ESSAY

Anthropology: An Entrepreneurial Discipline

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Abstract

In this essay, I take stock of the existing entanglements and possible future symbiosis between anthropology and entrepreneurship, both as a field of research and as a practice of venture creation. While anthropologists have studied entrepreneurship as an economic phenomenon (anthropology *of* entrepreneurship) and have more modestly entered into direct conversation with this field (anthropology *in* entrepreneurship), I propose that there is an alternative way in which the discipline can make an impact and assert its value in the realm of new venture creation. To substantiate this proposition, I showcase how anthropologists and founders share affinities of practice. Specifically examining uncertainty, failure, and pivoting as fundamental to both how anthropological knowledge is generated and how venture creation unfolds, I argue that, seen in this way, anthropological practice and thinking can be understood as fundamental to business creation.

Keywords

Anthropology, Entrepreneurship, Knowledge, Venturing, Founding.

Introduction

Although business anthropology, including anthropology in or for business, has a long tradition within our discipline, traceable at least to Elton Mayo and the Hawthorne shop floor studies, it is only recently that the field has gained momentum. Such momentum has been brought forward by pioneers in this field, who have fundamentally reshaped how anthropologists approach organizational settings (for instance, Cefkin 2009; Ferraro and Briody 2017; Schwartzman 1993), marketing and advertising (for instance, Malefyt and Moeran 2020; Malefyt and Morais 2020; Sunderland and Denny 2016), and technology (for instance, Dourish and Bell 2011), to mention just a few themes within the field. It has been evidenced by the proliferation of various interest groups focusing on industry, such as the Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Community (EPIC), and by the creation of journals such as the *Journal of Business Anthropology*. Additionally, it has been fueled by an increasing disillusionment in academic employment, marked by precarious labor conditions (for instance, Fotta, Ivancheva, and Pernes 2020), leading to more and more anthropologists choosing to apply anthropological methods and ways of thinking in the broader business sector, whether as designers, consultants, or user experience researchers.

The overwhelming majority of these instances, however, involve mature businesses. Against this exciting and ever-richer backdrop, new venture creation and innovation – entrepreneurship in its nascent stages – remains an area of anthropological focus which, although gaining speed recently (see, for example, Koycheva and VandenBroek 2024; the *Journal of Business Anthropology* 2023, vol. 12, no. 2), is yet to catch up. This creates an exciting array of possibilities for anthropology to engage the field of entrepreneurship, both as a practice and as a scholarly effort. In the first part of this essay, I briefly review the ways in which anthropological inquiry has approached the entrepreneurial phenomenon and use this overview to map out the main features and implications of such approaches. Specifically, I identify two distinct modes of engagement between the two fields: the anthropology *of* entrepreneurship and anthropology *in* entrepreneurship. The former mode is perhaps most developed, as it treats business creation as an economic activity, which has always been the purview of economic anthropological theorizing. In a more limited way, the ways in which anthropological approaches can be leveraged to study this phenomenon are also part and parcel of how anthropology and entrepreneurship come together. The latter mode – anthropology in entrepreneurship – is less developed. There are two broad companion questions, mutually informing one another, which characterize this second mode. One question is: How can anthropology better inform entrepreneurship research, the scholarly domain of inquiry within management research? The second question is: How can

anthropology become more appealing to the practitioners – the entrepreneurs – themselves?

While both of these questions are worth exploring comprehensively, in the second part of this article, I focus on what may be the more unintuitive one for an anthropologist to make, to read, and above all to enact: How can anthropology gain more currency among entrepreneurs and business creators? One answer has been that anthropologists should better "translate" what they do for potential clients (for instance, Vogel and Gamwell 2020). Another, more typical route so far has been via design thinking. Design thinking is a staple of new venture creation and is widely promoted and practiced in various business creation programs. As a framework, it has picked up many aspects from anthropological and ethnographic methods. Crucially, however, it has recently also seen push-back from within anthropology, as it has been argued that design thinking represents a watering down of crucial elements of the anthropological craft (for instance, Hasbrouck 2018; Koycheva 2020) and, in so doing, occupies a space which ethnographic thinking (Hasbrouck 2018) ought to better claim for itself.

In this essay, I offer an alternative intellectual ingress into the question of how anthropology can become more appealing to entrepreneurs, arguing that entrepreneurs and anthropologists share great commonalities of practice. Hence, I trace the affinities of the production of anthropological knowledge and the aspects fundamental to entrepreneurship. Specifically, I focus on three characteristics that both venturing and anthropology share: failure, pivots, and uncertainty as a milieu that must be embraced, navigated, and captured in the production of value on behalf of others. Although I am aware of the fact that, under late neoliberal capitalism, there is a tendency to use entrepreneurship in a normative way – or, as David E. Pozen wryly observed, "everyone, it seems, is an entrepreneur these days" (Pozen 2008: 283, quoted in VandenBroek 2021) – I find a lot of opportunity in reworking this neoliberal insistence on rendering everything entrepreneurial in order to make future businesses more aligned with the values, hopes, and understandings that anthropology has for human societies.

Finally, even though I would not go as far as to say that all anthropologists are (or should be) entrepreneurs, and that all entrepreneurs are unknowingly anthropologists, I want to demonstrate that there are under-explored possibilities for rapprochement between the two fields as they are practiced in the world at large, outside of academic contexts. To this end, I make two calls in this contribution. I call for a way of making anthropology more attractive and appealing to entrepreneurs, who traditionally look to psychology, economics, design thinking, and, increasingly, data science for elements to incorporate in their practice. This offers anthropologists a way of imbuing the business of tomorrow with the anthropological spirit, values, and practices – not

through their currently existing models of critical theorization alone, but by pursuing critique by doing (to adapt from Magatte Wade's (2022) inspired suggestion that entrepreneurs criticize by creating). Second, in the same vein, I call for more anthropologists to become founders themselves, leading and enacting by example (see also Artz and Koycheva 2025).

The Anthropology of Entrepreneurship – and in Entrepreneurship Research

Can there be an anthropology of entrepreneurship? The answer is yes, because, in many ways, there has always been one, albeit somewhat on the margins of anthropology. Richard Pfeilstetter (2022) has recently offered a thoughtful overview of the topic in his superbly comprehensive *The Anthropology of Entrepreneurship: Cultural History, Global Ethnographies, Theorizing Agency*, which will be difficult – and largely unnecessary given the limited scope of any single article – to replicate here.

For my purposes, however, a brief sketch of the status quo will serve to outline the broader backdrop against which my intervention takes place. In many ways, anthropology – and economic anthropology especially – has never lost sight of entrepreneurial practices as foci for inquiry. For example, the relationship between kinship and economic practices has historically been central to anthropological theorization of various societies, including a steady focus on family firms (for instance, Koellner 2022). The role of ethnicity in entrepreneurship has also been studied (for instance, Wong 1998). De facto entrepreneurship imbues practices otherwise studied and discussed under different labels and in various societal contexts. They are present in ideas of nation building in China (Lindtner 2020) and India (Irani 2019), as well as in ethnographies of informal labor and markets, criminality, spirituality, morality, and changing meanings of careerism in post-Soviet societies (for instance, Fomina 2020; Hemment 2015; Yurchak 2003). Moreover, entrepreneurial practices have been shown to be a form of political resistance (Vertovec 2020) and a form of rehabilitative mechanism for reintegrating into society (Marshall 2018).

And yet, an anthropology of entrepreneurship continues to feel somehow novel. Pfeilstetter (2022) aptly demonstrates the origin of the difficulties in making this stick, noting that it is "hard to clearly identify the existing body of scholarship" (2022: 57). This is due to many reasons, chief among them, at least in my view, being that entrepreneurship has been studied under other constructs that anthropology has privileged, whereas entrepreneurship is "simply taken for granted as ordinary vocabulary" (2022: 57).

This inattention or uneasiness in integrating anthropology and entrepreneurship has persisted for a long time. If Pfeilstetter shows how and why this is the case in the anthropology *of* entrepreneurship, Alex Stewart (1992) is set on a noble campaign of making space for anthropology *in* entrepreneurship research. This is a campaign that he continues, some 20 years later, together with Elizabeth K. Briody (2019), writing in this journal and making a powerful case that entrepreneurship is a fruitful ground for anthropology.

In entrepreneurship research – the academic study of venture creation and development – this integration of anthropology becomes even more difficult. Very often, the way that anthropology forms part of entrepreneurship research is through the implementation of some sort of semblance of the method. In these instances, however, what is meant by ethnography can hardly be recognized as such in terms of the end product or the insistence on relational and contextual inquiry. The focus on human aspects in entrepreneurship research continues, therefore, to be dominated heavily by psychological cognitivist approaches (for instance, Shepherd and Patzelt 2018). As Michiel Verver and Juliette Koning (2024) have recently noted in adopting an anthropological approach to studying the role of socio-cultural ties in entrepreneurship in Asia, "[v]ery few anthropologists study entrepreneurship, and anthropological insights are only sporadically used in entrepreneurship studies" (2024: 650).

This is not to say that things are not slowly changing – indeed, they are. A new generation of often applied anthropologists are making strides to build up critical momentum for the study of entrepreneurship, ecosystems, and the impact of new technologies on the field (for instance, Artz and Ren 2025; VandenBroek 2022). The recent partnership between the American Anthropological Association and the Kauffman Foundation – the premier foundation for entrepreneurship research – in sustaining several ongoing dedicated symposia, which have resulted in edited volumes on the topic (for instance, Liebow and McKenna 2022; Liebow and Sunderland 2023), has been a welcome and encouraging sign for the future of a much better engagement between the two fields.

But if anthropologists are still to better campaign for the relevance of their discipline for entrepreneurship, and to better sharpen the focus on entrepreneurship as a phenomenon irreducible to practices previously subsumed under other economic categories, there is a parallel, equally worthy campaign to be undertaken. It is driven precisely by this next wave of interest in studying entrepreneurship as a phenomenon in its own right in specific ecosystems and working spaces (for instance, Koycheva 2022; VandenBroek 2022). This opens up an opportunity to bring anthropology as a highly applicable set of methods and ways of thinking into the world of entrepreneurs.

In this way, anthropologists should be appealing to founders themselves as a way of introducing anthropology into the practical and conceptual toolbox of the entrepreneur. Why this is possible, and what is one possible starting basis for doing so, is what I focus on in the second part of this article.

Towards Entrepreneurial Anthropology

One of the characteristic features – and, for me personally, intellectual attractiveness of anthropology – is how multifaceted the discipline can be. It has always held a very special kind of capacity to stretch its approaches and perspectives to accommodate the varieties of human experiences. This has resulted in variants of anthropological practice and theory which are almost chameleonic in their ability to adapt to specific environments or even shape-shifting in their ability to change form in escaping institutional expectations.

This is perhaps most immediately and obviously seen from the many adjectives which have been given to the discipline in an effort to capture its many essences, all of them harkening back to an unruly spirit. Thus, for example, Nancy Shepherd-Hughes (1995) has very powerfully called for a militant anthropology, one which is ethically responsible towards those it researches with – as companheiros and comrades – rather than research subjects approached from a neutral and distant standpoint. This sentiment is echoed by Don Kulick's (2006) treatment of the pleasures and pains ethnographers gain from identifying with the powerless, crucially always failing to truly do so, going as far as calling the discipline masochist. This is much in line with Danylin Rutherford's (2012) famous labeling of the anthropologist's empiricism being "kinky" in that it:

> admits that one never gets to the bottom of things, yet also accepts and even celebrates the disavowals required of us given a world that forces us to act. An empiricism that is ethical because its methods create obligations, obligations that compel those who seek knowledge to put themselves on the line by making truth claims that they know will intervene within the settings and among the people they describe (2012: 476).

Maïté Maskens and Ruy Blaines (2013) have moreover proposed that anthropology's endeavors are very Quixotic in that ethnography is romantically subversive. And it is Laura Nader (2018) who, perhaps most famously and aptly, sums it up in calling anthropology "contrarian" in its ability to escape the established normative laws of "abrogating unwritten rules" and "a critique of entrenched mindsets" (2018: xi).

Given this chameleonic nature, what are the perspectives and possibilities of an entrepreneurial anthropology, and could we add

entrepreneurial to the list of manifestations of a beloved discipline? What are the antecedents and existent developments in the rapprochement between anthropology and entrepreneurship more broadly, in relation to which we can start imagining such an anthropology? Writing for the very first Kauffman Conference on Entrepreneurship and Anthropology, convened at Princeton University by Derek Lidow (see Lidow 2017), Per Davidsson (2017), one of the preeminent figures in entrepreneurship research, offered a humble and cautious suggestion of how an "entrepreneurial ethnography" might look like, signaling a focus on "entrepreneurial collectives and communities" as key (for examples, see Koycheva 2020; Koycheva and VandenBroek 2024; VandenBroek 2022).

Although I take inspiration from his title – "Musings on the Prospects of an Entrepreneurial Ethnography" – my point here is entirely different. More importantly, in my view, a recurrent and unifying theme for all of the above recalibrations of the character and essences of anthropology is this: the ethical imperative of enacting a challenge to the status quo. Anthropologists not only study change but also aim to challenge incumbents – whether it be incumbent understandings, norms, or practices. In this, anthropology and entrepreneurship are very alike.

In having a penchant to study and represent the disempowered and the oppressed; in complicating – and disrupting – existing understandings and fighting stereotypical meaning; and in offering novel, unexpected angles for interpretations, anthropology is just as much an exercise (perhaps ironically so) in Joseph Schumpeter's "creative destruction" (1975 [1942]) as entrepreneurship is. In its habitually contrarian positioning (Nader 2018), the discipline has developed a very strong anti-incumbent muscle, which manifests most strongly perhaps in those colleagues who are activists for social causes. Although the products resulting from such creative destruction are different in the purpose, circulation, and currency they have in society, this "muscle" is what I see as a shared characteristic with entrepreneurship, as both share the same powerful impetus to change things.

Anthropology and Entrepreneurship: Affinities of Practice

How, then, and to what ends, can anthropology and entrepreneurship come together in a more organic and integrated manner than the former being just harvested for its method or the latter being used as a site and a context for critical exploration? How can the two help one another in not (only) the building of theories, but, in practice, the building of ventures?

My suggestion on how to navigate this proposed new confluence of anthropology and entrepreneurship comes from a number of experiences I have: as a researcher of technology, entrepreneurship, and innovation; as a mentor and coach to tech startups; and as a founder myself. Through these experiences, I have noticed a compelling affinity of

practice between both doing anthropology and doing entrepreneurship. I believe that these affinities of practice hold a promise for enriching both the practice and the theory in anthropology, entrepreneurship, and entrepreneurship research. Specifically, both anthropologists and entrepreneurs operate under uncertainty; failure is an inevitable part of the work; and pivoting is a question of survival. In what follows, I briefly sketch out these affinities of practice.

Uncertainty

For entrepreneurship, uncertainty is a key parameter of venturing as a practice. Closely associated and typically examined with the concept of entrepreneurial action (for instance, McMullen and Shepherd 2006), uncertainty marks virtually every aspect of being an entrepreneur and founding a startup – from new product creation, market entry, and development (for instance, Alvarez and Barney 2005; Sarasvathy 2001). So pervasive is it as a phenomenon in entrepreneurship that David M. Townsend et al. (2018) note that "one of the enduring and fundamental assumptions underlying theories of entrepreneurial action is that entrepreneurs operate in uncertain environments" (2018: 659). However, the entrepreneurship literature treats it almost exclusively as a context, with little coalescence towards the theorizing of uncertainty as a key phenomenon and a medium of venturing.

In turn, in anthropology, although most often present in between the lines of ethnographic accounts and typically becoming part of anthropological inquiry, uncertainty is an aspect that marks most, if not all, anthropologically informed work. Lack of certainty – and certainties – marks the method, the theorizing, and, indeed, the fundamental conceptualization of anthropological work. As such, there have been a number of approaches to uncertainty at the theoretical level, often found in political anthropological ethnographies. For example, Henrik Vigh's (2009) beautiful work on social navigation as "motion within motion" theorizes how people deal with uncertainty. Similarly, uncertainty is central to theorizing life under unstable political regimes in an important compendium in political anthropology – as demonstrated powerfully in *Ethnography in Unstable Places* (Greenhouse 2002), for example. Perhaps even more importantly, anthropologists address uncertainty not only as a context and at a theoretical level, but also espouse it as an epistemological disposition. It is the medium in which anthropologists operate contextually in that they often do not know how a particular dynamic reconfiguration of objects, people, phenomena, and events will come together, even if they have been familiar with it for years. Such an epistemological standpoint, in which anthropologists often start out as amateurs, with a hefty imposter syndrome (cf. Ingold 2021; Taylor 2020), is indispensable for anthropological knowledge because it helps question

one's assumptions – a key ingredient to challenge the incumbent status quo and models of thinking.

Uncertainty, therefore, permeates our toolbox and mindset. In his superb book *The Art of Fieldwork*, Harry Wolcott (2005) lists "a tolerance for ambiguity" under the very basic arts of conducting fieldwork: "[A]nother admonition that becomes trite in the saying, but essential *in the doing*, is to remain as adaptable as possible, to exhibit a tolerance for ambiguity. In the terms of *priorities, perhaps this point deserves first mention"* (2005: 86, my emphasis).[1] More recently, writing with the explicit aim to translate how anthropologists think and work for business contexts, Jay Hasbrouck (2018) notes that the "ability to embrace ambiguity and shift between perspectives also opens up opportunities for new approaches and possibilities" (2018: 39). This tolerance in the doing of ethnographic fieldwork, then, readily translates into the way anthropologists theorize. "It is a strange science," Clifford Geertz (1973) wrote in his paradigmatic *The Interpretation of Cultures*, "whose most telling assertions are the most *tremulously* based, in which to get somewhere with the matter at hand is to *intensify the suspicion*, both your own and that of others, that you are not getting it quite right" (1973: 29, my emphasis). Even more strongly, Limor Samimian-Darash and Paul Rabinow (2015) position uncertainty as central to the anthropological project as a whole. In their *Modes of Uncertainty: Anthropological Cases*, they note that the anthropological mode of uncertainty is not only what marks the discipline, but, in many ways, what make it scientifically superior: "[H]istory and philosophy without anthropology are static. In a turbulent and changing world, we argue, remaining static is scientifically inadmissible, ethically deficient, and misleading" (2015: 206-207). Finally, and perhaps most comprehensively, in *Uncertainty and Possibility*, Yoko Akama, Sarah Pink, and Shanti Sumartojo (2018) bring together all of the above strands of how anthropology has approached uncertainty in its intellectual project by exploring in detail:

> [H]ow uncertainty can be transformative, how we attune to and engage with it more attentively in our practice in change-making processes, and how uncertainty might be harnessed as a technology for producing new and open ways of understanding, making, and imagining the world (2018: 5).

In sum, anthropology – and ethnography – are well suited to navigate uncertainty as a context precisely because it is embraced epistemologically. In this, anthropologists are just as entrepreneurial as venturers who start a company. Moreover, largely as a by-product of operating under conditions of uncertainty, failure and pivoting constitute

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[1] For the purposes of this essay, I do not distinguish between uncertainty and ambiguity.

two additional domains of overlap between anthropologists and entrepreneurs.

Failure

Because of the uncertainty inherent in entrepreneurship, failure is an inevitable part of the entrepreneurial process and journey. New ventures fail frequently (for instance, Holtz-Eakin 2000) for a number of reasons, from lack of product-market fit to team conflict, making the creation of startups and the introduction of novel products and services into the market an endeavor fraught not only with uncertainty but also costs. The collapse of a venture in whole or parts thereof (such as a failed business model, failed team dynamics, and so forth) has been shown to inflict a number of negative psychological, financial, and social costs (Dew et al. 2009; Shepherd, Wiklund, and Haynie 2009; Smith and McElmee 2011).

Yet, despite this, failure is elevated as a key methodology for learning – and, therefore, progressing forward. "Fail fast and often" is a mantra in innovation and entrepreneurship, which I am sure that most readers working in business have heard. Anecdotally, a near-mandatory slide with Edison's famous dictum of not having failed but having found 10,000 ways of how *not* to build a light bulb proudly features in many pitch decks and on the walls in many startup spaces.

Similarly, being iterative rather than rule-based in how anthropologists explore the world, anthropological knowledge production also incorporates failure. In fact, if flexibility, ambiguity, and uncertainty in anthropology are enabling, failure is truly generative. Hasbrouck (2018) notes that "any seasoned ethnographer will tell you that fieldwork never goes as planned. Most have a slew of stories about *mishaps* in the field, as well as how those mishaps eventually led to unexpected insights" (2018: 36, my emphasis).

As an example, consider a mishap in the field described as the onset of one of the most paradigmatic ethnographies in the anthropology of violence. Originally in the field to conduct an archeological survey of sites, Neil Whitehead (2002) notes how, instead, a moment as fleeting as incidentally touching an object fundamentally changed everything:

> *It had not been my intention* to collect archeological materials; we not only wished to be alert to Patamuna sensitivities about the handling of ancestral remains, but we were also in no position to carry heavy and fragile ceramics for the remaining six weeks. However, *what happened next* was to become, both in my mind and that of others, a defining moment: as the Patamuna with us would not "trouble" the pot in any way, my Lokono companion moved the pot to the cave moth where I could photograph it – and

> where I, too, *without thinking,* touched it (2002: 18-19, my emphasis).

This failure of knowledge of local prohibitions surrounding burial sites resulted in one of Whitehead's best-known and most authoritative ethnographies on violence in the post-colonial context. The insights that follow a breakdown – what people say and the actions they take to remedy what has just created a rupture in normative fields, social or symbolic orders, or material consequences – are significant for our understanding of larger cultural and social systems which are at play. Failure opens up pockets of understanding and opportunities to see elements of any social field in a new light, as well as invites reflection and a change in the course of action. This is perhaps best encapsulated in the short but powerful treatment which Cymene Howe and Stephanie Takaragawa (2017) give the topic of failure:

> The paradox of failure is that we can only fail if *we strive to do*. To fail is to set a goal, to act, and to aspire. Failure marks initiative and courage, as well as action, ambition, and intent. At times, it involves succeeding in just the opposite of what was intended (2017, my emphasis).

Finally, the third and last main element of the affinity between anthropology and venturing is the pivot – the change of reorientation in aims, practices, and overall approach after failure.

Pivoting

In venturing, pivoting is often a very fraught moment of survival. The decision whether to go forward with an idea or a plan of action or to change directions – and to what degree of difference from the original plan – is not only difficult to time, but also personally and psychologically taxing, as it involves an evaluative decision under continued uncertainty. Matthew Grimes (2018) defines the pivot as a "[f]eedback-induced change, while likely intended to increase the viability of creative ideas, might paradoxically undermine that viability by compromising creative workers' associated identity-based relationships with their creative endeavors" (2018: 1692). In other words, the difficulty in changing course is because startup founders' attachment to their business ideas and plans are often so personal that they are unable to let go of them.

For the ethnographer, this is luckily not so poignant a moment of survival, but it does tie into practices of what Hasbrouck (2018) has argued is a defining characteristic of the ethnographic mindset – "expanded awareness" and being attuned to what people are telling you in real time. In many instances, in ethnography, the pivot is forced upon anthropologists by practical circumstances, and fieldworkers must choose it, whether they like it or not – or, in other instances, pivots in

research are demanded of ethnographers by the informants who are duly instructing them to "research this and not that." This is a powerful moment that ethnographers have learned to recognize as being told what is meaningful and significant locally.

In fact, many ethnographies start that way. Consider, as an example, Tobias Rees' (2016) opening vignette in his book *Plastic Reason*:

> I *never planned* to do work on the brain, let alone its retrained embryogenetic plasticity. When I arrived in Paris in early 2002, I wanted to study French biology [...] Once I arrived in France, however, things developed in unforeseen ways. Gaining access to biotechnology centers turned out to be arduous and slow. Weeks passed, and I made little progress in securing a site for my research. But while my *frustration* with biotechnology labs grew, an *unexpected opportunity* opened up. I was offered the chance to work in the laboratory of Alain Prochiantz (2016: 3-4, my emphasis).

Or the way Keith Basso (1996) arrived at the topic of his paradigmatic ethnography, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, on how language is culturally inscribed and mediative of space and social relationships. He describes being instructed on what to research by an interlocutor, Mr. Lupe:

> "Why don't you make maps over there" the chairman suggested firmly [...] "Not whitemen's maps, we've got plenty of them, but Apache maps with Apache places and names. We could use them. Find out something about how we know our country. You should have done this before." Mr. Lupe's suggestion (or was it a directive?) appealed to me at once (1996: xv).

In combination with navigating uncertainty and being open to failure, then, the ability and need to pivot bring the ethnographer in their daily research very close to the iterative cycles marking early-stage venturing.

To conclude this section, uncertainty, failure, and pivoting are affinities which both entrepreneurship and anthropology share – although such an insight would be difficult to notice unless a person is equally proficient in both anthropology and venture creation (as a phenomenon and as the study thereof). However, in a recent book recasting a number of hitherto seemingly intractable debates in entrepreneurship research, Saras Sarasvathy, Nicholas Dew, and Sankaran Venkataraman (2020) make several points which lend themselves to continue building up the line of reasoning that I have offered here, from within both anthropology *and* entrepreneurship. Following Herbert A. Simon (2019), the authors reframe "entrepreneurship as a science of the artificial" and "entrepreneurship research as an endeavor to study the making, as well as the finding of, valuable new opportunities, ventures and markets" (Sarasvathy, Dew, and Venkataraman 2020: 4). Crucially, they also posit that "entrepreneurship

is a *method* of acting in the face of uncertainties" (2020: x, my emphasis). Such a recasting of entrepreneurship as a method creates a possibility to explore how it shares characteristics and logics with the anthropological method: something I have started doing in this essay.

Founders, Anthropologically: Where Next for Anthropological Knowledge Production?

Finally, if entrepreneurship is a method and if it shares several affinities with anthropological knowledge production, what can – and should – such shared characteristics amount to in practical terms? What are the opportunities for anthropology in such intellectual recasting and institutional range expansion? Throughout this essay, I have been making the case that both entrepreneurship and anthropology share a strong resonance, if not an equivalence. What strategic stakes and practical hurdles exist?

There is no one answer to these questions. And I recognize that the impulse I have shared here may prove controversial amongst many anthropologists, not least because anthropology is paradigmatically opposed to the logics of capitalism, especially in its technological manifestations and the systems of dispossessions and inequalities it often creates. My hope for this essay is that it will spur anthropologists to offer a multiplicity of answers going forward, but, especially so, answers based on applied practice. My own are admittedly too many and merit a much larger space than a single essay (Koycheva in progress). Yet, in conclusion, this is what I have to offer.

At the very least, anthropologists can, and should, seek out ways to better embed anthropology in the life of the organizations and institutions enabling entrepreneurship. They can provide workshops, mentoring, and advisory services in these spaces, which have until now not been a very intuitive recipients of anthropological insights, especially since practitioners of anthropology have tended to orient their activities largely towards other types of organizations and corporations. The potential is not least to directly help shape new products and services as they are being developed by startups. Another – even more impactful way – is for anthropologists to become founders themselves (Artz and Koycheva 2025) and bring into the world a materialization of anthropological work and critique, which otherwise remain often at an abstract level – or, as Matt Artz has recently called on the community, to "productize anthropology" (Artz 2023a, 2023b).

This would require a number of methodological, theoretical, and even dispositional recalibrations of commonly established anthropological practice. Among these are questions such as: What are the conceptual and practical steps beyond critique? When can and should relativism be ignored in favor of consequential action? What else, beyond

description, can there be in both anthropology and ethnography? And can anthropology – arguably the most anti-capitalist of modern social sciences – ever find a different intellectual orientation to capital?

All of these require hefty conversations and recalibrations that have, to some extent, started, but which must be continued more extensively in search of answers which imprint also the disciplinary identity of anthropologists and how they see their role in society. My own excitement about entrepreneurship is that it opens a ground for engagement with the world which offers anthropology a way of both contributing to materially building it – through products, infrastructures, and services – and tinkering with its own form of expression, largely confined until now by the dominant role of textual representations. It offers a new form of dwelling in the world and of doing anthropological inquiry – for example, in the way that Paul Rabinow and Anthony Stavrianakis (2019) have proposed.

What new forms of inquiry can entrepreneurship offer anthropology? What new forms of value creation does anthropology offer entrepreneurship? This is where the work truly begins. For me, personally, the answer to these questions is very clear. I am not an entrepreneur despite being an anthropologist. I am an entrepreneur because I am an anthropologist.

Conclusion: The Campaigns Ahead

Anthropology and entrepreneurship (as a research field but also, above all, as a practice) have not been eager or easy to integrate, despite entrepreneurship being an increasingly normative global phenomena, driven forth by the rapid proliferation of new technologies and policies promoting it. In this essay, I have offered a different take on anthropology and entrepreneurship as I have argued for anthropology to pay more attention to how it can recast itself as entrepreneurial, engaging the neoliberal logics of new venture creation, in order to advance its own humanistic agendas more successfully in ways that move beyond intellectual critique. To that end, I have made several points. The more minor and less novel is that there needs to be more anthropological training in engineering and business schools. This is often called for at various professional gatherings, but, somehow, this effort is not gaining substantial momentum. A little over ten years after Stewart (2014) wrote of his experience in being an anthropologist in management departments, anthropologists still "would not even be a token" in such departments (2014: 153). Changing this will require a serious campaign effort, because the value of anthropology is not very clearly differentiated from other human-centered disciplines like psychology and sociology, which have a longer history in shaping management and entrepreneurship as research fields.

The more important points I have made, however, lie elsewhere – not in academia whatsoever. As a corollary to the argument above, I call for anthropology to highlight and promote its entrepreneurial side, even if it is yet to fully realize it has one. Anthropologists should make a greater effort to render anthropology legible to entrepreneurs themselves, as an entrepreneurial practice valuable in its own right and as fundamentally different from established insight-generating frameworks and practices that startups regularly turn to (such as design thinking). In this essay, I call for more anthropologists to join ventures – either as mentors or advisors within the broader entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Finally, and most importantly, I contend that more anthropologists should start their own businesses, not so much as consultants, but as makers of products or services that will circulate in the world. This requires campaigning in anthropology programs to stop essentializing venturing as a reprehensibly capitalist and individualistic act. It is a fallacy to dismiss anthropologists working in business as somehow betraying a putatively purer form of anthropological inquiry undertaken in academic contexts – if not for anything else, then for the fact that academia these days is a corporate setting for all intents and purposes (for instance, Loher and Strasser 2019; Soley 1995). Anthropology cannot escape the late neoliberal context in which it finds itself. The question to be asked is: How can it be reworked to promote its humanistic agenda? It is important to recognize that, perhaps paradoxically so, academically trained anthropologists are well equipped to not only be observers and critics of the entrepreneurial process, but to be entrepreneurs themselves. This is not only because academics are remarkably similar in skillset and mindset to entrepreneurs, albeit operating in an environment much more restrictive than venturing (for instance, Koycheva 2022), but also because venturing and anthropological knowledge production share similarities. Key among these are the ability to embrace and operationalize uncertainty, to pivot, and to learn from failure. Thus, I would like to end this essay with the question that I have been asked countless times by engineers skeptical of what an anthropologist can offer to the startup ecosystem: "What can it build?" It falls upon anthropologists to answer this question by venturing into building.

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