**Migrant Entrepreneurship: Reflections on Research and Practice**

**Abstract**

This paper assesses recent developments in the research and practice of migrant entrepreneurship by examining the powerful contribution that the perspective of ‘mixed embeddedness’ has provided to this field. We identify key themes emerging from mixed embeddedness, particularly in relation to the role of the institutional and market contexts, and highlight areas that could strengthen the perspective, such as (i) the role of regulation, (ii) the incorporation of racist exclusion and (iii) gendered structures of migration and labour market processes, (iv) market ghettoization, and (v) greater sensitivity to historical context. We also consider the extent to which growing interest amongst practitioners in supporting migrant enterprise has been influenced by developments in the academic domain.

**Key words**

Mixed embeddedness, racism, gender, practice.

**Introduction**

During the 1990s a major shift began to occur in the long established post-war pattern of migration into Europe, with a freeing up of international population movement to levels not seen since the pre-World War One age of “globalisation avant le mot” as Judt (2010) calls it. In the specific case of the UK, the era of mass labour migration from South Asia and the Caribbean has given way to two new predominant flows: labour migration from new EU member states in Eastern Europe; and asylum seekers in flight from war-ravaged areas of Africa and South West Asia. For the first time since records began, immigrants from outside the Commonwealth now make up the largest group of new arrivals, with numbers from traditional origins like the Caribbean and Ireland actually falling.

Yet, even while the direction and demographic composition of migration has undergone quite fundamental change, one constant element has been a higher than average rate of entrepreneurial self-employment, a recurring feature applying just as much to the recent waves of Somalis and Poles as to their South Asian and Hong Kong Chinese precursors (Edwards *et al*., 2016). Undoubtedly this new “super-diversity” (Vertovec, 2007) has presented challenges for researchers, notably the unprecedented geographical hyper-mobility of the post-Soviet East Europeans (Legrain, 2007); and the active transnational networks of African groups, notably the Somali community noted by Thompson (2016) as operating a particularly dynamic money transfer system throughout their worldwide diaspora. At the same time, however, these changes in provenance do not generally translate into changes in performance, with new migrant business owners experiencing the structural disadvantages similar to their predecessors (Jones *et al*., 2014, Sepulveda *et al*., 2011; Edwards *et al*., 2016).

It is a moot point whether the phenomenon of the ‘migrant entrepreneur’ is adequately appreciated within the fields of entrepreneurship and migration studies. The entrepreneurial activities of migrants do not seem to be prominent within ‘mainstream’ entrepreneurship research, thus appearing not to be accorded the same degree of intellectual space as seemingly cognate areas of alterity such as gender and ‘family’ businesses. At the same time, the domain of entrepreneurship is extending its reach to encompass the notion of ‘social value’ (Zahra and Wright, 2016), the ‘informal economy’ (de Castro *et al.*, 2014), and the importance of ‘context’ (Welter, 2011). These ideas have informed migrant entrepreneurship research in Europe, much of which has been conducted at the intersection of disciplines such as sociology, work, migration studies, and economic geography (see Jones and Ram, 2007 for review). Much of the ferment attached to contemporary discourses on migration tends to focus on the causes and consequences of ‘superdiversity’ (Vertovec, 2007) rather than the concrete experience of work. And when work is the focus of analysis, it tends to concern itself with migrants’ relationship with large firms and the labour market *per se* rather than entrepreneurship (Waldinger and Lichter, 2003).

This paper offers some reflections on developments in the research and practice of migrant entrepreneurship. It is far from exhaustive, since our aim is simply to identify pertinent themes that we have divined from engaging with academic debates and practical initiatives designed to make a difference to the world of the migrant entrepreneur. We examine the powerful contribution that the perspective of ‘mixed embeddedness’ (ME) (Kloosterman, 2010) has made to the field. The focus on ME is well founded given its eager reception amongst European scholars keen to find frameworks that go beyond US-dominated models predicated on the so-called ‘ethnic resources’ of migrant entrepreneurs (Jones and Ram, 2007; Jones *et al.*, 2014). The melding together of the migrant entrepreneur’s *economic* and social relationships - the *sine qua non* of ME – has encouraged more contextualised and balanced accounts of ethnic minority entrepreneurship, although scope remains to push this trend further. We also essay some brief remarks on the world of practice because initiatives to support migrant entrepreneurs are increasingly common in Europe (Rath and Swagerman, 2016), with the UK particularly active in proffering measures to inveigle ethnic minorities into self-employment (Ram and Jones, 2008). One should also note the current agitation amongst some entrepreneurship scholars in favour research that is meaningful beyond the narrow confines of academe (Frank and Landstrom, 2016). Engaging with non-academic stakeholders and minority entrepreneurs draws attention to wider societal inequalities, and offers an opportunity for researchers to pursue ‘scholarship of social consequence’ (Ozbilgin, 2010; see also Ram *et al.,* 2015).

Before proceeding any further, it is necessary to attempt a definition of migrant entrepreneurs and indeed the proliferating array of categories used by scholars who alight on the topic. The task is a challenging one, and we remark later on some of the difficulties of using terms that recognise difference without descending into crude essentialism (See Ram *et al.*, 2006 for critical discussion). For present purposes, we use the definition below, which is typical of the (implicit) approach of many studies:

‘Ethnic minority entrepreneurs have been understood to be immigrants in the countries concerned or children or grandchildren of immigrants. Immigrants are defined as persons who have been born abroad. Irrespective of their nationality and irrespective of whether they are considered to be ethnic minorities in the countries concerned, immigrants also include the offspring of immigrants […]’ (Smallbone, 2005:2)

The paper is structured as follows. First, we start with a sympathetic critique of ME, before identifying areas in which the strengths of the perspective can be built upon. These include: the impact of regulations; a stronger emphasis on racism and its intersection with other axes of difference (gender and class in particular); market ghettoization; and a historical perspective. We then consider developments in the practitioner domain, not least because supporting migrant entrepreneurship is increasingly a feature of policy-oriented debates in a number of European countries.

**Theoretical Shifts in Ethnic Minority Entrepreneurship Research**

Perhaps the greatest single theoretical leap forward in this field occurred at the very close of the last century with the publication of Robert Kloosterman and his colleagues’ thoughts on what they call “mixed embeddedness” (Kloosterman *et al.*, 1999). Reacting against the widespread previous belief that the rise of migrant-origin entrepreneurs could be explained almost solely with reference to their embeddedness within the fertile ground of solidary co-ethnic social capital networks (a logic persuasively expounded in Light’s [1972] pioneering classic), Kloosterman and his associates insisted that they must also be recognised as embedded in an external business context. This context comprises firstly of *markets* in which the entrepreneur must compete with established indigenous firms, including large scale corporates; and secondly the *state*, with its regulatory regime to which all businesses must comply and which in some European states actually places direct restrictions on non-natives entering business (Kloosterman and Rath, 2003).

It is difficult to overstate the difference made by this changed perspective to the conclusions to be drawn about the raison *d’etre* and the performance of the migrant-origin firm. In the original social capital perspective (Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993) insider access to the loans and labour of family and friends at sub-market rates is argued to provide entrepreneurs with a decisive competitive advantage, a compellingly persuasive argument for the ability of racialized migrants to use business self-employment to rise above the discrimination bearing down on them in other walks of life. In the UK, this attractive rags-to-riches narrative reached its apogee in the 1980s heyday of the Thatcherite “enterprise culture”, when Indian and Pakistani firms were seen to be in the vanguard of a remarkable resurgence of small firm formation (Campbell and Daly, 1992; Ballard and Ballard, 1982; Ward, 1986).

This rhetorical flow was unable to wash away various islands of dissent which turned out to be the forerunners of Kloosterman’s more systematic theoretical developments. In particular, critics were concerned that community-based resources were far too circumscribed to support entrepreneurial activity above a very rudimentary level (Aldrich *et al.,* 1981), a concern leading to the eventual conclusion that most of the cheer-leaders for Asian entrepreneurial success were celebrating quantity instead of quality – a proliferation of micro-firms in low value market sectors instead of diversified activity in mainstream sectors (Jones *et al*., 2000; Ram and Jones, 2008).

 Ultimately these authors were entering a plea for *balance*, for a move away from a blinkered obsession with what creates the supply of entrepreneurs to a simultaneous consideration of why there should also be a demand for them. Elsewhere this wish was operationalised by Waldinger, 1990), with their presentation of an *interactionist* model, whereby minority business is seen as resulting from the interplay of ethnic resources (community social capital) and opportunity structure (market environment), the two linked by the entrepreneur’s own management strategy. Oddly, given the American nationality of two of these authors, this model failed to gain ground in the US itself and it is only very recently that a few US authors have begun to re-introduce this approach (Romero and Valdez, 2016; Valdez, 2011). In the interim, however, anxiety was expressed by Kloosterman’s colleague Jan Rath in relation to the way in which American literature appeared to be reverting to the old decontextualised ethnic resources approach (Rath, 2000). As a key member of Kloosterman’s team, this author was at the forefront of the fresh theoretical departure that was ME. In broad outline, ME follows the same logic as interactionism but, importantly, it is distinguished by two central elements (Kloosterman, 2010):

1. The market is not presented as some kind of competitive level playing field in which immigrant entrepreneurs can insert themselves on the same terms as natives but as a hostile environment bristling with all manner of hazards ranging from sheer unfamiliarity to outright racist discrimination (Jones *et al*., 2014). Alongside this the model assumes that, because of the limitations of ethnic social capital, migrant entrepreneurs will be under-resourced and able only to enter market sectors where there are few demands on capital and expertise. Coupled with the other disadvantages previously mentioned this confines most migrant firms either to *vacancy chain* openings, declining markets like corner shop retailing abandoned by indigenous owners; or *post-industrial low skill* openings like catering, taxi driving or personal services emerging to service an expanding professional class (Kloosterman 2010). For most firms these markets yield only lean pickings, a livelihood sustainable only by brutally hard work and often the cutting of regulatory corners to reduce costs (Jones *et al*., 2006, Ram *et al*., 2007; Forthcoming). It is the intensive utilisation of such practices that is likely to account for the survival of migrant businesses, sometimes for much longer than their native-owned counterparts (Riva and Lucchini, 2015)
2. Hailing as they do from a European tradition as opposed to an American free market outlook, Kloosterman *et al*. (1999) introduce the state regulatory regime as an essential ingredient in the analytical mix. Following Esping Andersen’s (1990) comparative analysis of international variations in welfare capitalism, they emphasise decisive contrasts between the deregulated states of the Anglo-American sphere and the relatively highly regulated realm of mainland Europe. Significantly the former is seen as by far the more business-friendly of the two, with its absence of any kind of attempt to protect the position of indigenous entrepreneurs opening up a market space which is often lacking for immigrant entrepreneurs in Austria, Germany and several other advanced economies in the EU (see contributions to Kloosterman and Rath, 2003). This logic might explain why migrant origin business has proliferated faster in the UK than in its immediate neighbours, a hypothesis given empirical backing by Sepulveda *et al*. (2011).

As Kloosterman himself would agree, ME is not intended as tablets-of-stone dogma but as a helpful framework to be built upon by subsequent researchers. In this spirit we note several items on which the proverbial jury is still out, thus presenting opportunities for further research.

***Regulation***

Helpful as this perspective is as a broad guideline to highlight contrasts between regulatory regimes, the reality is that these are not as clear-cut as may appear at first sight. At this stage international comparative work in this field is beset by a number of technical inconveniences, not least the lack of an agreed international definition of what constitutes an ethnic minority, a drawback acknowledged by Kloosterman and Rath (2003) themselves. Stemming from this is a lack of empirical testing, a near-absence of explicit cross border studies recording whether and how the entrepreneurial performance of any defined group varies according to its country of operation. Research on the impact, for example, of migration policy regulations on the drivers and outcomes of migrant entrepreneurship, is also lacking. Since South Asians in Canada and Britain were compared several decades ago (Jones McEvoy 1992), there has been no equivalent follow-up apart from a recent survey of Pakistani firms in Copenhagen, Oslo and Manchester (Yassin, 2014). Going somewhat against the ME grain, this study finds entrepreneurs in highly regulated Scandinavia performing better than their fellows in the less regulated environment of the UK, largely because they benefit from state entrepreneurial support. This study provides a glimpse of how the core insight of ME can be enriched by comparative investigation.

***Racist Exclusion***

While the ME approach has usefully foregrounded structural disadvantage as the main source of entrepreneurial marginality, there is scope to disentangle the various threads of this multi-faceted process. Migrant firms often face a three-fold handicap – 1) *small scale* in a modern market dominated by the giant corporation (Rainnie, 1989); 2) *unfamiliarity*, crippling lack of knowledge of local conditions, aggravated often by language barriers; 3) *discrimination*, racist exclusion based on cultural or phenotypical features. In their nationwide survey of South Asians and African Caribbean business owners in England, Jones *et al*. (1992) showed that, far from offering some kind of haven, the business sphere is as much subject to racism as every other aspect of life, with entrepreneurs subject to resistance and hostility from customers, suppliers, banks and insurance companies. A more recent survey of ethnic minority businesses in Scotland (Ishaq and Hussain 2007) shows that racism – verbal and physical abuse and graffiti – is an ‘occupational hazard’ for shopkeepers. Such experiences indicate that the obstacles faced by racialised entrepreneurs are of a different order to those confronting their ‘mainstream’ peers. Businesses run by ‘new’ migrants – increasingly common in an era of superdiversity – are handicapped by similar processes. Jones et *al’*s (2014) study of new migrant business owners in the UK reports a widespread mismatch between qualifications and occupation and desperate attempts to scrape together start-up capital from meagre wages. They argue that new migrants are experiencing the classic fate of the racialised entrepreneur, crucially handicapped even before business entry.

The structural position of ethnic minorities and immigrants in the reception context therefore requires close scrutiny in order to give due attention to the pernicious impact of racism. Beckers and Blumberg’s (2013) large-scale study of migrant entrepreneurs in the Netherlands shows that acquisition of host country credentials is no guarantee of entrepreneurial success. Regulatory controls that confront migrants, ‘blockages’ or ‘barriers’ to particular markets, educational and labour market discrimination blight immigrant entrepreneurs; and they illustrate the persistence of racism in its different guises.

***Gendered migration and labour processes***

In a context of superdiversity, the gendered migration system and its impact on labour processes also need to be incorporated in explanations of migrant enterprise. The dominant ‘ethnic entrepreneurship paradigm’ tends to locate entrepreneurship at the ‘meso-level’, which has the effect of portraying entrepreneurial action as largely an outcome of ethnic group-based attributes and features (Romero and Valdez, 2016). Intersectional approaches (Valdez, 2011; Villares-Varela *et al.,* Forthcoming) take a broader view of an entrepreneur’s social location; such a perspective acknowledges distinct yet interdependent identities, such as gender race and social class. The intersection of ethnicity, gender and other core axes of difference (class, religion, disability), tends to be overlooked. It often seems that entrepreneurship research investigates ethnic minority entrepreneurs and women as two groups that deviate from the imaginary of the mainstream entrepreneur (white, male, middle-class), and which are in isolation from each other (Carter *et al*. 2015, 50). The main theoretical perspectives pay limited attention to the gendering of social structures that facilitate/constrain migrant entrepreneurship. Theoretical approaches such as the middleman minorities perspective (Bonacich, 1973), interactionist model (Aldrich and Waldinger, 1990), and ME (Kloosterman, van der Leun and, Rath 1999) do not consider how migration flows are gendered, nor the way in which access to the labour market is crucially influenced by how productive (and indeed reproductive) work is organised.

The field of migrant entrepreneurship could benefit from incorporating Glucksman’s (1995) ‘*total social division of labour’* framework, which argues that unpaid work is consubstantial to paid work; the same way that formality is to informality for migrant firms (Ram et al., forthcoming). Therefore, in order to understand entrepreneurship and self-employment in the ethnic economy, we also ought to study how productive and reproductive work is organized within and outside the firm. This is vital to grasp processes of self-exploitation in the ethnic economy, mobilization of kinship ties or the sustainability of migrant firms. These interdependent systems of privilege and oppression (racialised, classed and gendered) (re)produce the ways in which (migrant) entrepreneurs navigate the available opportunities in the market. Therefore, given the often-vital role played by members of the business, and the need to account for paid and unpaid work for the survival of migrant firms, we feel that ME could be vitally enriched by according a central role to the hitherto down-played sphere of gender studies (Essers, 2009).

Feminist scholarship has sought to foreground patriarchal privilege as a central explanatory variable (Phizacklea, 1998; Dhaliwal 1998; Anthias, 1992; Hillman, 1999; Essers and Benschop, 2007; Essers 2009; Essers, Benschop, and Doorewaard, 2010). These studies focus on the experiences of women in the ethnic economy, disentangling the ways in which racialised and gendered incorporation produces different experiences of oppression, contestation and/or empowerment (for a detailed review see Villares-Varela, Ram and Jones, forthcoming). Although these studies draw attention to the intersections between family, households and firms, their main focus on the experiences of migrant women means that there is ample scope to deepen our understanding of the intersections of gender with other axes of difference, that move beyond a focus on women in the ethnic economy. Accounting for ethnic relations, racism and discrimination is not sufficient to explain the ways in which migrant entrepreneurs find their way in the markets of the countries of destination. Its intersection with gender and class is central to these experiences. Therefore, we commend a transversal inclusion of the multiplicity of systems of privilege to understand the experiences and outcomes of migrant entrepreneurs. The field of immigrant entrepreneurship has acknowledged these limitations by incorporating an intersectional stand (Crenshaw, 1991, 1995) when looking at the ways gender, class and ethnicity shape the drivers and outcomes of migrant entrepreneurs. This has been emphasised by scholars accounting for the multiplicity of experiences of differences within the ethnic economy (Knight 2016; Romero and Valdez, 2016; Zhou et al., 2016; Villares-Varela, 2016). This refreshing perspective helps the field to move beyond an over-emphasis on cultural and ethnic characteristics of the groups by accounting for the interaction with other variables, such as class and gender, which shape the spaces in the market that migrants are able to occupy as entrepreneurs.

***Market Ghettoisation***

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of ME is its foregrounding of the role of market exclusion in frustrating the potential of migrant entrepreneurs and compelling them to operate in the under-rewarded sectors unwanted by indigenous firms. In line with earlier studies revealing the labour-intensive toil of British Asians in low value markets (Jones *et al.,* 1994), ME is strenuously insistent that market segregation is the paramount handicap imposed on these entrepreneurs. Somewhat surprisingly, then, in our most recent study of new migrant businesses in the UK West Midlands (Edwards *et al.,* 2016), we came upon a handful of highly successful firms, whose profitability is not due to their break out from the low value business ghetto – on the contrary the three most profitable performers are retailers and restaurateurs – but to their successful transfer of substantial capital assets from previous businesses in Afghanistan, Iraq and Poland respectively. Evidently capital is much more internationally portable than previously, even for asylum seekers (Harding, 2012) and there is an alternative school of thought implying that we should spotlight financial capital as the definitive influence on ethnic business performance (Bates and Robb, 2014).

This difference in emphasis should not be seen as some kind of irreconcilable dispute, but rather as expressing a multi-faceted reality in which all kinds of resource scarcity reinforce one another. Once again a balanced verdict would say that further investigation is needed; for now our high flying West Midlands performers must be seen as exceptions to a very powerful rule which very few migrant firms can expect to defy. In any case, markets and capital ought not to be presented as mutually exclusive assets. More properly they might be seen as mutually supportive, as Kloosterman (2010) points out when he argues that any move from low level to high-level markets can only succeed if adequately capitalised. One recent study highlights some of these aspects by pointing out how the field of migrant entrepreneurship has overlooked research on entrepreneurs in high value activities, such as professional services (Vallejo and Canizales, 2016), and the ways in which class positions are vital to understand the strategies of Latino entrepreneurs in the US. Accounting for context in breakout strategies from the ethnic economy is a theme explored by Arrighetti, Bolzani and Lasgni (2014) in their study of migrant firms in Italy; they conclude that firms are likely to become more multiculturally hybrid over time, moving beyond the over reliance on ethnic times and opening up to mainstream markets and assimilating to Italian companies.

From all the above we gather that ME provides a launching pad for a host of possibly fruitful investigations in the field. In addition to the items above, we might invoke Kloosterman’s (2010) reference to entrepreneurial agency by entering a plea for in-depth studies of practices like patch-working and multiple job-holding, designed to maximise the meagre returns from Low Valued Added (LVA) sectors (Edwards and Ram, 2006). Alongside this are studies of survivalist cost-cutting through informal practices (Ram et al*.,* 2007), an area which demands further research into the small firm labour process (Ram et al., 2007). Additionally it should not be overlooked that market context has an important spatial dimension, with ME research needing many more updates of the initial work by Rekkers and van Kempen (2000) on the effect of urban location on consumer-facing migrant owned firms; or on the bidirectional relation between diversity and markets, rehearsed by Hiebert, Rath and Vertovec (2015).

***Historical context***

Finally the importance of historical context should not be overlooked. Given the attention which must be given to logical rigour as an end in itself, there is always a tendency to present any theoretical model in a kind of abstract vacuum. The reality is, of course, that the post- World War Two rise of migrant business in Britain has taken place as an integral part of a concrete historical process (Jones and Ram, 2007), whereby overseas migrants themselves and their changing economic role have been called forth by evolving Economic History:- 1945-73 Fordist Industrialism and mass migration of labour power from former colonies; 1974-2000 Post-industrialisation and ethnic minority self-employment; 2000 onwards Globalisation and super-diversity. Indeed this summary sketch needs to be expanded into a fully rounded account of the inter-connections between the evolving political-economy of the post-war world and shifts in immigrant livelihoods. Such an account could examine the possibility that some of the more successfully incorporated migrant-origin communities are now moving on to high level employment having used self-employment as a transitional foothold (Jones et al., 2012).

On another level, we might argue that ME already performs a historical service by emphasising the profound continuity lying beneath the frenetic surface of novelty which some writers see as bedevilling the current world. Bemoaning what he sees as widespread intellectual amnesia, Judt (2015: 265) castigates the habit of “seeking actively to forget rather than remember, to deny continuity and proclaim novelty on every possible occasion”. It must be said that ME, with its insistence on long-lasting immigrant structural disadvantage, is the perfect riposte to such superficiality, well designed to distinguish fluctuations in style from eternal content. Even so it clearly needs to be alive to the possibility of real structural change as well as maintaining vigilance about differential responses to structural forces on the part of individual ethnic groups.

**Policy, Practice and Ethnic Minority Enterprise**

The powerful ways in which the institutional context shapes the entrepreneurial activities of migrants is a key contribution of ME. Political and regulatory processes in this view are multi-faceted and wide-ranging; they extend from state legislation to the provision of financial incentives, which means that they can be both enabling and constraining. Further, the regulatory environment exercises its influence through a variety of state activities, ranging from conscious design, as in the specific targeting of ethnic minorities for enterprise aid, to the knock-on effects of immigration laws, which may have no intended bearing on entrepreneurship but which in practice may limit occupational choice, especially if they render the status of immigrants and their descendants insecure. As a result, the institutional environment and wider policy context is a key element in any analysis of immigrant or ethnic business development, incorporated within ME ([Ram and Smallbone, 2003](#_ENREF_69)).

A small strand of policy-oriented literature has developed in the UK (Deakins et al., 2003; Ram and Smallbone, 2003; Ram *et al.*, 2012), Sweden (Hogberg *et al,.* 2016) and within the European Union (Rath and Swagerman, 2016). These and other studies highlight a number of challenges, including: the lack of engagement with the evidence base, thus resulting in ‘over-ethnicized’ approaches to understanding and supporting minority businesses; the tendency of businesses support initiatives for minority entrepreneurs to be secondary to ‘mainstream’ provision; and researchers’ detachment from more practical endeavours to support minority enterprise. We elaborate on each below.

***Disconnected from the evidence base***

Advances in the conceptualisation of migrant businesses have resulted in a growing appreciation of the diverse economic and social relationships in which firms are embedded. The perspective of ME has been an important catalyst, but contributions from industrial sociology (Jones and Ram, 2007) and economic geography (Nathan and Lee, 2013) have also aided our understanding of the dynamic, complex and multi-faceted nature of migrant entrepreneurship. Converting this corpus of academic insights into actionable knowledge is a challenging proposition. As Vertovec (2007:1047) argues, ‘Social scientists are not very good at translating data and analysis of complexities into forms that can have an impact on policies and public practices’. In the field of enterprise, the understanding of entrepreneurial minorities afforded by ME and other contextual perspectives is not easily reconciled with the “ethnic managerialism’ prevailing in policy circles (Law and Harrison, 2001). The ethnic pigeonholing of diverse patterns of identification, needs and aspirations, combined with delegation of strategy and action to regional or local managers leads to poor policy, provision and practice (Law and Harrison, 2001). A study of business support providers in east Midlands region of the UK (Ram *et al.*, 2006) highlights the deleterious consequences of ethnic managerialism. Business intermediaries in this study saw their main function as advocates for “Asian” or “black” business *per se*, with little attention paid to special interests within these groups – women, young people, the British-born; and ignoring other communities not fitting the designated categories. New migrants – emblematic of ‘superdiversity’ - were nowhere on the agenda. These intermediaries also competed against each other for ever-dwindling sources of state funding, which often meant that they spent more time developing ‘products’ rather than interacting with the businesses they were supposed to represent.

Policy and business support initiatives also tend to overlook another key insight of ME: the critical importance of the structural context in which migrant enterprise operates. A slew of recent studies highlight how the often challenging market environment in which migrant firms are embedded powerfully constrain the capacity of businesses to develop and grow (Edwards *et al.,* 2016; Jones *et al*., 2014; Ram *et al*., 2011). This is often the case for firms in ‘low value added sectors’ (Edwards and Ram, 2006) like retailing and catering. But it can apply in more advanced sectors too, as Ram *et al*. (2011) demonstrate in their study of well-credentialised minority entrepreneurs who supply large organisations; they found that large buyers imposed onerous conditions on their migrant suppliers, which resulted in reduced profits and long working hours. Yet studies of business support (Deakins et al., 2003; Rath and Swagerman, 2016; Ram and Smallbone, 2003; Ram *et al*., 2012) report that interventions usually comprise measures to enhance the skills of individual migrant entrepreneurs. Such ‘agency-centric’ initiatives were commonplace in Rath and Swagerman’s (2016) recent study of business support in 32 European countries; most measures were designed to enhance the human capital of actual and aspiring business owners. They took the form of information provision, education services, mentoring, training and counselling. Few attempts were made to address the structural conditions of entrepreneurship. Assessments of business support provision for minority entrepreneurs in the UK (Ram and Jones, 2008) confirm this general picture, although there have been isolated attempts to enhance the market opportunities of such businesses by fostering relationships with large companies (Ram et al., 2007).

***Detached from the ‘mainstream’***

The detachment of minority firms from ‘mainstream’ business support networks and initiatives is a recurring theme. Rath and Swagerman’s (2016) study of 32 European countries found that ‘ethnic entrepreneurship has *not* played a major role in the overall strategy supporting the integration of immigrants’ (original emphasis). They identify a number of reasons for this absence from wider economic agendas. First, immigrants had yet to establish a foothold in self-employment (although this could be attributed to a lack of relevant support). Secondly, some believed that minorities did not necessarily face disadvantages that could be attributed to their ethnic background. Thirdly, social measures - for example, language acquisition and personal security – were seen as more relevant to the needs of immigrants. Fourthly, some jurisdictions favoured ‘colour blind’ approaches rather than group-specific measures. Finally, the prevalence of a strict ‘neo-liberal’ logic militated against undue public sector involvement.

The UK has been more active than most in devising measures and programmes to support minority businesses, with a history of dedicated initiatives stretching back to the mid-1980s (Ram and Jones, 2008). Successive governments have subscribed to a ‘boosterist’ philosophy towards enterprise promotion that has encompassed support of minority entrepreneurship, particularly in respect of business start-up. A lack of supporting evidence did not prevent, governments of all persuasions from pursuing an approach that was effectively ‘routinised’ by years of central and local government spending (Keith, 1995). The Labour administration of 1997-2010 was particularly active in its championing of enterprise in ‘disadvantaged groups’, of which ethnic minorities were a significant element. However, the implicit consensus on support for minority enterprise came to an abrupt halt in 2010 with the arrival of the coalition government, which effectively dismantled publicly-funded business support for small firms as part of its programme of austerity.

Ram *et al.’s* (2012) study of ethnic minority business support provision, conducted around the same time as the election of the 2010 coalition government, paints a gloomy picture. The researchers discovered that numerous and highly diverse business intermediaries were engaging with ethnic minority entrepreneurs in the region. However, there was acute uncertainty over the future of many of these organisations and a great deal of fear that the more established agencies would survive at the expense of specialist community-based organisations. The viability of many intermediaries in the new policy climate was under severe threat. Closure, retrenchment or a tokenistic existence appeared to be the most likely options in the near future. A number of organisations operated as little more than ‘empty-shells’ even before the full extent of the cuts became apparent. Many of the gains recorded in earlier studies (Deakins *et al*., 2003; Ram and Smallbone, 2003) were likely to be eroded. The most poorly represented communities, notably new migrants, were the most vulnerable. The abstentionist stance of the Conservative Government, elected in 2015, towards business support suggests that the situation will deteriorate even further.

***(Dis)Engaged Scholarship***

Whatever the academic argument is for doing a specific piece of research, it is politically naïve and potentially dangerous to see research as autonomous from its contextualised political environment (Solomos ,1989:5)

The dearth of comment on the implications of the terminology used to study migrant entrepreneurship is surprising, not least because ‘identity in respect of ‘race’, ethnicity and nation is embedded in the very fabric of social relations’ (Ratcliffe, 2001:3). Despite growing research and policy attention, there is no generally accepted definition of an ethnic minority and migrant entrepreneurs. Approaches have included: businesses that are owned and staffed by ethnic minorities; firms that serve an ethnic minority clientele; and, simply, the ethnic origin of the owner (See Ram and Jones, 2008). The shepherding of complex social relations into narrow empirical categories of this kind runs the risk of underplaying the highly contested terminology used to describe ethnic minority groups. Approaches range from essentialist and enduring notions of race and ethnicity, to social constructionist perspectives that emphasise the importance of context and social processes. Whilst these debates have been rehearsed at length in sociological circles (Alleyne, 2002; Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992; Carter, 2000; Gunaratnam, 2003;), they barely warrant a mention in extant research within the domain of entrepreneurship, or in policy circles.

Researchers subscribing to relational perspectives on ethnicity and multiple identities face challenges when operating in policy arenas where there is a strong managerialist predilection for categories than can be readily identified and administered (Ram *et al.,* 2006). A key tension is ‘how researchers can work with inadequate racial and ethnic categories that are to hand, whilst also finding ways of identifying and disrupting the ways in which the same categories can “essentialise”’ (Gunaratnam, 2003:29). Debates on gender and entrepreneurship highlight the challenges of categorisation. The practice of differentiating and targeting specific groups of clients potentially reinforces a divisive norm of the entrepreneur as a White male belonging to the majority population (Ahl, 2004; Berglund and Johansson, 2007; Essers, 2009; Sundin and Tillmar, 2010). As Ogbor (2000:605) shows in his analysis of entrepreneurship discourse, the notion of the entrepreneur is in itself ‘discriminatory, gender-biased, ethnocentrically determined and ideologically controlled’.

A recent study (Ram *et al.*, 2015) of how researchers worked with a state agency to improve the provision of business support for migrant entrepreneurs is a rare attempt to tackle the tension of categorisation. The researchers drew on the philosophy of Critical Realism (CR) to undertake a project that involved: identifying previously neglected migrant entrepreneurs in local area; developing a non-essentialised approach to migrant entrepreneurs within the state agency in question (referred to as ‘SUPPAG’); and ensuring that SUPPAG’s services were utilised by local migrant business owners. The theoretical pay-off for researchers was a deeper and fuller understanding of the agency-structure dialectic as it applies to entrepreneurial minorities and confirmation of the value of mixed embeddedness theory (which was applied in the project). Helping to generate such an understanding is a strength of CR. The research was able to respond to it principal audience, SUPPAG, by linking the academic discourse of mixed embeddedness with a lay discourse that was predicated on an essentialist notion of ethnic and new migrant enterprise. The agency initially subscribed to the common view that these firms are defined mainly by their ethnicity. By the end of the project, the views of the agency had changed in a way that recognised that business owners had economic and other motivations, and they should not be essentialised in terms of ethnicity. The research subjects – migrant entrepreneurs – benefited from the project in that they gained access to networks of business support of which they were previously unaware or detached.

**Conclusion**

Such has been the impact of ME since the turn of new millennium that one could arguably now outline elements of a European approach to the study of migrant entrepreneurship. Emphasising the importance of the multiplicity of contexts in which migrant entrepreneurs are embedded is of course the key insight. And now it is something of a commonplace to argue that migrant enterprise must be seen as grounded in the wider political-economic environment as well as in the social capital of its own communities.

This is far removed from the US-inspired ethnic resources approaches that held sway for so long and we could well argue that this transatlantic rift is one of the main defining features of this research field. Locating this in its ultimate political-economic context, we might draw upon John Gray’s notion that ‘America today is not treading a path which other societies will follow. It is detaching itself from other ‘western’ cultures in the extremity of its experiment in free-market social engineering …’ (Gray 2009, 103). It is hardly fanciful to assume that any resistance to the demise of neo-liberalism should make itself felt in the US analysis of minority entrepreneurship, where a supply side approach continues to predominate challenged only by rare exceptions like Valdez (2011).

For future research it is only to be regretted that there can be only a limited US contribution to the exciting directions now being explored in European studies, not least the harnessing of a range of disciplines beyond ethnic relations. ]\* Labour process theory has been combined with ME to examine the nature of work in migrant firms (Edwards and Ram, 2006; Edwards et al., 2016) and the informal economy (Jones et al., 2006; Ram et al.,2007). Gender and organisational theory has informed study of minority women entrepreneurs (Essers, 2009). And the ‘new economics of diversity’ has provided the disciplinary base for analyses of the competitiveness of migrant firms (Nathan, 2015). A final element is the view of the minority firm as site of contestation and conflict, rather than a unified and harmonious entity committed to social mobility. A key feature of European minority business is its engagement with the strategies and perspectives of owners (and indeed workers) in relation to the operating environments in which they are embedded (Edwards *et al.,* 2016 is the latest example of this tradition).

The concern with how research influences policy and practice may well be a further feature of European approaches in due course. Migrant entrepreneurship is being invoked as response to an array of diverse challenges, from enhancing competitiveness to promoting integration. The opportunities for meaningful and engaged scholarship are considerable.

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