

# Developing the good life: social entrepreneurship in #SthlmTech

**European Association of Social Anthropologists Conference**  
**Panel: Virtuous (im)mobilities: the good life and its discrepancies (P115)**  
**August 14-17, Stockholm University**

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**This research was funded by the American-Scandinavian Foundation.**

**Work in progress, please do not cite.**

## Short Abstract

Drawing on a year of fieldwork within Stockholm's startup ecosystem, this paper will explore the tensions between the aspirations of social entrepreneurs to build better futures and the neoliberal underpinnings of the communities and infrastructures they move within as members and co-creators.

## Abstract

The good life drives the work of social entrepreneurs as they strive to take advantage of the resources available to startup companies, including plentiful funding and well-established support infrastructures in startup ecosystems, to fashion futures free from the social and environmental problems of the present in the hopes of creating a collective good life for all. In this work, they also seek the good life for themselves by embracing their talents in technology and business as tools for their aspirations to do good. Among academics, social entrepreneurship is often dismissed as digital utopianism (Turner 2010), technological fetishism (Hand and Sandywell 2002), or technological solutionism (Morozov 2013), as these literatures rightly point out the contradictions of and the damage left in the wake of social entrepreneurship's assumptions (e.g. the Internet's inherent democratic qualities) and practices (e.g. surveillance and algorithmic mediation). However, these critiques obscure the creative and subversive work of social entrepreneurs as they negotiate the contradictions between their aspirations and the neoliberal

underpinnings of the communities and infrastructures they move and operate within as members and co-creators.

This paper will examine the aspirations, obligations, and moralities of social entrepreneurs and the productive tensions, resistances, and adaptations that arise from their collisions. This paper will draw on a year of fieldwork within Stockholm's startup ecosystem, which is widely recognized as a leader in social entrepreneurship for maintaining its social and environmental aspirations while simultaneously producing the highest number of billion-dollar (USD) startups per capita outside of Silicon Valley.

## Transcript

Last Friday, I concluded a year of fieldwork within Stockholm's "tech startup ecosystem"—the popular title given to the dynamic assemblage of people, institutions, and infrastructures that support technology startups and entrepreneurship in the city. For the last 12 months, I have completed participant-observation within Stockholm's startups, co-working spaces, hubs, events, and meetups and conducted interviews across the community's stakeholders, including entrepreneurs, students, educators, investors, and the founders and employees of event and support organizations.

As an anthropologist, I entered this fieldsite armed with a rich literature—dubbed "dark anthropology" by Sherry Ortner—which as she described "emphasizes the harsh and brutal dimensions of human experience, and the structural and historical conditions that produce them," (Ortner 2016, 49) particularly the rise of neoliberalism. The social sciences' approach to technology entrepreneurship has produced valuable critiques of this community demonstrating the repercussions of neoliberalism, techno-libertarianism, and digital utopianism (Turner 2010; Morozov 2013; Hand and Sandywell 2002). These literatures rightly point out the contradictions of and the damage left in the wake of tech entrepreneurship's assumptions (such as the Internet's inherent democratic qualities and the assumed neutrality of technology) and its practices (such as mass surveillance, algorithmic mediation, and reliance on contingent labor). Yet, after a year within this community, I have found dark anthropology literatures insufficient for grappling with the anxieties and aspirations of my interlocutors. So, for this paper, I will draw on an emerging positive anthropology, particularly Edward F. Fischer's "The Good Life" (2014), to describe the journeys of one subset of my research participants, social entrepreneurs, as they navigate their anxieties about the future, the skills and resources made available to them, and their aspirations for a better life and future.

Fischer (2014) describes the good life as beginning with access to—relatively defined—adequate material resources, physical health and safety, and family and social relations. However, these commonly accepted requirements of wellbeing, Fischer argued, are insufficient for understanding claims of wellbeing and added that a good life also requires an ongoing aspiration for a better future with the opportunity to pursue it with dignity and a connection to a larger purpose (2014, 5). I argue that entrepreneurship can itself be a path to wellbeing and one that was embraced by at least 68,000 Swedish entrepreneurs in 2017 alone (Bolagsverket 2018). My interlocutors described Sweden's generous social welfare systems as providing much of the material resources required for wellbeing, including access to healthcare, education, security, and unemployment services. But, entrepreneurship offers access to the three additionally required domains of wellbeing proposed by Fischer (2014): commitment to a larger purpose, aspiration, and dignity.

In business media, Stockholm is known for being a unicorn factory—it produces more startups valued at a billion dollars per capita than any city except Silicon Valley, including Spotify, iZettle, Klarna, Mojang, and King—as well as its bustling startup community that is ripe for new entrepreneurs' appetites with plentiful funding and resources. However, within the startup community, Stockholm has another reputation: it is strongly aligned with social entrepreneurship. Although it is a disputed concept, social entrepreneurship is generally defined as entrepreneurs that use the methods, tools, and resources of the startup ecosystem to support “innovations” that are intended to positively impact society or the environment in the future. In Stockholm, this looks like a startup that creates batteries in a factory with a near zero carbon footprint, a virtual reality game studio that uses neuroscience research to create empathy building experiences, or a startup that connects recent immigrants with local mentors who speak their native language.

The most obvious of Fischer's three domains of wellbeing within social entrepreneurship is a commitment to a larger purpose. This commitment is most visible in startups' origin stories: a genre of storytelling that is used to mythologize the origin of the startup for promotional purposes, showing up on “About us” webpages, on event stages, on packaging, and in media interviews. The origin story genre generally begins with an unexpected experience that catalyzed within the entrepreneur's existing moralities and experiences to create an internal call for action—often highlighted with a sentence like: “It was the moment I knew I had to do something.” These experiences are generally unrelated to the pursuit of entrepreneurship but connected to pre-existing concerns: observing the effects of air pollution on health when studying abroad as an asthmatic; listening to the struggles of recently immigrated members of one's community; seeing bleached coral in the great barrier reef as a scuba enthusiast; or witnessing a violent hate crime in

your neighborhood. The catalytic moment's prominence and ubiquity in the origin story genre also points to the emerging role it plays in entrepreneurship generally.

The Foresight Group, a Stockholm based think tank, has recently popularized this commitment in Stockholm as a valid approach to creating value with a book and a series of presentations titled, "The Rise of the Meaningful Economy" (Drewell and Larsson 2017). Their research shows, as Fischer's does, that consumers and producers are concerned with making economic choices that are "meaningful" for the future and thus they prescribe that both entrepreneurs and investors should focus on creating value through the lens of social and environmental justice. However, despite the recent emergence of the "meaningful economy" in the Swedish entrepreneurial imagination, my interlocutors did not tend to move easily from their connection to a larger purpose to an aspiration for social entrepreneurship.

Unlike the claims of techno-utopian critiques, they did not see their STEM and business educated hammers as tools for these aspirations and thus did not see the problem as a nail. Rather, many only turned to entrepreneurship after experiencing what Fischer refers to as "frustrated freedom" as their attempts to make an impact within their existing positions and political activism failed to alleviate their anxiety about the future.

The majority of my interlocutors were born between the mid-1970s and late 1990s and thus were raised with social norms and public policy that taught them that the path to prosperity for themselves and their society lay within innovation—specifically innovations within STEM or business fields that ought to be applied within existing corporations or public institutions that would provide stable employment. So, most of my interlocutors were on this path when the catalytic moment occurred. However, this path locked them into corporate hierarchies and rigid methods of development that made making changes for socially or environmentally just ends always subservient to corporate goals and office politics. Those that attempted to enact their aspirations outside of their employment were frustrated with the relative low impact of activist work that tended to focus more on lobbying slow-moving politicians and raising awareness within the public sphere. Their anxieties about the future were compounded by the restrictions they felt within the opportunity structures available to them.

For some, entrepreneurship was a natural fit once they discovered it. But, many of my interlocutors had a moral reluctance to it that had to be reconciled. Namely, they, like anthropologists, were concerned about the effects of neoliberalism and techno-libertarianism on both their personal lives and society generally. Their social networks often denigrated entrepreneurs as greedy, arrogant, or foolish and thus they struggled to see entrepreneurship as a

vehicle for their aspirations.

Greed was the most common concern among my interlocutors and required that they find ways to reimagine capital as a means for their socially or environmentally just ends, such as Albrekt, a startup founder who was seeking a seed investment at the time of his interview:

*That is one of the things I had to look at closely: my relationship to money or—more correctly—my emotional connection to money. Because, intellectually, I had this idea that, yes, it is good and money can't make me a bad person. But, emotionally, one of the feelings I had was shame. If I become this person who goes after money, I won't like people and I'll use people. Or, I won't have a healthy relationship with them. After I looked at that very closely, I thought it's nonsense—the whole thought. Money doesn't have the power to influence your character. It's more like it gives you opportunities...*

[Interview with Albrekt, June 8, 2018]

Through engagements with books, podcasts, speakers, courses, peers, and mentors, capitalism became transformed into an imperfect but powerful apparatus for their aspirations. Consumer behavior became something to study—not to exploit for profit—but as a way of aligning themselves with others' lives to more quickly and easily reach and affect them. With the support of investment, they could amplify their aspiration with marketing, more in-depth research, and better engineers and designers. Through this new opportunity structure, they could assert their agency and aspire for better futures with far less frustration.

Social entrepreneurs were not alone in the making of this re-imagination. Organizations like the Swedish Energy Agency, Norrsken Foundation, and Impact Hub offer resources only to entrepreneurs explicitly seeking to make a positive impact where profit is a necessary only insofar as it furthers that impact. At events, hero stories are touted to showcase successful entrepreneurs with a mission to do good without obviously compromising their values, such as Spotify's founder Daniel Ek who has chosen to take no salary as CEO and whose company has never posted a profit as all profits are reinvested into their mission to realign the power structure of the music industry from record labels to artists and audiences.

It can be easily debated whether this approach to entrepreneurship is a moral or an appropriate way to achieve socially or environmentally just ends. Yet, I have found that it does contribute to the wellbeing of its practitioners. The social entrepreneurs I worked with are vastly more satisfied with their life in these pursuits than before—even when their startups failed. They expressed feelings of freedom, power, and a lowered sense of anxiety about the future. They also expressed

a greater sense of dignity in using the tools and resources that their milieu thrust upon them.

Anna, founder of a startup game studio, struggled with making video games at her former corporate job but found dignity in her work by creating her own startup where she could achieve her aspirations to encourage empathy toward other lifeways:

*"There are a lot of things about society today that can be kind of scary and a lot of things to be pessimistic about. And, I'm like, "OK, here I am making games, making entertainment, not doing anything 'real'." [...] How can I justify sitting here making games when the world looks like this? [...] So, I was actually considering going into politics or volunteering, like what should I do? [...] That is kind of what got me thinking—games reach billions of people! Literally, every tenth person in the world has played a Swedish [video] game. They reach all of those people and if all of those games actually said something we could really be part of the conversation. [...] So, I realized [...] this is what I want to do because I'm good at it and I love it. So, I'm going to use this as my weapon of choice, if you will. But, always keeping our eyes on the ball. We are here to make the world a better place—but in our way." [Interview with Anna, April 16, 2018]*

This sense of dignity was felt even more acutely by traditionally marginalized people within the startup community. Entrepreneurship provided the flexibility and independence for immigrants and women particularly to explore what the tech industry could do when they had some independence from the demands of Swedish corporate culture, such as resumes reflecting European or North American education and experience or fluency in Swedish. This is by no means to imply that this form of labor was free from the indignity women, immigrants, and other marginalized groups face from corporate labor and elsewhere. However, the primacy of the idea behind the startup over the experience of the individual has removed some barriers. Additionally, the Stockholm startup ecosystem specifically benefits from the prominence of women and first and second generation immigrants in roles that allocate resources within the community, particularly recruiting, accelerator, and incubator programs and angel investment.

As I leave the field, I'm preoccupied with a question: What guidance could anthropology provide if we did not approach entrepreneurs as perpetrators of and exploiters of capitalism's darkest effects but acknowledged their work as pursuits of wellbeing and thus potential allies in its critique? In my own work, I seek to understand how entrepreneurial practice shape the outcomes of their aspirations in both damaging and productive ways. Like Fischer, I seek to "explore this way of combining cultural critique with non-prescriptive, ethnographically informed positive alternatives" (Fischer 2014, 19) to recruit my interlocutors into my own project for a good life,

committed to a larger purpose and aspiring to affect the future using—what my interlocutor Anna calls— “my weapon of choice,” anthropology.

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