

READERS' CORNER

Book Review: *The Anthropology of Entrepreneurship: Cultural History, Global Ethnographies, Theorizing Agency* by Richard Pfeilstetter. London and New York: Routledge

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Are you looking for a concise yet comprehensive introductory book on entrepreneurship which skillfully adorns theoretical foundations with cutting-edge empirical cases? Look no further. Richard Pfeilstetter's book delivers this and some more.

Pfeilstetter does not limit himself to the discipline of anthropology. He also adroitly references major areas in sociology, psychology, and economics which are important for understanding the nature of entrepreneurship. Such a conscientious approach already merits this book to be a good companion resource for students taking introductory courses of entrepreneurship in any of the above-mentioned disciplines. While psychologists generally prefer to study risk-taking personalities, economists seem more eager to explore the questions of production and profit. Sociologists typically look at the social surrounding of business enterprise, particularly various startup ecosystems. However,

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essential concepts such as innovation, creativity, and social change often escape notice. Anthropologists hold that it is worthwhile to investigate the interplay between all these various aspects of entrepreneurship.

Pfeilstetter proceeds by carrying out a formidable task of “unearthing” classical anthropological works which have exclusively dealt with notions of entrepreneurship. It is ironic that numerous current anthropologists develop somewhat similar conclusions in their research, while not knowing the giants on whose shoulders they stand. Advancing the intellectual rigor of entrepreneurship studies within the anthropological tradition may be strengthened with more knowledge of previous extensive work. Fortunately, Pfeilstetter cites major thinkers, providing future generations of scholars a fruitful foundation to build upon.

The Austrian social scientist Joseph Schumpeter is certainly one of these thought titans. He envisioned the entrepreneur as a social change agent, a “man of action.” Schumpeter viewed the entrepreneur as a leader in the economic sphere, analogous to rulers in the political realm or commanders in the military sphere. Another intellectual colossus, Fredrik Barth, followed in Schumpeter’s footsteps and continued the “agency-driven social change” tradition in the anthropology of entrepreneurship. Throughout his research, Barth emphasized the themes of choice, competition, and strategy.

Another school of ethnographic thought focusing on the concept of entrepreneurship goes back to Mary Douglas and Clifford Geertz. These authors formulated “culture theories” of entrepreneurship. While Douglas envisioned a nuanced normative-structural theory of culture, Geertz explored descriptive-historical dimensions of what constitutes an “entrepreneurial culture.” Douglas spoke of four cultures, not one, in which entrepreneurship embodies a specific belief system, a common way of categorizing and experiencing the world, but always in the context of other competing cultures. According to her, an entrepreneurial culture appears through constant struggles with other human cultures, both in personal and organizational life-worlds. As for Geertz, he was primarily interested in the various moral and historical conditions that make the emergence of entrepreneurial subgroups possible.

Having explored the foundational theories, Pfeilstetter moves on to new and exciting empirical directions concerning the entrepreneurship concept. One of these directions is the examination of the “social” in entrepreneurship. What are the emancipatory examples of effects of business on a society? To answer this question, Pfeilstetter gathers several contemporary empirical studies under the umbrella of the gift economy, which has been on the anthropological menu since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to this line of research, businesses strive to build social service delivery as a profitable part into

their everyday operations, not just as a complementary form of publicity. Corresponding ethnographic studies from Austria, Venezuela, and Bolivia follow.

A second line of research in contemporary theorizing of entrepreneurship probes the oppression facets of this phenomenon. Rich anthropological reports from the field demonstrate how such oppression disguised as successful entrepreneurship builds poverty capitalism in the south and “preariat capitalism” in the west. Detailed examples from Kenya, Egypt, the United Kingdom, Bangladesh, and Costa Rica follow.

A third line of inquiry goes under the name of “entrepreneurialization,” which is a two-pronged phenomenon. On the one hand, there is a growing global tendency of increasing encroachment of monetary exchange and market-like competition upon formerly discrete spheres, including personhood, love, religion, family, heritage, or the State. On the other hand, entrepreneurialization stands for the particular academic practice that reframes non-economic structural phenomena in terms of micro-economic agency.

The main champions of this academic tradition are Howard Becker and John and Jean Comaroff, scholars based in Chicago. Becker talks about the business-like constitution of moral categories, while the Comaroffs investigate the marketization of ethnic selfhood. The foundational issues of autonomy, motivation, decision, rationality, and responsibility come forth once researchers treat various sorts of phenomena as “entrepreneurial”: the labeling of outsiders, the marketing of protection, the commodification of identity. These are complex societal mechanisms which come to light by deploying the entrepreneurialization paradigm. Contemporary empirical cases supporting such an approach come from countries as diverse as Russia, Spain, China, and India.

In the book, Pfeilstetter does not shy away from questioning the validity of various criticisms of entrepreneurship from different disciplines. He is also quick to identify his own assumptions and biases. Such reflexivity adds weight to the overall argument.

Although the book’s brevity is commendable, it is, paradoxically, its *tendo Achillis*. Some passages are so interesting that they definitely warrant further investigation. However, Pfeilstetter moves on to the next vignettes quickly. This is a jarring experience for readers and may make it difficult for them to fully understand important concepts. Hence, I sincerely wish for a second edition of the book to expand on its key themes and major empirical findings.

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