**What Can Marquis de Sade’s Literary Critique Teach Us About Entrepreneurship?**

**Abstract**

Donatien Alphonse Francois, the Marquis de Sade (1740-1814), is arguably one of the most misunderstood figures in both literature and history. As a historical figure, he is known as a criminal, libertine, and inmate, who may have been the spark behind the French revolution. As a literary figure, his works are said to have no redeeming social value. Perhaps there is more to this multifaceted figure, and this may be the case as to what de Sade can show us about entrepreneurship as a phenomenon and in entrepreneurship research. This work will explore de Sade's literary critique, specifically, his "Reflections on the Novel" to resurrect his insights. It will highlight that de Sade explains "what not to do", that he advocates authenticity in writing, and that he explains how to build systems. The paper will conclude by providing some finer writing points inspired by the "Divine Marquis."

Keywords: Marquis de Sade; Entrepreneurship; Literary Critique; Authenticity; Systems

**What Can Marquis de Sade’s Literary Critique Teach Us About Entrepreneurship?**

Donatien Alphonse Francois, the Marquis de Sade (1740-1814), is arguably one of the most misunderstood figures in both literature and history. As a historical figure, he is known as a criminal, libertine, and inmate, who may have been the spark behind the French revolution (Gray, 1987). As a literary figure, his works are said to have no redeeming social value (Wyngaard, 2013), and to be nothing more than a “tissue of horrors” (de Sade, 1987). Perhaps there is more to this complex figure, and this may be the case as to what de Sade can teach us about entrepreneurship.

Jones and Spicer (2009) asked if de Sade could be considered an institutional entrepreneur – the conclusion was a reticent “yes”. His hatred of the pre-revolutionary France led him to write multiple novels that undermined the authority of the monarchy and the church – he even incited the rioters outside the Bastille to attack the fortress to release prisoners whom he falsely claimed were being executed (Gray, 1987). He was also an outstanding corporate entrepreneur – his work of transforming the Paris hospital system was considered exemplary (Quinlan, 2006). His ideas during the revolution were also considered sufficiently dangerous that he was imprisoned – especially his rulings as a judge that the state had no right to impose a death penalty (Gray, 1987), which is reminiscent of narrative entrepreneurship (Spinosa et al, 1997). Finally, he was known to be an exceptional theater organizer while he was imprisoned in a mental hospital towards the end of his days – his successes were so robust that individuals from across France visited his remote location to see him perform (Philips, 2005).

But what lessons does de Sade the writer have for modern scholars of entrepreneurship? While Jones and Spicer (2009) labeled de Sade as an entrepreneur, we could equally argue that entrepreneurship is the study of deviance (de Vreis, 1985), and that to understand deviance, we need to penetrate the imagination of history’s greatest deviant. Some of the answers to understand a type of Sadean entrepreneurship lie in subtle clues of his works, whereas others are more obvious based upon his own literary theory and first hand writings. This article will follow de Sade’s advice and advocate for studies in entrepreneurship that follow his spirit. De Sade makes four main contributions to the study of entrepreneurship: 1) He discusses what not to do 2) he discusses what was not actually done, and 3) how to build systems to coerce people through both threats and manipulation to act according to his whims. In short, de Sade’s lasting contribution is to infect our imagination (Trouille, 2004). In entrepreneurship, this idea can be paralleled by understanding entrepreneurship as the study of the imagination (Gartner, 2007) that can unleash potentiality (Pelly, 2016).

This essay will proceed with a review of de Sade the man, as well as some of his literary precepts. It will then discuss how his techniques can be used to describe entrepreneurial failure (i.e. what not to do), entrepreneurial imagination through the study of narratives (what was not actually done), and how de Sade’s writing can highlight institutional and narrative entrepreneurship (i.e. building systems to coerce people through both threats and manipulation). This article will then utilize these comparisons to advocate for a Sadean style autoethnography as a novel methodology, before the discussion and conclusion sections.

**De Sade the Man, De Sade the Writer**

The biography of de Sade is often overlooked, but it can nonetheless illustrate the antecedents of his literature, much like an entrepreneur’s biography can likewise influence entrepreneurial enactment (Sarasvathy, 2001), or entrepreneurial antenarratives (Rosile et al, 2013). His upbringing was that of pre-revolutionary French aristocracy, but with a few interesting twists. His father was frequently absent, and his mother seemed to care little about him, leading him to be raised by his uncle, Abbe de Sade (Gorer, 2013). The Abbe undoubtedly was the greatest influence on the young Marquis. The Abbe had several live in servants, including a mother-daughter duo with whom the Abbe engaged in incestuous orgasms – all while he was a devote man of God whenever the local bishop dined with him (Berman, 1999). Likewise, the Abbe had an extensive library of pornographic books which undoubtedly influenced the young Marquis to not only distrust the church, but also may have steered the young Marquis towards corruption (Schaeffer, 2000).

As a young man, the Marquis served a stint in the army, followed by marriage. His wife continued to look the other way (and may have even been complicit) whenever de Sade was accused of corrupt acts involving prostitutes (Ostermeyer, 1941). His mother in law, the Madame de Montreuil, even served as his advocate, but only up to a point – after which she made it her personal crusade to imprison him (Schaeffer, 2000). De Sade’s frequent stints in various prisons provided the perfect heterotopia for the intellectual adventures that formed his lasting legacy.

As a writer, de Sade has been labeled as without any redeeming social value (Wyngaard, 2013). His literary style has been described as anti-women, anti-liberal, anti-humnaist, and anti-democratic (Corey, 1966). Sadism in contemporary discussion is normally described as something similar to Sado-Masochism, a doctrine based upon sexual pleasures (Bos, 2007). De Sade’s true ideas, however are much more nefarious because it sees pleasure as a zero sum game; in other words, pleasure is maximized in direct proportion to the amount of pain inflicted upon the victim.

While these ideas could be seen as shocking, they are not totally foreign to entrepreneurship. Sarasvathy (2001) famously described how an entrepreneur’s biography could impact their behavior during process of effectuation. Furthermore, the idea of an entrepreneur as deviant has been previously been explored (de Vreis, 1985). Finally, the idea that deep thought can lead to innovation is also not new with the concept of enactment (Sarasvathy, 2001). If de Sade is a deviant enactor with a colorful biography, then perhaps exploring entrepreneurship through his eyes may lead us to better understand entrepreneurs as deviants, understand the antecedents to their behavior, and harness the power of their imagination to similarly help the reader interpret, instead of simply observing entrepreneurial behavior.

**The First Rule of de Sade: Discussing What Not To Do:**

While many literary critics have characterized de Sade as a man who recorded his fantasies through literature, in his own words, he purports the exact opposite. In his *Idees Sur les Romans* (de Sade, 1987), he explains that the point of his works is to educate individuals about deviance; in effect he wants to scare people away from the villains in his novels. In the same work, he further elaborates that he is performing a public service though his writing.

This basic precept harks back to a fundamental problem in research, especially in entrepreneurship. In most post positivist research, there is an obsessive hunt for “the truth” (Herrmann, 2020). This truth focuses extensively on what does work, what happened, and why was something successful (Pelly, 2017). This seems especially problematic for entrepreneurship – we do not have any universal definition of entrepreneurship, or even of opportunity (Alvarez and Barney, 2007), nor do we even agree upon the basic components of a business plan (Gartner and Teague, 2017).

This lack of agreement in many ways mirrors the biographical and literary epochs that transcended de Sade’s lifetime. As a young man, the judicial system in France was comprised of two courts – one of members of the nobility and one for everyone else – a clear dichotomy of the law, if not also for ethics (Jandeaux, 2012). During the revolution, these values were turned on their head in a most chaotic fashion, only the once again be deconstructed during the reign of Napoleon (Gray, 1987). A pioneer like de Sade is essentially testing these frontiers – by showing humanity in its most repugnant fashion, by de-masking his fantasies without the constraints of society (Delon, 1972), and amidst endless debates on morality, de Sade provided a unifying force of what is simply not acceptable behavior.

By the same token, we may not understand what is success in the field of entrepreneurship – but this agreement may not be relevant (Pelly, 2017). Perhaps we should follow in this vein, and use de Sade to explore what entrepreneurship is not (Jones and Spicer, 2009), or even use his literary methods to explore entrepreneurial failure, and its causes. Sometimes understanding the opposite of success can lead to the opposite of failure, if we tell the stories in such an evocative way that the reader participates in the story with us (Whitehead, 1933, Follett, 1970).

**De Sade in Search of Authenticity:**

Authenticity is something that is sought after in research – we seek it is order to somehow uncover “truth” in our writing (Herrmann, 2020). Enactment is a significant driver in entrepreneurship (Sarasvathy, 2001) in the assessment that the entrepreneurial action is motivated by an underlying intention or generalized aspiration. Unfortunately, most research, including ethnographic research, is observational instead of interpretive (Herrmann, 2020). Researchers focuses on the ontic instead of the ontological (Heidegger, 1961); or what the can sense instead of what can be believed.

De Sade advocates the use of literature over history to explore mankind, and how man wishes to be instead of how he actually behaves. De Sade invites us to take off the mask, and make ourselves vulnerable to the reader. Such a willingness to be vulnerable makes us as authors believable (Herrmann, 2020), and more importantly, it helps the reader feel become part of the story (Follett, 1970).

This authenticity (or verisimilitude in de Sade’s terms (de Sade, 1987)) can be augmented by giving the full details of our fantasies. In the words of Agent Smith from the *Matrix* film, humans define their existence through misery (Wachkowski et al, 1999), a sentiment shared by de Sade. But the Marquis makes one addition to Smith’s postulate - that misery makes the experience believable. In entrepreneurship, we are flooded with Horatio Alger stories (Decker, 1997) or the myth of the heroic entrepreneur (Anderson and Warren, 2011). But our fantasies, our fears, our failures, as we play them out in our minds, are often left out of research (Rosile et al, 2013); frequently the choices we did not take are sometimes the ones that have the most educational value for the reader (Follett, 1970).

De Sade also encourages us to use travel as a way to provide verisimilitude for the reader (De Sade, 1987). Every fantasy, or story, happens in a strange setting. For some entrepreneurs, this could be a luxurious yacht purchased after the IPO of a tech firm, but is could also be the fantastical grandmother’s house “if only she could see me now”, or even the former or future boss next to the water cooler at the point where the entrepreneur cites Johnny Paycheck (1977) and exclaims, “Take this Job and Shove It”. Either way, these oddball settings provide fertile ground for the entrepreneurial imagination for all entrepreneurs, and provide a vivacity for readers to construct their own fantasies.

**De Sade as a Builder of Systems:**

De Sade’s postulates are also reminiscent of Schumpeter, in that both men advocate for the destruction of existing systems in favor of constructing new ones. In fact, de Sade shares many similar ideas with members of the school of Austrian economics – Kirzner’s (1997) exploiting gaps in the market place (or in institutions in de Sade’s case), Lachamann’s (Chiles et al, 2007) exploration of the socio-material for enhancing opportunities (or improvising with common implements to enhance torture for the libertine), or even Hayek’s (Steele and Vaughn, 1993) use of introspection to understand humanity (or in de Sade case, the use of deprivation and deep though to enhance perversions).

But what de Sade does that is unique is his use of literary device to explore the underlying evil in mankind. De Sade is supposed to scare us; he is supposed to infect our imagination (Trouille, 2004). His use of literary devices explains in a very authentic way not just the actions of constructing systems, but their underlying motivations (Butler, 2003). His use of archetypes for example provides a road map of how the libertine (or entrepreneur) and can exploit others based upon their social status and skillsets. Alternatively, de Sade hints at latent needs as well as some concepts in marketing by showing how a socio-material environment – replete with a dark, isolated, castle, a secret room in the Vatican, or even a dungeon, can be altered to force individuals to conform to the norms of the person in power (Greteman, 2016).

This use of literary devices serves as a roadmap for other entrepreneurs to emulate as they try to construct their own systems. If we accept entrepreneurs as deviants (de Vries, 1985), then readers can likewise use de Sade’s novels as a roadmap to construct their own deviant systems.

**Tips from de Sade to Write the Perfect Entrepreneurial Tale**

I hesitate to provide a step by step checklist to writing entrepreneurship research like the Marquis de Sade, because he offers an orientation or branch of ethics in lieu of step by step system (Butler, 2003). However, I am pleased to offer a few pointers from the divine Marquis that might give the entrepreneurial research community a moment for pause.

While many literary scholars have accused de Sade of heinous crimes, he admits that most of this work is based on pure fantasy (Wyngaard, 2013). But what distinguishes de Sade from other pornographers of the time, such as Mirabeau, in that he created a coherent ethic to accompany his stories (Butler 2003). Unlike the modern entrepreneurship scholar, who provides some sort of moral or lesson in the paper – de Sade strongly advises that the author not moralize in the text (de Sade, 1987). When there is a lesson, de Sade allows the characters do to the speaking, not the author. For writers who attempt to create their own entrepreneurial Sadean auto/ethnography, they should therefore allow the characters to deliver the message to the reader and allow the reader to interpret the findings for their own ways and reasons (such as found in Follett 1970; Whitehead, 1933). Who would have ever guessed that de Sade was a post-modernist at heart?

De Sade also advocates that we embellish or exaggerate what we see (de Sade, 1987). This exaggeration allows for further extrapolation on the part of the reader, who can freely apply it to their own settings. However, he strongly advises against exaggerating in such a way that the story lack verisimilitude – a story must be relatable, if not believable at all costs. Interestingly, many entrepreneurs exaggerate their successes and perfections in speeches as a way to gain credibility and form a bond with the audience – perhaps entrepreneurship scholars could emulate their practice as well?

De Sade was also a master of the *tableau vivant* style of writing (Shapiro, 1993). In other words, de Sade’s writing chops up the action into vignettes that oscillate between characters and the narrator to keep the reader on the edge of their seat, hungry for the next page. Long, drawn-out text (yes, even the kind found in modern management literature) can be exhausting to the reader. More troublesome is the fact that research for the most part no longer considers the practitioner, but practitioner critique could be more available if our research reads more like de Sade’s prose. Coincidentally, this structure is frequently emulated in reality television shows – there is filming of the characters, followed by a cut scene that provides thoughts of the characters – and each show rotates through multiple characters in this format.

De Sade furthermore encourages us to view writing as a palimpsest (McMorran, 2007). The palimpsest is a literary orientation where the author, reader, and writer engage in a simultaneous act of reciprocal interaction with the text. In many ways, this enables the text to take on a life of its own across readings and interactions of a manuscript. De Sade was a master of producing multiple versions of his books to match the times, and ideas of his audience. His support of the palimpsest is akin to indigenous storytelling (Rosile et al, 2018) where the author engages in process of storytelling, storylistening, and story co-construction, as found in entrepreneurial articulation (Pelly, 2016), or re-historicizing (Hatch and Schultz, 2017).

Finally, de Sade encourages every novelist to be an effective writer (de Sade, 1987). Much like an evocative autoethnographer (Herrmann, 2020), de Sade realized that without an effective writing craft, the author had nothing to offer. For those of us in entrepreneurship research who compose texts, could we not make our writing a but more “spicy” for the audience? Would it be a crime if our audience saw every article as an appetizer, only to be left hungry and excited for more? Perhaps more importantly, could we allow readers to then creatively apply findings to their own stories (Follett, 1970; Whitehead, 1933)?

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