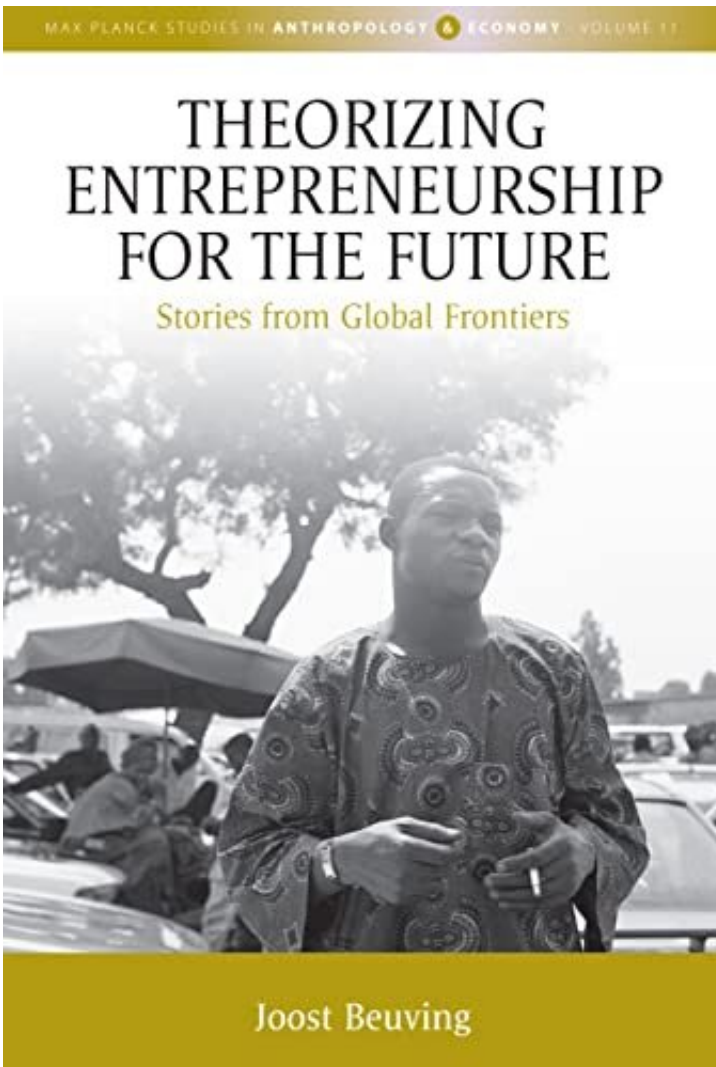


An anthropological glimpse into entrepreneurial behavior

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Credit: Berghahn Publishing

Anthropologist Joost Beuving provides new insights into entrepreneurial behavior in his recently published book, "Theorizing Entrepreneurship for The Future." This behavior shows striking similarities around the world, according to Beuving's long-term studies and fieldwork in Greece, West Africa and the United States, among other countries. "In reality, entrepreneurial success often has more to do with a variety of circumstances over which entrepreneurs have very little control, than with rational anticipation and well-thought-out planning," he states.

The notion that the [free market](#) always leads to more prosperity does not align with the practical reality of financial crises and failing businesses. The 2008 [financial crisis](#) raised serious questions about this widespread notion. Since then, several scientific studies have been published on the causes of this crisis and on a healthier economy.

But to really understand how crises and corporate scandals arise, we need to look beyond the economic view of entrepreneurship, according to Joost Beuving. In his book "Theorizing Entrepreneurship for the Future: Stories from Global Frontiers," Beuving adds an ethnographic contribution to what is often a purely economic debate.

The anthropologist used insights from his fieldwork studies from the past 20 years. For instance, he researched second-hand car dealers in West Africa, fish exporters around Lake Victoria in East Africa and fish-farm business owners in Greece. For this book, he additionally investigated the behavior of investment bankers in financial America.

Uncertain future

In the 250-plus-page book, Beuving analyzes how entrepreneurs view the [future](#). "Entrepreneurial behavior is really about 'future work': everything entrepreneurs do to get a grip on the future, which of course is always uncertain. Consider, for instance, how they talk about the

future, their habits to cope with uncertainty and their social practices, such as collaborations that they pursue or conflicts that arise in doing business."

The various cases covered by the researcher in his book bear striking similarities. According to Beuving, an ideal image of what an [entrepreneur](#) is permeates all entrepreneurial groups: a [homo economicus](#), an opportunistic individual who acts out of [self-interest](#) and rationally weighs up costs and benefits in search of the greatest possible profit. "That ideal assumes a kind of omniscience: a knowable future as the basis for your decisions in the present," Beuving explains. "Many entrepreneurs act outwardly as if they know exactly what their actions will bring them. Meanwhile, they are doing 'future work,' because they don't actually know what that future holds. So they do experience insecurity, yet they rarely show it."

The cases reveal that across all of these countries, entrepreneurs put up a façade; they act with more confidence than they feel. "While West African car dealers are driven by making a profit, most dealers actually live a meager existence," the researcher says. "They primarily draw their motivation from the dream of achieving a big, unexpected hit—essentially a gambler's mentality. And in the world of investment bankers, although cost and risk calculation admittedly plays a role, wishful thinking also proves to be important: bankers invariably paint a rosy picture of the future, even if the figures contradict it."

According to Beuving, the ideal image of the homo economicus has been eagerly embraced by news media and has thus become deeply embedded in our society. This book is in fact a call to reach beyond that façade and instead to look at what entrepreneurs actually do and the stories that they tell one another and themselves. "Thus appears the actual, realistic story of entrepreneurship, which is after all often a matter of trial and error. In this story, entrepreneurial success often has more to do with a variety of

circumstances over which entrepreneurs have very little control, than with rational anticipation and well-thought-out planning."

More information: Theorizing Entrepreneurship for The Future.
www.berghahnbooks.com/title/BeuvingTheorizing

Provided by Radboud University

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