Igniting Entrepreneurial Ventures in the Humanities and Social Sciences

a cura di

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DISCLAIMER

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INTRODUCTION

The role of universities within contemporary knowledge economies is undergoing a profound transformation, though the extent and visibility of these changes vary across countries and, within the same national systems, across regional contexts and universities.

While a first and highly visible dimension of this transformation concerns the growing managerialization, e.g. the increasing attention devoted to governance practices, performance indicators, and systems of evaluation (Boitier and Rivière, 2016; Lorenz, 2012), important changes have affected the core academic activities. Training and research, for example, are both increasingly transformed by the new challenges and opportunities arising from digitalization and AI, which are reshaping labour market focus on skills and competences (Buchmann and Buchs, 2025), and re-defining knowledge production, dissemination, and learning processes (Yu, 2025; Grossman et al., 2023; Salvagno et al., 2023). Alongside this, a relevant transformation concerns the growing recognition of what is commonly referred to as the "third mission": universities are increasingly expected to engage with society and to contribute actively to the social, cultural, and economic development of the communities and territories in which they operate (Compagnucci and Spigarelli, 2020; Rubens et al. 2017). On the one hand, this "new" mission involves engagement in a structured set of non-commercial activities aimed at fostering the broad societal dissemination and use of knowledge, thereby generating social and cultural value. Examples include the organization of public cultural events, science communication initiatives targeted at non-academic audiences, dissemination through digital channels such as blogs and social media, initiatives that actively involve citizens in research and innovation processes (e.g., citizen science projects), and engagement with schools through educational and laboratory activities. On the other hand, the third mission also encompasses initiatives aimed at the economic valorisation of knowledge produced within academia. This may occur through knowledge transfer mechanisms, such as technology transfer offices, incubators, and science parks, through collaborations with firms, or through the direct involvement of academic staff and students in entrepreneurial initiatives. These latter entrepreneurial activities may derive from supporting the protection and exploitation of intellectual or industrial property (e.g., patents), as well as from the promotion of the entrepreneurial culture within universities, and from the carrying out policies aimed at promoting instruments such as spin-offs, start-ups, or entrepreneurship-oriented programs (e.g., contamination

labs). These developments are consistent with the growing literature on the entrepreneurial university and academic entrepreneurship, which highlights the importance of an increasing role of universities in knowledge commercialization and innovation ecosystems (Etzkowitz, 2003; Siegel et al., 2007; Siegel & Wright, 2015).

Both the academic literature and practical experience suggest that the relationship between academia and the third mission, particularly with respect to its entrepreneurial dimension, is highly dependent on disciplinary background, and that the Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) in particular face several challenges in engaging with these activities. Several factors help may explain these difficulties. Among these, two stand out. First, many of the policy instruments supporting academic entrepreneurship have historically been designed with the logic of the natural and technological sciences in mind, focusing on mechanisms, such as patents, technology transfer offices which tend to fit more naturally with STEM research outputs (Cunningham et al., 2024; Spigarelli et al., 2024). Second, cultural factors play a role and SSH scholars have traditionally displayed a certain degree of skepticism toward entrepreneurial activities, because they perceive them as contradictory with respect to the intellectual and public-oriented academic missions of these disciplines (Cunningham et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, the interaction between the SSH and entrepreneurial activities can also generate significant opportunities for innovation and societal impact. SSH ease understanding social and cultural contexts which is essential to estimate market opportunities for entrepreneurial ideas and allow developing critical knowledge and interpretative capacities that are particularly useful to support entrepreneurial decisions that by definition face uncertainty and ambiguity; they stimulate imagination and creativity which are crucial to achieve non-technological innovation, bring communication and networking competences which are crucial for entrepreneurial activities (European Commission, 2007; OECD, 2017. Illustrative examples of interactions between the SSH and entrepreneurial activities, as well as entrepreneurship-oriented educational initiatives, are discussed, for example, in Ebbesen (2008) and Josa and Aguado (2021). Furthermore, digital technologies amplify the potential contribution of the SSH by enabling the creation of new business models based on cultural and knowledge-intensive content. In this respect, the growing field of digital humanities – where information and communication technologies intersect with traditional humanities disciplines, from archaeology and philology to language studies, history, and the visual and performing arts – opens significant opportunities for entrepreneurial initiatives. By transforming cultural knowledge into digital resources, platforms, and services, digital humanities create new possibilities for innovation, commercialization, and societal impact.

Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that the interaction between SSH and entrepreneurship is becoming an increasingly dynamic and evolving field. With the

aim of capturing and reflecting on this emerging dynamism, the University of Naples L'Orientale and the Neapolitan digital innovation hub and business accelerator Spici Srl organized the international conference Igniting Entrepreneurial Ventures in the Humanities and Social Sciences, held in Naples in June 2025 and carried out in the framework of the CTE - Casa delle Tecnologie Emergenti di Napoli "Infiniti Mondi: Napoli Innovation City" project, which has received funding from the Ministry of Enterprises and Made in Italy (CUP B67F23000000008). The event was conceived as a space for dialogue and exchange among academics, students, researchers, and policymakers, with the objective of exploring the intersections between SSH and entrepreneurship and highlighting their strategic relevance.

The conference, whose detailed program is reported in the appendix, brought together 35 speakers representing eight Italian universities and five international institutions among the most active internationally in research and practice on these themes. This volume collects a selection of contributions presented during the event, organized into two parts.

Part I examines the systemic transformations reshaping the conditions for academic entrepreneurship in the SSH. In the first contribution of this section, Vitaliy Charushin and Yann Gozlan analyse how artificial intelligence is reconfiguring cognitive processes, capability formation, and innovation dynamics within HSS disciplines. In the second contribution, Andrea D'Andrea explores the implications of the data society through the case of digital archaeology, highlighting how data infrastructures, legacy data, and digital replication technologies are transforming knowledge production. Finally, in the Third contribution, Mariavelia Soave, Carla Notaro e Giuseppe Lucio Gaeta focus on the institutional level by analysing how Italian universities incorporate academic entrepreneurship within their strategic plans, providing an exploratory overview of emerging governance approaches and policy orientations.

Part II shifts to the analyses of organizational and micro-level dynamics of academic entrepreneurship in SSH by providing Italian and international case studies. The fourth contribution, by Alessandro Grandi, examines the University of Bologna institutional model to support entrepreneurship; in contribution five Luigi Amodio illustrates the promotion of public-private synergies for innovation and cultural industries carried out by Spici srl. The sixth Contribution, by Sara Alba and Anna Cardinaletti, presents the experience of academic entrepreneurship at Ca' Foscari University Venice through the case of the VEASYT spin-off, illustrating pathways of knowledge transfer and social innovation. In chapter Seven Chiara Frenda and Alessandra De Chiara investigate entrepreneurial intentions and activities among SSH students at the University of Naples L'Orientale, providing useful empirical evidence for the design of entrepreneurial education. The eight contribution, by Benedetta Giovanola, Emanuele Frontoni and Benedetta Petroselli describes the GAIA spin-off

of the University of Macerata, focusing on the development of tools and services for AI ethics, governance, and algorithmic accountability. In chapter nine, Francesca Marone analyses innovation pathways in the EdTech ecosystem through the GRETA spin-off experience, highlighting the interaction between educational technology, market positioning, and university-based innovation. Finally, in chapter 10, Maria Pia Di Buono, Giulia Speranza and Raffaele Manna illustrate the challenges they faced for developing Dahlia, a SSH-based spin-off from the University of Naples L'Orientale.

Taken together, these contributions provide a rich and multifaceted picture of the evolving landscape of academic entrepreneurship in the SSH, highlighting both the diversity of institutional approaches and the emerging practices through which knowledge produced in SSH disciplines is translated into innovation and societal impact, pointing to a field that still requires further theoretical development and systematic empirical investigation.

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