dragon Coop, another Polish enterprise selling fresh vegetables and other local produce, used a tiny room to provide space for members to socialize during the winter months. In the summer, this space was opened up onto the street, and customers were invited to share the use. One of the interviewees expressed a conviction that working there felt like being at home, because “there is a sense of freedom possible only in a place when one feels good [...] and can *be oneself*” (Łucja).

But such sense of being at home is not necessarily limited to sharing a “homely” space or, indeed, to being present on the premises. Eric, a member of the English social enterprise Starlight offering conference and working space, explained that he started to feel at home when he stopped obsessing about being present at work.

I feel comfortable being myself at home. I don't worry about having a spat with people at home, because I know it's part of the process of understanding. And I feel a certain kind of kinetic energy when I'm at home. The kind of energy that comes from not worrying too much about the little things, focusing on the big things. It's about ignoring the chipped paint and instead, tuning into the vibe. (Eric)

Likewise, Zofia from GreenLife, a marketplace for independent vendors selling local organic produce in Warsaw, pointed out that both she (a founder and one of the key organizers) and the other workers needed to have free time away from work in order to be able to feel at home in the workplace. It is necessary to be able to disconnect, to have a life independent from work tasks and concerns. Work provides the organizers with a sense of stability and comfort, of coming back to, and being able to get away from, something well known, personal and social. It is in this sense that we find the notion of “home” particularly interesting. It recurs as a motif, signifying not only belonging, but familiarity and routine.

This becomes particularly visible in instances when a clear distinction is kept between “work” and “not work”. For example, employees at EduGamers, a successful and welcoming work organization focused on creating and running educational games for corporate and public sector clients, maintain a clear distinction between different spheres of life. Agnieszka, one of the employees proclaimed: “people here treat work as work, not as everything, not as the whole world.” Diana, a co-founder of EduGamers, mirrored Zofia in insisting that people needed to have a life and time away from work in order to feel engaged and connected. But, she added, they also needed to be in control of their work, without necessarily sharing or making transparent all of their work activities.

Sometimes I come [to work] and I look around and I really have no clue what these people are doing. Sometimes I have a reflection that they are more at home than I am – in their work – [...] they do such things, they create games, projects, they talk about things, and I have a feeling that I am disconnected from a number of everyday things that happen. And I have a feeling that this is their world [...]. I have discovered that I enjoy it, that people do different things [...] that I don't know what they're doing. (Diana)

In the same organization there is a strong and recurrent narrative about the homeliness of the workplace. It is something people come back to, something “usual”, “everyday”, a “comfort zone” which one of the interlocutors presented in very proud and loving terms. She emphasized how good it was to be able to return to it over and over again and how it remained “just the same” even after the physical move to another office space.

Several of the cooperants of the Dragon Cooperative who, for one reason or another, had to be away from the shop for a longer time, expressed their “homesickness” to the ethnographer. They admitted to missing the place considerably, to cherishing images from the surrounding area of the city, the light and shadows of the space. At one occasion, during a prolonged observation in the field, the ethnographer was joined by an ex-member who had moved away to the countryside. While being happy there, she also said she missed the cooperative quite a lot. For more than an hour they both sat observing the work in the coop with a smile, and taking photos from time to time. The only difference was that the ethnographer was taking down notes and the ex-member was not. She later explained that she wanted to be there as intensely as possible, to take some of it with her when she went back home. She said that it was “just like before” even if it “had changed quite a bit” – the place has been refurbished and there was much more abundant produce now than it used in “her time”. But this expression: “just like before”, we believe is a key to understand and appreciate the idea of homeliness, so central for these organizations. This as well as the notion of comfort zone – which inspired us to the writing of this text.

Against entrepreneurial hegemony

The above stories describe ethnographic insights from a longitudinal study of small, relatively new alternative organizations. They have been chosen to focus on everyday activities and on homeliness rather than on the heroic accounts of hardship and adventure. We have done so because routine work not only takes up most of the time members devote to these organizations, but also because creation and maintenance of stability is crucial for their longer-term viability: organizations persist only through achieving a certain level of institutionalization: when most of the activities become routinized and humdrum. The alternative organizations in this study have additionally been created in order to create good places to work in; consequently, they are judged by their members through criteria including their homeliness and ability to keep their members within their comfort zones⁴.

And it is here that our opposition to entrepreneurship arises. Almost uniformly, entrepreneurship literature presents familiarity as a trap, a barrier to innovation, an obstacle on the path to growth. “The more you step outside your comfort zone, the more value you can potentially create” proclaims a self-described successful entrepreneur in a recent practitioner-oriented article in an, again, self-described “award-winning quarterly report on management, leadership, and strategy”, published by a reputable academic publisher and affiliated with a respectable university (Maillian Bias 2015, p. 58). Another journal article on technological entrepreneurship, this time directed towards an academic audience praises practices in a technological business incubator where would-be entrepreneurs are “stimulated to step out of their comfort zone” (van Weele et al. 2017, p. 25). Yet another sees the main barrier to flexibility in health-care organizations in the constation that “[m]ost professionals love their comfort-zone”

⁴ We expect this to be a common wish of many workers, but examining the issue on a wider scale lies outside the bounds of the reported study.

(van Gool et al. 2017, p. 194). The examples are fairly random (and all quite recent), but here serve only to illustrate the entrepreneurial viewpoint as prevalent in dominant academic and popular discourse: creative destruction is good, and there is no destruction as creative as that of the comfort zones.

The described situation is a problem both in regards to what we found in our field study, and in regards to a broader socioeconomic problems. The small, busy and innovative organizations of our research, which many may perhaps be tempted to call entrepreneurial (even though many if not most organizers distance themselves from this term, much more strongly than from the notion of “management”), are very definitely examples of the opposite of “creative destruction”. Rather, they are “tame sanctuaries”. The way the notion of the “home” is used here does not necessarily pertain to “work-home balance”. Instead, it *is* the balance. People feel good in a workplace that provides them with a sense of balance. And they are not only largely successful, they also tackle societal issues in ways that creatively destructive ventures of serial entrepreneurs optimizing individual career success over collective good (Sarasvathy et al. 2013) most demonstrably do not. Structures are difficult to build and maintain in our liquid modern society, and the many global problems facing our society can only be tackled through building effective structures for global action. While it could be possible to recuperate the term of entrepreneurship to account for such activity (the terms quiet, modest, or earnest entrepreneurship spring to mind), we believe it is not a fight worth spending our time on. For this reason, for the sake of homeliness and common future, we are against entrepreneurship.

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Abstract

In this chapter we argue that the in stark opposition to creative destruction as applauded by most mainstream writing in the field of entrepreneurship, one of the important and recurrent motifs in organizing are the attempts to acquire and solidify the sense of *homeliness* and familiarity in the workplace. We present material derived from an ethnographic study of alternative organizations and show how these workplaces provide homely spaces and a sense of belonging to participants and other stakeholders. Routine work not only takes up most of the time members devote to these organizations, but is also crucial for the creation and maintenance of stability, itself necessary for their longer-term viability: organizations persist only when they achieve a certain level of routinization, institutionalizing commonplace processes and activities. We argue that creation and presentation of the comfort zones for their members is a vital function of these organizations rather than an impediment to their growth, and that the widespread glorification of instability is harmful to management, organizations and society.

