The tactical mimicry of social enterprise strategies: Acting ‘as if’ in the everyday life of third sector organizations

Pascal Dey
University of St Gallen, Switzerland

Simon Teasdale
Glasgow Caledonian University, UK

Abstract
Using England as a paradigmatic case of the ‘enterprising up’ of the third sector through social enterprise policies and programs, this article sheds light on resistance as enacted through dramaturgical identification with government strategies. Drawing from a longitudinal qualitative research study, which is interpreted via Michel de Certeau’s theory of the everyday, we present the case study of Teak, a charitable regeneration company, to illustrate how its Chief Executive Liam ‘acted as’ a social entrepreneur in order to gain access to important resources. We establish ‘tactical mimicry’ as a sensitizing concept to suggest that third sector practitioners’ identification with the normative premises of ‘social enterprise’ is part of a parasitical prosaics geared toward appropriating public money. While tactical mimicry conforms to strategies only in order to exploit them, its ultimate aim is to increase potentials of collective agency outside the direct influence of power. The contribution we make is threefold: first, we extend the recent debate on productive resistance by highlighting how ‘playing the game’ without changing existing relations of power can nevertheless produce largely favorable outcomes. Second, we suggest that recognition of the productive potential of tactical mimicry requires methodologies which pay attention to the spatial and temporal dynamics of resistance. And third, we argue that explaining ‘social enterprise’ without consideration of the non-discursive, mainly financial resources made available to those who identify with it, necessarily risks overlooking a crucial element of the dramaturgical dynamic of discourse.

Keywords
Social enterprise, third sector, productive resistance, space, tactical mimicry, de Certeau
To succeed as a country we have to make best use of all our resources. We have great social entrepreneurs and it is time for the public sector and socially responsible investors and businesses to get behind them. Expect the quiet revolution to get noisier.


Introduction

The global rise of neoliberalism has largely relied on the embodiment of the individual as entrepreneur of the self (Foucault, 2008). The entrepreneurial homo oeconomicus is not merely a partner of exchange. As an entrepreneur of himself (sic), the self-optimizing individual is a flexible man, able to systematically respond to any modification of the environment (Foucault, 2008). It is this flexibility that ultimately renders the individual amenable to external control. That is, the individual becomes governable insofar as s/he accepts that the best forward is to conduct one’s life just as one would manage an enterprise. Foucault’s interest in the entrepreneur as an eminent figure in the contemporary ‘art of governing’ has struck a chord with organization studies scholars interested in how discourse works to structure individuals’ freedom and desires in accordance with managerial objectives. By expanding norms and practices from the realm of entrepreneurship to individuals, groups and organizations which might not (initially) be entrepreneurial, ‘enterprise’ works as an antidote to bureaucracy while creating a heightened sense of importance of business virtues such as performance and competition (du Gay, 2004).

It has been objected that treatises of enterprise and the enterprising self have too readily supported a deterministic understanding of discourse (Fournier and Grey, 1999). Interpretive research has helped resituate agency back into the understanding of the enterprise discourse by demonstrating that individuals do not necessarily identify themselves in the prescribed terms (Jones and Spicer, 2009). Instead these prototypical entrepreneurs (of the self) may resist by making choices between competing meanings while negotiating “their own understanding within their own particular worlds” (Cohen and Musson, 2000: 44). Thus individuals may not necessarily be docile bodies unreflectively endorsing enterprise discourse, but rather agentic subjects antagonistically relating to enterprise discourse through a process of ‘permanent provocation’ (to use Foucault’s (1982) terminology). However, while
studies looking at how the enterprising self discursively resisted have focused mainly on opposition, appropriation and transgression, relatively little work has explored the dramaturgy of resistance, notably as it pertains to mimicry.

In this article we address this lacuna by offering an account of resistance which works less through provocation or antagonism than through mimicry. Unlike discursive accounts which view resistance as the process through which people reject the enterprising subject as their ‘true nature’, we explore resistance as it manifests itself in the ‘showings’ of everyday life. Applying Michel de Certeau’s (1984) theory of everyday creativity to introduce prosaics, dramaturgy, tactics and space as important elements of resistance, we show how ‘acting as’ social entrepreneurs can create space for collective agancy outside of power’s gaze. The paper proceeds as follows. First, we introduce our wider field of study, the English third sector, thus pinpointing how the discourse of social enterprise is employed to transform the social sphere into a governable terrain (Carmel and Harlock, 2008). Second, we offer a brief sketch of de Certeau’s theory of everyday creativity which forms the backdrop for our empirically based conceptualization of tactical mimicry. Third, in our methodology section we outline our longitudinal research study and approach to analysis. Fourth, we present the case of ‘Teak’, a charitable regeneration company, which overtly mimicked the discourse of social enterprise in order to gain access to important resources. Fifth, framing our empirical insights alongside de Certeau’s theorizing, we suggest that even though tactical mimicry leaves the strategic social enterprise policies and programs unscathed, it represents a form of productive resistance as the appropriated resources are used to advance collective ends and not sectional interests. Finally, we discuss the political, conceptual and methodological implications of our study.

The English third sector and the social enterprise discourse

The introduction of the social enterprise discourse to the English third sector has occurred against the backdrop of a general atmosphere of anti-welfarism (Hogg and Baines, 2011) and associated attempts to render the social a space of competition, individual responsibility and self-organization (Tomlinson and Schwabenland, 2010). Following the election of a New Labour government in 1997, there has been broad political consensus that social welfare was no longer the primary responsibility of government, and that communities and individuals should adopt a more proactive approach to solving social problems. Various initiatives and measures were introduced by government to redefine the third sector as a political category designating a territory of human conduct which needs to be both governed and supported (Carmel and Harlock, 2008). Government discourse purports that in return for public
resources third sector organizations, particularly those involved in public service provision (Tomlinson and Schwabenland, 2010), should professionalize by demonstrating proper management skills and a more business-like, entrepreneurial approach to their way of doing things.

It was in this post-welfarist climate in the late 1990s that English government retreated from its traditional role of providing welfare, while positioning itself as a global leader in delivering welfare indirectly, through social enterprise (Nicholls, 2010). Social enterprise’s essential ideological operation is to encourage third sector organizations to be more “market-driven, client-driven, and self-sufficient” (Tracey, Phillips and Haugh, 2005: 355.) A vast arsenal of discursive re-articulations and material incentives, such as performance-based contracts, policies, grant programs, and education schemas were used to establish an entrepreneurial culture at the heart of the third sector. A Social Enterprise Unit was established within the Department for Trade and Industry in 2001, which was later moved to the new Office of the Third Sector in 2007. A new legal form for social enterprises, the Community Interest Company, was introduced which allowed limited distribution of profits, and revealingly, “business support” for social enterprise was delivered by the Government’s Small Business Service (author reference). The transformation of the third sector was continued under the coalition government elected in 2010. Their Big Society program was directly contrasted with the (overbearing) Big State, and forms an “endorsement of the positive and proactive role that [...] social enterprise could play in promoting improved social inclusion and ‘fixing Britain’s broken society’” (Alcock, 2010: 380). One of the most important support mechanisms is Big Society Capital, a social investment wholesaler launched in 2012 which lends £600 million to social enterprises, charities and community groups to enable them to scale up and deliver public services on a larger scale. Alongside this the Public Services (Social Value) Act (on the surface) aims to help social enterprises win contracts through encouraging commissioners of public services to take wider social value into account (author reference).

**Resisting social enterprise through disidentification**

Perhaps unsurprisingly social enterprise was not wholly welcomed by commentators and practitioners. “I spit on it” was the unapologetic reaction of Andy Benson, director of the National Coalition for Independent Action at a seminar in Northampton in late 2012.iii An overarching critique was that social enterprise offered a neoliberal response to the problems caused by neoliberalism (Amin et al., 2002), in the process de-politicizing community
engagement by rendering collective identities and processes subservient to ‘what works’ (Pearce, 2003). It would be wrong though to assume that social enterprise automatically hegemonizes the third sector through a set of mainstream business ideas. Such an interpretation eschews tout court issues of agency and resistance as they occur on a day-to-day basis.

Spearheaded by Parkinson and Howorth’s (2008) seminal inquiry, scholars became increasingly interested in exploring whether practitioners identify themselves with the terms used by government to unleash the third sector’s entrepreneurial spark. This research suggests that practitioners, rather than being determined by incessant attempts to shape their reality and identity, retain a certain degree of agency and are able to resist the social enterprise discourse by displacing, appropriating or negotiating their own meanings and identity within the political context in which they work. For example, Howorth, Parkinson and McDonald’s (2011) study shows that the language employed by policy-makers, and other powerful actors is not in accord with how practicing social entrepreneurs construe their social realities. Baines, Bull and Woolrych (2010), studying initiatives intended to advance entrepreneurial and business-like approaches in the realm of public service delivery, demonstrate that public sector commissioners and third sector organizations often face difficulties in relating to the other party’s world view and assumptions. Seanor and Meaton (2007) concluded from a study of a social enterprise network that practitioners reject the prevailing image of the heroic leader and even deny wanting to become social entrepreneurs. Froggett and Chamberlayne (2004) further point out that practitioners’ sidestep individualistic and consumerist discourses of social enterprise. These studies are united by an adherence to an antagonistic paradigm which conceives of resistance as the “constant process of adaptation, subversion and reinscription of dominant discourse” (Thomas and Davies, 2005: 687).

By foregrounding complex struggles over meaning, existing research has turned a blind eye toward the possibility that discourse might be resisted in non-antagonistic ways (Courpasson, Dany and Clegg, 2012). In the rest of this paper we explore a particular form of non-antagonistic resistance of ‘social enterprise’ through an in-depth analysis of a third sector organization called Teak. The findings we are about to report came as a surprise as our research was aimed precisely at understanding how practitioners resist (or not) ‘social enterprise’ antagonistically by variously displacing and appropriating its normative premises. Thus our understanding of ‘tactical mimicry’ emanated from unexpected observations and an ensuing process of abductive reasoning which involved both authors, and various colleagues with whom we discussed our results. Though such empirical surprises, and the conceptual
muddles which they engender, are usually edited from academic articles (Van Maanen, Sørensen and Mitchell, 2007), we elicit the generative role of erroneous speculations by narrating our conceptualization of tactical mimicry as an incrementally unfolding learning event. But first we provide a brief overview of Michel de Certeau’s theory of everyday creativity.

**De Certeau and the prosaics of the everyday**

In short, de Certeau grappled with everyday life as a hallmark of immanent creativity (de Certeau, 1984; de Certeau, Giard and Mayol, 1998). A key concern in his work was resistance. Partly as a response to Foucault’s (1979) “Discipline and Punish”, which he admired but perceived as omitting the possibility for agency, de Certeau developed an understanding of resistance as the potentiality inherent in everyday practices. Particularly relevant in this regard is de Certeau’s distinction between strategies and tactics, arguably the most famous of his conceptual binaries but also one of the most misunderstood (Buchanan, 2000). De Certeau conceives of strategies as “calculus of force-relationships” (de Certeau, 1994: 380) that can be found in all powerful projects of “political, economic, and scientific rationality” (de Certeau, 1984: xix). Strategies thus prescribe what is adequate or desirable, and so form the “institutionalized frameworks, scripts, or patterns of action that serve as general guides to behaviour” (Carlson, 1996: 49). Transposed to the present context, social enterprise policies and programs can be regarded as strategies for they seek to dictate the conditions of proper subjectivity and social production. Tactics on the other hand are the devious but dispersed creativity at the hands of the people. Tactics, according to de Certeau (1984), represent the inventive possibilities that exist within strategic circumstances. Importantly, tactics do not stand in opposition to strategies but ‘make do’ with the opportunities which strategies offer.

Stressing the makeshift creativity of the everyday, de Certeau paid heed to how strategies are variously exploited through “disguise, surprise, discretion, secrecy, wit, play, bluff” (Highmore, 2002: 159). He developed a prosaic understanding of resistance which emphasized the parasitical and creative aspects of the everyday over the antagonistic and confrontational. “Prosaics” in de Certeau (1984) has a very particular meaning since derived from the etymological meaning “to create, invent, generate” (p. 205). The role of invention and creativity as part of the everyday is evinced more strongly in the original title “L’invention du quotidien” of de Certeau’s theory of the everyday than its English translation as “The Practice of Everyday Life”. The prosaics of the everyday in de Certeau designates the
mundane ways of ‘doing things’ as the locus of attention, delineating ordinary individuals as “poets of their own acts, silent discovers of their own paths in the jungle of functionalist rationality” (de Certeau, 1988: xviii). The prosaic interpretation of the everyday underscores that tactics, rather than opposing or displacing strategies, “take place in its blindspots” (Highmore, 2002: 160). Conceiving tactics quite generally as the clever tricks and spatio-temporal practices more generally which people enact to develop their individual trajectories, de Certeau’s primary purpose was to invite “continuing investigation of the ways in which users – commonly assumed to be passive and guided by established rules – operate” (de Certeau, 1984: xi). Indicating that tactics can take various forms, de Certeau made it clear that his concepts lend themselves to adaption and novel uses. Before doing just that, we offer some details on the empirical inquiry upon which our conceptualization depended.

The Real Times study
Real Times is an ongoing Economic and Social Research Council funded qualitative longitudinal study of fifteen ‘core’ third sector organizations which is now into its fifth wave of fieldwork. It broadly aims to understand third sector organizations’ everyday reality: how they work in practice, change over time, respond to challenges, and under which conditions they flourish. Although data collection was not structured towards this article, the generalist nature of Real Times made the retrospective repurposing of the empirical material particularly suitable for our objectives.

The theoretical framing of Real Times is that third sector organizations are situated within and influenced by a complex web of overlapping fields including those which may be geographic, industry based, or of political action (Fligstein and Macadam, 2012). The organizations and individuals within them are shaped by the fields they are part of, but – dependent on their relative power – are also able to influence those same fields. Existing research on third sector organizations has tended to study third sector organizations in isolation from the wider environment in which they are situated, or to examine them through the lens of a single field based relationship (Scott et al., 2000). Real Times aimed to avoid the problems inherent in synchronic research which studies third sector activity at a particular point in time (and space), and often draws conclusions which may not be representative of the snapshots which could be taken from other angles (ibid.). Longitudinal in nature, the aim of Real Times was to study how third sector organizations react to and thereby change or perpetuate respectively their changing environments over time.
Real Times involved the selection of a diverse range of third sector organizations, broadly sampled to reflect the diversity of the sector. To contextualize the organizations, each of the 15 core cases was matched with up to three supplementary cases involved in similar activities. In the case of Teak this meant that we selected as supplementary cases a for-profit supplier from the construction industry; a housing association which had initially created Teak; and a social enterprise support agency. We were able to further contextualize Teak by connecting it to two of the other core cases – a deprived former mining village, and a social enterprise which it provided support to through a government funded programme (which we return to later).

Empirically, the project was based on interviews conducted with third sector practitioners at their place of work, observational visits, and documentary material relating to the cases. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and then stored in NVIVO. Materials pertaining to this paper was collected between January 2010 and March 2013. At the time of writing we had collected over 500 interview transcripts, 33 of which related directly to Teak. While one of the authors was responsible for researching Teak as part of the Real Times project, other members of the Real Times team were involved in the initial thematic coding as well as in the iterative interpretation of the interview material.

**Approach to analysis: The generative role of a deviant case**

The overarching aim at the start of our inquiry was to understand how, or indeed if, the enterprising up of the English third sector was affecting practitioners. Operating on the assumption that processes of identification and disidentification would play an eminent role in the reproduction of social enterprise, our early analysis attempted to develop a typology of ways in which practitioners respectively identified or disidentified with the social enterprise discourse. One of the classifications we began to develop was provisionally called manipulation and arose through our analysis of transcripts of interviews with practitioners in Market Garden, a small social enterprise which trained people for employment through volunteering placements in a garden centre. However, we were somewhat puzzled by what we initially perceived as a deviant case.

The director and self-proclaimed social entrepreneur of Market Garden explained that not just anybody can be a social entrepreneur, you need ‘ability and knowledge and experience’ (interview date: August 2010). He was an enthusiastic adherent of the language of social enterprise, making numerous references to ‘sustainability’, ‘business plans’, and ‘managing sales’. Operating in a deprived geographic area, the director mentioned that it was
his unique skills which gave Market Garden the ability to succeed in a context where local businesses had failed:

“I couldn't see anybody in [the local community] doing something like this [operating a business]... the people who did the catering at the family fun day, they’ve gone under ... So it’s really, really hard, it’s really hard, and you know it, cerebrally, that to run your own business is really, really tough. Until you do it you just don’t realise how tough it is.” (September 2011)

But the rhetoric of social enterprise did not appear to relate to the realities of Market Garden’s funding practices as almost its entire financial resources stemmed from grants and subsidies. For example, Market Garden was given its premises at a peppercorn rent by a local community trust following the council deciding to charge them for previous space. Our initial impression was of an organization manipulating the language of social enterprise to access grant funding (from local authorities, and the European Union). We were also sceptical regarding the balance between personal gain and community benefit of their motivation for doing so. We did not include this case in our first paper derived from Real Times data (author reference), partly because of the ethical issues involved in reporting what we felt to be deviant, potentially illicit behaviour. Perhaps a more important reason for omitting the case was that when we reflected upon it with the interviewer and other members of the Real Times team we were persuaded that perhaps Market Garden was not a deviant or unique case and that what we deemed to be “manipulative” behaviour might be common across a wider range of organizations. We thus returned to our transcripts and began searching for further examples of deviation – conceived of as feigned consent with ‘social enterprise’. One external interviewee had questioned whether one of our cases was spending too much time speaking on the “social enterprise self-gratification circuit” of conferences and awards dinners and neglecting the day-to-day business. But when we questioned representatives of the organization, it appeared that our hypothesis was wrong as they highlighted their desire to promote the social enterprise movement through conferences and events.

However, practitioners’ stories became more nuanced and reflective as our working relationship matured. As (author reference) mention in this regard, the longitudinal design of the Real Times study had the advantage of excavating “some of the more formalised organizational narratives that were presented initially and uncover the practices and tensions beneath.” Over subsequent waves of fieldwork then, participants increasingly gained trust in
us, sharing thoughts and beliefs which had initially been kept private. As a result, it became obvious that part of what we had learned, or thought we did, during the initial stages of the research about third sector practitioners’ relationship with ‘social enterprise’ was in fact a dramaturgical performance more or less explicitly aimed at portraying a desirable image towards us as researchers.

When asked again two years later as to why the directors spent so much time addressing conferences and attending awards dinners the interviewee revealed that this served the purpose of boosting the public profile of their organization. This in turn led to their organization being featured widely in policy documents as an example of a successful social enterprise and meant that organizations became keen to provide grant funding to the social enterprise, partly because this might be seen as a way of “investing” in a “proven winner” but also through a need to be associated with these “proven winners”. Thus spending time in the social enterprise self-congratulation circuit was perceived by the directors as a crucial element in acquiring resources which were subsequently used to provide enjoyable activities for young people with mental health problems (and which could not be funded through public contracts).

As the example of Market Garden shows, studying organizations longitudinally might potentially change one’s initial interpretation of why they act the way they do. In the case of Teak, to which we turn below, a critical moment occurred when Liam left the organization in late 2012. His resignation offered him more freedom to reveal the practices behind the formal organizational narratives initially presented to the researcher. It also allowed us to report on aspects of the case which might otherwise have proved detrimental to Liam’s career and status. Of course it is plausible that Liam preferred to represent himself to us as a cunning manipulator of government’s social enterprise strategy rather than a passive recipient of government money as he became aware of the direction our research was taking. But while we use Liam (and Teak) to illustrate our conceptualization, it is important to emphasize that tactical mimicry is not endemic to Teak as it was also manifest in other cases in the Real Times study.

**Findings**

**Embracing social enterprise?**

The first wave of interviews conducted in 2010 appeared to confirm our initial assumption that practitioners either reinforce and support, or challenge and appropriate the social entrepreneurship identity which was prescribed through the political context in which they
worked. As we have discussed elsewhere (author reference), some third sector organizations did in fact reject social enterprise. However, our empirical material also seemed to indicate, in contrast to Parkinson and Howorth’s (2008) study, that many practitioners were increasingly embracing the discourse of social enterprise. Implied in this observation is the question of whether social enterprise has eventually gained legitimacy at the level of practice. It is to this question that Teak offers an alternative interpretation.

Teak’s website proclaimed the organization to be “one of the largest social enterprise groups based in the [region].” Their stated mission was “delivering social justice through enterprise.” Teak had been created to provide in-house maintenance to a parent charity in the mid-1990s and had gradually expanded to incorporate a wide range of subsidiary businesses including construction and hospitality companies. The Chief Executive, Liam, had initially been recruited to manage the construction company and later became chief executive in the mid-2000s. Much of the language Liam used in our first interview in 2010 could have derived straight from the policy rhetoric surrounding social enterprise at the time. In accordance with New Labour’s portrayal of social enterprise as being “first and foremost” about business (Defourny and Nyssens, 2010), Liam emphasized Teak’s business-like nature:

“We just want to trade as a company. ... we’re not particularly selling ourselves as a Social Enterprise, we’re selling ourselves because we’ll deliver a product on time, to a quality, at a cost.” (March 2010)

During the same interview Liam set Teak apart from charities and other social enterprises which according to him were dependent on “government hand-outs”. Here we felt that Liam was trying to convey the impression of a tough (male) business and, in accordance with policy rhetoric of the period, to set himself apart from patronizing charities which inadvertently perpetuated poverty. However, the economic downturn had hit Teak hard. As Liam explains, the industries in which they operated were particularly vulnerable:

“And construction, landscape, maintenance, conference and hospitality ... it is one of the worst mixes in the present economic position. I mean we have got murdered this year. You know you couldn’t think of anything [worse] – what do people cut first? Construction spend and training spend.” (March 2010)
Liam stressed that protecting the jobs of his staff was of paramount concern and that Teak had drawn upon reserves to do so. He was particularly proud that:

“We’ve been here 11 years, no staff member’s ever left, it’s a family and they’re reliant on me for their wages, and it’s very close in here.” (January 2011)

Despite Liam’s criticism of other charities and social enterprises which were dependent on government money, it appeared that one consequence of the economic downturn was that Teak had for the first time engaged in contracting to deliver services for government, initially through the Future Jobs Fund – a New Labour government program designed to provide short term employment opportunities:

“So if I was very frank this is about survival in this market because we are totally and utterly reliant on contracts. There isn’t any construction work out there, we’re going to do it differently and now we’ve also just taken on as a delivery [agent] for the future jobs fund. We’ve [previously] avoided it like the plague, yeah?” (March 2010)

Liam had also become the manager of a government sponsored program designed to encourage third sector organizations to earn money through trading rather than rely on grants. At the time it seemed somewhat perverse that an organization which had placed a high emphasis on trading in the private market place (i.e. competing on cost and quality) and avoiding government contracts appeared to be repositioning itself as part of the government supply chain.

So our initial impressions of Teak were of a social enterprise on the boundaries of civil society and the market positioning itself as distinct from traditional charities and the public sector by virtue of their business-like nature. In entering new markets (read the public contracting arena) Teak had effectively identified with the changing governmental stipulation of social enterprise which by 2010 was shifting towards third sector organizations delivering public services (author reference). If the story were to end here, we would be left with the impression that government resources and discourses have effectively recreated Liam as a budding entrepreneur acting on their behalf.

**Tactical mimicry of social enterprise by third sector practitioners**
By the time of the second wave of fieldwork in January 2011 a Conservative led coalition government had taken power and the government funding environment for social enterprises had become increasingly uncertain. The relationship with Liam had developed and we were regularly in contact regarding issues not directly relevant to the case study. We felt that he was being more open about his private thoughts about social enterprise, and more particularly public policy:

“I think I’m a cynic because I think there’s much more of a boys’ club in this government, and there is much heavier linkage to large private sector... Yes, I am a cynic; I’m a very cynical person at the moment, but, as long as you understand the game ... I don’t think there’s any point fighting it. You’ve got to play it ... I had a conversation with someone the other days who’s getting all uppity, I said, “Look, at the end of the day, I have a vision mission, which is to help people in need. Now if I have to wear a yellow shirt to achieve the ability to do that, or a blue shirt, or a pink shirt, I don’t really give a shit,” so long as my morals don’t go, and I’m still achieving it, yes, I don’t care. You know, it’s a bit like, you know, we shouldn’t use dirty money ... Okay, yes, we don’t like where it came from, but look at the good we can do with the ten quid, you know, so ... I don’t think it’s a time at the moment to stand on your moral high ground” (January 2011)

Over the next two years Liam increasingly opened up to one of us about the tactical ‘game’ he was playing. The game involved mimicking the new government policy towards social enterprise and the Big Society to obtain what he saw as “dirty money” – i.e. money from a government which he found morally repugnant because of its “boys’ club” and links to the large private sector. On the other hand, this dirty money became an important resource stream for his organization as it was used to support the salaries of his workforce, most of whom had originally come from disadvantaged backgrounds, and many of whom had been with Teak for 11 years.

Returning to our transcripts, the first hint of the rules of this tactical mimicry, which we had missed at the time, came in our first interview back in March 2010. Referring to Teak’s seemingly accidental move into delivering a previous governmental program to teach third sector organizations to be more entrepreneurial, Liam outlined how he had “been asked by [a government department] to do a presentation on social business to a number of homeless organizations.” Liam had observed that the charities which attended “didn’t give a shit, just
keep giving us the money, we’ll carry on doing the hand out and let someone else do the hand up” (March 2010). In a “loud and argumentative conversation” which took place in the bar afterwards Liam had been asked for his thoughts as to how to change the situation by government. He proposed that the government department should fund a program which Teak would manage to encourage charities to become more business-like. Over subsequent interviews it became clearer that Liam had played upon the business-like nature of Teak and his reluctance to accept government funding to encourage a situation whereby the government would give Teak money to enable other organizations to copy Teak. Evidently, it is somewhat ironic that in the process Teak was moving towards a different financial model which relied more upon government money.

**Changing government, changing the act**

As Liam noted in January 2011 the rules of the game had changed again under the incoming Coalition Government. Despite the Big Society rhetoric, Liam saw the rules as tilted in favor of “larger private sector” companies. As regards the government program to encourage charities to become more business-like, it seemed unlikely that Teak would get any more money because the program was seen as an initiative of the previous government. So Liam was trying to disassociate the program and Teak from the previous government and connect it to the Big Society with a particular emphasis on the role that private business could play. Teak had developed links with corporate partners, one of whom had agreed to host a big event in the City of London: “When will you get involved?” (a play on the Big Society message of community involvement by business). Liam had invited various speakers and representatives from the corporate world, particularly companies wanting to win contracts with government:

“... and the strategy is actually saying this isn’t a third sector organization saying, “We’re Big Society”. This is some of your biggest fucking suppliers. This is British Telecom Global Services, this is Price Waterhouse Cooper, this is Serco ...”

His feeling was that if he could present Teak as closely involved with government to the corporate world, and simultaneously as closely linked to the corporate world to government, he might be able to gain more government interest and funding for the program. The final piece in the jigsaw was positioning Teak as an exemplar of the Big Society.
“I don’t want to be saying to the new politicians who have this grand new idea, “By the way, we’ve been doing it for ages” … What I would say is, “We’re doing this which is good, actually, given a twist with yourselves, this could be a real good Big Society.”” (January 2011)

This approach seemed to work. Liam had received a letter from the prime minister which he was using in the publicity material for the event:

“… the information you sent us sets out very well what a valuable institute [this program] is, particularly because its emphasis is based on sustainability in partnership with the private sector to enable [disadvantaged] people to become economically independent. [The program] supports the coalition government’s vision of the Big Society.” (Letter from December 2010)

As far as Liam was concerned it didn’t matter what government wanted to label Teak as so long as he could get some money. He was just mimicking what he felt the government expected from a successful social enterprise in the era of the Big Society:

“And, if [the coalition government] want to say “This is it,” and I get a million quid out of it to deliver something, I don’t give a shit. They want innovation, they want something different, they want something new, they want something they can put their own label on. … What we’re trying to do is work on the tactic, let’s put that lovely apple that’s shining up there, saying, “And let them come to us’”” (January 2011)

When asked if he had used these mimicry tactics before, Liam laughed and said:

“We did it the first time we got this [with New Labour in 2008/09]. We said, “We’ve got an idea, you need to bring some money. You go off, do a deal, get the money” … I think, some of it, you’ve just got to be a bit … because it’s bullshit … Confident bullshit, and we’ve got, you know, let’s get it straight, TEAK punches way above its weight in presence and stuff, but you need to do it.”” (January 2011)

In the event the tactic had worked – Teak was awarded a contract for over a million pounds to run a revised version of the government program later in 2011. This constituted over a quarter
of their annual turnover. This was particularly important as Teak’s revenue from their other businesses was steadily declining. The money from the government program was being used to pay staff in the other businesses and protect their jobs. Despite all the “confident bullshit” Teak was an organization which was dependent on the government contracts to ensure survival. When Liam was asked about his commitment to social enterprise he laughed and responded:

“What the masturbating in public? ... I think it’s just a badge ... I don’t think it’s real in a lot of instances ... And I think the bit that gets me is people aren’t telling the truth, they’re telling the flowery bit ... And I think people believe their own story whereas I don’t.” (November 2012)

Discussion
The starting point of this inquiry has been that amid the ‘enterprising up’ of the third sector, social enterprise has become a crucial strategy for bringing the English third sector more in line with the rationality of the market. While social enterprise policies and programs chiefly call on practitioners to think and act more like entrepreneurs, this raises questions as to whether, and to what extent, practitioners respectively identify or disidentify with this desideratum. Earlier research, which was broadly discursive in nature and premised on a logic of identification, suggests that practitioners were initially reluctant to identify with social enterprise (Parkinson and Howorth, 2008). However, quantitative research showed that in 2009 almost half of formally constituted third sector organizations claimed to closely fit the government’s social enterprise definition. But on closer inspection many of these organizations seem to exhibit little more than surface level identification, with many not even engaging in trading (author reference) – which is a, if not the, defining feature of social enterprise. This suggests that existing research, including our own (author reference), failed to understand that practitioners’ apparent consent with ‘social enterprise’ might not be acts of genuine or authentic identification.

Drawing on de Certeau helps qualify this apparent “shift” of the third sector toward a more pro-enterprise attitude by offering a fresh look at how practitioners creatively ‘make do’ with the desideratum of social enterprise. On the most elementary level, a Certeauian perspective implies that practitioners are not bona fide social entrepreneurs but cunning actors. Their identification with social enterprise, as the case of Liam testifies, should not be seen as signs of truthfulness or ‘seriousness’ but as “willing activations of pretense” (Saler,
The success of such pretense, or what we referred to as tactical mimicry, hinges on conveying the impression that one really believes in social enterprise. Tactical mimicry thus demands the capacity to see resemblances as well as the expressive capacity of imitation (Benjamin, 1977). More important, tactical mimicry hints at the theatre-like acts whereby individuals conform to government stipulations of social enterprise in order to exploit them. Liam’s overt consent with social enterprise is opportunistic in that he acts ‘as if’ he were a social entrepreneur in order to gain access to valuable resources. This shows that practitioners conform to strategic designations of social enterprise “only in order to evade them” (de Certeau, 1984: xiv). De Certeau, whose work on tactics calls attention to the clever tricks people use to divert energy, time and resources away from ‘how things should be done’, helps us make sense of why Liam and other practitioners in our study were acting as social entrepreneurs whereas privately disagreeing with the concept. Mimicking forms an instrument of the “weak” which allows the exploitation of (economic) opportunities inherent in government social enterprise policies and programs. What mimicry achieves is precisely to camouflage the instrumental motif of the ‘as if’. While the broader implications of the conceptualization of tactical mimicry for our understanding of the complex interplay between ‘social enterprise’ and resistance are numerous, we deem the following three most noteworthy.

**Qualifying the power of social enterprise**

Central to the concept of tactical mimicry is that the ‘socially constitutive power’ (Trowler, 2001) of strategic stipulations of social enterprise is more limited than would initially appear as people might not believe in its normative premises. How third sector practitioners act and speak does not necessarily reflect their beliefs or convictions. This might foster the conclusion that government-led social enterprise initiatives are a congenially failing operation. However, such reasoning could be misleading for it ignores that tactical mimicry constantly re-enacts social enterprise, even though practitioners might not agree with what it ideologically stands for. This prompts us to question why such voluntary servitude is happening. One possible explanation would be that government reproduces its rationality not through ideological consent but by relying through blunt ‘economic coercion’ (Žižek, 1994). By implication, although social enterprise might not affect what practitioners believe, the resources offered by government might nevertheless compel them to submit to the official doctrine (Mason, 2012), while in turn rendering the third sector governable terrain (Carmel and Harlock, 2008).
Analyzed through the perspective of ‘tactical mimicry’ we reach a different conclusion. Though Liam referred to himself as a cynic, practitioners involved in tactical mimicry are not cynics (in Sloterdijk’s (1983) sense of the term) who bend to official strategies having lost faith that resistance is possible. To the contrary, tactical mimicry implies that practitioners are still hopeful of a better world. Their subordination to an economic rationality is a consequence of their ability to cunningly exploit whatever opportunities government-led social enterprise policies and programs offer them. Although tactical mimicry entails that practitioners are influenced by monetary considerations, government money does not necessarily possess coercive power because practitioners possess considerable agency to “manipulate events in order to turn them into opportunities” (de Certeau, 1994: 480). The perpetuation of social enterprise on the level of practice is thus less the result of governmental manipulation of economic resources than of practitioners’ tactical opportunism through which they appropriate public money (as well as status).

Our conversations with other practitioners suggest we cannot claim originality for these observations as ‘playing the game’ through tactical mimicry is an inherent part of the everyday reality of many practitioners working in the English third sector. As Trexler (2008) remarks: “social enterprise reflects the recurring tendency of the charitable community to engage in strategic symbiotic mimesis, adapting by adopting what it believes to be the traits desired by potential supporters” (pp. 66-67). What is needed, though, are inquiries, premised on a tactical perspective, which explore the complex interplay of the discursive and non-discursive (e.g. financial) aspects of social enterprise policies and programs, and how practitioners parasitically engage with these strategies in ways largely unforeseen by government. Purporting that the discursive dimension of social enterprise is “too important to leave out of the equation, but not so important that it can bear the burden of explanation on its own” (Thompson and Harley, 2012: 1378), it appears necessary to treat government discourse of social enterprise as enforced by the distribution of material flows (Armstrong, 2005). Only then will it become possible to reach a more elaborate understanding of how social enterprise programs and policies work strategically and how they lend themselves to alternative, tactical usages.

**Tactical mimicry as productive resistance**

Recent media coverage in England has taken an interest in cases of ‘bogus social enterprises’ (Floyd, 2012), alleging that such fakes pretend to be interested in the social good while in actual fact just being “in for the money” (Secret Social Entrepreneur, 2013). While these
views tend to focus on individuals and organizations mimicking social enterprise for personal gain, our own conceptualization conceives of mimicry as a prosaic response to the strategic situation engendered by social enterprise policies and programs. Despite this positive connotation, it must be kept in mind that tactical mimicry does not amount to grand revolutions. As de Certeau (1984) reminds us, tactics are defined by their inability to conquer strategies once and for all. In view of this, we are reminded of infrapolitical forms of resistance\(^v\) which have increasingly fallen out of favor in organization studies due to their purported ineffectiveness in changing the status quo (Contu, 2008). Contrary to this wilful ignorance of ‘decaf’ forms of resistance which fall short of outright revolution, we contend that tactical mimicry is in fact amenable to a more affirmative reading for it does comprise an inherently productive potential.

Whereas discussion of productive resistance (Courpasson, Dany and Clegg, 2012) has hitherto focused on forms of resistance that change extant power relations, our conceptualization looked at the deviational tactics which parasitically engaged with strategic situations without necessarily changing them. However, the “guileful ruse” (de Certeau, 1984: 37) involved in third sector practitioners’ use of social enterprise bears a productive side in the way that it creates transient spaces of difference within the coordinates of the existing order, if outside the direct visibility of power. To us, positive resistance need not necessarily change extant relations of power for good, for instance by voicing “claims and interests that are usually not taken into account” (Courpasson et al., 2012: 801). Whether resistance is productive or not to us seems to depend more on how the opportunities being created through “clever tricks” (de Certeau, 1984: xix) are finally used. As the case of Teak shows, the resources gained from acting ‘as if’ might be channelled into the advancement of the organization’s ‘true’ social objectives.

Hence, a further contribution our paper makes is that it extends the understanding of productive resistance to phenomena which do not so much try to change or even overthrow power but to take advantage of the opportunities a given strategic situation offers. Nesting practitioners’ tactical mimicry in terms of productive resistance appears pertinent because the act of mimicking is ultimately geared toward extending possibilities of action outside of the visibility of strategic power. At the same time, our conceptualization acknowledges that mimicry per se is not ipso facto productive or unproductive. Such normative judgment presupposes shedding light on the broader conditions of possibility engendered by mimicry. Being able to distinguish productive from less productive forms of mimicry requires establishing in situ how practitioners use the advantages they produce: e.g. to pursue their
own advantages, to create a temporary respite from the influence of power or to create space to advance collective ends. Hence although there are many inquiries dealing with the dramaturgical aspects of identification, identity work and resistance (e.g. Murphy, 1998; Stormer and Devine, 2008), there is a paucity of research probing the moral line separating more egoistically inclined and more politically motivated forms of mimicry. Though we do not denigrate the value of the former kind of mimicry, which often happens “out of prudence, fear, and the desire to curry favor” (Scott, 1990: 2), we feel that it is important to gain a deeper understanding of tactical forms of mimicry where individuals act ‘as if’ they were in line with strategic expectations in order to ultimately contribute to the common good.

**The theoretical and methodological role of space and time**

Our conceptualization reminds us that to grasp the dramaturgical aspect of resistance requires remaining “critically analytic of the link between appearances and what is really happening” (Anderson, 2005: 588). This makes it clear that time is an important factor in the epistemological process. The insights reported in this paper would not have been possible through a synchronic research design based on one-off interviews. It is with the benefit of hindsight that we were able to comprehend that the stories we were initially offered by the participants of our research project did not necessarily reflect their true convictions. Rather, participants’ initial consent with social enterprise often formed a theatrical performance in line with how they might act vis-à-vis government authorities. Delving beyond practitioners’ dramaturgical consent became possible only after trust was developed over time.

Equally significant, if more unexpected was the realization that the productive role of mimicry could not have been detected without attending to its spatial whereabouts. Concurring with Thanem (2010) that space forms a neglected aspect in conceptualizations of resistance, we believe that research on resistance needs to develop a better sensitivity to the possibility that ostensible conformity with power in a particular space might be a tactical manoeuvre designed to create space for alternative modes of (co)existence elsewhere, in other spaces. Spatializing resistance thus permits us to see that movement between, and the creation of (alternative), spaces are crucial factors in how actors enact realities that cunningly deviate from the ‘dream of the strategist’. In the case of Teak, Liam cunningly submitted to strategic stipulations of social enterprise in one space (i.e. vis-à-vis government representatives) in order to create liberties for realizing his true convictions (providing employment for disadvantaged individuals) elsewhere, and outside of the immediate influence of power. These liberties reflect that there are often loopholes for creating other spaces or what Foucault
(1986) termed heterotopias in which possibilities for collective action can be increased. Such a spatial perspective helps us further stress the positive connotation of mimicking by showing how resistance works to produce favorable effects. Resisters such as Liam, though deviating from the mandate given to them by government, can be viewed as entrepreneurs of a different kind. Though it might well be that Liam is not the sort of social entrepreneur government wanted him to be, he might still be an entrepreneur in the sense described by Hjorth (2005: 395; emphasis in original): “It is the entre and prendre of entrepreneurship. Entre for creating space, spacing, and stepping into the in-between, and prendre for the grasping of opportunities.”

Placing more emphasis on space’s eminent importance in tactical mimicry specifically, and resistance more generally, requires methodological procedures that are able to capture the possibility that compliance in one space might be a precondition for more radical action in another. While we were only alerted to the spatial dimension of tactical mimicry when practitioners started to openly admit that there was another side (or space) to what they had initially told us, future research should adopt methodological procedures that give explicit emphasis to the spatiality of reality. It is in this connection that mobile methods (Urry, 2007) appear most helpful. Mobile methods suggest that researchers need to move to become part of the powerful performativity of their research subject, while applying a range of interviewing, observing, and recording technologies ‘on the move’ (Büscher et al., 2010).

**Post script: A warning against romanticism**

Arguably the single most important contribution of tactical mimicry is that it alludes to the positive liberties associated with the ‘as if’ which allows people to practice agency and realize their fundamental purposes. Although it was never our intention to contribute to an overly idealized image of tactical mimicry, we are aware that this paper might nevertheless contribute to a romanticized understanding of resistance (Mumby, 2005). To counter-act this tendency, it should be noted that even though de Certeau expresses a remarkable faith in the everyday (Buchanan, 2002), tactical mimicry might not be ultimately successful. It is in part because tactical mimicry is inherently ambiguous that we were drawn to a case which failed, in the ultimate sense of the term. By 2012 Teak’s cash flow situation had become increasingly precarious. In June a prime contractor cancelled Teak’s sub-contractor status and decided to carry out the work in house.
“And we hunted round and tried to get [other money] – but you just couldn't do it. So in end of July I started saying, with the board basically ... the market's changed, the market is different. If we could have seen a way out in the next six, nine months ... but the market's not going to change.” (September 2012)

Liam paid all his staff and the “small sub-contractors” before closing down the construction company and conference centre. This ensured the costs of redundancy were passed to the government. Over the next few weeks Liam worked hard to find employment elsewhere for his staff before resigning himself. Reflecting on his time as a “social entrepreneur”, Liam posed himself the rhetorical question as to whether social action might simply be easier if the rules of the game were changed and social organizations would not have to mimic the latest government fashion in order to access “funny money”:

“Can you actually do some of this without some funny money? Should there be funny money or should it not be called funny. Is there an economic case for support but in a much more [obvious way]” (September 2012)

We believe that Liam’s hope might remain wishful thinking in that government’s “funny money” will probably remain conditional upon (apparent) consent to the strategies being enacted. However, another, maybe even more relevant issue concerns whether tactical mimicry is a form of deviance which occurs only under exceptional circumstances such as those encountered by Teak or whether it is actually a defining feature of how social organizations these days operate. In our assessment, there are reasons to believe that tactical mimicry forms the courant normal of many organizations working in the social realm. However, since offering a conclusive answer is beyond the limits of this paper, it will be the task of future research to clarify the precise role and prevalence of mimicry and feigned performances in the context of organizations operating in the social sphere. The focal purpose of such research should not be to dismantle these organizations as mere impostures, but to develop a sensibility for the inherently dramaturgical aspect of social organizing and to establish understanding that such dramaturgical acts are often a sine qua non for engendering social value.

**References**


**Notes**

1 All names of organizations and people in this paper have been anonymized to protect the identity of informants.

ii The third sector is a politically contested term which is not used by the current UK government due to its association with its predecessor (Alcock, 2010). We use the term to refer to the interlocking fields of organizations adopting a not for personal profit legal structure, and which may be said to serve collective rather than individual interests.

iii See http://beanbagsandbullsh1t.com/2012/11/21/cant-see-the-fig-leaves-for-the-smokescreen/ for further details.

iv Space limitations prevent us from providing more than a necessary contextual overview of the study here. A more detailed description of the rationale behind the study and overview of the case study organizations can be found via the Real Times homepage http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/generic/tsrc/research/real-times/index.aspx

v Scott (1990) conceives of infrapolitical resistance as forms of resistance that are unobtrusive.