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Assembling social enterprise: how and why social movements become part of the state apparatus

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ABSTRACT

TThis article explores why revolutionary social movements eventually become part of the state apparatus. Centring upon the case of the historical evolution of Scotland's social enterprise ecosystem using the lens of assemblage thinking, we reframe the ecosystem as a shifting configuration of actors, values, organizations, and policies shaping desire for social change. We demonstrate how heterogeneous coalitions redefine what counts as social enterprise, with consequences for public value. The article advances public management scholarship by problematizing a structural tension between the values of social movements: in our case autonomy and collective self-help and democratic commitments to openness and inclusivity.

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KEYWORDS Assemblage; social enterprise; Scotland; social entrepreneurship; community business; collaborative governance; social movement

Introduction

The *new public governance* turn (Osborne 2006) has led scholars to focus on relational dynamics within public service ecosystems (Osborne et al. 2022; Skålén, Engen, and Jenhaug 2024; Strokosch and Osborne 2020). Particular emphasis is on the ways governments, social movements, and citizens collaborate to enhance public value (Brandsen and Pestoff 2006; Bryson et al. 2017; Calò, Sancino, and Scognamiglio 2024; Calò, Teasdale, et al. 2024; Chandra and Teasdale 2025; Pestoff 2014; Teasdale and Dey 2019). Understandably, much of this work approaches these relations from a governmental perspective, often drawing on variants of field theory

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(Barman 2016; Fligstein and McAdam 2012). The underlying theoretical assumption is that civil society organizations, social movements, and social enterprises occupy sub-fields that are structured by the state (Barman 2016; Fligstein and McAdam 2012). Consequently, we have not moved beyond path-dependent accounts of how collaborative arrangements evolve (McMullin 2024) and lack the theoretical tools to understand what alternative outcomes might have been. Insufficient attention is paid to who governs, who is excluded, and how power is exercised (Sahamies and Anttiroiko 2024). The ecosystem metaphor potentially obscures issues of democratic accountability, legitimacy and public value (Sahamies and Anttiroiko 2024; Skålén, Engen, and Jenhaug 2024). Power struggles to define *what is seen to have* public value are downplayed by a focus on social movements and citizens' organizations role as proxies for, and activators of, service user involvement in public services (Mazzei et al. 2020; Terstriep et al. 2025). What is required instead, we contend, is a sensitivity to flatter ontologies which permit relational analyses focusing on the interplay between actors and objects, the wider societal context, and values (Rossi and Tuurnas 2021; Strokosch and Osborne 2020).

Our focus on this paper is the historical evolution of the social enterprise 'ecosystem' in Scotland. Our research began as a phenomena-driven puzzle. All authors have engaged in researching social enterprise in Scotland, from its emergence as an oppositional practice challenging the state, to its current – and somewhat paradoxical – role as an instrumental partner advancing governmental ambitions for 'inclusive growth' (O'Connor et al. 2024). Academic literature has curiously little to say on this, and the ecosystem perspective is unhelpful in addressing this puzzle. As we moved between data, analysis and theory, we were drawn towards assemblage thinking as developed by Deleuze, Guattari, and Massumi (1988) to understand why radical movements of the left often fail (Nail 2017; Savage 2020). Assemblage thinking is thus well-placed to examine the shifting interface between the state and social movements. Here we conceptualize the social enterprise 'ecosystem' [henceforth 'assemblage'] as consisting of heterogenous components: actors, organizational traditions, policies, symbols, and values (Baker and McGuirk 2017; Nail 2017; Savage 2020). This assemblage works to imbue the concept of social enterprise with values in order to stimulate (or deflect) desire for social and policy change (Nicholls and Teasdale 2019; Teasdale 2012). In this article, we demonstrate the utility of assemblage thinking in helping answer our research question: how and why do such seemingly revolutionary social movements eventually become part of the state apparatus?

We begin by providing contextual background on social enterprise in Scotland. Scotland seemingly offers ideal conditions for collaboration between government and social enterprises given a supportive centre-left

government and the historical association of values congruent with the left (see Roy et al. 2015). Our study traces the emergence and shifting coalitions of an increasingly influential network of actors from support bodies, powerful social enterprises, and, later, government. Our findings are structured around visual representations of three distinct forms of social enterprise assemblage, separated by discontinuities in temporal flow (Bird 1992). These help us illustrate how social enterprise evolved from a nomadic assemblage of radical ideas and actors at the turn of the millennium into a more statist assemblage (circa 2022), where social enterprise becomes part of a government apparatus, structured around hierarchy and control, and arranged around the fulfilment of political objectives.

A feature of phenomena-driven research is that research problems emerge much later in the study (S. Wright, 2011). As we moved iteratively between data, analytical interpretations, and the broader academic literature(s), we recognized that insights from our case possess wider theoretical significance – not only for understanding social enterprise across diverse countries and contexts – but also for examining the evolving interface between governments and social movements. Our paper therefore contributes to both social enterprise and public management scholarship by integrating assemblage thinking. First, we move beyond the ecosystem perspective in our novel framing of social enterprise. This framing highlights how meanings and practices shift through ongoing processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization (as will be explained), supporting understanding not just of what social enterprise is, and entails, but also how it changes over time and context. Our analysis shows, at different points in time, that social enterprise in Scotland was assembled around different values by different sets of powerful actors. In leaving space for agency, assemblage thinking invites us to imagine alternative trajectories: what if different decisions had been taken? Our discussion section explores such alternative possibilities. In the process, we identify a structural tension, between values of autonomy and collective self-help, and commitments to openness and inclusivity. This tension helps explain how radical agendas become diluted as social movements are absorbed into state structures. Together, these insights offer a critical reappraisal of the evolving relationship between social movements and the state, with implications for both theory and practice.

Social enterprise in Scotland

Social enterprise is usually studied by business scholars. Here it tends to be portrayed as signifying the potential for a more enlightened capitalism (e.g. Shaw and de Bruin 2013; Vedula et al. 2022). Research has tended to focus on the organizational challenges in managing tensions between social and commercial objectives (e.g. Smith, Gonin, and Besharov 2013). From

a public management perspective, the focus tends to be on how social enterprises can be included within public service ecosystems to co-produce public value (Calò, Sancino, and Scognamiglio 2024; Mazzei et al. 2020; Strokosch and Osborne 2020; Teasdale and Dey 2019). This literature tends to neglect earlier work on social enterprise as a more oppositional practice to state power (see for example, Borzaga and Defourny 2001; Nyssens 2006; Ridley-Duff and Bull 2015; Teasdale 2012). It is apparent that the meanings and varieties of social enterprise vary across time and context (Defourny, Nyssens, and Brolis 2021; Kerlin 2009; Teasdale 2012). In many countries, social enterprise emerged as a radical alternative to New Right governments of the late 20th century, such as in England, where social enterprise emerged as a substitute for state provision of goods and services in working-class communities (Murray 2019; Ridley-Duff and Bull 2015). Social enterprises are generally perceived as value-led businesses whose organizational practices enact the values of their members (Powell and Berry 2021; Powell, Gillett, and Doherty 2019). These practices may include, for example, the distribution of surpluses to members or beneficiaries (Teasdale 2012), democratic governance (Defourny, Nyssens, and Brolis 2021), and/or the prioritization of the environment over profit (Picciotti 2017). However, given the heterogeneity of social enterprises (Defourny, Nyssens, and Brolis 2021), it is problematic to assume that they share a common value set. Instead, they are spaces where different combinations of values are negotiated and recombined through organizational practice (Bull and Ridley-Duff 2019; Chatterjee, Cornelissen, and Wincent 2021; Gehman, Grimes, and Cao 2019). Networks and organizational actors have emerged to support and advocate for social enterprise (see Roy and Hazenberg 2019), often leading to a central role in public service delivery (Calò, Sancino, and Scognamiglio 2024; Calò, Scognamiglio, et al. 2024; Choi, Berry, and Ghadimi 2020). While much of the academic literature focuses on the business support role of the social enterprise assemblage, of more relevance to this article is the advocacy role of the assemblage in persuading policymakers that social enterprise offers solutions to pressing social problems (Nicholls and Teasdale 2019). A sub-field of social enterprise research has focused on the role of powerful networks in shaping how social enterprise is perceived, by saying which organizations and organizational types are included (Dey, Schneider, and Maier 2016; Hervieux and Voltan 2018; Nicholls 2010; Teasdale et al. 2021). Building from this, our focus in this paper is the role of the assemblage in shaping perceptions of what social enterprise is, and shaping desire for social change.

Our empirical focus is Scotland, which has been described by politicians as 'the most supportive environment in the world for social enterprise' (Roy et al. 2015, 777). Other governments have looked towards Scotland as an example of a nation with a particularly effective ecosystem of support and

have sought to emulate and implement components of this in their own countries (see, for example, Victoria State Government 2017). A recent social enterprise census in Scotland revealed that, in a country of around 5.5 million people, there were just over 6,100 social enterprises (Diffley Partnership 2025). Social enterprises are defined by the Scottish Government as organizations which 'trade for the common good. They address social needs, strengthen communities, improve people's life chances or protect the environment' (Scottish Government 2016, 8). Currently, Social Enterprise Scotland (SES) serves as the 'single, enhanced intermediary body' for social enterprise in Scotland (SES 2022), acting as a single point of contact between government and the social enterprise assemblage. Alongside SES, a complex architecture of intermediary and membership organizations for social enterprise has developed over time, such as CEIS (Community Enterprise in Scotland), Development Trusts Association Scotland, Social Enterprise Academy, Firstport, and Social Investment Scotland. These, and others, contribute to a complex and intertwined assemblage of actors, organizations and values working (at least from a Scottish Government perspective) to deliver upon the ambitions outlined in Scotland's ten-year national social enterprise strategy published in 2016 (Scottish Government 2016).

Radical roots

In this section, we briefly outline the radical roots of social enterprise prior to 1997 (when it first emerged as a concept) and position it as a movement for social change in Scotland. For a more detailed account see Murray (2019).

In 1979, Thatcher's Conservative government came to power on a platform of economic transformation. In Scotland, whole industries disappeared, and communities were 'decimated' (Collins 2011). Partly in response to alienation, economic crisis, and mass unemployment, a community business movement arose from alliances of community development workers, local authorities, community activists, and communities themselves (Murray 2019; see also Roy et al. 2015).

Community businesses were 'alternative' enterprises built upon collective values (Hayton 1997). As an explicit rejection of the for-private-profit motive, they were owned and controlled by local communities, with profits used to generate further employment or invest in community projects (Community Business Scotland 1984). They sought to avoid government funding 'to ensure that Community Businesses continue to be community-based and not imposed by local and central government agencies' (Community Business Scotland 1987, 15). The community business movement began to dissipate in the 1990s, as a series of reports highlighted their dependence on public funding. In 1995, one community business security company in a deprived area of

Paisley – FCB Securities Ltd – became embroiled in scandal when it was revealed to be the front for significant drug dealing and money lending (Collins 2011). While the revolutionary potential of community business was never realized, these 'lines of flight' had created revolutionary actors, networks, and intermediaries such as CEIS, loosely amalgamated around the autonomous values; notably, the importance of autonomy and self-help, community ownership, and the reinvestment of profits (Murray 2019).

Assemblage thinking

Assemblage thinking was developed by Deleuze and Guattari during their multi-year project *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. It is mainly presented across two books – *Anti-Oedipus* (Deleuze and Guattari 1984) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (Deleuze, Guattari, and Massumi 1988) – and addresses how intersecting and even conflicting movements might work on the margins of the state to achieve freedom and equality (Tampio 2009).

According to assemblage thinking, social entities consist of a variety of heterogenous components: actors, values, and objects. For example, a body of work exists on Housing First as a policy assemblage (Baker and McGuirk 2017). The assemblage consists not only of the policy – Housing First – but also of the policymakers, advocates, housing providers, service organizations, clients, and evidence from research. All these components could potentially be arranged in different ways to produce different effects.

While a full articulation of assemblage thinking lies beyond the scope of this paper, we delineate three key aspects of assemblage thinking that are central to this study: the phenomena that constitute an assemblage; the ways these phenomena are structured; and the dimensions of change that alter an assemblage's phenomena and structure (see Baker and McGuirk 2017; Buchanan 2020; Nail 2017; Naylor 2024; Savage 2020).

Phenomena

An assemblage consists of three interrelated phenomena: elements, agents, and conditions (Naylor 2024). These elements are the material components that collectively constitute the assemblage (Deleuze, Guattari, and Massumi 1988). In the context of Scottish social enterprise, these elements include, for example, social enterprises themselves; intermediary and membership bodies like Social Enterprise Scotland; policy documents such as *Scotland's Social Enterprise Strategy 2016–2026*; and regulatory tools such as *The Voluntary Code of Practice for Social Enterprise in Scotland*. These heterogenous elements exist in dynamic relationships, continually reshaped by and reshaping the assemblage's structure (Buchanan 2015).

Agents connect elements, creating relationships between them. In the Scottish social enterprise assemblage, agents include policymakers, social entrepreneurs and funders. These agents link symbolic expressions – values such as mutual aid and self-help – with material content such as governance models or legal frameworks preventing the assets of social enterprises being sold off for private gain (the so-called 'asset lock').

Conditions provide the underlying framework that binds elements and agents together, shaping their relationships and possibilities. In the Scottish social enterprise assemblage, conditions include overarching themes like Scotland's policy emphasis on 'inclusive growth' and historical legacies of cooperative and community development. Together, these three phenomena define the mutually constitutive relational structure within which the assemblage takes form.

Types of assemblage structures

Deleuze, Guattari, and Massumi (1988) identify four broad types of assemblage, which represent distinct ways of laying out the phenomena within them: territorial, state, capitalist, and nomadic (Nail 2017). In this article, our focus is on the trajectory between 'nomadic' and 'state' assemblages.

State assemblages are arranged to unify heterogenous elements – such as actors, values, and policies – into a 'vertical, hierarchized aggregate' (Deleuze, Guattari, and Massumi 1988, 539). This structure seeks to centralize control and manage external influences by either incorporating them into the assemblage or severing their relations with other elements. A government bureaucracy exemplifies a state assemblage, whereby hierarchical layers of authority work to coordinate actions and enforce rules, limiting external interference.

Nomadic assemblages are laid out so that the different elements are free to change or enter new combinations, unstructured by natural or hierarchical forces. They are 'nomadic' since they are not geared towards a particular endpoint. Nomadic assemblages are laid out in ways that emphasize equal participation. As the least-ordered and most fluid type of assemblage, nomadic assemblages are also inherently more prone to instability.

Modes of transformation

A key strength of assemblage thinking lies in its ability to capture dimensions of change. An important concept here is *lines of flight* which are 'ruptures, cuts, and cracks' marking 'ongoing processes of resistance-permeated experimentation' mobilized through practices of discontinuity (Wood and Brown 2011, 519). Lines of flight may lead to the emergence of revolutionary social movements (Deleuze and Guattari 1994) where

they build upon multiple connections of actors and ideas. In seeking to build a new movement, the community business activists, referred to in the previous section, pursued lines of flight from the established state assemblage.

Assemblages are not fixed but tend to change shape over time (Legg 2011). The concept of *deterritorialization* describes the dismantling of relations within the assemblage, and removal of some elements (Nail 2017, 34–36). Deterritorialization is often accompanied by reterritorialization, whereby dominant systems attempt to absorb or neutralize change. This cyclical interplay ensures that assemblages are constantly evolving as components are added and removed (Nail 2017). Therefore, an assemblage of one type may, over time, transform into a different type of assemblage. Now that we have set out our theoretical framework, we next turn attention to the methods employed in our study.

Methodology

Our concern was to understand how and why a seemingly revolutionary social enterprise movement in Scotland eventually became part of the state apparatus. Informed by assemblage thinking, we focused our attention on tracing and analysing the dynamic interplay between actors and networks (agents), as they sought to link values (expressive content) to elements (policies and definitions of social enterprise) to affect change. We focused on the period since 1997, when the New Labour government was elected in the UK, ending 18 years of Thatcherism and a New Right government, and when the term 'social enterprise' began to be adopted in UK policy discourse (Teasdale 2012).

Adopting an 'assemblage thinking as methodology' approach that involves drawing together whatever data sources are appropriate (Baker and McGuirk 2017), we combined two separate studies (or components) that together help address our research question. In the first study (Study A) we analysed key documents to identify the changing values attached to the social enterprise concept in government strategy documents (Scottish Government 2016, 2021). We contextualized this through a wider reading of archival materials, with the aim of building a picture of the powerful actors and networks shaping the concept over time. This was augmented by a second study (Study B), which involved qualitative interviews previously conducted with key actors involved with the Scottish social enterprise 'sector'.

Study A

We began with an analysis of materials listed in Appendix A, which included over 50 documents such as annual reports, meeting minutes, newspaper clippings, and conference proceedings related to community business, social enterprise, and the broader third sector, archived at the Social Enterprise Collection (Scotland), or SEC(S). Documents were purposively sampled based on titles, content summaries (where available), and relevance to discourses surrounding social enterprise and community business models. While our focus was on the post-1997 period, we retained a small number of earlier documents that provided essential historical context (e.g. on antecedent movements such as community business). To mitigate bias, we sought to include materials from a broad range of actor networks and coalitions. While we cannot claim a fully balanced account, we aimed to reflect the field's diversity of traditions and perspectives as far as possible. The final selection reflected a saturation point in relation to our research focus; additional materials were excluded where they lacked substantive relevance or duplicated existing insights. In our analysis, we homed in on the official government sources (i.e. the Social Enterprise Strategies) as authoritative articulations of social enterprise values and identity (at least from the perspective of powerful governmental actors) at their time of publication. Other archival documents were treated as 'documents in action' (A. Wright, 2011) illustrating the less prominent perspectives of those who produced them who were often not fully involved in the policy process.

As we engaged with these documents, we were drawn towards assemblage thinking as a way of making sense of them. This in turn led us to abductively (viz. Peirce 1932) develop theory-based codes around networks, actors, values, definitions of social enterprise, and processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. A narrative account of how the assemblage changed over time, and how it became central to Scottish policy, was then developed by Author 1. This provided the basis for mapping and visualizing the assemblage at different points in time, which was later refined using insights from Study B.

Study B

The second study involved a re-analysis of 24 semi-structured interviews with 23 individuals, originally conducted by Author 2 (between June 2021 and January 2023) as part of a separate project examining the co-production of Scotland's Social Enterprise Strategy. Although that project was framed around policy co-production, the interview guide explicitly invited participants to reflect on the longer history of social enterprise in Scotland, including key events, actor relationships, and political shifts dating back to the

1980s. As such, the interviews generated valuable insights into the contested meanings and shifting actor relations within the social enterprise assemblage.

Participants were purposively sampled for their involvement in the development or implementation of Scottish social enterprise policy and networks. Initial interviewees ($n = 10$) were selected for their proximity to key policy processes, with further participants recruited via snowball sampling to map connections and gather perspectives from across the sector. While sampling was not explicitly guided by assemblage thinking, care was taken to include actors from across the sector's varied organizational traditions, sectors, and coalitions. This included participants from public institutions, intermediary bodies, delivery organizations, and frontline social enterprises (see Appendix B). As with Study A, this diversity was intended to mitigate bias and avoid overrepresenting any single tradition, while recognizing that some voices are inevitably more prominent than others. Interviews lasted approximately one hour each, ranging from 45 to 105 minutes.

The interview data were re-analysed by Author 2 using the theory-based codes identified by Author 1 (as above). This generated a second narrative account that helped explain why the assemblage changed over time, particularly by shedding light on the evolving interests, tensions, and alignments among key actors and networks. While this account built upon and engaged with the timeline developed in Study A, it also challenged and extended aspects of that initial narrative. The resulting dialogue between accounts formed the basis for further synthesis.

Relationship between the two studies and synthesis of data

Although Studies A and B were conducted independently (see Figure 1), both examined how the social enterprise assemblage in Scotland emerged and evolved since the late 1990s. Study A offered an archival, document-based perspective that helped trace how the assemblage changed over time – by mapping shifting actors, values, and discourses. Study B provided situated accounts from those involved in shaping the assemblage, offering insight into why these changes occurred – by surfacing evolving interests, tensions, and alignments across networks. Analysing both through a shared theoretical lens allowed us to trace the shifting relations between actors, values, and networks more effectively.

The synthesis process unfolded in several stages. First, the theory-based codes abductively developed in Study A were applied by Author 2 to the Study B interview dataset, enabling a shared conceptual structure across the materials. Author 1 and Author 2 then each produced separate narrative accounts based on their respective materials – focusing, respectively, on how and why the assemblage evolved. These accounts were brought into dialogue through collaborative reflection and negotiated agreement. The resulting

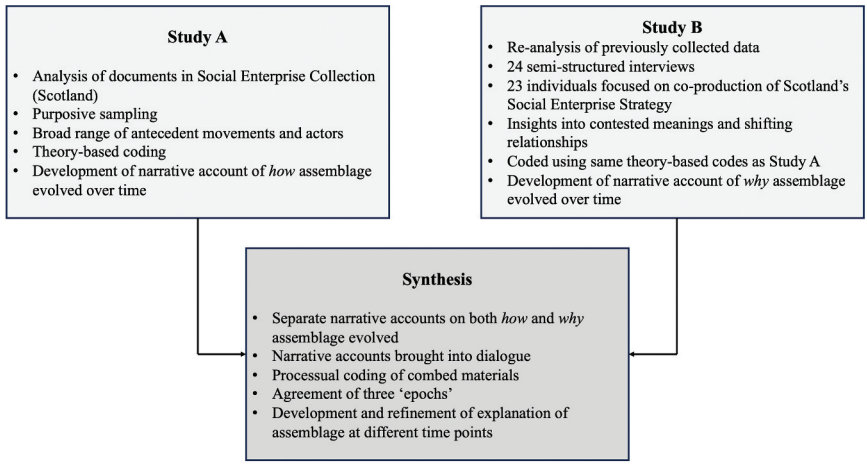

Figure 1. Relationship between the two studies and data synthesis.

synthesis was shaped by the back-and-forth between Authors 1 and 2 and enriched by interpretive input from Authors 3 and 4, who helped refine and extend the final account. Throughout, core themes from assemblage thinking – networks, actors, values, and processes of territorialization – remained central to the dialogue and synthesis.

Building on this foundation, we coded the combined materials 'chrono-processually' to locate events and actions within discrete time periods, loosely following the approach of Kumar (2022) and Aldous and Conroy (2021). This did not always proceed smoothly: pathways from one type of assemblage to another were not necessarily linear. Eventually, we agreed upon three 'epochs' characterized by distinct patterns of relation between networks and values. These epochs are 'bracketed' by key moments in the evolution of social enterprise in Scotland. We considered these key moments as representing changes in the wider political conditions that altered the trajectory of the assemblage. This process enabled us to sketch and refine the key components of the assemblage (*actors*, *networks*, *values*) at different time points, and to identify the periods during which these elements discernibly shifted (including the development of the social enterprise concept, and processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization). Throughout, we moved recursively between data, theory, and contextual knowledge, drawing on interpretive judgement to aid synthesis. The resulting account reflects a synthesis shaped through collaborative agreement among all authors.

We fully acknowledge that the analytical construction presented over the remainder of this article is only one possible genealogy of social enterprise in Scotland. Each of the authors has been involved in researching social enterprise for between 5 and 20 years, and we have tried, as far

as possible, to use this multiplicity of perspectives to foster a comprehensive approach-one which we believe limits the risk of the narrative being confined to a single viewpoint. In outlining our processes as clearly as possible above, we aim to help the reader follow and interpret our analytical journey.

Where interview quotes are used, participants are identified by their sector affiliation and a number, in accordance with university ethical approval received for this research. All quoted archive documents and other references to grey literature are directly cited.

Findings

This findings section is structured around three 'epochs', bracketed by events in the wider political landscape that altered the trajectory of the social enterprise assemblage. For each epoch, we construct a narrative account from the interviews and policy documents described in our methodology section. Although these epochs are presented as discrete, in practice there is considerable overlap. We also draw upon the same data sources to construct visual representations of the social enterprise assemblage during each epoch. Each representation illustrates how the assemblage is structured (whether hierarchically or in ways that emphasize equal participation); the roles and positions of different organizational actors and networks (or agents); the values (symbolic expressions associated with social enterprise); and how these are attached to material content (such as governance models or legal frameworks) in ways that stimulate desire for social enterprise and social change (see Figure 2).

1998–2007: a nomadic assemblage

Nomadic assemblages are characterized by fluid relationships between elements and the absence of hierarchical leadership (Nail 2017). The emphasis is on the journey rather than any fixed end goal. They are formed where lines of flight lead to ruptures in existing practices of thinking and doing (Deleuze and Guattari 1994).

A meeting of community business activists in late 1998, hosted by the Big Issue (Scotland) identified the need for a network to enable regular contact between participants. In response, Senscot (Social Entrepreneurs Network for Scotland) was formed in 1999. One interviewee noted:

> In those early days, it was very much about independence from local government or national government, and the trading notion was a means of giving you that independence. (Third Sector Intermediary 3)

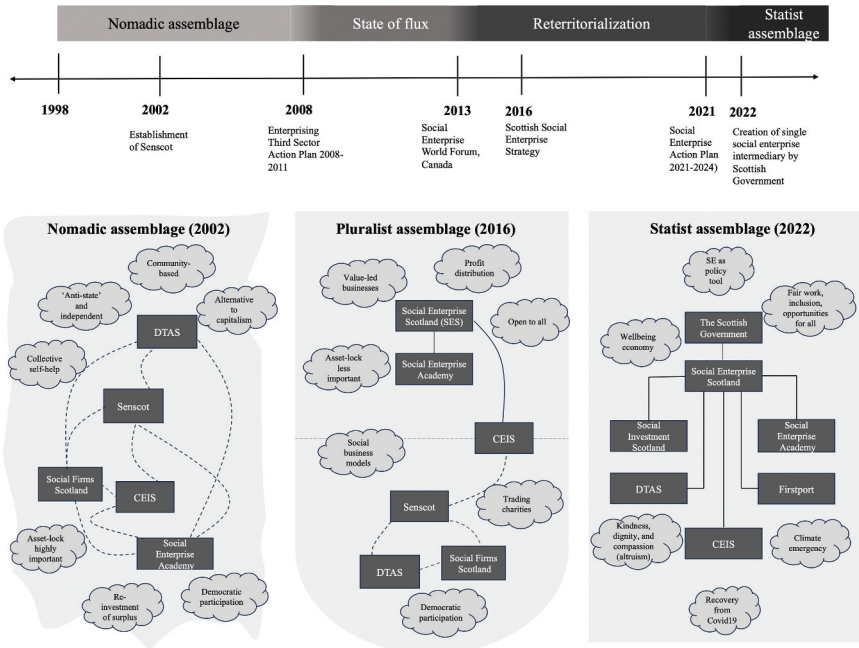

Figure 2. The shifting social enterprise assemblage.

They saw social entrepreneurship as a *collective* practice with a community orientation. Thus, the choice by these activists to start using the language of social entrepreneurship was pragmatic, particularly in a context where the community business movement had fallen out of favour (Hayton 1997, 2000).

By 2002, Senscot had created an incubation space in Edinburgh. This subsequently spawned many social enterprise intermediaries, including the Development Trusts Association Scotland, the Social Enterprise Academy, the Social Enterprise Coalition (which later became Social Enterprise Scotland), and Social Firms Scotland (Pia 2022). In an archive document outlining the evolution of Senscot and its contributions to the sector, Pia (2022, 1) notes there was 'a conscious effort not to create a large, centralised "intermediary" organisation' but rather to 'put in place a support infrastructure for a strong and sustainable social enterprise community in Scotland' and to support social entrepreneurs.

According to this document, Senscot maintained several key principles to achieve this ambition:

- letting the 'network' determine what might be required next;
- taking and developing initiatives only in areas with no existing 'players';
- forming coalitions and partnerships wherever possible;

• relinquishing ownership and control of new initiatives – by spinning them off into independent companies – as soon as practicably possible;

• offering unrestricted access to … materials on 'open source' principles (Pia 2022).

These principles approximate to a nomadic assemblage. During this period, participation in the social enterprise assemblage was democratic and open to all, albeit more in a participatory, rather than a formal 'one member, one vote' sense. Nevertheless, there were some conditions laid out to structure the effects of social enterprise around particular values. Surpluses had to be retained within the social enterprise or reinvested for community benefit, and the assets of social enterprises were 'locked' to prevent them being sold off for private gain (viz. Pearce 2003). Deriving from community business antecedents, the values attached to social enterprises prioritized collective self-help and mutual aid, combined with principles of openness and inclusivity. The aim was to build networks of organizations which offered an alternative to capitalist self-interest. Notably, however, social enterprise during this period was not especially anti-state. Indeed, the movement was principally funded by European sources and by local authorities. Nevertheless, there was a strong desire for autonomy.

2008–12 state of flux

Assemblages are distinguished by varying degrees of fluidity between their various elements (Deleuze and Guattari 1994). Nomadic assemblages are more open to dissensus and the emergence of new elements, whereas state assemblages seek to control and codify these elements (Nail 2017).

In 2007, the pro-independence Scottish National Party (SNP) came to power in Scotland and subsequently became entrenched as the dominant political party. From the outset, they expressed a strong commitment to social enterprise (Roy et al. 2015). SNP policy rhetoric emphasized the need for a social democratic Scotland, with a focus on equality and 'inclusive growth'. Key actors in the social enterprise sector viewed this change in government as a window of opportunity for social enterprise:

> From the sector's side, to have had doors closed in government for decades … and suddenly a new willingness in government to collaborate and to support. And to have [now First Minister] John Swinney as champion … who would turn up to events, he would say how important this is to government. (Third Sector Delivery Organisation 1)

By 2008, a recognized social enterprise infrastructure was in place, involving the intermediaries spawned by Senscot. Many of these intermediaries shared Senscot's values around democratic participation and

control and the non-distribution of profits. More government funding became available for social enterprise following the *Enterprising Third Sector Action Plan 2008–2011* (Scottish Government 2008). This funding included a £30 m Scottish Investment Fund (2008–2011) that provided both grants and loans; a Third Sector Enterprise Fund of £12 m; and a £1 m Social Entrepreneurs Fund (Alcock 2010; Alcock et al. 2012).

This increased policy attention and funding attracted people to social enterprise who did not always share the values of Senscot. Some organizational actors, including Social Enterprise Scotland and later Social Investment Scotland, began to question whether limited distribution of surpluses was necessarily problematic. At a time when the discourse of 'inclusive growth' suggested that pursuit of private profit and greater equality could be compatible, they argued that it was possible to 'do good' and create profit simultaneously. While considerable debate ensued around the 'ethos' of social enterprise, many actors welcomed the expansion of the assemblage and began to see social enterprise as a way of affecting not just communities, but also the way that business was being conducted in Scotland generally. New forms of social business emerged that were not necessarily rooted in geographical communities but combined social purpose with a more mainstream, 'business-like' approach. A strong champion of the community business movement reflected on this shift:

> Through Senscot, but before that CBS [Community Business Scotland] . . . we had to make a very clear definition of what we actually mean by [social enterprise]. But then other people . . . who want to move it in a slightly different direction then reinterpret it . . . but their reinterpretation of it muddies the water. (Third Sector Intermediary 6)

These new ideas and organizations were cautiously welcomed. There was enough funding for all, and many recognized the need to balance the preservation of historical traditions with the creation of a mainstream movement. Several interviewees reflected on how this period marked contestation over the values attached to social enterprise. For example, one leader of an intermediary organization highlighted how the notion of an 'asset lock' (designed to prevent the assets of social enterprises being sold for private gain) became a key site of struggle:

> Some people either don't understand . . . or are choosing not to understand why it became so important. But as social enterprise . . . started to get a higher profile, it became a magnet for other people to get involved. . . . And as more and more people came into the sector, they might not have had any background or history or experience of being in the third sector. So, they weren't really aware of these fairly fundamental values and principles about the asset lock . . . certain organisations or individuals with a profile were getting involved and the people in the sector were kind of a wee bit starry eyed. And

> that [power and political influence] became more important [than] what the core principles were. (Third Sector Intermediary 3)

This period from around 2008 to 2012 can therefore be seen as one of considerable flux for the social enterprise assemblage. The open network approach advocated by Senscot, combined with considerable government funding, had attracted new actors and organizations into social enterprise. These entrants introduced new values, notably moving the assemblage away from a focus on place-based development and the rejection of private profit. The assemblage was in a state of flux; no longer largely nomadic, but not fully statist or capitalist either (see Figure 2).

2013–21: reterritorialization

Reterritorialization is the process through which the state obstructs and incorporates revolutionary movements or lines of flight by accepting (some of) their demands (Nail 2017).

In May 2011, the SNP became a majority government with a mandate to take forward their agenda around inclusive economic growth (Osborne 2012) and a referendum on Scottish independence. As one actor who was working within the Scottish Government in the run-up to the 2014 independence referendum described, 'sitting underneath' the constitutional debate:

> . . . was a huge sort of discourse [and/] or contemplation about what kind of society [was wanted] . . . and where [Scotland] might go in the future . . . [and] the third sector had a major role to play . . .. (Public Sector Actor 1)

Against this backdrop, several actors from the Scottish social enterprise assemblage, along with key public sector officials, attended the Social Enterprise World Forum (SEWF) in Calgary in 2013. According to three different interviewees, this was the first occasion on which the idea of a long-term social enterprise strategy was mooted. After the delegation returned, there was an important session at the 2014 CEIS Policy Conference. A Scottish Government official recalled how that session was almost 'the genesis of, "We're going to do something very specific on social enterprise"' (Public Sector Actor 1).

As the remit for a ten-year strategy emerged, several key actors in the assemblage commissioned Social Value Lab to synthesize perspectives from across the sector. According to one social enterprise intermediary, the resulting document – *Scotland's Vision for Social Enterprise 2025: Moving Social Enterprise in from the Margins to the Mainstream* (Coburn 2015) – reflected a desire to be part of the policy conversation. They recognized that social enterprise was now firmly on the Scottish Government's agenda, clearly aligned with several core areas of government policy, and they did not want to miss a window of opportunity.

We can see throughout the Scottish Social Enterprise Strategy (Scottish Government 2016) a discursive emphasis on the strategy being 'co-produced' with the sector. From the Introduction:

> This strategy ... has been developed through a process of co-production, where the Scottish Government has worked with the social enterprise community to articulate shared ambitions and find ways to deliver on these (Scottish Government 2016, 6)

From the perspective of some actors, collaboration with a sympathetic Scottish Government offered an opportunity to 'co-create' a new social enterprise assemblage alongside policymakers.

However, during the co-production of the strategy, tensions began to surface between the older, nomadic, assemblage and those associated with a newer, more business-oriented approach to social enterprise. The Strategy acknowledges a wider movement that includes democratic and member-led enterprises but also highlights the increasing presence of (often for-profit) 'socially responsible businesses':

> [We] welcome new ideas and business models that respect the established ethos and values of the sector—a commitment by all social enterprises to use assets and surpluses for the public good and to operate in the wider interests of society. (IScottish Government 2016, 8)

Additionally, delivery of the Strategy did not always live up to the expectations of those from the earlier nomadic assemblage. Reflecting on the gap between the Strategy's rhetoric and the policy actions in the first Action Plan (published in 2017), one intermediary commented:

> I think that ... probably a lot of the sector ... probably felt as if we kinda lost a bit of ownership around it at that time. And I think that's just a natural thing when resource becomes available. (Third Sector Intermediary 2)

Tellingly, during informal interviews with government officials, we observed exasperation about the need to continually negotiate with a wide range of actors. From their perspective, so long as the values and traditions of the wider sector were incorporated into social enterprise meanings, was it necessary to 'consult' and 'co-produce' with *all* the actors involved?

This period – from approximately 2013 to 2021 – marks a transformation in the social enterprise assemblage. It begins to take a markedly different form and is gradually reterritorialized into the state; albeit a different form of 'state' from which the original lines of flight emerged. We can observe growing tensions between key actors, particularly surrounding issues of profit distribution and the values that should define social enterprise. These tensions translated into power struggles over influence with the Scottish Government, with actors from the original nomadic assemblage becoming increasingly marginalized, and newer entrants gaining influence

in shaping the dominant understanding of social enterprise as an 'inclusive church' open to all value-led businesses (see Figure 2).

2022- A statist assemblage

State assemblages are structured around hierarchy and control, such that relations between elements are strictly controlled (Deleuze, Guattari, and Massumi 1988; Nail 2017). This aims to reduce flux. Where ruptures do emerge, dissensus can lead to deterritorialization from the assemblage.

In 2021, the second of three Social Enterprise Action Plans associated with the 10-year strategy was published: *Inclusive Growth Through Social Enterprise: Scotland's Social Enterprise Action Plan / 2021–2024*. A rhetorical emphasis on collaboration remained:

> Strong collaboration has helped to shape this action plan. It was informed by an extensive process of consultation throughout the social enterprise sector. (Scottish Government 2021, 10)

Yet some actors within the assemblage felt excluded from the government-led consultation process. One interviewee noted that engagement with the sector relied upon the 'usual suspect' organizational actors. This:

> wasn't ideal because it was almost like [the Scottish Government got] a group of stakeholders, many of whom [had] an element of self-interest in terms of how the resources [were] allocated and then they [came] up with a draft outline and then [went] out for consultation. (Social Enterprise Leader 1)

The second Action Plan set out plans to promote social enterprise in schools, invest in start-up funds to support social enterprises, establish a loan fund, and provide business support (Scottish Government 2021). Notably, these were activities lobbied for, and delivered by, a particular set group of newer entrants to the social enterprise assemblage.

The Scottish Government argued that the original nomads (such as Senscot) had already helped shape the values and practices of social enterprise. The next step was to incorporate new ideas and voices to spark 'creativity and innovation':

> You can only really embrace the ideologies of people you've brought into that process and there has to be a recognition that things will be changing outside that process . . . You can't have the same innovative 20 people at the start of a ten-year process contributing to that innovation in the same way because then you're not recognising everything that's going on around that process and outside that process. (Public Sector Actor 7)

This exclusion, or deterritorialization, of agents and symbolic expressions from the early nomadic assemblage was thus justified on the basis that their ideas and values had already been incorporated into the Strategy.

During this movement towards a statist assemblage, social enterprise had become a policy tool – something to help the Scottish Government deliver its objectives:

> Social enterprises demonstrate how Scotland's businesses can help us work towards a modern wellbeing economy through prioritising sustainable growth, environmental responsibility, promoting fair work, inclusion and opportunities for all. (Scottish Government 2021, 8)

Social enterprises had thus become businesses with social purpose, characterized by shared values of 'kindness', 'dignity', and 'compassion'. Their utility to the public sector was increasingly expressed in terms of 'realising market opportunities', 'sustainable procurement', and participation in 'corporate supply chains' (Scottish Government 2021). These values and effects are somewhat removed from those of the nomadic assemblage outlined earlier. Processes of reterritorialization brought the concept of social enterprise into a statist assemblage. Many of the values and traditions of the past had become lost along the journey. And finally, perhaps to ensure these traditions do not re-emerge, the Scottish Government proposed consolidating sector representation into 'one clear voice', advocating for the sector, replacing the previously plural intermediary structure. This creates a 'vertical, hierarchized aggregate' (Deleuze, Guattari, and Massumi 1988, 539) that cuts off relations with other elements:

> As part of the changing landscape and in line with international comparisons we believe that the support provided to the Social Enterprise sector will be best served by having one clear voice advocating for it (Scottish Government 2021, 35)

Over the following year, a power struggle unfolded between allies of Senscot and newer social business actors, such as Social Enterprise Scotland, over who should become the single intermediary. With the benefit of hindsight, this battle had really been fought since 2008, but perhaps Senscot had not fully recognized both the dangers of first opening the assemblage to those with different values, and of reterritorialization by government. In March 2022, after a drawn-out commissioning process, Social Enterprise Scotland was granted the status of single intermediary for social enterprise in Scotland, with government funding for Senscot withdrawn. The 'new' statist assemblage was 'arranged in such a way that the conditioning relations attempt to unify or totalize all the concrete elements and agencies in the assemblage' (Nail 2017, 30). Social enterprise had become something qualitatively different. The Scottish Government reterritorialized some elements while deterritorializing original agents and values, notably self-help, democracy, and autonomy (see Figure 2).

Discussion and conclusion

We set out to understand how what has been presented in popular and academic literature as a revolutionary social enterprise movement – emerging in opposition to the New Right government in the United Kingdom of the late 20th century – eventually became part of the state assemblage. We identified three 'epochs' (1998–2007; 2008–21; 2022-) and showed how the relationships between actors, organizations, and values shifted across these periods. This allowed us to present a genealogy of social enterprise in Scotland, beginning with the revolutionary potential of community business as a response to Thatcherism in the 1980s, through to a nomadic assemblage of radical actors in the early 2000s united around a loose set of shared values. As policy support and funding flowed into the sector, particularly following the election of the SNP Government, we observed early signs of flux as new entrants were attracted. The period after 2013 saw the gradual reterritorialization of social enterprise into the state assemblage (albeit a Scottish, rather than UK, statist structure). The 'taming' of social enterprise values and partial incorporation of the movement into the state assemblage came as resources flowed into the sector from government (particularly following 2008) and new actors sought to align the values of social enterprise with governmental objectives to secure these resources (see Table 1).

Our assemblage approach helps make three main contributions at the interface of public management and social enterprise research. First, we add to literature problematizing a general movement towards new public governance and coproduction (see Bianchi, Nasi, and Rivenbark 2021; McMullin 2020; Oliver, Kothari, and Mays 2019) in showing that collaboration between government and civil society/social movements is not inherently positive or transformative even when well-intentioned and under benign conditions. We show how such collaboration can reconfigure power dynamics, reshape values, and co-opt or marginalize more radical ideas and actors. In Scotland, our case illustrates how founding commitments such as collective self-help, autonomy, and democratic participation were gradually displaced by values more compatible with political objectives – such as sustainable procurement and inclusive growth. Rather than fostering pluralism, collaboration can work to stabilize dominant agendas and constrain dissent. Our data suggests that in co-opting social enterprise into public policy, the Scottish Government has changed perceptions of social enterprise such that the values and practices which initially made it attractive to government have been marginalized. This insight connects with, and extends, long-standing Gramscian concerns about the relationship between civil society and the state (Gramsci 2006). For Gramsci, civil society is a space distinct from government: one capable of offering checks, balances, and alternative visions. Historically,

Table 1. Summary of the evolving configuration of actors, networks, and values in the Scottish social enterprise assemblage.

Assemblage type/epoch	Nomadic assemblage (1998–2007)	Pluralist assemblage/State of flux/reterritorialization (2008–2021)	Statist assemblage (2022–)
Main actors	Senscot (Social Entrepreneurs Network for Scotland); Development Trusts Association Scotland (DTAS); Social Firms Scotland; Social Enterprise Academy; Community Enterprise in Scotland (CEIS)	Senscot; Social Enterprise Scotland; Social Enterprise Academy; The Scottish Government; Social Firms Scotland; DTAS; CEIS;	The Scottish Government; Social Enterprise Scotland (as single intermediary); Social Investment Scotland; Social Enterprise Academy; Firstport; DTAS; CEIS
Network configuration	Open and participatory; absence of hierarchical leadership; deliberate non-centralization; network-led emergence of initiatives; relinquishing ownership and control of new initiatives	Expanded and heterogeneous networks; increased state engagement; influx of new organizational actors; continued openness but growing differentiation; overlapping coalitions; heightened contestation over boundaries and influence	Centralized and hierarchical; consolidation of representation into a single intermediary; vertical alignment between government and sector bodies; exclusion or marginalization of legacy nomadic actors; State managed consultation processes
Key values	Collective self-help and mutual aid; community/place-based orientation; democratic participation; reinvestment of surplus for community benefit; asset-lock as highly important; openness and inclusivity; alternative to capitalist self-interest; desire for autonomy from the State	Plural and contested value orientations; continued commitment to democratic participation, community benefit, and asset-lock among legacy actors; increasing acceptance of profit generation and social business models; 'inclusive growth' framing; tension between place-based /community traditions and business-oriented interpretations	Social enterprise as policy instrument; working towards a wellbeing economy; fair work, inclusion and opportunities for all; kindness, dignity, and compassion; sustainable procurement and supply-chain participation; alignment with government priorities

authoritarian regimes, such as the Soviet Union and, more recently, Hungary under Viktor Orbán, have sought to neutralize civil society by absorbing it into state structures (Greskovits 2020). Our research demonstrates that similar effects can emerge even under progressive, well-intentioned forms of collaborative governance. These dynamics are not necessarily the result of bad faith or practice but reflect structural tendencies within states (Deleuze and Guattari 1994) towards control, codification, and strategic alignment.

Our second contribution is to theorize social enterprise as an assemblage of values, actors, and organizations, deliberately laid out to affect desire for social change. This perspective synthesizes literatures on the evolution of social entrepreneurship as a concept (Teasdale 2012), the values work of social enterprise (Gehman et al., 2019), and the role of powerful actors in shaping how social enterprise is understood (Nicholls 2010). A distinctive strength of assemblage thinking is its ability to trace how change unfolds through the interlinked processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. Our analysis foregrounds this cyclical and contingent interplay, helping to explain not only what social enterprise is at different moments, but how it evolves through these structuring forces. Although our focus on a single jurisdiction (Scotland) is a limitation, similar processes of transformation – from nomadic to statist assemblages – can be observed elsewhere, including in England, Italy, Korea, South America, and Southeast Asia (Calò, Sancino, and Scognamiglio 2024; Chandra and Teasdale 2025; Hazenberg et al. 2016; Ridley-Duff and Bull 2015). Prior studies have provided seemingly contradictory snapshots of how social enterprise is understood and practiced at different moments or in different contexts (e.g. Defourny, Nyssens, and Brolis 2021, Kerlin 2009 Teasdale 2012). Our assemblage lens shows these divergent interpretations are not necessarily contradictory. Rather, they reflect shifting relationships between agents, values, and policies that reshape the assemblage in different contexts or points in time.

If our first two contributions together address the first part of our research question: how do revolutionary social movements become part of the state apparatus. Our third contribution begins to unpack the 'why' elements of our research question. Our analysis reveals a deeper, underexamined tension in movements of the left: the uneasy coexistence of values like autonomy, redistribution, and collective self-help with democratic commitments to openness and inclusivity. In Scotland, the early nomadic assemblage embraced inclusivity as a founding principle, attracting new actors motivated by a broader desire to 'change the world' through business. Yet these actors did not always share the commitments of the original movement. Over time, this led to a loss of control over what the assemblage affects and how. This tension has received limited attention in social enterprise and public management research. However, similar dynamics are recognized in social movement studies (Benford and Snow 2000; Doherty, Davies, and Tranchell 2013; Teasdale et al. 2023), where mainstreaming is accompanied by a dilution of original values. Our paper makes this tension more visible – not as a failure of governance per se, but as an ongoing challenge in sustaining more radical ideas and agendas within progressive movements for change. Further research is required to understand the boundary conditions of our theorizing. In particular, we should ascertain whether our findings are limited only to those countries such as the United Kingdom where the policy discourse of

co-production and collaboration sits uneasily alongside the levers of new public management (Teasdale and Dey 2019), or do similar processes apply even in more socially democratic welfare regimes (viz. Esping-Andersen 1990)? And relatedly, even in Nordic countries, democratic norms are changing and democratic institutions are being challenged. Assemblage thinking provides us with theoretical and conceptual tools to better understand and predict the consequences.

To the best of our knowledge, nobody has previously used assemblage thinking to explore either social enterprise or public service ecosystems. Our paper potentially makes a significant contribution in extending work on ecosystems by integrating assemblage thinking to better understand and theorize a general tendency for social movements (such as social enterprise) to 'lose their radical edge' as they move from oppositional to collaborative working with governments. We contend that incorporating assemblage thinking into existing work on ecosystems can help move beyond some of the criticisms highlighted at the beginning of this paper. Notably, we depart from field-based perspectives that position social movement fields as subservient to state power (see Barman 2016) and divert attention to the relationships between actors, organizations and values. This, in turn, addresses more fundamental critiques of ecosystem perspectives – that they offer little in the way of explanatory or predictive value. Our relational analysis focusing on the interplay between actors and objects, the wider societal context, and the shifting values that underpin such (Strokosch and Osborne 2020) helps bring a more nuanced but less optimistic perspective on collaborative governance and/or coproduction arrangements between government and social enterprises in suggesting that social movements such as social enterprise will eventually become part of the state apparatus if they engage.

Our findings also raise important implications for practitioners and policymakers working at the intersection of public management and social enterprise. Even when there is genuine desire for collaborative governance and embracing diversity and plurality, such efforts may be constrained by bureaucratic structures and managerial logics rooted in New Public Management (Cairney, Russell, and St Denny 2016; Dan, Lægreid, and Špaček 2024). Our paper illustrates how these dynamics can unfold across time, and points to moments where different choices may well have led to alternative outcomes.

The first moment occurred between 2008 and 2013, a period of significant flux in which the assemblage could have followed different trajectories. As the nomadic assemblage opened to actors with divergent values, it became a more pluralist movement for social change but also risked losing control over its founding values and practices. In being open to outsiders, perhaps the nomads inadvertently diluted the focus on autonomy and self-help. In

mainstreaming a movement for change, the change component became obfuscated. But openness was also a founding value. We could argue that the principles of openness and inclusivity prominent in much of the literature on social enterprise should never have been prioritized to the same extent as values such as autonomy and self-help. Yates (2015) provocatively highlights that the *means* (democratic decision making) of prefigurative politics are regularly indistinguishable from the *ends* since the actions of prefigurative movements are a 'scaled down' expression of the social movement goals. Our case highlights that similar social movements might be advised to practice a form of value prioritization. While principles such as openness and inclusivity are important, they should not be allowed to overshadow the founding values of the movement.

The second key moment came around 2013, when actors entered closer partnership with the Scottish Government. For many, the values and goals of a progressive, social democratic Scotland, appeared compatible with social enterprise. However, as Deleuze, Guattari, and Massumi (1988) remind us, states have an inherent desire to control, codify, and reterritorialize. An alternative trajectory might have been to refuse government money. However, social enterprise in Scotland was never hostile to government *per se*, just the Westminster governments of Thatcher. Indeed, many actors within the social enterprise assemblage deliberately sought wider policy change and influence through their interaction with the Scottish Government. From the perspective of the social movement, the choice may effectively be between gaining a seat at the table, or building an alternative table altogether (Chandra and Teasdale 2025). Our analysis suggests that if the original social enterprise nomads in our study could live their life again, they may not have engaged so closely with government and instead refocused their efforts on building a nomadic assemblage that can offer an alternative to the state.

If we are to practice collaborative governance effectively, then more attention must be paid to restructuring the workings of state machinery in ways that make it more receptive to pluralist movements for change: to listen and learn rather than codify and control. Sympathetic Governments may need to better understand how to accommodate radical perspectives without neutralizing their transformative potential. Equally, social movements and their networks might reflect more critically on how they negotiate alignment, preserve core commitments, and manage the tensions between autonomy and inclusivity. Encouraging work in this respect is ongoing in many countries (particularly in Scandinavia), and sympathetic governments might reasonably seek to learn from the means as well as the stated aims of policy-making in these contexts (Cairney and Widfeldt 2015).

Finally, a more sympathetic reading might be that social enterprise has led to progressive change in Scotland, particularly in the wider ways that

business is practiced, and government collaborates with civil society. A more optimistic argument might be that radical ideas eventually lead to incremental social change even as they are diluted and incorporated into the mainstream. Notably, the actors and radical ideas in this article may have been deterritorialized from social enterprise, but they have not fully disappeared. As Deleuze and Guattari, (1988) remind us, assemblages are never fixed – we are always in a process of 'becoming'. In Scotland, as elsewhere, some actors have taken lines of flight and formed new alliances. No doubt some of these movements will carry the seeds of future assemblages with revolutionary potential.

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