Chapter 7: On the Rise and on the Move – but where to? Discussion, Reflection and Outlook

7.1 Introduction

The aim of this book is to contribute to a better sociological understanding of the contested concept of social entrepreneurship (SE) in the specific context of Germany between 1999 and 2021. Four main research themes were investigated: ***Diversity and dominance***: exploring different understandings as well as identifying dominant representations of the SE concept. ***Representation and Relevance***: analysing what a broader audience gets to learn about the SE phenomenon, i.e., parts or aspects of SE that are getting noticed by wider society, beyond the niche spaces of the SE scene. ***Development over time***: tracing the evolution of the SE concept in Germany from the late 1990s (when the 'social entrepreneurship' term first started to appear) until the early 2020s (when interest for SE in the German public and politics is starting to increase). ***Notions of 'change' and politics:*** examining the 'change' that SE seeks to achieve and the idea of economy and society that SE envisions and exploring the (potential) societal or political role that is ascribed to SE in Germany, including its relationship to neoliberalism.

For these purposes, relevant literature on SE was reviewed (in Chapters 1 and 2) and the theoretical framework of discourse analysis was explained and operationalised (in Chapter 3), in order to conduct an empirical study of newspaper articles. This research design and choice of data leads to certain limitations of the findings of my research that need to be taken into account. Strictly speaking, the empirical findings are on certain *representations* of SE in newspapers. Therefore, my empirical results mainly refer to a mediated and an 'outside' view on SE. Yet, I argue that these mediatic representations are a valid choice for my research themes and questions. As explained in the Introduction and in Chapter 3, my study is concerned with analysing different understand-

ings of SE but also with identifying dominant versions of SE, in particular, aspects of the SE concept and wider narratives linked to it that receive attention from a broad(er) societal audience. It is, therefore, precisely this 'outside' view on SE that I was principally interested in capturing: i.e., what a broader (or 'mainstream') audience gets to perceive of the SE concept, which ideas of and around SE 'make the news' and reach into wider society.

The central contribution lies in the periodisation: three periods were identified in the analysis: from 1999 to 2008, 2009 to 2014 and 2015 to 2021. Accordingly, the research findings were organised and presented in three results chapters. In this final chapter, I will now summarise the key insights and findings and discuss in which way they contribute to previous academic research. The insights and findings in different ways add to, substantiate, differentiate, exemplify or demonstrate findings of previous scholarship. Some of them challenge or expand previous literature and some are original contributions. In addition, due to certain limitations of my approach, several aspects and themes on which my analysis has touched upon require further or complementary research approaches, as I will outline throughout the chapter.

7.2 The Three Periods in the Social Entrepreneurship (Media) Discourse

Inspired by previous research, mainly from the UK, this book has provided an empirical study on representations of the SE concept and their development in Germany. A key and novel finding of the empirical analysis is the identification of three periods within the investigated two decades: From 1999 until 2008, in which SE was conceptualised mainly as a reform of the welfare infrastructure. From 2009 until 2014, when SE was increasingly seen as part of the economy. In the third period (from 2015), there are two important currents: one views SE simply as 'entrepreneurship' and the other one as transformative for the economy as a whole, as being part of a wider social economy movement, or as part of a certain (regional) economic model. This periodisation and showing how each period comes with different explanations of SE, which are intertwined with wider narratives and different visions for society, is the central contribution of my research. It integrates and synthesises the four research themes outlined above, as summarised in the following table:

Table 9: Periodisation According to the Media Representation of Social Entrepreneurship

Time period and given title	**1999–2008:** SE Coming to the Aid of the 'Sick Man'	**2009–2014:** SE Becoming Part of the Economy	**2015–2021:** SE – Towards an Entrepreneurial Society, or a Transformation of the Economy or Both?
Dominant description(s) of SE	SE as part of welfare production and (reform of) the social infrastructure.	SE as business and part of the economy.	a) SE as a part of the start-up world, a particular form of business (entrepreneurship) and b) SE as a vehicle for deeper societal transformation.
Main sector and fields for SE	Traditional social and public sector (work integration, education).	The economy gains importance (poverty reduction and development, sustainable production and goods, education).	The economy (sustainable production and goods, environmental or climate protection, technology, work integration).
Main target of reform addressed by SE	The traditional social sector and the state and their institutions and ways of functioning	Both the traditional social sector and the state as well as businesses and business logics in the private sector	Both the traditional social sector and the state as well as the private sector
Important narratives	Business methods are presented as overwhelmingly positive and contrasted against a very inefficient or even deficient image of the state and social sector. Heroic individuals with managerial skills are presented as good and necessary examples.	Business methods and techniques are often still presented as valuable. But, at the same time, the perspective that business and business education also require reform (business ethics) gains importance. SE offers an opportunity to provide 'meaningful work'.	Entrepreneurship becomes an end in itself – SE offers an opportunity to develop entrepreneurial skills, and boundaries to commercial entrepreneurship fade. On the other hand, SE is more often linked to a specific model of economic development and to the transformation of the economy as a whole. The state is often presented as a partner for this transformation.

Time period	**1999–2008:**	**2009–2014:**	**2015–2021:**
Link to the wider political and socio-economic environment	Fuelled by high unemployment, public acceptance for neoliberal reform of the labour market and social security is high in Germany during this time period, leading, among other things to the largest reform programme in recent history: the *Agenda 2010*. SE often appears embedded in this particular reform spirit and language at the time.	This period is congruent with the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008. During this time, the sustainability of the neoliberal economic model is increasingly questioned by different societal actors. Practices in the private sector become a target of critique, albeit this critique mainly remains on an individual and less on a structural or systemic level (e.g., focusing on the behaviour of managers instead of political action).	One the one hand, there is a hype around entrepreneurship and start-ups (including tech companies), all things entrepreneurial are presented as socially desirable. On the other hand, the 'Silicon Valley' model of development is questioned. Critique is more often structural, and linked to debates around sustainability (e.g., the UN's *Sustainable Development Goals*), and SE appears as part of a different model of (economic) development.
Exemplary and illustrative quotes	*When it comes to child care, there are a lot of problems. "There have to be private offers because the state system can no longer or doesn't want to shoulder everything. What the state has to offer is not enough and it is getting worse and worse"* (A_18_Süddeutsche Zeitung_17.11.2006).	*The economic crisis is causing that social entrepreneurship is gaining relevance. More and more MBA students question the previous economic models of profit maximization. "Many want to build careers in a more socially responsible way"* (A_36_ Handelsblatt_06.03.2009).	for a) *One trend [in the start-up scene] are start-ups in the field of social entrepreneurship. Their focus is not on financial gain, but on a social purpose* (A_112_Mittelbayerische Zeitung_12.02.2015). for b) *(…) the pioneering work starts on a small scale (…) social entrepreneurship also has a lot to do with transformation aid. These companies prove that something works and the established players are looking closely* (A_249_Berliner Morgenpost_16.12.2019).

In this way, my research makes an academic contribution mainly in four regards: strengthening sociological research on SE, helping to understand SE in the specific German context based on empirical research, tracing the development of the SE concept over time and (more generally) contributing to the interdisciplinary study of (socio)economic phenomena (in applying discourse analysis to this object of study). The findings of the analysis help for the sociological 'making sense' of SE and contribute to the study of SE as a social and political phenomenon and movement, in this way connecting SE with perspectives and debates in sociology, political economy and socioeconomics. In addition, it reiterates the importance of understanding SE in interplay with its specific political and socio-economic context, and that SE – as well as the research focusing on it – cannot simply be transferred from one place to another.

Yet, despite having highlighted the importance of a context-specific understanding of SE, it should also be noted that there are similarities between SE in Germany and SE in other contexts. For example, my analysis has demonstrated that, similar to the global euphoria about SE, a generally positive view of SE is reproduced in the German media – even though, over time, the reporting on SE becomes more down to earth and realistic. Often, SE is presented as the bearer of positive change – and this is mostly taken for granted instead of evidenced, almost as if it would not require any explanation. This overly positive portrayal of SE and the 'social change' SE is supposed to bring about (regardless of the context) is sometimes mirrored in academic literature, too (as explained in Chapter 1). Similarly, my analysis also supports the claim that SE is receiving more and more attention, which is voiced in SE literature ever since the first publications – at least for Germany in the time frame 1999–2021, in providing (indicative) empirical evidence, namely, in the rising number of newspaper articles (see Graph 1).

For the first period (1999–2008), my analysis has demonstrated that a certain version of SE is predominant in the media in Germany. This includes a portrayal of SE that is, among other things, individualistic and person-centred, focused on the individual social entrepreneur. SE is mainly described as 'new', 'innovative' and 'changemaking'. Social entrepreneurs in the articles are represented as skilled ('exceptional') individuals and appear linked to competitions and awards as well as to members of the business elite, such as Klaus Schwab. In addition, SE is characterised by favouring private and market-based solutions and is often embedded in narratives of welfare reform and state failure (see Chapter 4). Thus, my analysis is also a contribution to substantiate the existing literature (in part theoretical and/or focusing on other contexts) with

empirical findings and exemplifies observations of, among others, Dart (2004), Nicholls (2010), Dey & Steyaert (2010), Teasdale (2012), Papi-Thornton (2016) – but for the specific context of Germany, approximately between 1999–2008.

Having identified dominant accounts and narratives of SE for each period should, however, not lead to disregard that SE in Germany (as in other contexts) is and remains a phenomenon or movement that is contested, appearing ambiguous and, at times, incoherent. Explanations of SE and the wider narratives that these are connected to entail normative contradictions (Ranville & Barros 2021). These contradictions may be found within single explanations as well as within the overall SE discourse, as demonstrated in my empirical analysis (see Chapters 4–6). I argue that 'resolving' this conceptual confusion *once and for all* (in the sense of answering what sort of phenomenon SE *really is*) seems impossible and does not seem desirable either. Moreover, my empirical findings are merely based on representations of SE in German newspapers. Other arenas, in which meanings and knowledge around SE is produced will need to be taken into account by future research to grasp an even broader picture of the diversity of meanings and goals associated with SE.

In sum, despite having identified dominant versions of SE in different periods, a central claim of my book is that the meaning(s) of and around SE are dynamic, that they evolve over time and that the contestations of these meanings are ongoing. The three periods shall by no means be viewed as static and clear-cut. In addition, the year numbers should be regarded as indicative – in particular the wider narratives that appear intertwined with the SE concept and that relate to long-term political and socio-economic developments that do not change abruptly from one year to another. There is also a great deal of complexity and ambiguity within the shifts leading from first to second and from second to third period (as the following section is going to discuss).

7.3 Ambiguous Social Entrepreneurship: Criticising *and* Legitimising the Capitalist Economy

SE remains sociologically complex and ambiguous. Despite the dominant SE discourses that were identified during the analysis, which allowed to distinguish the three different periods between 1999 and 2021, it must be noted that across all periods, there are different, to some extent competing, understandings of SE. This also applies for the developments or shifts between and during

the periods (or leading from one period to another), as I will reiterate in this section.

In Chapter 5, I have explained the 'sectoral shift', leading from the first to the second period: SE is now increasingly presented as a phenomenon that occurs in the economy, and this perspective is then consolidated in the third period (see Chapter 6). In addition, organisations that compose the SE field (social enterprises) are increasingly conceptualised as businesses (and not merely *like* business) – what may be seen as part of or as an organisational expression of this (sectoral) shift of SE towards the economy. As explained in Chapter 5, this shift entails, on the one hand, aspects of economization, implying a transfer of business logics into social fields and organisations, and, arguably, contributes to the acceptance or 'normalisation' of combining social and economic goals, and that organisations may be able to pursue both at the same time. To some extent, there is a blurring of the boundaries between 'the economic' and 'the social' (e.g., Ridley-Duff & Bull 2011). Institutions in the public or 'social' realm are now more often described with the language and concepts of business, for example, as 'markets'. My analysis thus, shows similarities to the turn to 'social business' described in Nicholls (2010) and in Teasdale (2012). Nicholls (2010) and Teasdale (2012) have identified a shift in the SE discourse in the early 2000s, with SE being increasingly understood as 'business solutions to social problems' (away from SE being rooted in and part of the third sector).[1]

However, my findings also show that 'SE becoming business' is more complex and ambiguous than only injecting business logics into the social realm. This development also introduces new narratives, e.g., foregrounding certain organisational aspects of SE and initiating a more explicit discussion about work, about (decent) pay for social entrepreneurs as well as for their staff and about organisational governance within the SE field, as can be observed in the second and third period. Beyond my empirical analysis, it is also interesting to note here that – taking *SEND* as a reference – organisational governance has found a place in the German SE scene. *SEND*'s definition for SE includes a governance dimension (next to the social and the economic/entrepreneurial dimension), similar to the definition by *EMES* (see Chapter 1). To some extent, this institutionalises the (normative) notion that social enterprises should take aspects of (democratic) organisational governance into account.

1 Mind, however that the context that these authors describe is a different one: SE in England ca. 2001–2005.

Occasionally, the discussion around work and (decent) pay within SE has also been linked to the wider topic of decent pay in 'social' fields, more generally (see Chapter 5). This is a perspective that would be worth exploring in further research. Arguably, there could be an interesting nexus to feminist research around care work and pay in 'social' professions, which is historically and socially constructed as 'female' and remains underpaid (e.g., Gather et al. 2007; Maier 2013). This perspective seems relevant, in particular, as SE is sometimes celebrated as 'female', since there is a higher proportion of women entrepreneurs and leading staff in social enterprises as compared to tech start-ups (e.g., SEND 2022a: 66). In my empirical analysis, this was not yet a major theme, even though a few articles have made an attempt to establish a link between SE and women (entrepreneurship), even in the first period (see Chapter 4). Research that explores these issues, however, should be critical and mind the risk of reproducing gendered stereotypes and power relations in constructing SE as a 'female' version of entrepreneurship.

Alongside discussions of SE as work, SE is sometimes portrayed in a more realistic and balanced way in the newspaper representation. In contrast to articles that only stress the remarkable (almost super-human) skills of social entrepreneurs, these articles mention that social entrepreneurs sometimes experience hardship and that achieving both social and financial success is often difficult (see Section 5.6). These articles also increasingly address that there are different models for SE, e.g., differing in their approach towards profits. Some SE models exclude and others allow profits, and again others prescribe the purposes for which profits may be spent. In addition, the SE discourse then revolves less around the 'exceptional' or even 'heroic' individual social entrepreneur and becomes less person-centred. In line with these developments, *Ashoka* and the *Schwab Foundation* lose their extraordinarily dominant position after the first period, as more actors start to engage with SE.

Moreover, it is now increasingly 'the economy' that is presented as the 'problem' and in need of reform or 'change' – instead of the institutions of the social and public realms, which were the main target of critique and reform in the first period (in line with the *zeitgeist* revolving the *Agenda 2010*). In centring the debate more around business and the economy, a discussion and critique of business and the economy and their practices can be initiated as well. Sometimes, economic principles and practices are challenged, and different (alternative) business methods and practices are proposed. While the glorification of business, its people and methods can still be observed after the first period, it is by far not as evident as it used to be in the first period. The shift to-

wards the economy thus, does not only imply an economisation (organisations becoming more like businesses, adopting the principles of management, etc.), it is also a development that allows a critique of businesses and the economy, as demonstrated in Chapters 5 and 6.

However, it also needs to be noted that the critique of the (neoliberal) economic model often remains somewhat superficial, foregrounding business education and the personal values of a 'new' generation (of students), who now are found to seek 'meaningful' work and to make different career choices, pursuing 'purpose' instead of high salaries. The critique hardly extends to the economic system as such and to what should change about it – let alone are political proposals put forward, in order to achieve structural change in the economy. Paradoxically, the figure of the social entrepreneur then sometimes seems to have a legitimising and stabilising function for (neoliberal) capitalism, even when the articles criticise the capitalist economy. This is possible, because the entrepreneur – and in particular, the social entrepreneur – is presented as a new (ideal) economic figure. As Heidbrink & Seele (2010) have explained, the figure of the manager (especially of banks and other big corporations), which used to be appealing for many, remains widely discredited after the financial crisis of 2008 – which, to some extent, is also mirrored in the news articles (see Chapters 5 and 6). The (social) entrepreneur, on the other hand, personifies the promise that apparently it is still possible to participate in the economy, to 'do business' after the crisis, in a morally acceptable way. Somehow, SE is introduced as a response to problems in the economic model, offering what appears to be a 'quick fix': in becoming (social) entrepreneurs, it seems possible to 'repair' the system. This, however, entails logical fallacies and diverts the discussion away from the systems level onto the individual level. A problem is recognised within the economic system – but the offered solution is not to change the system, but, instead, to become a (social) entrepreneur. Through differentiating 'business administration' from 'entrepreneurship' (e.g., in Faltin 2012) and differentiating their respective protagonists (managers versus entrepreneurs), it becomes possible to criticise the (economic) system, but concentrating the critique on one specific actor (the manager) and then pointing towards a (different) actor in the system – the entrepreneur – as the 'solution'. The critique is then individualised and, ultimately, may have a legitimising and stabilising function for (neoliberal) capitalism.

Legitimacy is an interesting theme within SE – on which, among others, Dart (2004) has made crucial contributions. Dart (2004) has demonstrated that the SE movement has derived legitimacy from appearing similar to business

(and acting like business), which according to the neoliberal *zeitgeist* was regarded as a superior form of organisation (e.g., as compared to public institutions). While I have been warning against simply transferring insights from one context to another (in this case: from Dart's observation as a scholar based in Canada to Germany), my empirical analysis was able to show that Dart's (2004) observation widely applies to the German context as well – in the corresponding time period. During the first period (1999–2008), legitimacy *for* SE is established on the ground of SE sharing the (assumed) virtues of private businesses. More importantly, perhaps, as explained above, my research has been able to point out another aspect when it comes to legitimacy: namely, that it is a two-way street and that SE may also, in turn, legitimise the (capitalist) economic model.

7.4 The Importance of the Diversity and the Sector(s) of Social Entrepreneurship

An important finding of my research is the 'sectoral shift' in the German SE discourse between the first and the second period, when the dominant perspective on SE – as portrayed in newspapers – shifted from 'SE as a reform of the social (welfare) infrastructure' to 'SE as part of the economy'. I argue that this shift has revealed the importance of what I call the 'sectoral perspective' or the 'sectoral focus', and that this has, so far, received too little notice in academic literature. Perhaps, this plea for giving more attention to the sectoral perspective (i.e., to 'where' SE is taking place, in which fields or area of society) might apply for contexts other than Germany as well.

What is more, the sectoral perspective – and this specific shift towards the economy – challenges the view of 'SE as welfare reform' that, arguably, is still the main sociological interpretation of SE in academic literature. Based on my empirical findings, I argue that it becomes harder to accept the interpretation of SE as a (neoliberal) reform of the welfare infrastructure when more and more social enterprises emerge (at least judging from those that appear in the media representation), which trade, for example, in textiles and clothing (as e.g., in A_70, A_83), food and drink (A_72), agricultural products (A_75) or sustainable energy (A_84), among other things, as it is the case from the second period. Overall, based on the literature review and on the empirical analysis, I argue that (so far) it seems that the parts of SE that are taking place in 'the economy' are less represented in interpretations of SE as a political phenomenon.

Related to this, arguably, the impetus that SE may give for *reforming* the economy and businesses – may, to some extent, be disregarded, too. On the other hand, there might be an overemphasis of SE as reform of the social and public sectors (welfare) – at least contrasted against the findings of my empirical analysis for Germany and for the years after 2008. Based on these findings, I argue that looking at SE through a welfare lens only (*a priori*) highlights only aspects or parts of the SE field and discourse and implies a reduction of the SE concept.

While I can only make informed guesses about the reasons behind this (potential) over- or underrepresentation of certain aspects of SE, throughout my literature review and empirical research a few thoughts have developed on the role of the 'sector' – and its possible effect on the interpretation of SE as a political phenomenon. First, one reason might be the disciplinary belonging of researchers. It might be that the parts of SE that occur within the economy are underrepresented in this discussion, because these are mainly researched by business scholars, who are unlikely to investigate the sociological questions around the political meaning(s) of SE. Second, scholars rooted in sociology, social policy or third sector studies, who tend to ask these questions, have mostly focused on SE in areas of the social or public domain, such as health, education, and so forth. Interpretations of SE as a political phenomenon or movement then also mainly rely on insights from these fields. Given that these are areas, which, generally speaking, have undergone processes of privatisation and seen an increase in competitiveness and economic calculation as governing principles in the past few decades, SE appears as related to these developments. SE may then be explained *a priori* as an expression of neoliberal reform in the public or the third sector. To some extent, this view might also be entailed in Nicholls & Teasdale's (2017) 'nested paradigms' – in which SE finds itself in a 'mixed economy of welfare' meso-paradigm. Similarly, some authors place SE as 'entrepreneurship in the social realm' simply by definition, as, for example, management scholar Dees (2001 [1998]), who inscribes this sectoral positioning in defining that "[s]ocial entrepreneurs play the role of change agents in the social sector" (Dees 2001 [1998]: 4). While understanding SE as part of the welfare infrastructure matches my empirical analysis for the first period (1999–2008), it disagrees with the findings for later periods. Another possible explanation, therefore, is simply the historical context and that most studies investigating and interpreting the political meaning(s) of SE (until now) are based on SE in a different point in time. Finally, a self-critical explanation may be that the part of SE that occurs within the economy is *over*represented in the

analysed newspaper articles and, therefore, in my empirical findings. These and other (possible) limitations of my research will be discussed more in detail in Section 7.7.

Put differently, in bringing attention to (possible) 'sectoral' aspects when it comes to making sense of SE as a political and sociological phenomenon, this book is a reminder to acknowledge the diversity of SE. Under the SE umbrella one may find ventures as different as microcredit institutions, work integration social enterprises, fair-trade chocolate producers, kindergartens, or tech companies, etc. SE occurs in many different fields or 'sectors'. There is also a methodological argument to make here for future research projects. Having identified the weight of the sectoral focus, this can serve as a warning against assessing SE as a political phenomenon on the basis of very few cases (or case studies). This entails the risk that the SE phenomenon is then interpreted only according to the specific sector that one or a few cases (social enterprises) are situated in. This is something to take into account for future research, especially when it comes to the research design and sampling decisions.

7.5 The Complex Interrelations between Social Entrepreneurship, Capitalism and the State

SE often appears related to 'big' concepts, such as 'capitalism', or 'the state'. The analysed material representing the SE discourse, therefore, does not only contribute to the construction of meanings of SE itself – but also to notions of these concepts, as I will address in this section. First, I am going to address SE in relation to (neoliberal) capitalism, its organisations (businesses) and its subjects (entrepreneurs and managers). The empirical analysis has demonstrated that, in the first period, the articles draw a very positive picture of capitalism, mainly through the favourable and allegedly superior characteristics of markets, businesses, managers and entrepreneurs. This image somewhat changes in the second period. Arguably, due to the financial crisis of 2008, the established business world – or parts of it: especially banks and the financial sector and big corporations, more generally – have widely lost their ability to serve as possible role models and to provide legitimacy for the economic system as a whole. On the organisational ('meso') level, business, is no longer a 'good example' *per se*. This might, in part, explain the need for a deeper contextualisation of profits (which I have addressed in 5.5). On a 'micro' level, the figure of the manager has lost its appeal, which is a development that Heidbrink & Seele (2010)

directly link to the crisis of 2008 and to the role managers (mainly in banks but also in other institutions) had here.[2]

Furthermore, it was found that, in the third period, some aspects of the critique of the economic model are a bit more substantial. The two most notable findings are that, first, the US model of capitalism (including Silicon Valley) seems somewhat out of fashion. Second, a different (more positive and active) role of the state is portrayed in the third period. Overall, these narratives and proposals may be interpreted as a call for a different model of capitalism, as I will explain in the following paragraphs.

Across the three periods, there are interesting accounts of the relations between SE and different models of capitalism – namely the US versus the German model of capitalism – as well as of Silicon Valley as a symbol for a certain form of the capitalist economy. Arguably, having identified references to different models of capitalism in the analysed newspapers (see Chapter 6) also marks a novel contribution. An interesting contrast could be observed across the different periods in the references to the economic and social model of the US. In the first period, the US is mainly represented as a role model for Germany, which, at the time, is suffering from high unemployment. Similar to this, Silicon Valley in the first period serves as symbol of inspiration and as an example for Germany to follow. By contrast, in the third period, the US model seems to mostly have lost its charm – for which, again, probably the financial crisis of 2008 is one of the reasons. The references to Silicon Valley, too, have undergone a significant change. Once pictured almost like a utopia – now, Silicon Valley appears as a bad example, one to which SE is contrasted to, as (part of) a counter-movement or as an alternative model.

Furthermore, the picture of the state and politics – and the relations between these and SE – evolves in between the different periods. The German economy and welfare state, which were presented as deficient or at best as ineffective in the first period, in later years, above all, in the third period, are sometimes positively connoted. This includes a favourable view of social security, *Wohlfahrtsverbände*, cooperatives, trade unions, among others. While SE is sometimes still positioned against politics – i.e., as being more effective or better suited than solutions provided by politics and the state – this is much

2 Even though this entails ambiguous aspects, given that the figure of the (social) entrepreneur offers an apparent 'alternative' to the manager, in turn legitimising the capitalist system (as I have explained in 7.4).

more explicit in the first than in the second and third period. Broadly speaking, the articles' image of the state changes over the years: at first, the state and its institutions are pictured as deficient. They should, in part, be replaced by private actors. The perspective shifts towards a representation of the state as rather coexisting or in partnership with SE. The state more often appears as a partner for SE – and not as a completely incompetent entity that shall make space for smaller, agile and private units.

In the third period, politics also appears as a viable instrument for SE actors, as an arena, in which SE actors, too, are participating. *SEND*, for example, engages in politics and in policy proposals – some of which go beyond topics that target the SE field. Put differently: *SEND* engages in politics that go beyond the classic lobbying work, such as increasing funds directed to social enterprises. At times, SE organisations (such as *SEND*) and their representatives call for state action and for (additional) regulation, in order to establish a framework that acknowledges the social and environmental impact of economic activity. This includes instruments aimed at internalising costs that are produced by businesses and absorbed by the public as 'externalities', e.g., via a tax on CO_2 (see Chapter 6).

On the one hand, members of the SE scene present these proposals as a call for establishing a framework that is favourable for social enterprises, because such measures would help to level the playing field for organisations and businesses with social and environmental ambitions against purely profit-oriented actors. But they can be interpreted as more than that. As some SE representatives have described, SE may be seen as 'transformation aid' for the economy as a whole. In effect, if the state would issue legislation that is inspired by social enterprises, the rules would then apply for all businesses in the economy – regardless of the motivation behind it. Indeed, this could represent an option for SE to unfold political potential. For the time period until 2021, however, it cannot seriously be answered whether or not there have already been influences on general (economic) policy derived from the SE field or its actors, or whether this is likely to happen in the future (at least for Germany). While this intersection between policy – and potential agenda-setting by SE – goes beyond the scope of the discussion here, it certainly seems to offer a very interesting route for further research.

Nonetheless, I argue that the fact that SE actors engage in policy (proposals), 'doing' politics and proposing legal solutions, already seems relevant. First, because in calling for legislation, SE acknowledge the importance of politics. When (some) SE actors propose market regulation, they are demand-

ing a stronger and (more) active role of the state – which most definitely establishes a remarkable contrast to the *laissez-faire* spirit that was dominant during the first period. Politics is presented as helpful and as necessary – for SE but also for the economy and society as a whole. Second, the call for state action or legislation also impacts the relationship between the state and SE directly. As noted earlier, in the second and third period, the view prevails that SE shall not replace the state and politics. Instead, most articles maintain that there is a role for (private) SE actors in the economy and society, but that other tasks need to be resolved by the state and in a political process. This perspective also entails acknowledging that SE and the potential solutions provided by SE have limitations. SE may provide transformation *aid* – but large-scale transformation requires political action and policies implemented by the state.

To some extent, this portrayal of SE and the state as partners may also be interpreted as a challenge to the often assumed (false) dichotomy between state and market. It helps to acknowledge that in all capitalist systems, states have made and continue to make the rules for the economic system – including the organisation of economic activity via markets (Polanyi (2015 [1944]). (State) power has been and remains necessary to establish and maintain markets, which are no 'natural state' of humanity or of human civilisation, as some liberal and neoliberal thinkers tend to propagate.

On the other hand, it may be critically questioned how substantial such impulses emerging from the SE field can be for transforming the economy as a whole. It seems uncertain whether or not these would be able to provide more than a few economic incentives, with the aim of incrementally guiding production and consumption in a more sustainable direction – which, certainly, would be nothing groundbreakingly new or exclusive to SE. For a long time, different direct taxes have existed all around the world, with the aim of steering consumptive behaviour towards a healthier lifestyle – for example, taxes on tobacco or alcohol. On the side of production, companies in many countries can rely on tax benefits and aids, for example, to invest in energy efficiency measures. Thus, whether establishing a framework that is beneficial for SE would merely offer some tweaking of the tax incentives here and there, or whether this could also lead to more transformative or 'radical' policies, remains to be seen.

When regarding these findings through a critical angle, e.g., based on Davies's (2014a) understanding of neoliberalism – with competitiveness and economic calculation as its core principles (see Chapter 1) – one could even

argue that establishing such a framework may be yet another facet of neoliberalism. Sticking with the example of a CO_2 tax, such a tax may be seen as an instrument that actually *replaces* politics – i.e., trying to find a *political* solution for the ecological harms caused by CO_2 emissions – by economic calculation: in giving CO_2 a monetary value. Similarly, it should be noted that the idea of 'levelling the playing field' for social enterprises does not break with the spirit and organisational principle of competitiveness. Improving the capability of social enterprises to *compete* on the market would not change the fact that the world would still be divided into winning and losing businesses. Even though the parameters, by which 'winners' and 'losers' are determined, would then no longer be financial profits alone. Following this thought, the propagated 'transformation aid' that SE potentially propels could merely be a form of (neoliberal) capitalism absorbing its critics (Boltanski & Chiapello 2007). Again, a concluding evaluation of these developments would be premature here and should be investigated further in upcoming research projects.

On a more practical note, this book has also been able to shed light on SE within day-to-day politics in Germany. In the Introduction, it could be demonstrated that representatives of the different political parties are easily able to embed SE into their different political agendas. Everyone can interpret SE so that it fits their ideological background. The empirical analysis then found that – according to the media representation – out of the main political parties in Germany, the *Green Party* seems to have the most prominent role in the SE discourse (so far), and that it appears as the most explicit ally of the current SE actors (see Chapter 6). However, considering how niche and little institutionalised the SE field currently still is, this link does not seem very established or persistent, yet. It seems likely that any political party that would decide to put SE on their flag, making SE a major policy issue would be able to do so – under their respective premises and understanding of SE, shaping the SE field accordingly. This certainly represents a certain risk for the SE sector and movement, as I will address in the next section.

7.6 Social Entrepreneurship and Other Concepts: Overlaps and (Lack of) Boundaries

Strictly speaking, the relationship between SE and other ideas, concepts or *leitmotifs* exceeds the scope of my research. Nonetheless, this section will further discuss the proximity and (potential) intersections between SE and other ideas

and concepts that was briefly addressed in Chapter 6. I argue that (potential) overlaps and boundaries (or lack thereof), as well as the interaction with other ideas and concepts and the (political) actors related to these are of crucial importance for SE and its possible development in the future. My empirical findings do not really provide answers here, yet, it is possible to point towards avenues for further research. It has been demonstrated that SE often appears as embedded in or next to other concepts, such as 'entrepreneurship', the 'Social Market Economy', 'social innovation', 'sustainability', or the 'social economy', among others. Questions arise here concerning the relationships between SE and these other ideas and concepts, and how these relationships will develop in the future. If, perhaps, aspects of SE and other discourses will merge, or, whether SE could even be absorbed by another – more 'powerful' – concept or discourse.[3] These considerations also feed into the discussion whether it makes sense, at all, to speak about a distinctive SE discourse (which I will explore in 7.7).

In Chapter 1, I have raised the issue that academic literature (mainly in business studies), often subsumes SE under 'entrepreneurship'. Chapter 6 has demonstrated that, currently, this understanding of SE as part of or as a form of entrepreneurship is a dominant perspective in Germany. Embedding SE within 'entrepreneurship', however, can be seen as a reduction of the concept – and arguably disregards that SE may have political potential. When standing next to other forms of entrepreneurship, there is a risk that SE is being presented as a 'friendly face' or as a 'social fig leaf' next to other – commercial – ventures. When the prefix 'social' becomes optional in these situations, SE merely has the role of promoting and legitimising an entrepreneurial society, in which entrepreneurship is an end in itself.

Another prominent neighbouring concept and discourse that appears in the analysed articles, even from the first period, is 'sustainability'. 'Sustainability' and 'sustainable development' are popular conceptual frameworks. Since the adoption of the UN's *Sustainable Development Goals* (*SDG*s) in 2015, the idea of 'sustainability' is increasingly able to offer a political and practical programme and guideline – and on a global scale. Important SE actors already make reference to the *SDG* framework. *Impact Hub Berlin*, for example, declares its commitment to the *SDG*s on its website (Impact Hub Berlin 2022).

3 In theory, it would also be possible for SE to absorb other concepts or discourses. Given the still marginal and weakly institutionalised status of SE, however, this seems more unlikely at the moment.

In a workshop hosted by the *Social Entrepreneurship Akademie* in April 2020, in which I participated, the *SDG*s served as the basis, on which the participants should develop an idea for a SE venture. Participants should pick an *SDG* and then design a project around it.[4] As funding bodies, including foundations and public institutions alike, are also increasingly ascribing to the *SDG*s – expecting the same from their recipients or partners – the SE scene might follow. In the long run, being integrated into the *SDG* concept, its policies and logics, indeed, seems like a possible development for SE.

Another concept that appears related to SE is the 'Social Market Economy' (SME). SE is sometimes presented as a (potential) building block for a new or renewed version of the German SME model – or of a 'Social and Ecological Market Economy', as it is sometimes complemented or reframed in recent years (BMWK 2022b). To some extent, the SME can also be related to the debate about SE and a specific local or 'German' economic model and to regional economic development (see Chapter 6). This discursive link between SE and the SME seems promising for further research. While the SME itself is a highly contested term and concept, the popular use of the term in Germany often refers to a vague idea of an economic model that is somehow more 'social' than 'pure' capitalism (Nonhoff 2006). In this regard, SE and the SME have much in common. Yet, it remains to be seen whether the intersection between SE and SME will expand further in the following years. Most definitely, it seems too soon to tell whether SE would then be able to make any substantial contribution to a new SME model – and whether this new SME model would be more than just a rhetoric figure.

Another interesting concept that appears interrelated with SE is the 'social economy'. As explained in Chapter 1, some academic literature *a priori* seeks to place SE within the 'social economy' (Pearce 2003; Kay et al. 2016). This can also be seen as a way of prescribing that SE should represent some sort of alternative to (neoliberal) capitalism and function according to different principles. What is more, the 'Social Economy Berlin' programme (mentioned in Chapters 2 and 6), which is funded by the state government, to some extent, seems to connect to this tradition. The 'Social Economy Berlin' programme integrates actors and organisations of different social economy traditions: mainly *SEND*

4 In the past few years, I have encountered several workshops of this kind by different organisations related to the SE scene.

and *Technologie-Netzwerk Berlin*.[5] This approach could thus, be interpreted as an attempt (by state policymakers and administrators) to integrate SE more strongly into a wider social economy tradition and community. Whether or not this will turn out to be successful, still remains to be seen.

Apart from the 'social economy' umbrella, several (other) social enterprise movements and their actors seem relevant for the future of SE. For example, both *Fair Trade* and the more recent *Gemeinwohl-Ökonomie* were mentioned in the analysed articles. Beyond the empirical analysis, a few jointly-organised events came to my attention, for example, between *SEND* and the *Gemeinwohl-Ökonomie* or between *SEND* and the *Federal Association of Green Business* (*Bundesverband nachhaltige Wirtschaft e.V.*), a network and lobby organisation of mainly medium-sized businesses. Before the 2022 state parliament election in North Rhine-Westphalia, the regional groups of *SEND* and *Gemeinwohl-Ökonomie* even issued a joint paper, in which they commented on the economic policy proposals of the main political parties (SEND 2022b). These emerging collaborations and networks should most definitely be explored in further research, to investigate in which way these might shape the SE movement and whether SE could become part of a broader social economy movement.

Another relevant term and concept is 'social innovation'. Different SE actors, including *SEND* and their representatives repeatedly ascribe to the 'social innovation' label and promote the 'social innovation' narrative. For example, in the article A_327, Elsemann (*SEND*) and Haverkamp (*SEND* and *Ashoka*) argue that addressing social challenges requires more than technology, and they propose a stronger focus on 'social innovation' (see Chapter 6). Several of the most important actors in the SE scene (including *SEND*, *Phineo*, *FASE* and *Ashoka*) have launched an agency called *Kompetenzzentrum Soziale Innovationen* (Social Impact 2022b), which is part of the *European Social Innovation Alliance*, which pursues the aim of "working towards a pan-European social innovation infrastructure on all levels – locally, regionally, nationally, and transnationally" (Social Impact 2022c). A reason for increasingly focussing on 'social innovation' might be strategic, given that the EU and the federal government are increasingly seeking to support and promote 'social innovation' across different ministries (BMBF 2021). Perhaps, 'innovation' might also be a term that

5 *Technologie-Netzwerk Berlin* ascribes to the 'social economy' concept and tradition. Karl Birkhölzer, who has also made important contributions to social economy and third sector scholarship and who is referenced repeatedly in Chapter 2, was one of the founders of the organisation.

scares fewer actors than 'entrepreneurship', which comes with the 'ideological baggage' of the Schumpeterian figure of the heroic, creative entrepreneur (see Chapter 1) – and is alien to most third sector actors. A hint for this could be that one of the partners of the *Kompetenzzentrum Soziale Innovationen* is the *Diakonie* (one of the five large German welfare associations). Certainly, more research would be required here.

Furthermore, as explained in Chapter 6, in the third period, there is a remarkable closeness between SE and the start-up world. SE is now mainly described as a founding or start-up – not just as any type of business, which also establishes a closer link to the commercial founding and tech scene. To some extent, this perspective on SE is also being institutionalised, e.g., by certain networks and resources going into the SE field (such as awards for entrepreneurs and founders that include a 'social entrepreneurship' category). Beyond my empirical analysis, it should also be noted that *SEND* has emerged out of the *German Startups Association* (*Bundesverband Deutsche Startups e.V.*), the main lobby organisation for commercial start-ups (see Chapter 2). *SEND*'s history and (part of) its network, therefore, can also be interpreted as an institutionalised link between SE and the start-up world.

On the one hand, a closeness to technology and to commercial entrepreneurship may bring (new) resources into the SE field, which can then be used for the social aims pursued by social enterprises. Following this reasoning, the strategy of keeping tech and commercial entrepreneurship close may be seen as a form of 'tactical mimicry' as described by Dey & Teasdale (2016), i.e., applying a certain language for tactical reasons and attracting resources to the field. On the other hand, herein lies a risk that the SE concept is reduced to a form of entrepreneurship. SE may be absorbed by the (commercial) start-up world and its political potential contained. Moreover, Chapter 6 has also demonstrated that this proximity between commercial and 'social' entrepreneurship is sometimes found on the individual level. Or put differently: this proximity is personified in certain entrepreneurs, who become social entrepreneurs – and vice versa. Several articles report on social entrepreneurs, who have become social entrepreneurs only after having achieved financial success (as well-paid employees or as entrepreneurs in the business world). In addition, various articles describe courses on SE, in which young people (mostly university students) gain entrepreneurial skills – which they might then apply to become (commercial) entrepreneurs. This raises serious concerns about the purpose, function and priorities of such educational

programmes, as they sometimes seem to reduce SE to a facilitating function, as an entry ticket into entrepreneurship (of any kind).

There are also questions of inclusivity and participation related to this. Such questions have previously been raised (Voß 2015) and could only be addressed marginally. Certainly, there are interesting routes for further research around inclusivity and participation in the German SE movement that are worth exploring. When SE is only presented as an option for financially secure or even wealthy individuals, this would make SE indistinguishable from charity. SE would then resemble the charitable activities of benevolent industrialists, who want to 'give back' to their workers or to the local community – as many industrial families have done over centuries, e.g., by setting up foundations. Most certainly, such a take on SE would strip it from its political potential. I argue that this charity-like approach to SE (engaging in SE only after accumulating financial wealth) remains rooted in a dichotomy of the economy versus the social and charitable world. Arguably, this undermines the basic idea of SE of a somewhat more holistic understanding of economic activity that in itself should address social aims or achieve 'positive social impact'. There is also a moral dilemma entailed here: in order to become social entrepreneurs, individuals would first need to inherit or to accumulate wealth. However, this is problematic when assuming that in the current economic system (much) economic activity is harmful – as explanations or definitions of SE often do, at least implicitly (see Chapter 1). This creates a paradox: in order to 'do good' (through SE), one would first have to engage in harmful economic activity to achieve financial security. In addition, when SE only becomes an activity for the wealthy, this would mean a decoupling of SE and wage labour. This would then counteract the debates about decent pay and working conditions in social enterprises, which I have discussed as a route for SE to unfold political potential in Section 7.4.

Looking beyond the empirical analysis of the news articles, it seems that the lack of boundaries to the commercial and tech world (and its charitable activities) has recently reached a new stage. In June 2022, *SEND* has started a new project: *emp:our now*, which is funded by *Google*'s charitable arm: *Google.org* (SEND 2021e). Again, one side of the coin of engaging with *Google* might be clever 'tactical mimicry' – in order to draw resources to 'genuinely social' fields. On the other hand, this opens a door for 'social washing' for companies such as *Google*. There is a risk for SE actors of being instrumentalised so that large companies can polish their image by showcasing their 'social responsibility', regardless of the impact of their main economic activities. In this way, SE ac-

tors may become the 'fig leaf' of commercial entrepreneurship and, ultimately, of neoliberal capitalism.

Overall, it can be argued that the links, overlaps and boundaries (or the blurring of boundaries) and the interaction between the SE concept and its actors and other actors and movements will be crucial for the developments in the coming years. As the interest in SE has started growing in the early 2020s, it seems likely that different actors (in the economy, politics and civil society alike) will play an important role in steering the German SE movement in one or another direction. This being said, it seems that all the different overlaps and interactions come with both opportunities and risks. Collaborating with actors around another concept opens up the opportunity of bringing more attention, people, and resources to the SE movement. Aligned with other concepts and actors, SE may reach greater scale or leverage. However, there is also the risk that these other actors or discourses will appropriate or even instrumentalise SE for different purposes.

7.7 Social Entrepreneurship Discourse(s) and Newspapers: Reflections on the Methodological Approach

As mentioned in Chapter 3, it is relevant to note that the findings of the empirical analysis are based on newspaper articles, and that this might entail certain limitations. The choice of data has an impact on the findings, and certainly, only a part of the SE discourse is represented in the newspapers – and, therefore, in my findings. More specifically, my analysis has grasped:

- the part of SE discourse(s) that makes it into the news,
- the part of SE discourse(s) that journalists and editors find interesting – i.e., aspects of SE that make marketable news stories and/or that relate well to trending topics and current affairs,
- the part of SE discourse(s) that the media is able and willing to represent, possibly excluding more radical versions or aspects of SE.

In this section thus, I shall further reflect on the implications that this has for the reach of my findings and how additional research may help to fill the research gaps that remain unresolved.

Focusing on an 'outside' perspective was an intentional choice – as an attempt to look beyond the SE niche or 'bubble', and to investigate, what aspects

of SE reach a broader audience. I wanted to find out what larger parts of society get to perceive of SE. Of course, newspapers do not reach all members of society – yet a very considerable part of them. On the other hand, it must be clear that my findings cannot be seen as an all-encompassing and balanced depiction of the SE field. In particular, my analysis offers limited insights on the 'inside' view, on how the SE scene and the actors who constitute it, such as social entrepreneurs and their support and lobby organisations, may try to construct a 'common agreement' or identity. My findings thus, do not necessarily represent the dominant perspective on SE *within* the SE field, its practitioners and support organisations. These might agree, but also disagree, with the media representation of SE. In addition, the media representation of SE does not have to be congruent with understandings of SE in other important arenas in public and social life, e.g., in the arena of education (such as universities), politics (such as parliament or policymaking), the economy (businesses or business forums) or civil society, etc.

For this reason, a study focusing on the 'inside' of the SE scene, its network(s) of practitioners, support organisations, etc. would be a fruitful complement to my research – e.g., by conducting interviews, applying ethnographic methods and/or analysing websites or the social media activities of the relevant SE actors. Such further research would be necessary to better understand the internal workings of the SE movement. In addition, it would then be possible to compare the 'inside' construction and the 'outside' depiction of the SE phenomenon and movement, and to identify similarities as well as differences between them. This comparison would be very interesting, in order to assess, whether there is an overlap between such 'inside' and 'outside' understandings of the SE concept and whether or not SE actors would feel the media representation an adequate one. An inside view would also allow to better capture different 'voices' within the SE discourse. As I have explained in Chapters 4–6, social entrepreneurs and other members of the SE scene and wider support ecosystem are allowed to 'speak' in the newspaper articles. Ultimately, however, the protagonists of the stories have little agency over their representation in the final product, given that newspaper articles are mediated texts, which are researched, written, edited and published. The explanations of SE as well as the wider narratives around SE, which are captured in my analysis, are significantly shaped by journalists. Likewise, research that focuses on understandings of SE in other important arenas in public and social life would be offer quite fruitful complementary perspectives, e.g., through analysing representations of SE in universities, business forums,

policy documents, or the like. Keeping in mind, however, that SE in Germany is still in its infancy, and that in the areas of politics and policymaking, for example, it would be hard to find relevant and substantial material that dates back a similar time span (as I have explained in Chapters 2 and 3).

This being said, it must also be noted that newspapers are embedded in certain social and power relations that determine, which articles are produced, and how these are produced, as I have already mentioned in Chapter 3. It may be possible that the newspapers have only represented the parts of SE that *could* be represented within the constraints of the social and power relations within neoliberal capitalism, in which the media are embedded (Fairclough 1995). Following this thought, it could be possible that parts of SE that present a challenge or an alternative to neoliberal capitalism – namely, more 'radical' versions of SE – are widely excluded from the media discourse, because they are beyond the limits of what can be said (within the constraints of the neoliberal power structures). If it is beyond the newspapers' horizon to imagine an alternative to the neoliberal model of capitalism, then such takes on SE, understanding SE as (part of) an alternative model, will be excluded in the first place, therefore, containing the radical political potential of SE. Newspapers, especially the more conservative outlets, might represent only a reformist version of SE, one that is more conforming to the current economic and social system. Likewise, there is good reason to assume that other power relations, too, have shaped the media representation from which I gathered my empirical results, including inequalities that derive e.g., from gender or race relations. Various critical perspectives on power relations – such as feminism, post-colonial theory, critical disability studies, or intersectionality – may challenge the media representation when it comes to the subjects of SE, asking why certain social entrepreneurs are represented, and how inclusive or exclusive these representations of social entrepreneurs are (McRobbie 2020). Hence, further research could help to explore the (potential) effects that the media's power structures might have on the representation of SE.

Another important point seems to revolve around the flexibility and malleability of the SE concept, against the background of the media's function in informing the general public about current affairs. The central contribution of my book is that it was able to trace a development of representations of the SE concept in Germany over time. Related to this, I have made a strong case for understanding SE in dialogue with the more general political and socio-economic environment. I have demonstrated that, in the first period, SE appears linked to public debates over the reform of the labour market and the social

security system, and later, SE appears linked to the financial crisis of 2008. While I stand by the assertion that the broader political and socio-economic environment is important for understanding SE in a particular context, there also lies a possible critique with regards to the analysed material. Given that journalists report on current affairs, there might be a bias in the media representation that results from journalists constructing their stories in a way to fit SE in, connecting SE to what is trending at the moment. Following this view, it is possible that the relationship between SE and themes that are currently relevant in the wider political environment – at least those receiving news coverage – may be too pronounced in my findings.

Viewed from a different perspective, this, once again, points to the fact that it is possible to embed SE in various wider narratives, e.g., that it seems possible to link SE to whatever is going on in the world right now. This feeds into an important aspect that I want to discuss regarding the theoretical framework and the methodology applied to my empirical research, namely: whether it makes sense to speak of one SE discourse – or whether it would be better suited to think of several SE discourses (in plural).

At times, I was questioning the manifestation of a distinct SE discourse, and that, instead, it would be better to think of SE as appearing within different discourses – such as a 'reform of welfare' discourse, a 'reform of the economy' discourse, an 'entrepreneurship' discourse, a 'sustainability' discourse, a 'what makes good organisations' discourse, an 'empowerment' discourse, and so forth. There seem to be valid arguments for regarding SE as a 'scattered' phenomenon or movement that appears in many different discourses. However, I come to the conclusion that despite the flexibility and malleability of the SE term and concept, which makes it appear somewhat 'scattered', there is also a strong common thread in the complete analysed time frame: from 1999 to 2021. I propose to understand the 'different' SE discourses in terms of dominant and less dominant versions or currents of the SE discourse, but not as completely different discourses. Generally speaking, the different versions or currents have existed from the beginning, but they may be more pronounced in one period than in another – and they may evolve over time. For example, the idea of SE as 'entrepreneurship', which is very pronounced (even dominant) in the third period, does not appear all of a sudden. As demonstrated in Chapter 1, this perspective can already be found in early academic literature on SE (e.g., in Dees (2001 [1998]). In addition, the understanding of SE as 'entrepreneurship' can also be seen as a continuation of or building on the idea of 'SE as part

of the economy', which (in the media representation) only becomes dominant in the second period.

Different versions, narratives and currents of the SE discourse exist simultaneously – and they are not mutually exclusive and might, at times, appear intertwined. Yet, there is enough coherence and consistence to speak of a distinct SE discourse. In itself, my analysis is also a testament to this coherence, given that I have been able to trace specific developments across the entire period of investigation (1999–2021). Supporting this view is also that I was able to rely on the 'social entrepreneurship' term during the empirical research process (see Chapter 3). While still weakly institutionalised, the 'social entrepreneurship' term proved to be a successful signifier to refer to the social practice that I intended to study (in the German context). Furthermore, in recent years, the 'social entrepreneurship' term is becoming more established – in particular, as certain actors ascribe to it, most importantly *SEND*, founded in late 2017. As explained in Chapter 6, different institutionalisation processes are occurring in the third period, which include SE courses at universities, the promotion of SE by local economic development agencies, etc. Arguably, these deepening institutionalisation processes further sustain speaking of a distinct SE discourse in the German context – and that it will remain relevant in the coming years. Overall, the SE discourse is composed of "utterances which seem to be regulated in some way and which seem to have a coherence and a force to them in common" (Mills 1997: 7). This makes it possible to speak about a discourse of social entrepreneurship (in Germany). This being said, nonetheless, I consider that it is possible that the SE term and concept could merge with – or *be integrated* into – another concept, such as 'sustainability', 'social innovation', or 'entrepreneurship', in the future (as explained in Section 7.6). Any forecast on this development would be premature – and the future of the SE discourse will most likely depend on the activities of resourceful actors and the way, in which these will shape it. Further research should definitely pay attention to these potential prospects.

7.8 The Political Potential of Social Entrepreneurship

What to make then of the 'social entrepreneurship' phenomenon and movement from a sociological perspective, and what can I say to my former self, who, prior to embarking on this research had his own hopes for SE, as a way of experimenting with alternative economies that are more just and sustainable

than current business models, and therefore, as a means to reform the economy (as mentioned in the Introduction)? What 'political potential' of this sort could be observed throughout the research for this book?

There seems to be a quantitative and a qualitative dimension here – with the flexibility and ambiguity of the SE concept being an opportunity as well as a risk. On the one hand, SE seems to appeal to many actors, it is able to enter different spaces, and to attract resources from different sources, e.g., through 'tactical mimicry'. It should also be considered that, perhaps, flexible concepts can have great longevity, because of their ability to adapt to different (external) circumstances. Capitalism itself would be a good example for this, which has time and again been able to adapt to and to integrate criticism, as we know from Boltanski & Chiapello (2007). On the other hand, its flexibility and ambiguity seem to make the SE concept fragile, and prone to appropriation or instrumentalisation by other concepts or actors. Previous studies (mainly for the UK) have already pointed out how policymakers have managed to use and appropriate SE for various policy goals (Teasdale 2012; Dey & Teasdale 2016; Mason & Moran 2019). The remarkable influence of business elites on SE (see especially Chapter 4) should also be remembered here – and while they are not as dominant in the German SE field as in the early phase, they are still showing interest for SE. The new closeness between SE and the start-up (and tech) world may also present a risk for SE of being reduced to a form of entrepreneurship, and ultimately, being stripped from its political potential when it comes to establishing alternative economies. Similar to commercial entrepreneurship, to which Davies (2014a) – *in theory* – attests political potential, too, the political potential of SE could then be contained by capitalism as a system and by business elites, who manage to hold close links to entrepreneurs.

In order for SE to more fully develop its political potential thus, SE actors would need to clarify their political agenda and to forge and cultivate effective alliances. In order to be part of a transformation towards an alternative model, SE actors would need to be (more) critical with their alliances and beware of reproducing (implicit) economisation processes, such as uncritically transferring mainstream business logics into social realms, or engaging in cheerful praises of business virtues. To use the idea of 'transformation aid' that has been voiced by SE representatives, this would require formulating political proposals that go beyond incremental change – proposals that ultimately challenge neoliberalism's organising principles of competitiveness and economic calculation. In order to provide substantial 'transformation aid' that is worthy of the name, it would be necessary to draw a clearer vision of a framework for

an economic model, as well as to design strategies to implement it. Alliances between SE actors and other actors, or movements – in particular with other social economy movements – could offer a promising avenue. In shedding light on the background and development of the SE phenomenon and movement, my study may, to some extent, help to facilitate the communication and possible cooperation between SE and actors in politics and between different 'generations' of social economy movements. That is, if the term 'entrepreneurship' is not too off-putting for the respective political and civil society actors to get involved, appearing as compromised, as Davies (2014a) has raised – as it comes with (too) much neoliberal 'ideological baggage'. Moreover, the (potential) interplay of policy and SE, too, is a crucial aspect – both for political and practical relevance and as a topic for further research. Yet, the idea that SE could inspire policy ideas and action, i.e., put forward proposals, which are then put into regulation for all, remains rather hypothetical at the moment.

Given that policymakers of all stripes and various actors in the economy and in civil society may try to use SE for different (policy) goals and agendas, the involvement of these actors may swing the SE movement in different ways. There are different forces at play, and the future of SE seems uncertain. Different paths seem possible for the future development of the SE movement, most probably, depending on which resource-rich actors will be shaping it. At the moment, SE hardly seems able to propose a substantial 'alternative' to capitalism, certainly not in a 'radical' sense, i.e., addressing the roots and fundamental structures of the system. Instead – and assuming that the perspectives that consider SE to be 'more' than entrepreneurship are dominant (which is debatable) – SE could be seen as a (small) building block for moderate or gradual reform of the economy, for it to be more responsive to ecological and social justice concerns. Perhaps, SE can help to contribute to a discussion on the varieties of capitalism or to reinvigorate social-democratic or socially responsible versions of capitalism in the 21st century. But it would have to be closely monitored that this would actually result in action and reform and not merely in rhetoric.

The idea of SE, therefore, might not seem ambitious enough for those seeking fundamental systemic change. Against the background of a future without any 'alternatives' whatsoever, though, SE may offer hope for moderate reform. Considering the dire state of the economic model, economic though and economic policies, SE should not yet be easily dismissed. SE may not be able to provide all the answers, but, perhaps, be able to ask the right questions – and to contribute to a debate about the future of our economic and social model,

to debates about the future of capitalism, and to help pinpointing where it is doing harm. SE may also contribute to discussions around more holistic understandings of progress and development – and to some, these might seem like sufficient reasons to continue researching and engaging with this phenomenon.