Entrepreneurial Lunch Ladies, Liberated Bytes and Other Hybrids: Purifying the ‘Social’ and the ‘Technical’ in Small Businesses

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Today I’d to explore the ways in which public policy-making and businesses jointly produce a very particular understanding of innovation. In the east of England, novelty is anything but novel. It is a highly prescribed, politically configured notion, as if innovation were both entirely unobjectionable and easily identifiable. This particular rendering of innovation is part of a long term and global cultural conversation about capitalist production, about materiality, and about sociality. Today I want to examine ways of both experiencing and reinventing notions of the social and the material in the context of UK small businesses, which in turn has implications for how people think of themselves as economic actors.

In beginning this research one of my first ports of call was to attend a public consultation meeting, sponsored by the local regional development authority, EEDA. EEDA’s central strategic priority is to support ‘world class innovation’. In this consultation, insiders of the local high-tech world had pointed out the deeply problematic nature of picking and choosing which firms counted as ‘innovative’ enough to deserve state support—here they were using a Newtonian imagery of society as made up of so many billiard balls, some of which could have more ‘impact’ than others if given the right nudge. EEDA’s response in turn was largely agreement: that innovation was not just about IT and biotech, that it was not ‘just about Cambridge’ (Cambridge here serving as the marker for all things high-tech). But this claim left them in an interpretive bind—if innovation wasn’t just about Cambridge, it seemed terribly difficult for anyone to articulate what it was instead.

Interestingly enough, at this meeting representatives from the social enterprise world were invited (social enterprise in this context is defined as a firm that runs itself to make a profit, but with the goal of investing the profits in some socially beneficial way). It quickly became apparent, though, that social enterprises were present not as potential sources of innovation, but as passive consumers of it, as the IT laggards that
needed to be shepherded along a very narrow trajectory of modernity. While ‘innovative social enterprise projects’ were often trotted out as examples of the wonders of working within markets, this did not amount or equate to the ‘real business’ of innovation, the pinnacle of which was IT and biotech.

Something very interesting was going on here. It can hardly be said that social enterprise was bereft of innovation, even of the sort imagined by the state: I discovered in my fieldwork everything from experiments in sustainable building, new machinery to cut down on the miles that food travels within the food chain, a proliferation of food growing techniques, to school lunch ladies taking control over catering and converting it to a mini-enterprise within the school, in order to have a direct impact on the health of children’s bodies. The form of business rather than charity for these firms was more about control and autonomy than picking up the pieces left by a crumbling welfare state, the latter being in part how they are viewed by the state. Yet far from contesting this discourse of where ‘real’ innovation was, the representatives from social enterprise participated in it actively, seeing it as a way of remaining included into the broader economic development picture. The knowledge embodied in the material objects they produced was for them ‘inventive’ but was kept at a distance from any notion of ‘technology’. On the other hand, to refer to a ‘high-tech’ sector at this meeting was to evoke an object-centred set of imagery, and a policy category signalled by a sense of apartness and exceptionalism. While it was not problematic for me to show up the social relations in the ‘high tech’ sector—in fact part of my consultancy work is to do just that—this was okay as long as these entanglements did not disrupt, and were ultimately subordinate to, an externalised march of ever improved asocial things that plug into walls.

What seemed to be going on in local discourses of innovation was to my mind a playing out of the very old problematic of Latour’s hybridity and purification. Now, much social science work in the last twenty years or so has gone into showing how technology is socially shaped, and that it is no longer plausible to black box artefacts. It seemed, though, that for these people, the black box was not only plausible, but actively reproduced. In fact, it is a testament to the strength of this reproduction that to point out the social amongst the technical still has rhetorical effect. Some time ago Marilyn Strathern made a rather striking insight into the tautology that frames many
studies of the Internet. Speaking about the a virtual society programme, she writes “If the programme seeks to provide contextualisation in order to understand the social and human dimensions of the new technologies, it has to be because the electronic technologies themselves are already depicted as decontextualised” (Strathern 2001). The rationale of studying the ‘context’ of the Internet points to an actually existing context, one that pre-figures the Internet something unencumbered by social relations. The consultation meeting I attended seemed to me to be part of the social way in which that pre-figuring was done, this context making. Only certain kinds of objects appeared to them as novel, objects constructed as technical were set to take society by surprise, precisely because of the way context was simultaneously imagined.

In fact, it is doubly surprising that these distinctions of ‘social’ and ‘technical’ hold sway in a commercial context. We are not talking about laboratory science with its ethos of a removed scientific method. Business, after all, is the ultimate hybrid, a bricolage, an intervention between unlike things. For Latour, the pretense of modernity is just as important as its impossibility. He says that our ability to act as hybrids is prefaced by a notion of the separateness of the social and the material. Whereas the entrepreneur is classically thought of as a hybrid maker, Latour would argue that there is a residual process of purification simultaneously happening, one that helps entrepreneurs and others imagine ‘context’.

Next I’ll highlight some of the hybrids and purifications in one software firm and one social enterprise that I worked with, and I want to emphasize here that purifications for them are just as creative and regenerative as creating hybrids.

I’ll start with the software firm. Constructs of the technical were very much about agency and expertise. The ‘technical’ people within the firm fell into layers, like so many points on a Venn diagram. In fact, such scales suffused the office geography, the stronger the ‘technical’ identity, the closer you sat to one particular area of the office. But being technical was never one thing—it invoked a range of identities and agencies, and for the firm to think of itself as effective, translations between what they thought of as ‘social’ and ‘technical’ had to be made. The ‘technical’ had to be reigned in by the social—the techies were always threatening to run riot with their incessant production of new code. The expertise of the marketing director was
granted agency through this closeness with an imagined sociality—that he was capable of revealing the mysterious inner workings of the market. So, the ‘social’ here in many ways mimics ‘the technical’, but is still purified as separate.

Everything about the strategic thinking and action of this firm was created in order so that it can produce a thing, an object—which of course wasn’t an object at all, but software code. For them this ‘thingness’ was not enough to substantiate their claim to high-tech-ness. Now, the argument has been made recently that software firms exist in a state of permanently beta, where firm and customer work in a symbiotic feedback loop to co-produce technology (e.g., Neff and Stark). Again, this argument was part of the genre of revealing the social amongst the technical. But for this software firm, being permanently beta was the thing to be avoided. It saw itself as deliberately cutting off social ‘entanglements’ with customers, avoiding writing bespoke code and amalgamating existing code into something that approximated a commodity, something alienable. Alienation for them was also autopoetic: the vision of a successful alienation was one where description, human relations, and thing became a tightly knitted essence. The product was given a ‘release’ date, as if it was going to have its own agency once set loose in this wider world. Bytes would be liberated, both in the sense of the product release, but also as a description of the product, which was a statistical data amalgamator. Production was frantically geared around this, even though there was not one person to release it to: anyone important already had a beta version. But that seemed hardly the point. Rather, stopping the flow of innovation enabled them to know that novelty had happened. By creating a seemingly ‘pure’ object, a hybrid is created: which is the firm itself. The impossibility of this object was neither here nor there. The firm produces the social markers of materiality, a convincing argument about materiality that in turn configures both the inner workings of the firm and contributes to wider discourses about the relationship between things and people.

The social firm I worked with, which was an environment centre, shop, and café, also produced purifications, but in a different way. The social firm produced imagined social connections. For instance, much of the discourse surrounding organic food focussed ‘reconnecting’ people to the land, and consumers to producers, in the face of an imagined alien milieu. That this process of recovering past connections might
require technological interventions, disrupted ways of imagining the natural as unmediated. (for these guys there’s a link between the naturalness of food and naturalness of human relations). “Going back” was a project that self consciously multiplied interactions categorised as social. That is, far from ‘the social’ being everywhere all the time, as anthropologists make it their job to point out, it was possible to increase the frequency of relations deemed ‘social’. And indeed, in this enterprise they liked to talk about their organisation as ‘the place where issues come to mix’. By bringing into physical juxtaposition fairtrade artefacts, organic food, voluntary labour, and sustainable house building, they inspire others to acknowledge their own social connections. The firm and its customers co-produce multiplied relations, relations suffused with materiality, and yet the firm sees these relations as relations outside themselves, as a context in which they are embedded and attempting to change. Not unlike, of course, the processes of externalisation so central to the software firm.

Here one can see that the two purifications are analogously productive. The feigned thing-ness of the software firm produces its technical identity and masks its sociality. The feigned social nature of the social enterprise keeps issues mixing and downplays the technologies at stake, and by doing so producing a very different sense of the material. Both these firms contribute to an imagination of context that was in some ways shared, but ultimately meant access to very different sets of resources offered by the state. The innovations of the social enterprise are marked only in terms of whether or not they got access to broadband that year. Sadly, things having social impacts is still the more plausible trope, and more politically palatable, than support for those who act in ways conscious of their own sociality.