



Startup communities: Notes on the sociality of tech-entrepreneurs in Manchester

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Abstract

In this contribution I explore the conflicting moralities and practices of technology entrepreneurship through the lenses of Mary Douglas' Grid-Group Cultural Theory. Starting from the distinction between communitarian, individualistic and hierarchical culture, I explore my empirical material drawn from ethnographic fieldwork in Manchester, UK. In particular, I describe the sociality of young male tech-entrepreneurs at networking events, 'coffices' and coworkspaces around an urban 'creative quarter'. I argue that 'startup communities' simultaneously encourage individualistic market-competition, contribute to feelings of local group-belonging and are narrative constructions promoted by entrepreneurs, corporations and the State.

Keywords

Manchester, entrepreneurial ecosystems, coworking, cultural theory, startup community

Introduction

In recent years, much academic attention has been drawn to the digital, creative and entrepreneurial ideal underlying urban regeneration in the UK and particularly in the city of Manchester (Harvey 1989:9, Quilley 1999, 2000; Knox 2003, Ward 2003, Harvey et al. 2005, Hetherington 2007). As in many other cities around the world, in Manchester a 'startup community' is promoted in, as well as attracted by, urban 'creative areas', such as Manchester's Northern Quarter (Pfeilstetter 2017). There, the social distinctiveness of the entrepreneurial citizen is performed at regular meetings and events in coworkspaces and

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coffee-bars where investors and lobbyists meet computer-science students and young business founders.

The people I met at these places on a daily basis during July and August 2015 confronted me with a range of what I felt to be obvious contradictions. During my extensive interviews with mainly young men in their twenties; founders of (sometimes various) small scale algorithm building or based businesses; these seemed to believe in the possibility that their business idea could eventually be ground-breaking and therefore in danger of being copied or stolen. Nevertheless, transparency, open access and sharing were not only part of the marketing storyline of their products, but it was also actively practiced towards me and my interest in acquiring information. In addition, many of these entrepreneurs made a harsh distinction between themselves and people only interested in making money, like businessmen or consultants working in corporate jobs. Nevertheless, many of the meetings where these distinctions have been articulated were sponsored by corporations and the State administration. Many of the young entrepreneurs I met created meaningful and intimate social relations at events and in offices that operated at the intersections of work and leisure, and in spite of the virtual nature of their products (algorithms), many of them seemed convinced that a located community and face-to-face experience was paramount for their success. In addition, when I interviewed government advisors, tech-entrepreneurship policy makers and senior tech business founders, I was surprised that many of them explicitly avoided seeing themselves in any privileged position within the social hierarchy.

Taken together, these examples point towards a sociological paradox that may be interpreted as follows. What is expectedly an ideal-typical milieu of individualistic market-competitiveness, the 'startup ecosystem', often claims and displays egalitarian-communitarian values and, in addition, is embedded in or dependent on monopolistic-hierarchical structures provided by the State and global corporations. This distinction of three different social logics draws on Mary Douglas' Grid-Group Cultural Theory, which I will introduce in the following section. Her theory not only provides a language to describe some of the contradictions I have observed during my fieldwork in Manchester, but also allows me to classify three different arguments made by scholars to explain these new urban entrepreneurial milieus. In the second and third section, I present my empirical examples from Manchester. I discuss the symbolism of creative quarters and the performances of technology startup businesses in everyday practice. The role of the Northern Quarter, its networking events, coworkspaces, cafes or coffices for both envisioning and creating algorithm selling businesses is explored. In the conclusions I newly pick up the theoretical discussion in order to evaluate what kind of arguments from the literature is supported by the observations from my fieldwork.

Cultural theory and startup communities

Mary Douglas and her followers have developed a social theory that distinguishes between different basic social orders or cultures (Douglas 1992, 1999, 2005; Douglas and Wildavsky 1982; Thompson, Ellis and Wildavsky 1990). In the following I will describe

briefly the main differences between the hierarchical, the individualistic and egalitarian culture (deliberately omitting the fatalist cultural type) in order to use them as a framework for the analysis of my empirical material, as well as the literature relating to entrepreneurship in Manchester.

In an essay on the role of the person in the enterprise culture, Douglas describes the values that underpin individualistic sociality (1992). These promote personal desires and critical attitudes towards authority. Individual freedom, combined with meritocracy, tend to marginalize those unable to compete because of incompetence or infirmity. Inversely, in a hierarchical social structure, the person is only disqualified because of disloyalty or disobedience. Social mobility is restricted to small steps up and down the predefined ladder of ranks and all individual action is constrained by the lobby of the weak. The third cultural platform is the *enclave*, which has to be understood as a social system in contrast to its socio-cultural environment. This sociality of opposition favours a strong sense of belonging and the strict inward/outward group dichotomy does not favour internal social stratification. Sects and communes are prototypical examples for enclave cultures.

Mary Douglas (2005) held that these were ideal-typical categories and similar to other heuristic sociological models such as the market, bureaucratic, religious or traditional rationality proposed by Max Weber. She further held that these cultural formations were logically irreconcilable, but present, though unequally distributed and competing for legitimacy in any specific society. Douglas argued that the theory had to be tied to the analysis of particular space-temporal social realities and her framework was in fact applied by many followers to a wide range of issues.

Now one could argue that these three 'cultural biases' can also be found in different archetypical institutions in the business world. Think for instance of the differences between a family business, a technology startup and a large corporation. Traditional small and medium sized businesses are often based on strong moral principles and a kinship-like sense of belonging in opposition to the corporate world characterized by anonymous holdings with State-like dimensions. In contrast, the startup company evokes the idea of an individual, the competitive agency of an entrepreneur, responsible for his own destiny. Thus, bringing these basic social distinctions to bear upon the rise of 'technologically saturated' communities (English-Lueck 2002) of tech-entrepreneurs and freelancers, one could distinguish between arguments that emphasize either communitarian cooperation, or market competition, or State co-optation. Therefore, the following review of relevant literature is grouped roughly by Douglas' types.

Goddard has argued that the creative industry in Manchester's Northern Quarter relied heavily on social proximity. She was intrigued by the question of why this spatial concentration of tech-entrepreneurs existed, if these could work location-independent (2003:45-47). The supposed 'space-defying capacity' of computer technology (parasitic to community-building) has been unveiled by Manchester based ethnographers as a false dichotomy which both dismisses that space has not disappeared and that space has never been only physical as opposed to virtual (Green, Harvey and Knox 2005:806)¹. This argument was developed in the context of research on European Union funded projects

in Manchester during the 1990s and early 2000s which aimed to develop computer supported networks among European cities' administrations, foster the 'digitalization' of museums or support the consolidation of a new-media industry (Knox 2003). The moral underpinning of these public investment schemes, that the authors have labelled 'the imperative to connect', consisted of nurturing a sense of belonging to a new (virtual) Europe that would be compatible with existing identifications of nationhood and local place (Green et al. 2005:817). Also in this case, the authors argued that the implementation of a (virtual) European network of regional cities produced, paradoxically, a local community of 'net-workers' in Manchester, as "attempts to incorporate imagined networks [...] in practice always involves some form of located imagined community as well" (Green et al. 2005:808). It seems that especially anthropologists incline to identify new enclave communities, such as digital natives, hackers, freaks, techies, nerds, gamers or geeks (Tocci 2009) where others tend to see anonymous spaces and isolated individuals. Therefore, this first angle of analysis is grounded on the paradox that digital technologies and individualism also create what they are supposed to erode: collective solidarity and a sense of place or belonging. It is possible that this line of argument can be traced back to the classic work of Marshall McLuhan (1967). He held that the social consequences of new technological developments, such as electric circuitry, lead to new intimate social formations, a 'global village' and a 'new tribalism' that is 'orientalizing the west' (McLuhan and Fiore 1967). This challenged classic sociological readings of technological progress as related to rationalization and individualization while perpetuating the ethnocentric classification of *Gemeinschaft* (community) versus *Gesellschaft* (society).

A quite different thread in the literature is concerned with the growing imposition of market competition in formerly discrete spheres of community and the State. For instance, in a seminal publication David Harvey (1989) has argued that in Manchester and elsewhere in the UK, the administration is competing in a business-like manner to attract private and public funding. The State is portrayed in these accounts as subordinated to or compared to global corporations. No longer is redistribution its core mechanism but competition. From this perspective, Douglas' categories maybe misleading our understanding of contemporary societies, because the all persuasive logic of market-competition is really the dominant social logic underpinning apparently distinct social formations. A more radical claim in this direction is made by those who see a clearly defined strategy and liable agents behind this confusion between the public and the private sector. Here it is the entrepreneurs themselves who turn the values of proximity, community and egalitarianism into a marketable resource. Like the ethno-preneurs described by Comaroff and Comaroff, who exploit their own ethnic differences as a means to an end (2009), many entrepreneurs today take advantage of their critical intellect and their counter-cultural lifestyle as a specific 'subcultural capital', a way of enhancing profit and success (Thornton 1995). For instance, among the most admired entrepreneurs at the events I visited in Manchester were the founders of a dating platform, similar to Tinder but oriented towards male users with a preference for meeting men with beards. It was this sub-cultural or counter-cultural dimension of the business

idea and the product, which was emphasized as especially meaningful by the people I spoke to.

Let me summarize the theoretical discussion up to this point. I suggest that many of the sociological contradictions observable in discourse and practice of so called startup communities can be suitably classified by Mary Douglas' typology of 'cultural biases', namely individualism, egalitarianism and hierarchy. This approach is justified because many arguments used in the literature on entrepreneurship in Manchester match with at least one or more of Douglas' types of sociality. I further hold that it is the different interpretations of the nature of the relationship between these types that distinguishes recent theorizing relevant to the analysis of so called 'startup communities'. Some authors argue that individualistic sociality has taken over or substituted historically discrete social spheres. We might call this the confusion-thesis. Formally and formerly egalitarian or hierarchical institutions, such as friendship or administrations, in practice act like entrepreneurs in a market. Others attribute this observation to the claim that there is a specific politics of confusion. This strategy-thesis sees agentic manipulation behind the enactment of different social types. Startups and their political promoters claim egalitarian values, display community or act supposedly on self-reliant, anti-authoritarian grounds in order to dispel their corporate and administrative promotion and dissimulate the marketization of social intimacy. A third observation that we could label the paradox-thesis can be found in works such as those from Sarah Green, Penny Harvey or Sarah Knox. Here academics are especially interested in the irony that digital technology and market competition also enable specific local, space-oriented communities, which they are often thought to undermine.

In the following two chapters I will present my empirical research from Manchester in order to examine whether my data supports the confusion-thesis, the paradox-thesis or the strategy-thesis that I found in the literature. Therefore, I will explore the ways in which the three social types announced by Mary Douglas take shape in the specific institutions, people and places I have observed in and around the Northern Quarter.

The startup community in Manchester's Northern Quarter

In the past years a 'startup community' was promoted in Manchester by the administration, corporations and local lobbyists (Pfeilstetter 2017). Especially in the Northern Quarter, the social distinctiveness of technology entrepreneurs was performed at recurrent meetings and events taking place at specifically fashioned premises such as co-workspaces or coffee houses.

In summer 2015, during a continuous period of two and a half month, I went to those meetings on a daily basis. There, I have observed and participated in discussions, networking events, roundtables, parties, conferences and sales pitches. Many of the following descriptions derive from my field diary where I have written down my experiences, conversations and observations at these gatherings. After the first weeks in the field I became familiar with some of the entrepreneurs attending those events. This

allowed me to conduct and record extensive interviews with five young male entrepreneurs in their twenties. All of them were founders of (sometimes various) small scale algorithm building or based businesses, selling products such as apps, online videos or platforms to investors. All of them went to university at some moment, shared a desire for making a living as freelancers and visited events from the 'Manchester startup community' frequently. Some of them were very successful while others less so in commercial terms. In addition, I interviewed a government advisor, a tech-entrepreneurship policy maker and senior tech business founder of a business successfully sold to Silicon Valley.

All of the people I spoke to helped me to learn a lot about computers, finance, marketing and Manchester for which I am profoundly grateful. I felt that my self-introduction as an anthropologist studying Manchester's tech startup culture mainly aroused interest, not suspicion and I was granted a surprising leap of faith, for instance when recording interviews with many people I had only recently met. If difficulty in accessing the field is an indicator of how social boundaries are constituted (Knox 2003:91), I think that looseness was a source of group identification here and a moral imperative in the case of many tech-entrepreneurs. A rather different source of (sometimes productive) embarrassment has been my abstinence from digital networking services and modern mobile devices in a social environment where the 'imperative to connect' is constitutive (Green et al. 2005). For instance, the presence of my (analogous) notepad enabled, borrowing Michael Herzfeld's words, intimacies through the sharing of nostalgias. However, when I was introduced to someone who allegedly had just hacked my smartphone, showing my (traditional) cell phone caused, in this order, amusement, astonishment and suspicion. I will come back to other material 'things-in-motion' which illuminated specificities of the social environment I attempted to become familiar with (Appadurai 1986:5).

Manchester's Northern Quarter was, by far, not the only technological-digital 'hub' in the city. It was perhaps the most paradigmatic case of the various forefront enclaves of technological innovation in the city. During my fieldwork a public-private science park was supported by the adjacent universities 'catalysing the growth of innovative science and technology businesses'; the city council maintained a 'home for creative digital entrepreneurs' in a former warehouse in the east of the city and the 'MediaCityUK', an 'international hub for the creative and digital sectors', had been newly developed in the city of Salford (part of Greater Manchester). One of the major new tenants, the TV license funded BBC, had left a vacant plot in the city center which would eventually be transformed by a private investor into a 'new Silicon Valley' as the local press liked to call it.

However, various arguments could be made as to why the Northern Quarter or NQ (this was the acronym used, especially in online communication) was particularly associated with 'small cultural or creative businesses' and 'youth subcultures' (Massey 2005). Firstly, it was/is different to the previously mentioned examples, it was (still) not part of the redeveloped city, the constructed or enhanced places David Harvey refers to (1989: 7-8) and fitted better with properties associated with gentrified areas. Tourists,

academics and local elites felt attracted to this, formerly cheap and marginalized quarter. The tourist map highlighted it as the ‘creative’ heart with ‘independent’ shops and cafés and while I was taking out the surprisingly numerous theses done by Manchester University students about the NQ (Storey 2001, Goddard 2003, Mortimer 2008, Palmer 2009, Banner 2011), the librarian told me that ‘it is very popular’. This connects to a general assumption of city planners that tech communities are supposed to have an ‘environment’ where they can ‘flourish’. In London, Old Street was considered to be such an edgy, cheap and thriving place. Tech City UK, a government support institution for entrepreneurs, had established its headquarters there, and consequently, the Tech North initiative by the government was planned to replicate the experience in London and to establish something similar in NQ. One of the entrepreneurs I interviewed said that the NQ was a ‘techhub’ because it was in the center but cheaper, even if prices rose (‘about ten per cent’) you could still find/maintain a workplace at the co-workspace for one to two hundred pounds per month or ‘even fifty pounds for a desk’. But it was obvious that the real-estate business was capitalizing already on the creative image of the quarter. Just around the corner from where this interview was carried out, offices were available to let, promoting the space with the words ‘innovate, create, progress’ and CCTV was a common feature of a quarter that was ‘full of junkies and a no-go area ten years ago’ as another entrepreneur told me.

The symbolic importance of the quarter for the image of a creative tech community may be further illustrated by the following anecdote. One of the various tech network meetings I attended was the so called ‘NQ Tuesday Talks’. This time, the monthly evening event, where entrepreneurs promoted their businesses on stage (pitching), was taking place at a coffee bar and coworkspace supported by an international bank, located outside the NQ. Since that time, the event has continued to take place at this location. On Twitter, where these events were primarily advertised and people would comment on who had been or was going to come to this or that event (which Knox (2003) identified as the importance of leaving ‘traces’ for these communities in order to exist), it was promoted as taking place *in* the NQ. At the event, both the audience and the speakers laughed about this irony (‘Welcome to the NQ!’ the organizer said), which underlined that the quarter was an emotionally charged, condensed symbol of innovation, only vaguely associated with the triviality of the physical space as such. Participating in the NQ Tuesday talks was to bring the ‘spirit’ of the NQ to work and the significance or transcendence of the symbol grew with the increased dissociation with its direct meaning². Consequently, the term NQ was more an indicator about the content and format than about the place or location of the talks.

The NQ thus was the opposite of a ‘corporate environment’ as a young media entrepreneur explained it to me in our interview. That is why he moved from an ‘anonymous office complex’ into a coworkspace in the NQ. The ‘lawyers and consultants’ and ‘corporate cafes’ (he mentioned *Starbucks* as an example) were the significant difference between the old and new economy, between startup and corporate companies, between a boring and an interesting job. Another entrepreneur I met had an even more explicit theory of why places like the NQ had become popular for

entrepreneurs. It was because of the power of trendy cafes which important people had started to frequent and which subsequently attracted others. Therefore, belonging to a 'startup community' for my informants meant participating in a 'new' economy that was associated with originality (not corporate), individuality (not anonymous) and a pleasant working environment where bars, coffee kitchens and getting together played a crucial role.

Coffices and events

Cafes and bars were omnipresent features in making the Northern Quarter an entrepreneurial place. Coffee is perhaps among the symbols that represent the increased entanglement (or the collapse of distinction) between work and leisure, which is also a common feature in definitions of post-Fordist labor. In this line, the Guardian from 17th February, 2015 referred to the high density of trendy bars and cafes where people from the creative industries were working as 'coffices' and in The Economist from the 24th October, 2015 the revolution of capitalism through entrepreneurs was celebrated with 'young people [...] creating new firms in temporary office spaces, fuelled by coffee and dreams.' Many people I met styled themselves on their webs, posts and in conversations as lovers, drinkers, 'havers' of coffee or as drinking too much coffee. You could meet them over a coffee or 'brew' and even their products were portrayed as a result of a specific number of coffees. A lot of networking events took place at these coffices which tech-entrepreneurs and I frequented regularly, one of which I want to describe briefly in the following section.

The coffee bar in question was mentioned on the Tech Britain website as part of the 'startup ecosystem' and owned by a 'tech-community member', as one of the employees informed me. He further explained that the place was popular among the 'creative' because it had a relaxing atmosphere and they were involved 'with the community' through music and exhibitions. The bar was located in a quiet area of the NQ, in a street with CCTV and wall paintings such as 'team work makes the dream work'. The food was sustainable, organic, local and cooked fresh. I was sitting at a shared, about 5 meter long table in the middle of an approximately 70 square meter room. Everyone could join in and the other single tables were distributed around this collaborative epicenter. There was no place to hide and (maybe therefore) no CCTV inside. The self-service underlined the informal atmosphere and the two young, tattooed waiters had the time to small-talk with everybody. Even the toilet indicated flat hierarchies: shared by everyone alike, men and women, customers and staff. One of the wall-paintings of the coffee shop was signed, instead of an (artistic) name, with a twitter account address. At one point, I counted up to eight brightly shining Apple emblems, like stars on the horizon, around me. The people behind these laptops were apparently working, some collaboratively. At times the ratio of solitary costumers and group costumers was six to six; at times it was nine to one. The massive presence of these *MacBooks* turned the traditional books on the shelves of this coffee shop into a curious decorative device. Just as a Gideon bible is part of the furniture in hotels, there was a Steve Jobs biography

‘authorized by him’ on a shelf (Isaacson 2013). The photographs on the books’ first and last page showed that the master’s office had the same interior style as our coffee shop: wood strip flooring and visible brick walls in the interior. Steve Jobs was quoted below this photo with the words ‘I like living at the intersections of humanities and technology’.

This coffee house and other similar ones around the NQ, allow customers and employees an immediate corporal-sensual experience of such *intersections*, between the ordinary and the artistic, between leisure and work, between the local and the virtual. Jürgen Habermas described vividly the role of the coffee house and of coffee consumption in the 17th and 18th century shift of values from an aristocratic society to a (bourgeois) public sphere or civil society in Great Britain, Germany and France (Habermas 1991:32-37). In those countries, in places such as coffee houses, the political, economic or aristocratic status was suppressed in favor of an experience of egalitarianism and cultural avant-garde, especially by reading, writing and discussing literature.

Not that this idea of the public was actually realized in earnest in the coffee houses, the salons, and the societies; but as an idea it had become institutionalized and thereby stated as an objective claim. (Habermas 1991:36)

This in-betweenness was especially brought onto the stage at those (networking) events, like the NQ Tuesday Talks mentioned before, which took place in these and other bars and coworkspaces. The common feature of these meetings was that they took place in semi-private, semi-public spaces, had both an instrumental-goal-directed and playful-festive character and people met with strangers, close friends, fellow students or colleagues. The following anecdotes from such events might illustrate this point further.

A constant number of about 30 people, mainly 20 to 30 year-olds, were drinking beer and champagne sponsored by a bank and organized by a workspace renting company, on the rooftop of a factory-style building occupied mainly by creative businesses in the trendy NQ of Manchester. Self-service, sitting on beanbags or on the floor facing the landscape of an urban garden, music and (mainly) casual clothing underlined the laidback, informal atmosphere. This and other meetings were scheduled precisely before and after office hours as an enjoyable or fun start, close or extension of the working day. I asked two Computer Science students from Romania both wearing *Mendeley*³ t-shirts, why they attended. ‘Apart from the free beer? Networking!’ they said. Sometimes people at these events would have stickers saying ‘Hello, my name is ...’ and were announced online with slogans such as ‘Drop by and say hello’, ‘Don’t be shy’ or ‘informal networking’. People would present themselves by first name and those attending were actively encouraged to get in touch with each other. The main topic of conversation was work in the digital sector, for instance, which kind of software frameworks or programming languages people used or liked most, which ‘project’ and ‘business ideas’ someone had or who has raised what amount of investment for this or that project. ‘Do you write code?’ was in fact the first question I was asked at one of the first events I attended. That an important person among the people and institutions organizing such events in Manchester ‘wasn’t even coding!’ was emphasized by one informant as being particularly curious.

Knowing what algorithms writing consists of is a constitutive knowledge for tech-entrepreneurs. The process of learning to code was frequently described as a painful and time-consuming but still a rewarding or even spiritual or decisive biographic experience. The knowledge acquisition was portrayed by many of my informants as extra-curricular (even in the case of Computer Science students) and had therefore an agentive character. You could, you should and you needed to learn it by yourself, through the web and in collaboration with a community of people who knew how to code. For instance, one of my informants told me that coding helps him think and that he spent one year locked up in a room learning to code. He learned from a professor's online classes and he hoped to meet his teacher one day to tell him how important this was for his life path. Helping others to acquire this knowledge was also part of what people were concerned with. There was a special group for 'women who code', on occasions people would offer to show me how to learn coding when I was asking technical questions and code writing was a prior goal for education at all levels as stated by officials and lobbyists stakeholders during my fieldwork.

Knowing how to write algorithms, the business opportunities that this knowledge form entails and the subsequent prospect of novel ways of quantifying or 'tracking' the social environment, reflected also onto the ways in which networking was organized and the very fact that informal meetings were organized calculatedly. Many of these events requested subscription to one of the various online platforms. In practice, it was nearly always unnecessary to register and soon I understood that it was the affinity of people with these platforms and its builders or its measuring procedures, not the manifest function, that motivated the whole procedure. An interview request that was already confirmed by email would need an additional Google calendar invitation link to confirm again or at the entrance of an event you were advised that you could 'twitter' if you got lost, instead of ringing the door or make a phone call. One of the bars in the NQ was much commented online as it charged the customers by minute not for consumption. Altogether, these were indicators of what the anthropologist English-Lueck has called 'technolust' among the evolving Silicon Valley tech-community at the turn of the century (2002).

On Twitter the number of people who had attended meetings was always an important issue, participants and organizers would frequently comment on the number attendees, mentioning numbers when discussing the importance of an event. There was a certain pressure among the organizers to portray any event as a 'success'. At one event a speaker was introduced by the specific number he occupied among the top hundred technology speakers. Meanwhile, someone from the audience corrected the presenter, stating a different number and subsequent laughter followed as the presenter said he had studied at a business university which was among the top one hundred in the UK. This playful-reflexive employment of statistics in ordinary conversation could also be seen in the institutional narrative of my informants businesses.

One entrepreneur I interviewed attached specific percentages to the personal skills of his employees on the web presentation of his company. This reminded me of computer games that allow players to choose among different characters whose

strengths and weaknesses, different to the 'real' world, can be expressed in numbers in the 'virtual' world. Another entrepreneur explained to me that his web slogan (consisting more or less of the idea that people were more important than numbers) was a result of the contradiction that his product (an algorithm) could not be understood in technical terms by his clients. The value or distinctiveness of the algorithm had to be described in mainly humanistic, aesthetic and story-telling terms.

The passion for numbers, a sociality concerned with its auditable aspects and the reflexive, at times ironic, treatment of code or measuring systems brings me to what Mary Douglas has called the interested, instrumental or goal directed enterprise culture. Despite meeting a lot of people personally and recognizing many others by sight, there were always some new faces. The people would see you at such events at times as an acquaintance, but also as a potential customer, investor, employee, future partner or competitor. Business cards, scarce knowledge and contacts would be eventually exchanged at these events. The goal-directed character in the notion of 'informal networking' is condensed in the comment of one of my informants. When asked about what had motivated his attendance, he said that 'if you hang out with smart business men you become a smart business man'. At one event a mediator between startups and venture capitalists (or business angels) stated that raising money was about credibility, about whether you can trust the team or if 'these guys can do it. If he [the investor] likes you he will just put the money in'. Successfully starting up a technology business was about cultivating a perfected self-presentation, because in the early stages numbers [here: economic key figures] are fantasy'.

But relations of trust were risky investments. They might both enhance social capital, skills and be a prerequisite for funding but they also threaten uniqueness, independence and competitiveness. For instance, a young entrepreneur with whom I had established a certain degree of trust, after some time started to doubt the disinterested, non-commercial or irrelevant character of our conversations. At a meeting for hackers, which was by invitation only, I participated in a seemingly conspiratorial talk about the best way to start a conversation with the important investors or successful businessmen in the room at this apparently unconstrained meeting. Among the tips offered was 'don't speak too much of yourself but about your idea' and, eventually, the conversely. Therefore, one never knew exactly if your interlocutor was sales pitching something to you. These persuasive short presentations, aiming to persuade a possible customer, were practiced constantly on the stage at these events. On one occasion I met up with an investor and the way in which he demonstratively maintained silence stunned me. After a few seconds the situation became increasingly uncomfortable; I eventually realized that he was expecting me to take the initiative, to actively sell my idea, and that included saying hello. At another event the organizer would comment, seemingly incidentally, on how cheap his new mobile telephone provider was. Later on, he would distribute free SIM cards from this provider. As a result, often there was no clear line between who, when and what was, even if only potentially, been sold and traded at such events. This undermined the apparently relaxed, casual and cheerful character on the surface of these 'informal' networking events, where the sharing community was emphasized.

Conclusions

Taking together these ethnographic examples, I would like to argue that the tension between the goal directed ‘network’ and the self-sufficient ‘community’ (Green, Harvey and Knox 2005:807) or between the exclusiveness of the ‘hierarchy’ and the deliberately sharing ‘network’ (Mason 2015) was at the very heart of this specific arrangement of tech-entrepreneurs’ sociality, labelled as events, networking or community. The term ‘coffice’ condenses well this twofold social logic at those gatherings and maybe of entrepreneurial environments more generally. On the one hand, many ethnographic elements I have described in the previous sections indicate certain communalities in expectations, knowledge and lifestyle of tech-entrepreneurs. Participants at those events share ‘technolust’, ‘coding’ is a common ground for their social interaction. They also share a corporal-sensorial experience and desire for ‘intersections’ between work and leisure at offline events. This supports the ‘paradox-thesis’, the argument that online business creation can contribute to a sense of local, place-bound community belonging.

On the other hand, different elements from my field research indicate that the ‘startup community’ is a discursive tool, a way in which business information is communicated effectively by specific entrepreneurs in order to achieve publicity, attention, legitimacy and success (Roundy 2016). The habit of portraying any event as successful, the need to document success online through measuring and statistics, the real-estate business capitalizing on the image of the NQ as an entrepreneurial place or the constant ambivalence between competitive self-promotion and unconstrained self-realization at events, show that the ‘startup community’ is also a market place and an advertising platform. This aspect of the sociality of tech-entrepreneurs in Manchester supports what I have labelled the confusion or strategy-thesis. Here the lofty rhetoric of sharing, community or collaboration is covering up market-competition, self-interest and its promotion by lobbyists, corporations and the State.

In this contribution I focused on non-cyberspaces, such as Manchester’s’ NQ, coffices, coworkspaces and events, which constitute the social ground for a contemporary urban marker, the tech-entrepreneur and the related politics of technological place making. Therefore, I contribute to the exploration of cultural dimensions in the constitution of entrepreneurial ecosystems, a still underdeveloped and much needed line of inquiry (Roundy 2016, Spigel 2013). I suggest that one way to understand the cultural dimension of startup communities (and their description in the literature) could be in terms of three conflicting cultural biases as developed by Mary Douglas. Tech startup communities are simultaneously State-subsidized and defend a libertarian ideology (Borsook 2000, 2001: 10). The business efforts of their members are both guided by pragmatic-instrumental and spiritual-affective principles (English-Lueck 2002: 34-35, 178). Related social scenarios such as the ‘creative industry’ in Britain has been described using similar sociological vocabulary. There, art meets commerce (Caves 2002: 4) and creativity meets bureaucratic rationality (Brouwer 2008: 41). The self-rewarding liberty of the freelancer is irremediably tied to a sense of insecurity (McRobbie 2016: 15, 37). Other commenters, like Eriksen, look at the erosion of privacy in office

spaces, the rise of home and weekend working and what he called the ‘tyranny of the e-mail’. He criticizes the decline of time flexibility provoked by this increase in space flexibility (Eriksen 2005:57-58). Many of these or similar observations build on the distinction between, in Douglas’ words, hierarchical versus the individualistic culture. Anthropology is perhaps particularly well-situated to explore the third cultural dimension underlying the sociality of tech-entrepreneurs, namely the feeling of belonging to a community in opposition to the larger society.

Notes

- (1) David Graeber (2011) has argued something similar in relation to money, not by questioning the dichotomy itself, but by taking the teleology (evolution from physical to virtual) of it.
- (2) See Sapir’s (1934) definition of symbolism here from which I draw inspiration.
- (3) A program for sharing data and collaborating online founded by three PhD students and winner of the European Startup of the Year prize 2009.

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