Barefoot entrepreneurs

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Abstract
This article makes a contribution to critical entrepreneurship studies through exploring ‘barefoot’ entrepreneur[ing], i.e. the entrepreneurial practices and narratives of individuals who live primarily in marginal, poor and excluded places and contexts. Drawing on Max-Neef’s barefoot economics and a methodology based on the authoring and sharing of microstoria, the article asks how agents in deprived areas of Chile, Argentina, Zimbabwe and Ghana undertake entrepreneur[ing] from the margins or ‘periphery’. The article challenges us to seek better explanations for how these individuals apply their entrepreneurial practices, discourses, (social) creativity and novel organizational skills to maintain communal, organizational, familial and personal wellbeing. We conclude that their imaginary, their narratives and their overcoming of very real challenges as we encounter them through these microstoria, question the predominant conceptualization of entrepreneurship. We are emboldened to think again about ‘who is the entrepreneur?’ (Gartner, 1988) and what really are the principles and values that should be associated with the concept, the organization and the identities of agents involved.

Keywords
Barefoot entrepreneur, critical entrepreneurship, economy, indigenous entrepreneur, marginality, microstoria

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In the morning I collect plastic from the river. Then I go to the traffic lights, to beg with my sister Atim. I work until six. Sometimes I get chased by security guards or police … When they are gone I go back. How much I make from collecting scraps varies … . (Imin quoted in Bendiksen, 2008)

Creative destruction is our middle name, both within our own society and abroad. We tear down the old order every day, from business to science, literature, art, … the law. They must attack us in order to survive, just as we must destroy them to advance our historic mission. (Michael Ledeen, quoted in Klein, 2007: 281)

Who is the entrepreneur? one of us asked before embarking on this article. On the face of it, neither Imin’s nor Ledeen’s stories (quoted above) fit within the scientific (or more accurately scientistic) language and discourse that fills so many learned journal and book chapters written about this subject (Bruyat and Julian, 2001; Landström, 2005; Low, 2001). But perhaps we must look closer. Is Imin—as he tries to make a living out of his act of survival in the street and shantytown—‘collateral’ to the success achieved by other economically successful and entrepreneurial individuals or firms? Like so many others in the developing world who live in poverty (Zikode, 2008), his life is played out mainly on the streets where he ‘works’, sleeps or just exists (Berenstein-Jacques, 2001). From the standpoint of our neoliberal economic system, and in the absence of any obvious wealth production, Imin is not the entrepreneur.

What then of Ledeen who (aware or not of his Schumpeterian statement) sees as a mission the aggressive transformation of societies into something ‘new’? (Klein, 2007). In his grandiloquent view, he also considers surviving, like Imin, as part of the fabric of humanity. However, in his case, the focus is on the creative survival of the grand narrative of the West that has been on a mission since colonial times to evangelize the rest of the world (Galeano, 1997) under one homogenous economic system that embraces and rewards the enterprising activities of a few (Smith and Max-Neef, 2011).

For Sørensen (2008) quoting Wellington and Zandvakili (2006: 616): ‘the word entrepreneur has no meaning’ (p. 85). The entrepreneur emerges as a fairy tale character, a mythological role. So, perhaps Gartner (1988) was right after all—‘who is [the] entrepreneur?’ is just the wrong question to ask.

Yet, we suggest, lives, like Imin’s, do speak of experiences and narratives that present a significantly different, and arguably no less legitimate story (Boje, 2008) to the one generally employed to define, describe or analyse ‘the entrepreneur’ (e.g. Palomino, 2003). Imin’s life does not provide a grand narrative of successful business, growth or innovation (e.g. Peredo, 2003). Imin’s life does not contribute to what Weiskopf and Steyaert (2009) describe as the holy trinity of the entrepreneur—the strong entrepreneurial figure, a neo-positivist tradition of research and the belief of optimistic policy-making that is grounded in the discourse of neoliberal economic success. Imin’s life does not embed the myth of noble armoured knight entrepreneurs (Sørensen, 2008). But his life does reflect distinctively different and no less valuable experiences and stories that have a bearing on our understanding of entrepreneurship (see e.g. Pardo, 1996). They matter, first and foremost, because they are lived by other fellow human beings whose lives have otherwise been disenfranchised and abandoned. His survival tactics, self-reliance and creative practices (see De Certeau, 1988) reflect the more mundane (Rehn and Taalas, 2004) everydayness of the entrepreneur (Steyaert and Katz, 2004), and that which is lived out at the margins of the neoliberal economic world.

‘I am’, he said, ‘a very poor man. We are all very poor in my village. We belong to the forgotten people of this land. I am so poor
that the day I die I will have to look around myself and be careful not
to fall dead on a piece of someone else’s earth’. (in Max-Neef, 1992: 99)

In this article we concentrate on those everyday entrepreneur[ial] stories that populate the margins of our societies; those that belong to the disenfranchised and dislocated voices of the ‘barefoot entrepreneurs’. We based our research on Max-Neef’s barefoot economics (1991, 1992, 2004). Max-Neef refers to the working lives and practices of individuals who live in communities (rural or urban) that are marginal or peripheral to the main economic neoliberal system. Those areas of exclusion are where the poor have to carve out a living in order to survive (Wacquant, 2007). Max-Neefian barefoot economics is concerned with these areas, pointing out that mainstream models and theories in economics—that emphasize the creation of wealth, efficiency or (organizational) innovation—largely ignore people who live in these places. Instead, Max-Neef proposes to engage with them in order to construct a more humble and encompassing economic system that builds on values and practices experienced at the margins of our society, echoing Schumacher’s (1988) and Sen’s (2000) economic ideals. Likewise, Imas and Weston (2012) consider stories from these marginal areas the most important in altering our views on how the poor organize in order to challenge pre-conceived ideas of who these agents are and what they do.

Building then on Max-Neefian barefoot economic principles, we approach our study of the barefoot entrepreneurs by employing ‘microstoria’ as a method (Ginzburg, 1993). Microstoria precisely addresses Max-Neef’s concerns about the representation of the poor by engaging with stories of little people, i.e. indigenous, peasants, minorities, poor, marginal and so forth (González y González, 1997, 2002). Boje (2001) following Muir (1991) defines it as an ante-narrative method that questions elite great man narratives such as the mainstream notion of entrepreneurship (e.g. Casson, 1982; Drucker, 1985; Schumpeter, 1934) by collecting stories of people who otherwise will be left out. Hence, we approached marginal people in Argentina, Chile, Ghana and Zimbabwe to construct microstorias of entrepreneurs. For us, these microstorias come to interrogate further both the language of the entrepreneur (Jones and Spicer, 2009) and the ‘everydayness’ (Steyaert and Katz, 2004) of entrepreneuring that takes place at the margins of our societies. The barefoot microstorias we present in this article give us an insight as to the novel and original activities that originate in peripheral contexts. These reflect the organization of solidarity and community as seen in social movements (e.g. Davis et al., 2005; Frickel and Gross, 2005) that push for social transformation or change. They present alternative innovative thinking in relation to the creation of [economic] opportunities and (social) wealth, which respond to socio-economic problems in less competitive, destructive and selfish ways, allowing for a different language of (organizational) entrepreneuring to emerge. Finally, they contribute directly to the emerging critical entrepreneurship studies that challenge pre-conceived notions of who and what is the entrepreneur.

We structure the article in the following way. First we expand on our notion of the barefoot entrepreneur, which is based on the barefoot economics of Max-Neef. Following this we describe the methodology underlying our research. Then we present microstorias from the countries we have mentioned above—which constitutes the main analytical section of our article. We conclude with some reflections and thoughts as to the way in which we think these microstorias contribute to opening up further the study of the entrepreneur. This includes the possibility of re-balancing the interpretation of ‘who is an entrepreneur?’, and how to study this phenomenon (Ahl, 2004; Cálas et al., 2009; Essers and Benschop, 2007; Hjorth, 2003; Jones and Spicer, 2005; Rindova et al., 2009; Steyaert, 2007; Steyaert and Hjorth, 2003) in contexts and places where the main tenets of the discourse do not make sense, i.e. the sublime object of entrepreneurship.
Barefoot economics, barefoot entrepreneurs

The economic system under which we live … is a direct consequence of the view of life, human and non-human fostered by [a] neoliberal economic system—which as a corollary of its fundamental raison d’être, the enrichment of a few, can recognise value only in material things. (Smith and Max-Neef, 2011: 11)

We set out here to inquire into the stories and experiences of the barefoot entrepreneur. This is to say, the entrepreneur that dwells at the margins of society and who lives in poverty. These individuals usually are defined by economic measures that posit them outside the minimum necessary income to survive (Global Issues, 2011). However, as Hellman (1995) suggests, they are a much more heterogeneous, culturally dispersed and diverse group, aspiring for similar things such as autonomy from the conventional hierarchy of political and economic institutions and solidarity for social justice (Hellman, 1995). In quoting from Imin at the outset of the article, we have stressed that such individuals are neglected by a prevailing ideological discourse of the entrepreneur that privileges the object of the economy and the notion of the Western saviour and hero (Baumol, 1993; Schumpeter, 1934). In this sense, the entrepreneur is defined within an economic system that legitimizes values, actions and identities that do not reflect life among poor or neglected communities in the developing world or the poor south (Imas and Weston, 2012). For example, Shaker et al. (2008) remind us that the very market liberalization that promises long-term efficiency also intensifies the plight of those who occupy the bottom of the pyramid in the developing world.

This is something raised by Manfred Max-Neef (1991, 1992, 1995, 2007), a Chilean economist and winner of the alternative Nobel economic prize in relation to his barefoot economics. Max-Neef, who as a result of living amongst indigenous and poor peasants in remote areas of Latin America, proposed that the conventional knowledge we apply to understanding the economy of places and spaces in poverty are entirely meaningless. Categories, theories or models generated in the Western literature to represent their economic activities cannot account for people who live in conditions that are marginal and in places that are distanced from the developed (Western) world (Max-Neef, 1991). These individuals often have large and extended families, and are lacking in the basic facilities and resources that most of us enjoy in Western communities and organizations. This renders their language and experiences distinctively different from the consumption society (Baudrillard, 2004; Ritzer, 2007) we create and inhabit and upon which mainstream approaches to entrepreneurship are founded.

Max-Neef (2007) draws attention to the fact that increased poverty—both in relative and absolute terms—is an indisputable statistical trend (see Costanza et al., 2007). This is primarily the effect of a market economy that subdues and suppresses individuals, forcing them instead into a competitive form of ‘neoliberal’ individualism on which the unlimited expansion and growth of the economy is based (Max-Neef, 1991). This turns the process of abstraction within an open discipline such as economics into a sort of ‘exclusive club’ whereby ‘economic analysis embraces only those whose actions and behaviours [are] adjusted to what its quantifiers can measure’ (Max-Neef, 1992: 34).

The language and study of entrepreneurship very much reflects the points made by Max-Neef, and it is easy to see why. The mainstream discourse of entrepreneurship imposes an ideological and hegemonic reading that defines entrepreneurial behaviour and the enterprise economy (Jones and Spicer, 2009; Ogbor, 2000). This discourse draws from economic theories that narrow behaviour to economic axioms and taxonomies that focus on the capacity to generate economic wealth and business success by exploiting the market (Van Praag, 1999). For instance, the entrepreneur is defined as an individual who takes on certain tasks based solely on a perception of market opportunities and how to exploit them (Formaini, 2001). Further classical and modern representations
characterize them under individualistic discourses and Schumpeterian narratives that exalt their efficiency in exploiting opportunities for innovation (see Cunningham and Lischeron, 1991) and human and natural resources associated with financial capital (Bolton and Thompson, 2004). There is also an enduring belief in the entrepreneur’s power to have a positive effect on others (see Arndt, 1983 for more on the so-called ‘trickle down myth’). This view of entrepreneurship puts emphasis on an economic system that values success as part of the ‘creation’ of business, at the expense of individuals and communities who are marginalized or excluded from the discourse (Hines, 2000).

The problem that emerges is then not merely with the language of the entrepreneur, but with our understanding of the very real constraints facing those living in marginalized and excluded contexts, and how these are overcome—heroically, efficiently and, yes, entrepreneurially. Currently the discourse of the entrepreneur is driven with values that promote a great [white] man narrative of progression and economic achievement via ‘creative destruction’ or business innovation in the omnipresent market (e.g. Goossen, 2007; Kariv, 2011). Notions such as efficiency, production and maximization of growth become instrumental measures for economic (entrepreneurial) success (e.g. Carton and Hofer, 2006).

As a result of this narrowed view dominant economic theory assigns no value to tasks carried out at subsistence and domestic levels. In other words, such (economic) theory is unable to embrace the poorer sectors of the world (Smith and Max-Neef, 2011). This is something that Denning (2010) draws attention to in his insightful essay on ‘wageless life’. He makes the point that ‘to speak of labour is to speak of the already enfranchised’ (p. 79). Hence to speak of the entrepreneur, is to speak of individuals who have already been given, or born into a state of possibility and enfranchisement (see Fine, 1998; Fleetwood, 2006) within the existing dominant economic paradigm.

Max-Neef (1995, 2005) proposes to abandon this economic utopia that exploits nature and the poor for a more creative and organic integration and interdependence (of communities and peoples). This reflects, for him, a matter of bringing the ‘invisible’ (organizational) sectors into the forefront of life and of letting them, finally, have their say and ‘do their thing’. It is a matter of a drastic redistribution of power through the organization of horizontal communal integration. It is a matter of passing from ‘destructive gigantism to creative smallness’ (Max-Neef, 1991: 55). It is a matter of moving to an economic system that serves the people rather than people serving the economy (see also Shuman, 2000).

Max-Neef offers an invitation to explore entrepreneurial narratives that are coherent with the environment of deprivation and poverties. These narratives reflect other realities, discourses and practices which resonate with the emergence of studies in entrepreneurship that address similar concerns, such as indigenous entrepreneurship studies (e.g. Anderson and Giberson, 2004; Banerjee and Tedmanson, 2010; Cahn, 2008; De Bruin and Mataira, 2003; Peredo, 2003).

These literatures have come to question the role of mainstream entrepreneurship, emphasizing the social and cultural embeddedness upon which individuals in these communities construct their entrepreneurship. Anderson (1999) suggests, for example, that the Canadian aboriginal approach to economic development is predominantly collective, centred on the community or ‘nation’ for the purposes of ending dependency through economic self-sufficiency, controlling activities on traditional lands, improving socio-economic circumstances, strengthening traditional culture, values and languages (and reflecting the same in development activities). These studies also question the postcoloniality of the ‘entrepreneur’ discourse and the economy of dependency that it creates (Khan et al., 2007). For example, Frederick and Foley (2006) maintain that colonial and postcolonial [entrepreneur] practices deprive indigenous communities of their land, culture and their basic human rights. Adding to that, they consider that the loss of self-determination these indigenous
communities experience denies them the right over their own responsibility to manage their own affairs.

Both ontologically and epistemologically Max-Neefian economics embraces these critiques that question the pseudo-positivist, postcolonialist and the functionalist mode of conceiving of the entrepreneur, and where metaphoric representations can end up doing little more than deepening ambiguity.

The values espoused within the peripheral environment are arguably fundamentally different from those promoted in the mainstream economic discourse. For instance, we found that solidarity rather than competition informs relationships. In marginality new creative practices of day-to-day survival emerge that are not associated with an individual per se but with communities. Equally, novel and valuable social experiences that are not mediated by money or salaries demonstrate the high level of creativity that exists in these environments. Finally, self-reliance reflects social and cultural connectivities (Deleuze and Guattari, 2001) and pluralities (De Certeau, 1988) that emerge as part of solidarity, survival and struggle of the community.

Finally, though our focus on the marginal, the excluded and the ‘barefoot entrepreneur’ inevitably calls for analytical separation between us and the ‘other’, we write this article in the firm belief that we are part of something that we need to transform together. Our universal commonality is an axiological principle of being ‘human’. It is only possible to understand the other because we are able to enter into dialogue and be capable of sharing our experiences (Bhaskar, 2007) and (socially) build something different that goes beyond our pure imagination. This is the legacy of a Max-Neefian barefoot economics and our barefoot entrepreneurs.

Method and research background: microstorias

One writes out of a need to communicate and to commune with others, to denounce that which gives pain and to share that which gives happiness. One writes against one’s solitude and against the solitude of others. One assumes that literature transmits knowledge and affects the behaviour and language of those who read ... One writes, in reality, for the people whose luck or misfortune one identifies with—the hungry, the sleepless, the rebel and the wretched of this earth—and the majority of them are illiterate. (Eduardo Galeano, 1997: XIV)

The opportunity to conduct our research in places where our entrepreneurial managerialist language, axioms, taxonomies and theories do not make sense, such as in those contexts highlighted by Max-Neef, was more than just an incentive to approach individuals who live in deprived urban areas of the developing world. Equally important and more specifically was our intimate connection with the countries we visited in order to meet and talk to barefoot entrepreneurs. Two of us were born and grew up in Chile and Zimbabwe, and although we did not experience poverty or deprivation, we have to some extent at least learned to appreciate and empathize with the struggle and ‘invisibility’ that so many of our countrymen suffer (see Imas, 2005). Their lack of visibility and alienation was something that made us really conscious of how best to approach our study. Indeed, we wanted our reflections, narratives, empathy and observations to embrace the ethnographic discursus of Majefe (2001) in Africa and the critical world anthropologies of Restrepo and Escobar (2005) in Latin America. These authors expose the ethnocentric dominant gaze imposed on communities of the periphery and the margins to describe or depict the other. The Other, as Smith (1999, 2006) also suggests, loses his/her voice within the legitimized representations, descriptions or explanations that take frame within the colonialist knowledge production of the West. Like Smith or Restrepo and Escobar, we attempted to de-colonize ‘the entrepreneur’,
acknowledging that in writing in English, our analysis, descriptions and reflections are inevitably going to be made within the rules and grammar of the knowledge production of the academic West. Aware of these limitations, and in line with the views of the authors above, as well as Max-Neef’s barefoot economics, we thought it more appropriate to approach our research through microstorias (Ginsburg, 1993; González y González, 1997; Molho, 2004).

In microstoria we found a method that breaks with the hegemonic power of grand narratives (theories), such as those economic theories that have come to ‘represent’ entrepreneurship (e.g. Gartner, 1985, 1988; Kirzner, 1973; Knight, 1921; Schumpeter, 1934; Shane and Venkataraman, 2000). In microstorias what is particularly important is the emerging of an original view, alongside reflection and assessment that analyses the lived/living conditions of those involved. Muir (1991) defines microstorias as the stories of little people (e.g. indigenous people, minorities, women, peasantry, day labourers, etc.), which are usually ignored and abandoned in mainstream research programmes, as they do not provide the ‘big picture’ (Boje, 2001). These microstorias do not form a unitary discourse, a unique and grand history, but instead unfold the unconventional, the forgotten and the improper (Blackman and Imas, 2011). In microstoria, we found a method that overturns the sense of unity and coherence that usually exists in the classic representations of entrepreneurship, overcoming the desire to impose traditional plots and time structures on representations of what new venture creation, social change or entrepreneurial activities are (or how we should study or describe them). More specifically, it offers us the ability to climb the often insurmountable boundaries and barriers between us, ‘others’ and the ‘other’ (Göranzon et al., 2006; Nowotny et al., 2001; Wilson, 2010), encouraging a fresh, and no less valid or ‘real’, perspective on the lived experience of individuals who otherwise do not get heard.

Hence, our main criteria for constructing our microstorias of barefoot entrepreneurs, accepting the limitations and moral paradoxes (Geertz, 1968) when researching and analysing the other, was to approach only people who have been disfranchised and who operate at the margins of society. That is, people who are ignored or overlooked by mainstream institutions and therefore do not receive any state or (inter)national support for their minimum survival and existence; those who have to carve their own living out of poverty; those who do not have the freedom to be the person that ‘they are able to be’ (Nussbaum, 2011). These are what Galeano (1992) refers to as the ‘nobodies’ or Wacquant (2006) as the ‘banlieues’ and us here as the ‘barefoot entrepreneurs’.

In presenting the microstoria as a form of resistance to the grand narrative and its often hidden ideologically driven account of what reality is (or should be) like, we follow Barone (2008) (writing about arts-based research more generally) who notes that any approach which is ‘geared to subvert the master narrative and confound the political spectacle must be more than socially committed. It must also be epistemologically humble’ (p. 38). Barone also refers to the ‘conspiratorial conversation’ (2000: 150), involving the public in ‘history marking dialogue’ (Barone, 2008: 39). The conspiracy here alludes to a sense of communion, an engagement in discussions about ‘possible and desirable worlds’. Our approach to the microstoria is offered in this spirit of epistemological humility, founded on such conspiratorial conversations.

We chose Santiago (Chile), Buenos Aires (Argentina), Harare (Zimbabwe) and Accra (Ghana) to meet these individuals and collect their microstorias, because, in part of what we said above about two of us having been born in Chile and Zimbabwe. Argentina because one of us spent time conducting ethnographic work in fábricas recuperadas (reclaimed factories) (see Fajn et al., 2003) and Ghana as one of our Ghanaian students was collecting microstorias in Accra. Thus, it was opportunity and familiarity with these places and knowledge of language (in Chile and Argentina
the research was conducted in Spanish, in Ghana in Twi) and not as part of a big research plan to select places in the developing world in order to construct a grand discourse of entrepreneurship that could be applied to poor and excluded people in Africa and Latin America, that drove us to select these cities.

We met these people in the streets. The streets of these cities are where most of the excluded members of society make their trade in informal and disorganized ways (Burrell, 1997). There they beg, collect rubbish, dance or play music, sell in small kiosks, whatever they have, in order to make a living. We approached them in the streets and engaged with them in the movement and moment of our street encounter that brought a fluid conversation about their and our existence (Kosmala and Imas, 2011). We talked to 40 people in these cities. Our questions mostly reflected what they wanted to share with us in relation to what they consider to be their ways of understanding their work, business and general novel and creative practices to make a living. That is, we did not plan specific questions upon which to interrogate their ‘entrepreneurship’ or capacity for creativity. Theirs was a language of deprivation and exclusion; the one our microstorias wanted to raise. That is, before we intervene with our translations and analytical frameworks, we wanted to hear in their own language what they went through as ‘barefoot entrepreneurs’ and in this way avoid the obsessive attempt to impose (colonialist) representations that define who they are and what they do. We wanted to distance ourselves from these analytical presuppositions and allow a more decolonized ‘authentic’ local version of who the barefoot entrepreneurs are. In Majefe’s words, to acknowledge that we were not value-free in our assumptions and that these actors were not purely partners in knowledge (narrative) making but knowledge-makers in their own right. We were mindful of the danger that these relationships presuppose when one meets with the other and also mindful that to some extent it is impossible not to categorize and codify others’ experience in terms of our own, already existing frameworks and concepts. We would point to this meta-level of insight as representing the distinctiveness of our approach, rather than the particular claims we might make for the success with which we achieved this.

Our analytical approach to the microstorias was driven at a philosophical level by a ‘dialectical’ framework. The use of the word dialectic in this context is not Hegelian or Marxist in character, but one which follows the work of Roy Bhaskar (1993, 2007)—whose own approach emerged out of initial dissatisfaction with the potential of economics to explain economic development in Africa. This Bhaskarian dialectic draws our attention to the importance of absence or ‘negation’ or negativity, being real and causally efficacious. In Bhaskar’s own words, this is the ‘problem of the not’. The dialectic as a motivating force in the world is driven by the need to ‘absent an absence’. The absence being absented in our article is the voice, the experience and the life of the barefoot entrepreneur. For it is the barefoot entrepreneur who is all too often considered not there.

Our approach in writing up these microstorias is based on the principle of absenting this absence—and therefore allowing the barefoot entrepreneur to be heard. Similarly, the microstorias are framed in such a way as to focus on the barefoot entrepreneur’s words and stories, rather than the analyst’s interpretation, which may unwittingly absent the absent rather than the absence. In this way, the analysis is not super-imposed, but is allowed to speak for itself. How we choose to respond to the barefoot entrepreneur, as the analytical reader, is then a matter of an authentic dialogue between them and us.

Overall, their microstorias provided us with an insight as to how the representation and interpretation of entrepreneurship might be opened up, such that it reflects the participation and contribution of people whose lives are otherwise kept out of any discourse of social wealth creation and the transformation of ‘material’ and socio-organizational life.
Barefoot micro-entrepreneurial storias

Begging as an entrepreneurial path to development

It is ironic, Swanson (2010) says, that in capitalist societies where development and progress are associated with hard work and modernization and begging with decay, most indigenous (and poor) people in Latin America when they leave their homes in rural isolated locations and move to urban cities realize that begging might be after all a possibility to progress in life. In cities such as Buenos Aires, begging appears as the antithesis of the mercurial business entrepreneur that is supposed to bring economic modernization, capital and progress to the city. Stigmatized and labelled as a danger to progress, beggars negotiate their own ways of interpreting the economic, their space and their business activities, incorporating their entire family into their activities.

Pedro, Joaquín, Rosa, Maria, Lucho (my husband) and Juan, the baby, the entire family is here begging along Florida. Pedro, the oldest who is 12 can’t go to school, cause we need all the hands, the voices, the faces to make people feel sorry or compassion so we can obtain money from them. At times we sing, playing some drums or the accordion, Maria and Rosa who are 9 and 10, improvised some dancing. Our ingenuity has no limits, you know, in the streets you ought to improvise, as this is our market and we can only trade in sentimental value. Who are we? Beggars, family in denial, careless parents, else? Look, if you are in a situation like we live, it doesn’t matter who or what you are; you know you ought to be clever to somehow generate something to eat. The place we live behind the station is an improvised community, where we don’t trade in money or things that most people in these streets know. We have fear and from fear we come together to protect what we have, which for most of us mean our family. Our houses represent this improvised, patchy and original life. Walls covered in newspapers; windows covered in cardboard; tables and chairs a collection of disused metal and wood that we have converted in our ‘furniture’. Every day we go to do our job, we don’t know whether everything will be here. This life is a risk and if we eat and keep our shelter we succeed. (Mariana, from Buenos Aires, Argentina)

Their identities are forged in the practice and daily experience of life outside of the mainstream economic system. The everydayness of their creative practice, the sense in which they trade in original and innovative ways to make a living—this is to act entrepreneurially. They embody the ‘entrepreneuring’ spirit (Steyaert and Hjorth, 2003, 2006). Mariana’s entrepreneurial subjectivity is beyond question; and yet their activities are not legitimized as those of the entrepreneur—since they are not operating within the legal framework of their society. They may not succeed in creating consuming organizations, but every day is a ‘new venture’ and they have subsistence through their imagination and creativity. Their barefoot microstoria is of a struggle and of risk. Their narratives encapsulate discourses that are echoed by countless individuals who live lives that are ‘at the edge’ (e.g. Vargas, 2003).

The cartonero entrepreneurs

Late evening in Buenos Aires sees the emerging shadowy figures of armies of families who check inside street bins, amongst the dirt and rubbish thrown on the streets. These people are families organized in sections that collect everything from paper to cans for selling subsequently to others. The Panetta family is one of them. People in Buenos Aires recognize them as cartoneros, i.e. people who collect cardboard in the streets.

We come every evening from Matanza and we stay collecting rubbish along Santa Fe Avenue and then Corrientes until midnight. Recycling is what we do but, we don’t do it because we care for the environment.
Don’t get me wrong, we do it because it is the only job we can do at the moment as there are not other jobs. As our opportunities for work are minimal we create our jobs as they come along. In Matanza where we live, there is not much to do so we come here to collect cardboard and then all that we collect is sold and the money is divided among all of us who collect. We are a society as lots of us come over to collect cartones! We spot the most popular places where companies get rid of this stuff that they consider irrelevant and unimportant. For us, it gives a chance to sustain our families … All of us work; my children, my neighbour’s children and others. Do I feel rewarded by these bastards leaving their rubbish out for us to collect? No, I don’t! No, I feel frustrated by the misery they create. While they think they are great and hardly see us, we are collecting their rubbish! We are urban creative scavengers, like pack of dogs in the streets that everyone kick away, while we scavenge for whatever we can get.

As Jones and Spicer (2009: 1) have argued, the discourse of entrepreneurship is not just about ‘massive successes’, but about ‘struggle, stress, debt and failure’. The cartonero entrepreneur wears no mask—literally, figuratively or metaphorically—and yet these entrepreneurs need ‘unmasking’. Their work is dangerous, dirty, dismal, but ultimately valuable. The value they themselves appropriate is on the one hand minimal, but it is also life-giving, and therefore more precious than the discourse of market fundamentalism’s promised treasure. Their work is also collective. The cartonero co-create the ‘opportunities’ that are invisible to others, in and through their social creativity. In doing so, their activities go beyond the category of ‘necessity’ entrepreneurship (Acs, 2006), all too easily seen as the poor relation of ‘opportunity’ led entrepreneurship. If we look deeper still we find not the ‘creative destruction’ of Schumpeter’s (1934) entrepreneur, but a form of ‘creative reproduction’. Through collaborative endeavour the cartonero contribute to Matanza’s sustainability. But at what cost? As Jones and Spicer (2009: 14) have highlighted, entrepreneurship is ‘a way of talking, a language used by people that produces power relations, and … these power relations may involve problems’. The ‘master-slave’ power relations that are exposed here are themselves reinforced by and through the actions of the cartonero, as well as the rich. Our job as critical entrepreneurship researchers, especially in exploring the promise of transgressive knowledge creation, is to look both to the ‘everyday’ and beyond it—perhaps towards an as yet invisible road to human emancipation, which is necessarily inclusive.

**The street: creative business children**

Max-Neef recalls meeting children in isolated locations: one way of overcoming their need was to imagine themselves as animals, or anything else that could help them to escape their sense of insecurity and desire for protection—‘I want to be a cow, because cows are fine just eating grass’ (Max-Neef, 1992: 176). These children, like most other children, dream and display wonderful creative skills. In cities like Santiago this is on regular display, at traffic lights where they perform dances or juggle balls, clean car windows and sell ice cream, sweets or other products.

I’m Roberto, I come from La Pintana … Saturdays and Sundays for me are right now, hmm, a time that I make some money. My mate Jon comes here with me … We get some water from the petrol station there … add some soap and we improvise with long poles and rubber these window cleaners … We made enough money to buy stuff and go to the cinema … My parents don’t have much so we give back to our house … . (La Pintana is a poor neighbourhood in Santiago, Chile)

Children, of course, have long been associated with creativity (see Sternberg, 1999) and on some occasions their creative approaches to making money manifest themselves in more visible forms of creative play (see Hjorth, 2005), and real spectacles in the streets.
People, you know, like tourists, really enjoy our cueca (Chile national dance) performances. We dress up for the occasion and we dance the whole day, you know … Gloria, my sister and me, we get on the bus from Peñalolen where we live and come down to downtown … People like children. We are 13 and 12 … Do we like what we do? Sometimes, sometimes we wish we were playing with our friends back home in the hills … My mum is over there and she keeps watching that we dance and we don’t start just messing around. We like playing and somehow dancing here helps … We do make some good money! Sometimes enough to keep us going for a couple of weeks!

Children who are regarded without knowledge and the skills to generate ‘wealth’ are paradoxically able in the urban hostile context of their existence to develop the necessary skills to create new business opportunities that sustain their existence when protection by family and state does not exist. Clearly Critical Entrepreneurship Studies (CES) needs to include taking account of such ‘other’ forms of entrepreneurship, especially the role of children in the construction of subsistence entrepreneurship (see Gamlin and Pastor, 2009).

Art and craft: viator and exile entrepreneuring

The entrepreneurship literature has brought attention to the importance of immigrant entrepreneurship (see Saxenian, 2000). Being forced to move from one’s birthplace in order to start a new life is demonstrably a great incentive for creative venturing. Here again, history has tended to narrate the stories of those who were able to create enormous wealth, without considering, for example, the often irreparable destruction reaped in the process (e.g. Basu, 1998). Such is the case of colonization in the Americas and Africa where most native communities have been deprived of their natural wealth and forced to migrate to reservations or other parts of their original settlements (e.g. Mendonça and Benjamin, 1997). Pressures from a post-colonial way of doing business and creating opportunities in developing markets continue to exile and viatorize1 (Bourriaud, 2009a) people from their localities. In this context we see venture creation around crafting or other art forms in which, particularly women, show their skills in the embroidering of garments or the creation of small sculptures made from anything disposable. Knitting of multi-colourful garments and so forth is also characteristic:

We’ve been knitting cushions for the fair … We sometimes knit hats and jumpers for children, like the colourful ones we have here … We cross the border because we decided to venture for better opportunities. Chile is safe and has more stability … we were worried about the drugs and violence. Santiago is far from home and we suffer at night missing our children and families who are back in Bolivia … We want to start our own knitting business. We want to bring our family here if we can … Don’t know whether we’ll make it but we’ll stay until we can … I like designing new things, like carpets or clothes. The rooms we rent in a house in Quinta Normal has enough space for us to embroider new things. Difficult to bring things here. We ask people who travel back home for merchandise to make our products. We meet in parks weekends and there we met other Bolivian natives. People look down on us but they like our things. (Chami and Mamaq Bolivian viators and exiles)

Here we find the language of social creativity focusing on the crossing of spatial and ethnic boundaries. The Bolivian exile entrepreneurs, driven out, looked down upon and yet valued; the scarcity of resources, the necessity for ‘bootstrap’ or ‘parsimonious’ approaches (McGrath, 1997) to entrepreneurship and the need for bricolage—all are characteristic of entrepreneurship as widely discussed, and yet they speak to us in new ways about the possibility of an ‘altermodern’ (Bourriaud, 2009b) society characterized by fragmentation and hybridization.
Mosquito clouds entrepreneurial organization

Imagine, Max-Neef said, you are in a field facing a rhinoceros. The rhinoceros is furious and ready to charge you. The most stupid thing to do is to charge back as if you were also a rhinoceros. Then, what can you do? How can you defeat the rhinoceros? The mosquito cloud can defeat the animal, by making it crazy. Why? Max-Neef maintains that this is possible for two great attributes that the mosquito cloud has: first, it sticks together and second, it has no chief mosquito, therefore no one can behead the cloud, no matter what the rhinoceros does. The Argentinean movement of fábricas recuperadas (recovered business) by poor workers who lost everything in the Argentine economic collapse of 2000 exemplifies this adventure creation of driving something which is declared dead by the regular economic system and restoring it in creative and adventurous ways by workers (Magnani, 2003).

Can you see that hole up there in the wall? Yes, that one filled with bricks now. When we were declared bankrupt and the police came to close down and vacate this factory we have to use our ingenuity and somehow to work together in order to break the police blockade and continue production. Our neighbours were really helpful and kind and allow us to deliver all our work through the wall. (Ernesto)

It was such an innovative idea; a bankrupt business that let workers go as management of the organisation fails to keep the business going … No one thought, imagine we could pull this business out of trouble! NO one had faith! We removed heads, we removed organisational structures, we removed everything that control us and we let ourselves go! (Daniel)

Solidarity brother; solidarity help our self belief and guided our imagination for all of us to succeed in this enterprise … Machinery that needed parts to be mended. Money to make the equipment work and print the scarce jobs we had from others like us … there was nothing and from nothing we build this! We had everyday to come up with something new to keep our spirit and morale high … Luckily the storm went and somehow we’re still navigating in this sea, unpalatable sea of destruction and flagellation of our communities and wellbeing. (Antonio)

I don’t know whether we were political, creative, or else … All I know is somehow we had to keep production going, the electricity going and sell our products … Like ants and with the support of our families and local neighbours we had that and make the whole thing possible … Effort, sweating and the fact governments and banks ignore us simply gave us a kick to push forward and make this factory work, compañero (mate). (Juan)

Again we see a very collective form of social creativity in practice. The ‘boundaries’ being crossed are those of an organizational, hierarchical, industrial nature. The workers worked as mosquitoes, as a single joint cloud, contributing to their survival like the shoal of sardines under attack from shark and catapulting the business ahead (Sitrin, 2005). Were we to ask ourselves what contextual issues act to enable this form of [mosquito] behaviour (wishing perhaps to emulate this level of cohesiveness in our own societies), we will realize that despite the ‘unpalatable sea of destruction’ Antonio speaks of, a true act of defiance built from ‘insignificant’ and voiceless mosquitoes can result in success. Eventually, for Max-Neef, everyone needs to become a mosquito as part of a mosquito movement that will win the economic battle and triumph over the imperative economic system.

The barefoot spiritual entrepreneur

The severe economic and social crisis in Zimbabwe has meant that many people lack basic resources, food and employment, and are struggling to survive. Their struggle forces them to
become barefoot entrepreneurs because they have no other option but to create something for themselves out of the void that they exist in. Each person has different reasons for doing so; however, their reasons are often linked to the community, and the will to help both themselves, and also others around them to alleviate some of their problems. They command or add a great sense of spirituality in their entrepreneurial being.

... I’m employed as a vendor. I’m doing buying and selling. Like commodities, like sugar, cooking oil and stuff like that. It’s my own business for a year. I wasn’t working before. I was a loafer. I had some hardships in my family and so there were things that pushed me to start a business. The idea maybe is from the Lord. I grew up from a family that is poor so I had to think of an idea [to] try and eliminate the poverty in our family. I have got a large family, Maybe it’s from God ... The idea is from God ... I just came with the idea one day ... out of nowhere one day suddenly. I wasn’t working much at all before. But I can say the pressure is still there because I can’t afford to manage the family because they are a large number. I can’t explain ... there is a large number so there are a lot of pressures in life ... .

Ya, I have so many problems. Capital ... I don’t have a secure place to run a business ... nowadays our government doesn’t allow us to do business without them being aware. So that’s other problems I am facing. I just lose precious monies, because sometimes they can collect [my commodities], or they will [give an] order and then they will own it. They don’t allow us to sell nowadays without their word. It will be a loss because we can’t recover it and can’t do anything about it.

I just buy and sell commodities ... I would like to say if you have much pleasure to help me to order some stuff so that I can boost myself ... Ahh it’s tough we are facing economic hardship, we cannot survive without those monies, so we are under pressure so it will be a pleasure if you can manage to help me ... .

(Shine, Hatcliffe Extension, near Harare, Zimbabwe)

Here we find entrepreneurship driven by a divine spirit which ignites a hope for a better life for this person and his family. This engagement reflects the emergence of what Max-Neef (2007) refers to as micro-organizations (or micro-organizing) which is a defence mechanism against a hostile environment.

... Here we are moulding bricks ... it’s just a project for our houses, for the Muslims. I just want to say about our living here ... in this community ... we have got problems of houses ... that’s the first problem ... but [because] of our Islamic society it’s now better. We are doing it because we do not have the resources to do it [buy houses] one-by-one. And because we don’t have money, that’s the first problem, a very serious problem. There are many problems ... So if we work in groups we can help each other. [And we] have got some widows ... they don’t have children, so we can manage to work together.

And if we finish this work, we go to our houses then we do some more work... cooking, sweeping, doing the garden for our vegetables, because we don’t have money to buy everyday vegetables. So we can do that ourselves [and] if we have many we sell them for the children’s [school] fees ... Things are bad ... too hard. I just found it [the idea] myself ... my husband left work and so we didn’t have something to eat, so that’s why I just thought like ... if I buy some vegetables and my children can sell them ... .

[Previously] I learnt to mould some candles to give my children to sell, but I don’t have a moulding machine, and wax to mould it, because we don’t have electricity ... and so, if I get wax that’s the main problem [solved]. The moulding machines we can share, there are some who have got it so I can borrow some. But wax is a problem. I did it before. For 3 years and I have got used to it. I sold them from last year in December, January ... and I got some school fees for my children. So I paid the school fees but the money got finished ... . (Hanaah, Hatcliffe Extension, near Harare, Zimbabwe)
As before this example illustrates a spiritual entrepreneurship that is driven by divine spirit. Here it is collectively directed at improving community and family circumstances and drives the emergence of different ways of micro-organizing work (Max Neef, 2007) such as cooperatives and family enterprises.

... At the moment I’m not doing anything. I used to make donuts and samosas and selling. But at the moment I’m just seated. I’m broke ... if there is anything that crops up then I will do, but at the moment I’m just sitting ... Sometimes I am selling hardware things [or] ya anything else which I can buy and sell ... sometimes that’s what I do ... buying and selling. [The idea] just came out when I was just seated, when I couldn’t have anything to do. So I just thought if I just start buying and selling, otherwise I will earn a better living ... I once used to play soccer [he smiles] but I just left it. Because of the situation in the country, it was little money I was earning. So I just left it. Well actually it is the situation in the country at the moment that is affecting everybody ... actually nowadays its survival of the fittest. Ya the more you work, the more you earn, the more you live.

Actually myself I’m a plumber by profession but yeah I’m in the project as well. I’m working for my mother. I am just very happy about that because most of us we are poor. We can’t manage to build our own houses [alone]. Actually we build ... I don’t know the exact number of houses which we are going to build but I think there are more than 50 we are going to make. So we are divided. We divide each and every group of 10; 10 ... so we are moulding bricks. After we are finished moulding bricks then we are going to start building ... (Tawanda, Hatcliffe Extension, near Harare, Zimbabwe)

Shine, Hanaah and Tawanda offer us a rich picture of their otherwise invisible barefoot lives where entrepreneurial activities are at the same time a defiance mechanism and a way of (spiritually) organizing a better future for one's community and family. The deep evolutionary impulse that transforms on a timescale normally too long for us to observe is here somehow distorted, such that we can feel its force—‘survival of the fittest’—that resonates in a very tangible form in this extremely hostile environment. But, we also capture the space between the praxis. ‘At the moment, I’m just seated’. There is a flux, a flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992) to things, which the barefoot entrepreneur has to ride, just as any artist or creative in their work. We explore this temporal aspect of entrepreneurship in the next storia.

The road to Mana

In Ghana there are many people who are driven to create work for themselves from nothing. These barefoot entrepreneurs embarked—literally—with their bare hands when starting their own businesses because they wanted to create better futures for themselves and their families. Although they have found different ways to make a living, it is interesting to note that all of these individuals had similar reasons for how and why they started their businesses. It was, however, a slow, arduous, process in many cases, that did not happen overnight but was created over time with a great amount of effort and self efficacy (see Bandura, 1977).

First [I] sold vegetables ... small small ... , pepper, tomatoes, onions, very small small. Then I got more to buy bigger foods like yam, plantain ... so yes ... the little money I had saved up from the little selling, made me able to start this business, but it was a slow process. I had to sell a lot and save very small amount at the time.

... I tell you, life is hard ... life is hard for all ... You have to understand that everybody has their problems and past just like me ... you know ... some have had it even worse than me ...
[but]. I will tell you … you will not believe it …

The process from where I was and to where I am now has been long and hard. But no one can go from class 1 and jump to class 7, so it is a process that had to happen. I had to go through class 1, 2, 3 and so on. It has been a tough process.

I left the village to come to Accra to do petty trading, like selling ice-water, oranges, nuts, and little by little selling made me go through the day … , with god’s will, I opened the salon 4 years ago, but the process of opening the salon was long and hard, it was a lot of pain.

The road to establishing their businesses was difficult; they all recalled that getting started with something was the hardest part, often sacrificing a day’s meal to have money to buy small amount of goods to sell the next day. Some of the entrepreneurs gave a sigh accompanied by a slow head shake when asked how they started their business. However, this was quickly followed by altogether different signs of pleasure and relief when recollecting their personal entrepreneurial struggles. They were excited to be asked the question about how they came about to start their businesses and were generally eager to tell their stories. Most emphasized struggles and predicaments which they found themselves in on many occasions. There also seemed to be an unwillingness to come across as seeking pity but rather they wanted acknowledgement for their fight in life. The participants indicated that hardship and fighting for survival in life is a common trait within the Ghanaian society; personal stories of struggle seem therefore not to be exceptional to people. The sighs might therefore have signified a sense of pleasure and gratitude to finally be able to tell their story and receive recognition for their hard work in life.

Well it’s like when I completed school and before my apprenticeship, I saw big homes and people say about homes like that’s a rich, good home, so I sat down and thought this might have started with one person and then maybe they take good care of it so it sticks to the family. So how can I also have that kind of name labelled to me? I thought, that house is good, they are good, so I decided that I would work hard so that my kids could also hear that they are from good hardworking, rich homes. Make a name for my family. So that’s what’s in my soul to do.

… Yeah, Everything I do I have them in mind, I want to give them something in life that will relieve them from worries of what they will be eating tomorrow and how they will get it. So I want to help them achieve something as well, especially my father and mother.

Because I have children and needed to have something steady and not fly around to sell. I like this business better; I can spend more time with my kids. I started this business because of my children.

My kids, you see … I think about what they will eat for the day … how they will get to school, ‘lorry fare’, it makes you think that you need to go to work.

Family is an important motivation for many. When asked why they started their business many almost instinctively mentioned their family or something related to the family. The majority would refer to the family as the reason for their striving for success. The reason for starting the business was to all of them equal to their motivation to go to work every day. Some participants, however, regarded the family as a burden, although they still recognized and considered it a necessity and unquestionable part of their lives. Family as such was a central aspect of their lives, and a means of being.

Once again we are reminded of the otherwise absent ontology of the social world, where domestic life and subsistence are taken for granted or overlooked. These stratified levels of social being
are not themselves ‘peripheral’ but central to any and every human activity. We could not function without them.

In these microstorias we have encountered difference, and, as such, been offered new ways of thinking and being entrepreneurial. We have absented their absence. Though the Western academic reader will normally expect to see an analysis that now dissects the ‘data’ just presented, offering up its informed view of what it all really tells us, we suggest that these microstorias provide their own analysis—that is if we choose to think carefully enough about what they have to say, rather than putting it into our own words and frameworks (even though, we acknowledge our intervention in the process of selection and intervention in translation). This, of itself, is a core message of the article, and one we now follow through in the final section, where we draw together and discuss some of the key themes that have been raised.

Conclusions

Ever since I have been ‘from the outside looking in’, I have become aware of facts which had never claimed my attention before. What I had earlier interpreted as the evolution of economics [to which we add entrepreneurship] turned out to be an evolution only in words. There was a richer vocabulary but, as far as the invisible sectors were concerned, that seemed to be the extent of the evolution. Their misery and neglect were as obscene as ever, despite the insistence on yet newer words and concepts such as ‘social justice’ [indigenous entrepreneurship] and ‘participation’ [social entrepreneurship]. (Max-Neef, 1991: 114)

In this article we argue that barefoot entrepreneurs reflect stories and practices that contain a plethora of meaning, values and relationships which question the prominent view of the entrepreneur. These stories and practices are experienced in the everydayness of the periphery of an economic system that promotes a discourse of entrepreneurship associated with capitalist economic development. Recently Habibi and Coyle Jr (2010) claimed that emerging (developing) markets present an extraordinary capacity for growth and therefore creating new opportunities for small companies to succeed. Be this as it may, the storias we present here are fundamentally different from this exuberant narrative of postcolonial success and point to another form of entrepreneurship, which we should pay attention to for other reasons.

The storias we have shared here do not seek to provide a romanticized view of poor entrepreneurs (Karnani, 2009). We do not want to conclude with a mere caricature (see Prahalad, 2005) in which our barefoot entrepreneurs are depicted as superbly creative entrepreneurs, resilient and value-conscious consumers. Far from that, without a critical discourse such as Jones and Spicer’s entrepreneurship (2005, 2009) or Max-Neef’s economics, individual storias like the ones presented here will simply vanish. They will become marginalized from social and economic entrepreneurial practices or other sources of wealth creation. Worse, some will be absorbed as successful development stories of poor entrepreneurs (e.g. Seelos and Mair, 2005).

We want to emphasize instead the vulnerability that exists among these barefoot entrepreneurs—but also a deep sense of strength. It is their lives that are at stake everyday, where the lack of protection, care and freedom, and minimum subsistence, push them to act and enact their lives on a survival basis (Sen, 2000). Their vulnerability is something that matters as well as their lack of opportunities in life. These storias in this respect bring forward that necessity to survive despite the disadvantage upon which these individuals are submitted.

An equally important theme from our point of view in absenting this absence is recognizing the idea of the barefoot entrepreneur as the other, as a subaltern voice (Spivak, 2010) that has been
silenced by a colonial discourse of the entrepreneur. In this regard, this research questions our own academic principles or research objectives in terms of how to represent and interpret these individuals. Our method of microstoria attempts to undermine the hegemonic postcolonial conception of the term ‘entrepreneur’. Through approaching the less obvious characters in the prevailing entrepreneur tale, we are bringing forward alternative narratives upon which to discuss entrepreneurship rather than conforming to a regulated conception of ‘real’ entrepreneurs (Jones and Spicer, 2009).

Critical entrepreneurship studies can help to unearth, bring to light, reveal, unmask (etc.) the ways in which the barefoot entrepreneur is endowed with many of the local, small skills, behaviours and attributes that can increase the pace of change on these goals being realized. This is not merely a question of empowering those involved, or re-stating the importance of cultural context. Rather, it is recognizing that we may have been looking in the wrong place for some of the answers to big problems in the world (or asking the wrong questions). We may also have been too busy to notice or to listen to an ‘other’ invisible perspective of entrepreneur. Why should this matter? Well as Max-Neef points out, it is precisely our loud approaches to entrepreneurship, made in the name of progress, which are killing so much of life around us. The microstorias in these pages tell a different story—a story of how we might better sustain life when at the margins. This is the story we might not think we need to hear but it is a story that the barefoot entrepreneur knows only too well because for them, there is no choice.

In telling this story, we should resist the knee-jerk reaction of asking ‘…but what should we do to better sustain life at the margins?’, lest this merely encourages us to (re)-assert our agency over others, however unwittingly. It may well be that facilitating micro-credit to the barefoot entrepreneur, for example, is a more preferable way forward than continuing with the same old government-backed funding schemes for conventional entrepreneurs. But those at the margins need to play a more central role in the organization and management of this sort of initiative if it is to work properly, and this requires creating a ‘play-space’ in which the value of such an approach is understood from the inside, rather than being imposed from without. This article, and the sorts of discussions it might provoke, represents a very modest step towards achieving such a goal.

To recap, through the microstorias we have introduced people who are living as if out of nothing and, above all, outside the formal economy that privileges one type of discourse. In our research we have found (in agreement with Žižek, 2009, 2011) that this only promotes a post-colonial alternative (Prasad, 2003), in which the rich stay rich and the poor continue to be marginalized and invisible (in the economic system). Paradoxically, perhaps, a final lesson of these storias for us is that it is high time we turned the lens round on ourselves. For the underlying truth is that we have asked questions here of our own understanding of entrepreneurship, and have been found wanting. The field of entrepreneurship, now very much studied as a separate discipline in its own right (see Davidsson et al., 2001; Phan, 2004), has become increasingly (self)-assured over the last 20 years or so. For all the talk, perhaps we have been too busy making too much noise. What we really need now is to develop our ‘relational consciousness’ with others (Wilson, 2010), and learn how to have encounters with difference. The first step is obvious but difficult: we need to learn to listen.

This world is tired of grand solutions. It is tired of people that know exactly what has to be done. It is fed up with people walking around with a briefcase full of solutions looking for the problems that fit those solutions. I strongly believe that we should start respecting the capacity of reflection and the power of silence a bit more. (Max-Neef, 1991: 110–111)
Notes
1 We borrow the notion of *viator* and viatorize (from the Latin travel, traveller or travelling) from Nicholas Bourriaud’s *Altermodernity* (2009a) and by which we want to emphasize the displacement and movement of people from their homelands as a consequence of economic pressures.

References


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