Introduction

In the wake of the 2021 election to the *Bundestag* , the *Social Entrepreneurship Netzwerk Deutschland* (*SEND*), Germany's main network and lobby organisation for social entrepreneurs, asked all major parties to respond to some of their claims and to comment on their views and proposals for social entrepreneurship (SE) in Germany.[1] The party representatives responded with video statements, which were published (among other places) on *SEND*'s *Facebook* page between September 21th and 24th. In their statements, all politicians expressed their sympathy for SE, explaining why they consider that SE is important and needed. However, each of them using their own language and linking SE to their specific argumentation and political views.

Armin Laschet of the Christian Democrats (*Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands, CDU*) highlights the role of social entrepreneurs as Germany's 'innovators' (SEND 2021a).[2] For him, social entrepreneurs can help to activate society's potential to innovate and to find new solutions for social problems. Olaf Scholz of the Social Democratic Party (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, SPD*) sees SE as an opportunity to foster community ('togetherness'). According to him, social innovation requires the participation of many actors: in social enterprises, the community economy and cooperatives alike. Christian Lindner of the Liberal Party (*Freie Demokratische Partei, FDP*) points out Germany's role as one of the richest countries in the world, but also expresses his fear that economic success alone is not enough and that there is a variety of challenges facing the country. For him, SE has the potential of addressing these challenges – by applying new solutions and entrepreneurial thinking, also in areas that are not strictly linked to the economy. On the other hand, Janine

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1   All parties at the time represented in the *Bundestag* were contacted, excluding the far-right party *Alternative für Deutschland* (*AfD*).

2   The video statements were transcribed and translated from German by the author.

Wissler of the Left Party (*Die Linke*) summarises what she understands of SE as: 'common good before profit'. For her, SE can make a contribution to overcome social ills, including poverty, loneliness and ever more precarious jobs. Wissler argues that within the framework of solidarity economies social innovation can play an important role, developing ideas on a small scale that may then serve society as a whole. Finally, Katrin Göring-Eckardt of the Green Party (*Bündnis 90/ Die Grünen, Green Party*) sees social entrepreneurs as agents that are committed to the common good and sustainability, who are building an economy that replaces short-term returns with long-term thinking (SEND 2021a).

Given that this is only a few days before the election and that the campaigners are hoping for votes from the SE community and beyond, it is hardly surprising that all five politicians express their support for SE. But apart from this, the different party representatives clearly demonstrate that they connect certain hopes and political goals with the SE phenomenon or movement. However, what each of the five associates with SE can be quite different from each other – and mirror each party's political goals and broader vision for society. Two rather opposed understandings of and visions for SE that stand out are: Christian Lindner's (*FDP*) claim for entrepreneurial thinking in all areas of society – representing a (neoliberal) glorification of entrepreneurial solutions – in contrast to Janine Wissler's (*Die Linke*) understanding of SE as common good before profits – employing the language of solidarity (of the political left). In short, the support that these different actors express for SE is linked to different political goals and to different underlying understandings of the SE phenomenon and movement.

The much-cited quote by management scholar Dees (2001 [1998]) in one of the first scholarly publications on SE, remains timely: "[t]hough the concept of 'social entrepreneurship' is gaining popularity, it means different things to different people" (Dees 2001 [1998]: 1).[3] While this has mostly been taken as a starting point for discussing definitions of SE and what kind of organisations social enterprises are or should be – which remain to be important aspects – I argue that this matter goes much deeper. Taking a more sociological perspective, it can be noted that the different 'meanings' that are attributed to SE concern not only the underlying understandings of SE but also the broader ideas,

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3   Arguably, it was also this article, *The Meaning of 'Social Entrepreneurship'*, which first introduced the SE term and concept to a wider academic community. According to a scientometric analysis by Sassmannshausen & Volkmann (2018), in 2013 this was the most-cited publication on SE.

the political goals and agendas and the visions for society that people connect to SE – as could briefly be illustrated with the statements above. Academic literature, too, offers a variety of such wider interpretations and understandings of SE. To the extent that, sometimes, social entrepreneurship is described as a neoliberal concept, transforming the social and welfare sectors, while at other times, SE is said to represent an alternative to precisely this (neoliberal) capitalist economic model (e.g., Shaw & de Bruin 2013).

The fact that there is such "conceptual confusion", as Teasdale (2012: 99) has framed it, when it comes to the wider political or sociological meaning of SE and the motivation of trying to untangle this for the German context has been the starting point for my research. Being such a fluid and contested concept that might be understood and interpreted in very different ways by different actors, also making it prone to appropriation and even instrumentalisation for various political purposes, I aimed to investigate the idea of SE in Germany *empirically*, in order to contribute to a better sociological understanding and making sense of it – in particular along the following research topics and questions:

- *Diversity and dominance*: What different understandings of SE can be identified, and what is the dominant representation and perspective of the SE concept in Germany?
- *Representation and Relevance*: What does a broader audience get to learn about the SE phenomenon? What parts or aspects of SE are given a platform and getting noticed by wider society, i.e., beyond the niche spaces of the SE scene itself?
- *Development over time*: How has the idea of SE been introduced in Germany in the late 1990s (when the 'social entrepreneurship' term first started to appear), and how has the concept developed over time, until the early 2020s (when interest for SE in the public and in politics has started to increase)?
- *Notions of 'change' and politics:* SE seeks to 'change' the *status quo* – but which *status quo* is meant, what shall 'change' and how, and what is the vision for economy and society proposed by SE? What (potential) societal or political role is ascribed to SE, and what is the relationship between SE and the dominant (neoliberal) social and economic model?

Until now, these aspects of SE, i.e., its wider meanings, its normative and political underpinnings, have not been investigated empirically for the German context. Several studies have addressed similar aspects – including those of Parkinson & Howorth (2008), Nicholls (2010), Teasdale (2012), Dey & Teasdale

(2016), or Mason & Moran (2019), among others – but mainly for the United Kingdom (UK). As a result, the findings of these studies can only help to understand SE in Germany to a limited extent, since making sense of SE as a political and sociological phenomenon needs to take into account the political and socio-economic specifics of the respective context.

This is where this book makes an original contribution, explicitly focusing on the concept of SE in Germany, based on empirical research on representations of SE in the media between 1999 and 2021. The study is grounded on the theoretical and methodological framework of 'discourse' and 'discourse analysis'. This approach allows to study the development of ideas and, therefore, proves suitable to investigate the different meanings – in the broadest sense – associated with SE, how these meanings are 'produced' and contested, and how they have developed over time (Fairclough 1992; 2010; Diaz-Bone 2006). The empirical study is an analysis of 349 newspaper articles of general newspapers, published between 1999 (which is when the term 'social entrepreneurship' first appears in the German press) and 2021 (the latest year that my analysis was able to include and which coincides with a growing (political) interest for SE). I argue that newspapers (as part of the mass media) are important arenas for a society, in which 'common' knowledge and meaning(s) are produced.

It must be noted, however, that this choice of data implies that the analysis primarily casts light on certain representations of SE in newspapers. It only grasps some parts and aspects of the SE discourse(s), namely: the part of the SE discourse(s) that is represented in newspaper articles, i.e., the part of SE that journalists and editors find interesting and worth writing about. It is a mediated perspective on SE: SE seen through the eyes of newspapers. Yet, given that this book seeks to portray a certain dominant or 'mainstream' view on SE, and aspects about the SE concept that are getting noticed outside of the niche spaces in which SE, so far, is taking place, this is a valid and suitable choice of data for the research questions outlined above, as I will explain in detail in Chapter 3.

With its distinct approach, this book makes a contribution to SE scholarship mainly in four regards: strengthening sociological research on SE, applying empirical research to better understanding SE in the specific German context, tracing the development of 'common' representations of SE over time and, more generally, contributing to the interdisciplinary study of (socio)economic phenomena.

First, it contributes to sociological perspectives on SE that grasp and study SE as a complex (political) phenomenon, which is 'more' than just a (sub-)

form of entrepreneurship and which has 'wider' meanings and a multifaceted relationship to society. The wider political and socio-economic aspects of SE (not only in Germany) remain understudied, arguably, because most of the literature on SE comes from business administration and management studies (see e.g., Sassmannshausen & Volkmann 2018) – as pointed out by Parkinson & Howorth (2008), Lautermann (2012) or Bruder (2021), among others. Drawing on literature from political economy and sociology and a methodological approach (discourse analysis) at the intersection of sociology and linguistics, this study challenges a take on SE, which reduces SE merely to a variant of entrepreneurship, failing to acknowledge it as a complex social phenomenon and movement. In enquiring the relationship between (representations of) SE and neoliberal capitalism, my study also contributes to connecting SE more strongly to broader discussions in sociology, socio-economics and political economy. The relationship between SE and (neoliberal) capitalism remains ambiguous and an interesting object for study. Hopefully, further sociological work will explore SE's 'political potential' – using Davies's (2014a) terms – and its role in a neoliberal system, which is constantly evolving and is capable to adapt to a changing environment and to absorb its critics, as we know from Boltanski & Chiapello (2007) – but in which others see "cracks and contradictions" (Hall et al. 2015: 20–21), and which yet others already see coming to an end (e.g., Jacques 2016; Stiglitz 2019; Saad-Filho 2020).

Second, this book offers empirical insights for better understanding the SE concept and phenomenon in the specific context of Germany between 1999 and 2021. Especially from a sociological perspective, SE must be understood in interplay with its historical, geographic, political and socio-economic context – as I explain in Chapter 1. Arguably, context-specific aspects still receive too little attention in SE research, as among others, Deforurny & Nyssens (2010) have pointed out from early on (and restated more recently, e.g., in Deforurny et al. 2021). I also want to highlight the explicit empirical perspective offered in this book. So far, the interpretations of SE and its wider political meanings and (potential) role in society for Germany are mainly based on theoretical assumptions, they are most often assumed instead of researched (see, e.g., Ranville & Barros 2021) – or derived from studies from contexts other than Germany (as I will explain in Chapter 2). My study, on the other hand, offers an empirical sociological investigation on how the idea of SE is being constructed in Germany, identifying different understandings as well as the dominant mainstream (media) representations and perspectives of the SE concept.

Third, this book highlights that the idea of SE may change over time and helps to understand the development of the (mainstream view of) SE in Germany in a specific period (between 1999 and 2021). The key contribution of my empirical analysis of representations of SE in newspaper articles lies in the identification of three periods, in which certain perspectives on SE are dominant. From 1999 to 2008, SE is mainly understood as a reform of the welfare infrastructure. Between 2009 and 2014, SE is increasingly conceptualised as part of the economy. From 2015, there are two main currents: one sees SE becoming part of the 'start-up' world and, on the other hand, SE is conceived as a phenomenon that contributes to a social and ecological transformation of the economy. For the German context in particular this periodisation is an important contribution. As I argue in Chapter 2, little has been written about SE as a political phenomenon or movement in Germany – in particular beyond the initial phase of the late 1990s and early 2000s, and about how the idea of SE and what larger parts of society gets to perceive of it has developed over time. Arguably, this also gives political and societal relevance to this book – because even though SE in Germany remains quite marginal and weakly institutionalised interest for SE is starting to grow in the early 2020s.[4]

Fourth, this book is a contribution to (and plea for) the interdisciplinary study of socioeconomic phenomena. Qualitative discourse analysis at the intersection of sociology and linguistics is not the most common methodology to research topics related to business and the economy. Economists and business scholars mainly rely on quantitative approaches. In the past decades, mainstream economics has undergone a severe narrowing in methodological and theoretical perspectives – as pointed out e.g., by Graupe (2013), Ehnts & Zeddies (2016), or van Treeck & Urban (2017). The (over) reliance on neoclassical theory and on mathematical models has been heavily and increasingly criticised in recent years, different movements (led by academics, students and civil society) have emerged, demanding more theoretical and methodological pluralism in the study of the economy (e.g., Aigner et al. 2018). My study's interdisciplinary approach shall help to highlight the potential of discourse (analysis) in order to better understand (socio)economic phenomena and developments – and plea for the case that neighbouring disciplines may help to expand

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4   SE has not (yet) attracted significant interest or involvement of policymakers unlike in the UK, for example, where first the *Labour* and then the *Conservative* government have significantly shaped the SE sector. However, as I explain in detail in Chapter 2, interest for SE is growing in different areas of society, especially at the beginning of the 2020s.

the theoretical and methodological repertoire to understand (socio)economic phenomena and developments. On the other hand, my study shall also be an invitation for discourse analysts, who research issues related to the (political) economy, such as SE, less often than other topics (e.g., race or gender relations).

The book is organised as follows. Drawing on academic literature from various disciplines I am going to address the complex 'conceptual confusion' around SE in the first chapter. Even if this is not always explicitly stated (let alone investigated), much of the academic literature on SE offers normative and wider explanations of SE. Some explanations are (seemingly) more definitory, while others more explicitly address the proposed societal or political role of SE. Yet, all explanations of SE carry normative and political meaning (either implicit or explicit), as Section 1.2 will explain, given that the 'social' in SE is value-loaded and linked to a certain understanding of what is 'good' for society. Even though this distinction between a more definitory level and a 'wider' societal-political level is not strictly clear cut, it will serve as a useful framework for organising Chapter 1. Following this logic, Section 1.3 will focus on the more implicit meanings and normative underpinnings in definitions of SE. Next, Section 1.4 will address wider narratives that more explicitly ascribe SE a certain societal function, relating SE to other (established) societal institutions and explaining why SE is necessary. Section 1.5 then addresses literature that links SE to 'bigger', systemic questions – in particular literature that establishes a relationship between SE and neoliberalism. Section 1.6 will emphasise the importance of context (such as historical and political) for understanding SE. In addition, this section highlights the flexibility and malleability of the SE concept and the fact that different actors may link SE to various worldviews and/or political goals. Overall, this first chapter sheds light on the complex and dynamic nature of representations and explanations of SE and highlights the diverse and contested meaning(s) that are attributed to SE and that these might change over time, which is important before coming to the specific case of SE in Germany (see Section 1.7).

Chapter 2 focuses on SE in Germany and addresses particularities of SE in this context. First, Section 2.2 will situate the (untranslated) 'social entrepreneurship' term in this specific setting, explaining that it refers to a distinct movement, which can be (historically) distinguished from other social economy movements. Section 2.3 then addresses this specific SE movement in Germany, offering a brief overview of SE in the media, in academic literature, of the relevant actors in the field as well as of first policy engagements

with SE. Section 2.4 focuses on the reception of this specific non-translated (English) term and concept – which was quite sceptical in social science and social economy circles. Arguably, this critique is embedded within a critique of wider political and socio-economic developments, as I will explain in 2.5. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, SE was mainly perceived as part of a neoliberal re-shaping of society – globally and in Germany, which at the time was undergoing substantial social security and labour market reform. Looking forward, however, Section 2.6 argues, that little is known – and little has been written – about SE as a political phenomenon beyond the early 2000s and about the (potential) developments of the SE concept and movement after this initial phase.

In order to study the contested concept of SE in Germany between 1999 and 2021, how the meaning of SE has been constructed and whether it is possible to identify developments in this process, Chapter 3 will introduce the research framework of discourse analysis. Discourse analysis offers a suitable theoretical and methodological perspective to investigate the 'wider' meanings of SE in Germany and their development. Section 3.2 will first introduce the theoretical framework of 'discourse' more generally. Section 3.3 will then explain what it means to *analyse* discourse and focus in particular on *Critical Discourse Analysis* (mainly according to Fairclough 1992; 2010), which, complemented by Diaz-Bone (2006), serves as the principal methodological approach for the empirical study. Section 3.4 will then lay out the concrete operationalization for the empirical research. This includes describing the compiling of the corpus of 349 newspaper articles and the utilised search terms and reflecting on the choice of data (newspaper articles) and what this implies for my research findings as well as explaining the analysis of the data derived from the corpus – and, briefly, addressing ethical considerations and the way that the results will be presented in the following chapters (4–6). During the analysis of the data, three periods in the SE discourse in Germany were identified: the first period from 1999–2008, the second period from 2009–2014 and the third period from 2015–2021. Chapters 4–6 will each be dedicated to one period in chronological order.

Chapter 4 presents the results for the first period, ranging from 1999 (the year in which the first article on SE appears in the German press) until 2008 (when the SE discourse 'shifts' towards the economy, as will be explained in detail in Chapter 5). The first half of the chapter (Sections 4.2-4.4) presents the findings of the analysis mainly in a descriptive way, while the latter half (Sections 4.5-4.7) places the focus on discussing and contextualising the

findings, and establishes links to previous academic literature. In the first period (1999–2008), overall, SE in Germany remains quite marginal. A SE field emerges only around 2004, closely connected to the organisation *Ashoka* opening an office in Germany and revolves mainly around a few actors. The dominant version of SE in this early phase – as it is represented in the analysed newspaper articles – is rather person-centred, foregrounding the figure of the social entrepreneur. There are different (to some extent competing) 'wider' narratives about the role of SE in society, what 'change' SE shall bring about and what sort of economy and society SE envisions. Yet, the main perspective is clearly one of SE as a reform of the welfare-producing infrastructure. SE and the concrete social enterprises that are represented in the media largely operate in traditionally 'social' fields or fields of the state (such as education or work integration). Tied to this, social enterprises and entrepreneurs are often compared to – and presented as the more efficient or 'better' solution than – institutions of the state and the non-profit sector, which in turn are often depicted as inefficient or even deficient.

There is a remarkable shift around the years 2008–2009, as Chapter 5 explains, marking the beginning of the second period (2009–2014). According to the media representation, SE is now increasingly understood as belonging to the economy – in contrast to the first period, when SE was mainly seen as part of the welfare-producing 'social' infrastructure (see 5.1 and 5.2) – a development which I will describe as 'sectoral shift'. Related to this sectoral shift, SE is now increasingly linked to debates around business ethics and reform of business education (as Section 5.3 points out). Section 5.4 addresses another main theme in the second period: SE within a discussion around purpose and search for meaning in work, in particular for a 'new' generation of students, for who SE now becomes a career option. Sections 5.5-5.7 present the findings for the second period on definitions and explanations of SE, actors as well as logics and value statements in the analysed articles, at times drawing comparisons to the first period. Finally, Section 5.8 engages in a contextualisation of the findings and discusses, among other aspects, the role of the financial crisis of 2008 for the SE discourse.

Chapter 6 is dedicated to the third period, spanning from 2015 to 2021. From 2015, SE is now often described as a 'trend' among founders and start-ups, appearing next to other forms of entrepreneurship. This might be seen as a continuation or further evolution of the second period, however, SE is now presented not just any part of the economy, but more specifically, as part of the start-up world and as 'founding' (as Sections 6.2 and 6.3 explain). Section

6.4 shows that more actors get involved in the SE discourse, and as more people become familiar with the SE concept certain aspects of SE get institutionalised and normalised. In spite of (new) powerful actors such as *SEND* entering the SE field, this does not seem to settle the contested discussion of what SE is supposed to mean. On the contrary, as interest in SE grows, this rather seems to lead to an expansion of the term (as explained in 6.5). Sections 6.6 and 6.7 focus on politics and policy around SE and around *SEND*. Some of actors and policies see in SE 'more' than a form of entrepreneurship; SE is sometimes portrayed as a movement that propels a transformation of the economy and linked to a specific regional (economic) model. Finally, Section 6.8 engages in a contextualisation of the findings of the third period.

The final chapter summarises and discusses the key insights and findings of both the literature review and of the empirical analysis and shows in which way these make a contribution to previous academic research. Section 7.2 will highlight the central contribution of my study: i.e., having identified three different periods in the newspaper discourse of SE in Germany. Section 7.3 will then discuss that, in spite of having identified periods with a dominant and distinct SE discourse, SE remains sociologically complex and ambiguous. It was found that representations of SE may simultaneously be able to criticise and legitimise the capitalist economic model. Section 7.4 discusses the 'sectoral shift' identified, leading from the first to the second period. I argue that this shift is also a reminder of the diversity of SE, acknowledging that SE takes places in different sectors – and that this is relevant for the sociological understanding of SE. The next section (7.5) will then address interrelations between SE and capitalism and the state. Section 7.6 will address some of the overlaps between SE and other concepts (such as 'sustainability' or 'entrepreneurship') and discuss what these might imply for the future of the SE idea. Section 7.7 will reflect on the data (newspapers) and the methodological approach that served to provide the empirical findings and address their limitations. Finally, Section 7.8 closes with remarks on the political potential of SE.