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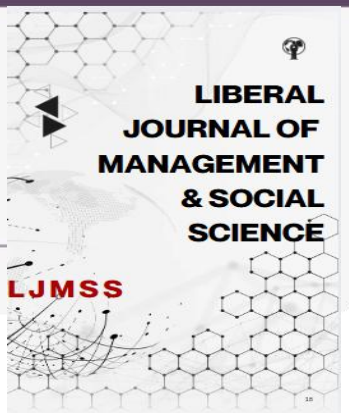

SOCIAL ENTERPRISE INCUBATORS AND NEOLIBERAL GOVERNMENTALITY: A FOUCAULDIAN DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The research examines how social enterprise incubators (SEIs) operate as technologies of neoliberal governmentality through critical analysis of the discursive formations that organize them. Social enterprises, considered as a means of solving social issues with entrepreneurial solutions, have increasingly been the object of praise and incubators are important infrastructures to support them. This celebratory rhetoric has, however, been misleading in relation to hidden layers of neoliberal rationality. Using Michel Foucault's notion of governmentality, this paper examines how SEIs disseminate entrepreneurial norms, disciplined selves and reinscribe neoliberal logics as social innovation. Through a qualitative Foucauldian discourse analysis, we looked at documents, websites, mission statements and public notices from ten SEIs in the UK, North America and Australia. Particularly salient themes revolved around are self-governance, performative metrics and market-based solutions to social problems; and the depoliticization of structural inequalities. The results indicate that, while SEIs provide valuable resources and legitimation for social entrepreneurs, they act as arenas of ideological replication in which the social becomes subordinate to market logics. The paper argues that problematizing SEIs as technologies of governmentality disrupts their apparent neutrality and urges for the cultivation of more critically reflective praxis in the social innovation ecology. Implications are made for researchers, policy makers and incubator managers about the socio-political assumptions embedded in support infrastructures.

Keywords: Social enterprise, incubators, neoliberalism, governmentality, Foucault, discourse analysis, entrepreneurship policy

INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, social enterprises have gained increasing attention as hybrid

organizational models that combine market logics with public interests. Cast as novel solutions to complex social problems — from poverty to climate change — they have rapidly become viewed as agile, entrepreneurial alternatives to the inefficiencies of the state and the shortcomings of antiquated charity models. Their status and power have developed in light of global transformations to governance more generally as part of the wider transition to neoliberal retrenchment of welfare (Roy et al., 2013). With this evolution, there is a visible proliferation of social enterprise incubators (SEIs) which have emerged as an important intermediary practice to assist social entrepreneurs with mentoring, provision of resources, guiding strategy and entree into funding networks among others.

Whilst SEIs are commonly lauded for being 'founders of new ground' in social innovation and impact (see Dees 1998), in this paper we argue that they also perform a more hidden but equally crucial function of historically developing the guidelines, or normative structures which champion ideas about how change ought to be realized. Social support networks They are not frameworks that do not just offer logistical and technical assistance, they form a type of institutionality which rules the behaviors and practices of social entrepreneurs as well. This governance is not direct and coercive in the way we understand traditional forms of governance, but functions through vague influence, expectation-setting, and norm diffusion. Such mechanisms are closely analogous to Michel Foucault's notion of governmentality or the complex of institutions, procedures and discourses through which individuals conduct themselves and carry out their lives according to governing rationalities (Foucault, 1991).

Key to the argument is that SEIs are technologies of power – not in an oppressive sense, but rather through the spread of discourses and practices that make-up what it is to be a 'successful' social entrepreneur. Through trainings, pitch competitions, impact measurement tools and curated mentorship, SEIs incentivize entrepreneurs to internalize entrepreneurial subjectivities of personal accountability, risk seeking behavior, reliance on market mechanisms and drive toward quantifiable results. These features are not value-free; they emanate from the logic of neoliberalism, a mode of governmentality that elevates market-based solutions, reduces subjects to economic agents and blames individuals for addressing structural issues that were once the obligation of the state (Brown 2015).

The emergence of SEIs has to be analyzed within the wider political-economic environment in which the welfare state is in retreat, public services are being privatized or contracted out and

there is a growing expectation that both private sector companies and civil society will take up some of the slack. In the Global North, governments have sought to promote the development of social enterprises and incubators through public–private partnerships, grant schemes and regulatory measures (Nicholls & Teasdale, 2017). This paradox of state support frequently serves to affirm neoliberal principles by offloading public responsibility onto market-based actors. If that is so, the applause for social entrepreneurship as a bottom – up emancipatory force obscures how deeply it has become enrooted in and reproduces hegemonic economic logics (Dey & Steyaert, 2010).

Furthermore, the narratives, disseminated by SEIs tend to depoliticize social issues. Problems such as racial injustice, housing instability, or ecological collapse are posed as "challenges" to be solved with new gadgets and gizmos; marketable business models; disruptive technologies. This framing is consistent with what Ferguson (1990) labeled the "anti-politics machine," referring to development interventions that depoliticize competing interests through a technicality of structural inequities as managerial problems. Within the incubator, complex issues are sometimes boiled down to 'pain points' and 'market opportunities', while success is often measured by metrics such as social return on investment (SROI) or number of beneficiaries impacted—measures that can belie activism or forms of collective action which in transiently resist quantification (Ruebottom, 2013; Ebrahim & Rangan, 2014).

Theoretical motivation This research is driven by an ambition to examine how SEIs function ideologically and how they are implicated in naturalizing neoliberal rationalities in the social innovation terrain. The generalization of impact metrics, business-model-logic, and investor rational logic by social entrepreneurs is not a neutral process but the product of discursive conditioning in institutional settings such as SEIs. As much as of organizations, the spaces are incubators of ideology, which, in turn, shape not just what is done but also what can be imagined within the sphere of social change (Miller & Rose, 2008).

Notwithstanding the increasing prominence and further consolidation of SEIs, however, critical analysis of their political and discursive aspects is scarce. Most of the literature has addressed either functional performance or the organizational dynamics of social enterprising (Battilana & Lee, 2014; Bacq et al., 2020), paying scant attention to the broader epistemic and ideological landscape they occupy. This gap is addressed in this paper wherein the author utilizes a Foucauldian discourse analytic framework to critically analyze SEIs, and seeks to reveal how

power relations are constituted through the discursive language of empowerment, innovation and impact.

Through an analysis of the range agency and communicative practices associated with everyday SEI discourses across websites, training materials, mission statements, etc., it seeks to arrive at an understanding of how these organizations work in terms of forming entrepreneurial subjectivities, defining legitimate social action and contributing to the wider project governing through freedom. As such, it delivers a vital counter-narrative to the dominant euphoria around social innovation and encourages both scholars, practitioners and policy-makers to reflect on the governing dimensions of structures designed for change.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Enterprise research has grown significantly as a field over the past two decades, moving from definitional questions to more complex investigations on hybrid organizations, impact measurement and strategic scaling. Pioneering research such as Battilana and Lee (2014) have shed light on the structural and institutional challenges that hybrid organizations seeking to reconcile commercial imperatives with social aims need to overcome. Also deserving special mention are the contributions from Ebrahim and Rangan (2014) to measure performance in social enterprises, including the development of frameworks accounting for scale, depth, and sustainability of impact. Though the theoretical orientation of this literature is neither homogeneous nor unproblematic, much of the literature still tends to be functionalist and managerial in character. Nowadays the focus is whether, and how, social enterprises can be more effective, sustainable or scalable, often in an effort to maximise their alignment with market and investor interests. In this paradigm, SEIs are being heralded as crucial infrastructures for success through the provision of mentorship, capacity-building and access to capital (Bacq et al., 2020). However, such views toward SEIs treat them as independent, ‘neutral’ or apolitical actors, and thus fail to acknowledge the ideological platforms that are promoted through their activity.

Opposed to such an instrumentalist framing, critical scholars have increasingly utilized theories of power and governance to question how social entrepreneurship is constructed and legitimized. One framework that is particularly useful in thinking through these issues is Michel Foucault’s idea of governmentality – the rationalities and techniques by which subjects are governed, not by overt coercion, but through more subtle forms of self-regulation, internalized norms and performative expectations (Foucault 1991). From a governmentality point of view, organizations

like the SEIs are not service providers but technologies of governance – places where subjects are shaped to live according to dominant social, economic and politics. For social enterprise, the latter often involves incorporating neoliberal values of self-help, competitiveness and market logic.

This critical perspective converges with the analysis of Dey and Steyaert (2010), according to whom "the discourse of entrepreneurship overall—and social entrepreneurship in particular—works to responsibilize individuals as autonomous agents able to overcome structural barriers via personal innovation and effort" (p. 34). This mode of responsibilities is a hallmark of neoliberal governmentality, which supplants collective or state-quartered solutions with individualized market-based responses. Rose (1999) develops this by focusing on how governance functions at the present time through what he calls 'technologies of the self', techniques in which people come to regard self-improvement, entrepreneurship and resilience as moral and civic obligations. In SEIs, these logics are institutionalized through programs, mentorship and performance measurement that reward entrepreneurs based on whether they continually optimize, pivot and can show tangible impact – often in terms derived from private sector investment models.

Methodologically, CDA and FDA have been used to investigate imaginaries about how entrepreneurship and social innovation are discursively shaped by various studies. For instance, Ruebottom (2013) examines how social entrepreneurs construct legitimacy via rhetorical tactics celebrating the personal heroism of actors engaged in work on a 'double bottom line', the market opportunities hidden within social problems and depictions of bureaucratic incompetence. Ramus and Vaccaro's (2017) focus on the nexus of stakeholder expectations and organizational identity highlights how language can facilitate, yet constrain social enterprise. Though illuminating about discursive processes that work to render the broader social enterprise ecosystem audible/ plausible, few explicitly concentrate on incubators as 'discursive places' wherein power is exercised through the structuring of entrepreneurial identity and action.

There are a number of 'strong' discursive features common to the social entrepreneurship literature: The focus on impact (in numerical terms), the exaltation of innovation (frequently technological) and preference for scalability and replicability. These characteristics correspond closely with neoliberal managerialism in that the preferred solutions are those that can commoditized, be subjected to measurement and be traded within market logics (Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004). Social problems are now routinely cast as technical ones, with algorithmic

solutions — most prominently machine learning and “big data” — being put forward to deal with them using data-driven models, the lean start-up methodology and investor-ready pitch decks. Even if these types of strategies lead to more operational efficiency or access to resources, they also transform the meaning of social change, and can marginalize other approaches that center systemic critique, community-based organizing, or deep political work.

This framing has important implications for the ways that SEIs institutionalize these logics. Incubators are themselves curatorial spaces—and ones that select, mentor, and promote certain types of ventures over others -and frequently on the basis of their alignment with those dominant discourses around impact and innovation. In this, they contribute to a form of governing at distance described by Miller and Rose (2008), whereby the behaviour of people and organisations is influenced not through direct control but through the establishment of norms, targets and expectations that actors come to internalise in their own conduct. For example, projects that emphasise commons-ownership, participatory governance or critiques of capitalism might be seen as less fundable or viable in incubator spaces focused on scale and investment readiness.

One noted gap explores the perceived lack of critical and academic interest about incubator spaces as such. Although research about the results and models of SE has been increasing, the incubator as a site for discursive production and ideological reproduction have received much less attention. This absence is important because incubators are not neutral spaces; they actively mold entrepreneurial subjectivities through their curricula, models of mentorship, funding priorities and narratives of impact. In other words, they are necessary to deciding what types of social change become thinkable, fundable and legitimate. By framing incubators as discursive and political organizations, this article fills a gap in existing scholarship on the sector—contributing to our understanding of how power is mobilized within social enterprise.

Toward that end, we consider how SEIs figure in the normalization of market-based approaches to social change more broadly and as part of the larger governmental project to shape citizens as entrepreneurial subjects. It inquiries into how such institutions construct problems, delimit solutions and shape subjectivities, and does so by the use of discourse analysis; it opens up the language, metaphors and assumptions informing their operation. In this regard, it answers the call for ‘more critical forms of research’ that go beyond measuring impact and organisational effectiveness to interrogate the ideological battlefield on which social innovation has come to be

constructed. Viewed through the Foucauldian lens, the incubator is not just a platform (as in springboard) for ventures but it's also power-laden, identity forming and governance performed endeavor that is deeply implicated in the reproduction of neoliberal rationalities.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Investigate the discourses on legitimate social enterprise utilized by SEIs.

Discuss how SEIs constitutes and further neoliberal entrepreneur Ing subjectivities.

Comprehend the SEIs' discursive practices in terms of policy and socio-cultural outlooks.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How do SEIs discursively construct social entrepreneurship?

In what ways are broader cultural and political tropes around neoliberal rationalities and mechanisms of governmentality seen through these discourses?

What are the consequences of these discourses for understanding and imagining social change?

SIGNIFICANCE

This article adds to the critical analysis of the social enterprise ecosystem by exposing what are frequently obscured ideological roles of SEIs. By demonstrating how SEIs implant and naturalize neoliberal values like individualism, market freedom, and entrepreneurial self-responsibility, it calls into question the idea that these spaces are politically neutral or universally liberatory. The conclusions provide important suggestions for policy-makers, educators as well as incubator managers aiming to promote truly inclusive and transformative social innovation. It invites readers to contemplate how the very infrastructure of support can inadvertently reproduce market logics, and how it might be redesigned to promote more pluralistic configurations for social change.

METHODOLOGY

The study is based on a qualitative, interpretive research methodology, and it applies the Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) approach to understand how SEIs produce, diffuse and render discourses to be taken-for-granted regarding entrepreneurship, for social change as well as for impact. Foucauldian discourse analysis provides a methodological approach to critique those practices that stress the inclusion of language as being constitutive for what is deemed true, normal or desirable within particular institutional and cultural settings (Kendall & Wickham, 1999). Rather than take discursive form for granted, FDA examines how discourse acts as a power device—constituting subjects, orienting problematizations and judgments, and authorizing

specific forms of knowledge while excluding others. Such an approach is especially apt for consideration of SEIs, which can appear gender-neutral while grounding a nexusofnormative assumptions that embed specific configurations of political values(see McRobbie 2009) linked to wider ideological currents, notably the culture and governance of neo-liberalism.

For this analysis, a purposive sampling technique was used to pick the top ten SEIs operating in English speaking countries having established social enterprise sector ecosystems; UK, USA, Canada and Australia. These incubators were selected because of their prominence in the field, rich public documentation, and as recognized thought leaders in social innovation. The selection was designed to ensure diversity across organization type and mission—attending from university-incubators to non-profit or corporate-sponsored accelerators —with projected orientation towards early-stage venture support.

The majority of original source materials were publicly available information along the lines of: official organization website, mission statement, value proposition or blog and entrepreneur testimonials, white paper content (if sector agnostic), annual report or training guide. The study also examined social media (LinkedIn and Twitter/X posts), as well as public webinars, podcasts, and panel discussions. We chose to capture not only fixed institutional messaging, but also moments of on-going interaction and unfolding discourse production in the public. This multivocal strategy made it possible to conduct a richer, more nuanced examination of the articulation and reinforcement of specific understandings of social entrepreneurship by SEIs.

All of the textual data were imported into NVivo, a qualitative analysis program, and coded using a combination of inductive and deductive methods. The coding framework drew on core Foucauldian concepts such as technologies of power (wherein institutions produce and structure people's behaviour), technologies of the self (how people are constituted in ways that make them governable by themselves), and regimes of truth (modalities through which truths are manifested; i.e. the media, scientific discourse) (Foucault 1980; Rose 1999). We discovered through iterative coding and thematic memorization that common discursive patterns included the fetishizing of resilient value, the fetishizing of impact metrics and the de-politicization of systemic issues. These were interrogated in relation to what the blog is made of, as well as what it does—how, embedded within institutional logics, it functions to produce docile entrepreneurial subjects who are fashioned (to quote Foucault) by and for neoliberal regimes.

This is not a law or theory, but this is used in an analytical way in order to provide the demands

of rigor and credibility. These included focus on repetition and consistency of key discursive elements between organisations; their correlation with established neoliberal rationalities (such as responsibility, market efficiency); and their institutional role—whether enabling, constraining or normalising particular modes of thought and action. These similarities and differences were compared across the entire data set, but are likely indicative of broader ideological patterns rather than individual speakers.

Ethically, all materials reviewed for this study were posted and publicly accessible, so no formal informed consent review by an institutional review board was needed. However, the research was ethical by qualitative standards and did not cause harm or stereotype participants or misrepresent their contributions. To protect institutional identities and focus on discursive structures rather than individual subjects, all SEIs have been anonymized and referred to in a generic manner (e.g., "Incubator A," "Accelerator B") across the analysis. There was no intention to criticize institutions themselves, but rather to consider how systems of power and knowledge come into being though institutional discourse, foreclosing possibilities of what social enterprise might think, say or do.

RESULTS AND EVALUATION

The discursive practices identified in the SEIs (all of which were sampled) generated four major themes through which social entrepreneurship is imagined, enacted and legitimized. These themes are not set up as separated rhetorical strategies, but as interconnected devices of an extended truth regime that mirrors and reinforces liberal governmentality. Building on Foucault's understanding of the way in which power works through discourse, the results illustrate how SEIs subtly direct social entrepreneurs towards conduct that characterizes both problems raised and solutions presented as consistent with dominant economic rationalities.

One key discursive theme across all incubators was the framing of entrepreneurial activity as a moral duty. The language was persistently abstract and moralistic – framing entrepreneurship not just as a career option but as a civic responsibility. Sentiments of 'change starts from you', 'be solution' and "there is no problem that does not have the potential to create the impact by a driven entrepreneur" (SEI 3 Website) indicate the internalization of a moralized economic agency. Entrepreneurship, we are told, is not simply a way to make money or generate value, but to pursue and solve large-scale global problems in a socially righteous manner. This framing, in turn, is closely aligned with the values promulgated by neoliberalism – which off-loads

responsibilities for social welfare from collective institutions to individuals and casts personal initiative as the highest good (Brown 2015). In this context, to be entrepreneurial is not only economically prudent, but ethically superior—an act of moral citizenship. The implication is that those who do not create entrepreneurial action are somehow just sitting there, being unhelpful, or even dangerous with their lack of activity to continue social problems.

The second emerging theme was the focus on metrics of impact and accountability. Nearly all SEIs made extensive use of dashboards, Impact reports and success metrics on the web-site and other promotional activities. Entrepreneurs were exhorted to document how many lives they impacted, how many jobs they created or carbon emissions reduced, and what their social return on investment was. They were listed as the key tools by which legitimacy would be proved and funding won, ensuring that a social mission was worthy. This "numerical fetishism" (Power, 1997) is not ideologically neutral; it epitomizes what Power refers to as the "audit society", where the ability to measure shifts seamlessly with that of being able to manage and govern. Their modus operandi is therefore that of technologies of control: they do not just tell us what does and what doesn't 'count' as success, but also which sorts of ventures might be considered fundable or scalable. Ventures that have relatively complex, long-term or qualitative forms of impact, such as political advocacy and cultural change may not be able to get the support, they need in growth via incubation because their outcomes are not easily standardized. This fetishization of metrics therefore serves to pre- empty what kinds of social change we value (and can imagine) by favouring the sorts of initiatives that reproduce metrics grounded in logics specific to corporate, investment and calling performances.

The third theme was a patterned depoliticization of social problems. Although they wrestled with deep-rooted economic, social and environmental problems like poverty, inequality and environmental destruction, most ESEFs always framed these issues in abstract terms. Poverty, for example, was framed as a "problem to be solved with scaleable solutions" rather than the consequence of historical and systemic injustices like colonialism, structural racism and labor exploitation. The climate crisis itself was often downgraded to an issue of failed energy systems or waste streams, capable of being addressed by some tech-led fix. This framing is consistent with Ferguson's (1990) notion of development as an "anti-politics machine" in which political problems are reconfigured into technical issues and taken out of the domain for public contestation and democratic deliberations. In the SEI world, highly political problems are

reframed as design or innovation problems best tackled by nimble, creative entrepreneurs rather than through system reform or collective efforts. This depoliticization obscures the underlying cause of inequality, and reinforces the lie that the market can correct systemic injustice on its own.

The last theme focuses on developing entrepreneurial subjectivities via self-governing and self-enhancing discourses. SEIs relentlessly pressured entrepreneurs to be in a state of constant self-improvement — upskilling, networking, pivoting, iterating, and hustling. The entrepreneur IS NOT painted to be one who has it all together, but rather is in a never-ending state of self-improvement. This focus on the ongoing development of self falls within one part of Foucault's (1988) analysis of "technologies of the self," or how individuals are positioned as managing their own conduct according to a code. In this situation, the norms are resilience, adaptability, positivity and productivity. Failure is not seen as a systemic problem or the product of market instability; it's a lack of personal grit or execution. This plays into neoliberal myths that the individual is 100% responsible for their success or failure, and that the solution to barriers is always just more self-discipline, harder working (because these aren't about work ethic enough already), or else inventing new things. The upshot is a subject who is always striving to optimize — not only their venture, but themselves—reflecting the tenets of the startup world where movement is perpetual and valued.

Collectively, these themes illustrate that SEIs are much more than technical supports: they are sites of discursive power in the construction of how social problems come to be framed, how solutions become envisioned and entrepreneurs learn their own roles and duties. The institutional language employed by SEIs is not a mere mirror image of reality, but plays in itself an active role in shaping that reality and laying the normative pattern regarding what counts for being a "good" social entrepreneur. In the process, these incubators take part in spreading neoliberal governmentality: they lead individuals to internalize the logic of market mechanisms, to assume responsibility for structural issues and seek change mainly in an entrepreneurial manner. Yet this kind of ideological work is more subtle, frequently described behind the language of empowerment and innovation, but its implications could be significant with respect to what kinds of social change are legitimated and funded in this policy environment.

DISCUSSION

Findings are situated in and add depth to an emerging critical literature that challenges the

ideological moorings of social innovation as well as entrepreneurship. Consistent with Dey and Steyaert (2010), this article suggests that the entrepreneurship narrative—at least as circulated through social enterprise incubators (SEIs)—commonly refers to political and economic doctrines within ostensibly apolitical narratives of innovation, impact, or empowerment. The image of the entrepreneur as a moral, gritty and infinitely adaptable figure serves to secure a neoliberal worldview that distorts away critiques of structure or alternative imaginaries for social change (Semuels 2015). In the same way, the focus on measurable criteria of success and accountability mechanisms resonates with those of (Ramus & Vaccaro, 2017) who view corporate social responsibility as a governance that exerts discipline upon organizations so as to act in line with dominant institutional logics. Our findings add to these insights by showing how SEIs – commonly taken as friendly, support organizations – constitute key intermediaries in the distribution of such ideologies and therefore not only determine what entrepreneurs do, but also the ways in which they start to think about their activities and make sense of what they are doing. These discursive patterns do have implications for practice. SEIs are not simply resources or guides; they act as gatekeepers on rescripting what kinds of solutions, narratives and identities count, scale up for value. Privileging those forms of social innovation that are scalable, technology-driven and replicable in the market, SEIs sideline or delegitimize ways of organizing such as grassroots activism, cooperatives models, mutual aid structures or solid long-term community organizing. This has knock-on effects for public funding, impact investing and the formation of policy that now heavily draw on frameworks and logics popularized by the incubation space. Then it is possible for particular types of social enterprise (those that fit into neoliberal norms) make become more legitimate or “investible” in the eyes of decision makers, replicating and enhancing structural incentives for adherence to this approach. So, the wider innovation ecosystem has a potential to become like income levels of a city, adding to homogeneity and exclusivity, with an orientation towards venture capital model type stuff, instead of deep systemic change. This is of particular importance when discussing the theme of depoliticization in social innovation, as initiatives that attempt to adopt a new way for redistributing power or resisting to present systems are often labelled as “unscalable” or “non-viable”.

As the article provides some strong critique, there are several limitations that should be addressed. The sample included only SEIs from Anglophone high-income countries (UK, USA,

Canada and Australia). Those milieus have some things in common regarding institutional infrastructure, the form of neoliberal governance and entrepreneurship discourses. Accordingly, the results of this study may be an underestimate of variation in incubation globally. Incubators in the non-Western context, especially those which are situated within local community networks or operating in contrary to the predominant funding models), may be exposed to different discourses and values. Moreover, the applied methodology of the study (Foucauldian Discourse Analysis), privileges interpretation through empiricism. This provides a rich, nuanced basis for analysis of the making of meanings and ideology but does not demonstrate how and if entrepreneurs take up these discourses or materially invest them. Further research could augment discourse analysis with empirical or ethnographic tools in order to discover how the discursive regimes are lived, negotiated or contested in practice.

This study generates several lines of future investigation. First, comparative research comparing SEIs in socio-culturally and politically distinct settings would provide insights as to how the discourse on neoliberalism moves or morphs (or is resisted) across sites. This might be particularly of interest in post-colonial or Global South contexts where the subjection to market logics is politically charged, meriting a different historical and political valence. Second, to understand better the reproduction challenges of and opportunities for discursive norms in practice, ethnographic study of day-to-day operation of SEIs—and interviews with mentors, funders or the entrepreneurs—could provide deeper insights into how discursive norms are reproduced, resisted or transformed. Third, longitudinal research of entrepreneurs as they progress through time would also be an important way to trace how these forms of subjectivity are constituted over the course of entrepreneurship, including whether the focus on self-improvement, resilience and calculable effects produces burn-out; disengagement; resistance to certain ideological elements.

This work also has relevance beyond social enterprise. Those working in public policy can learn from these insights to better grasp how state and non-state actors govern with soft power and discourse rather than direct regulation. On a more general note, in organizational research the analysis adds to discussions about identity, institutional logics and the performativity of entrepreneurship. For those in development studies, it provides a cautionary tale about how the depoliticization of systemic problems is affected under market-based framings. Lastly, within the emergent literature of critical entrepreneurship studies, this research contributes empirical depth

to critiques of the manner in which entrepreneurship is put to work as a hegemonic social imaginary that works to shore up dominant ideologies while foreclosing more radical alternatives. Collectively, these findings highlight the need to approach SEIs not simply as technological scaffolds but as ideological foundations that scaffold the landscape of contemporary social action.

CONCLUSION

This article has been an attempt to critically examine the position of social enterprise incubators (SEIs) not only as innovation intermediaries, but also as ideological apparatuses situated within the wider continuum of neoliberal governmentality. Although SEIs are frequently hailed for their role in currying favor on early-stage social ventures — mentorship, funding opportunities, and validation — our study reveals that they can serve as hidden mechanisms of power. Using a Foucauldian discourse analytical approach, we illustrated how SEIs construct social entrepreneurs' subjectivities, frame market-based solutions as inherently legitimate and de-politicize complex social issues by the re-interpretation of structural injustices as innovation opportunities.

This study has contributed in a number of ways through scrutinizing publicly available information about SEIs in several countries. First, it brought a Foucauldian approach to the investigation of infrastructures of social innovation providing us with a methodologically powerful way to make sense of how language functions as a technology of governance. Second, it brought to light the governance role of entrepreneurial support infrastructures, illustrating how SEIs contribute to normalizing certain modes of thinking, acting, and being that are compatible with a neoliberal mindset which values responsibilities (with an emphasis on individuals), individualism (over community welfare) and audit culture. Third, it raised important awareness of the ideological underpinning of social innovation ecosystems – an awareness that is crucial for researchers, policy-makers and practitioners interested in engaging more ethically and reflexively with these systems.

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