

# I was never in it for the money: Media narratives of celebrity chefs and the gastro-capitalist social entrepreneur

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## Abstract

This article critically interrogates media coverage of Claus Meyer, Danish gastro-entrepreneur, founder of New Nordic Cuisine, and co-founder of the restaurant noma. The article analyzes how the Danish press has constructed Meyer as an exemplary social entrepreneur on a mission to take on established agro-industrial interests and change the ways we produce and consume food. We argue that uncritical media narratives, that positioned Claus Meyer as the little man who successfully took on the establishment, in fact helped to produce brand value for his company in part by glossing over his close ties to state and corporate interests as well as Meyer's quite conventional business practices. The media's portrayal of Meyer as an entrepreneur on a social mission constitutes an uncritical celebration of the social entrepreneur and the marketization of society.

## Keywords

Media, marketization, New Nordic Cuisine, social entrepreneurship, spiritualism

On 1 April 2011, the public Danish radio broadcaster, DR, reported that Claus Meyer, gastro-entrepreneur, TV celebrity, and co-founder of New Nordic Cuisine (NNC) had sold his business empire to a Dubai-based private equity firm. This April Fool's joke had the tone of absurdity that April Fool's jokes usually possess. Such a scenario was remotely

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possible, but highly unlikely because Meyer was of course not the kind of person who would ever sell out. He was at the forefront of a new movement to challenge the corporate industrial food system by focusing on artisanal, local, and seasonal foods. Less than 3 years later, reality caught up with fiction, when Claus Meyer sold his company to the London-based private equity firm, IK Investment Partners, a company registered on the island of Jersey in the English Channel and a well-known tax-shelter<sup>1</sup> (Jakobsgaard and Clement, 2015). The news of the sale made headlines in most major Danish media outlets (Hyltoft, 2014; Jasper, 2014; Krogh-Andersen and Munch-Perrin, 2014; Pedersen, 2014). One journalist described it as ‘almost unnatural’, because ‘what can be further away from each other than a pinstriped private equity company based in London and the gastro-entrepreneurs Claus Meyer and Jacob Grønlykke?’ (Hyltoft, 2014) and the Danish tabloid *BT* covered the sale with the title ‘Meyer has sold out’ (Jasper, 2014). The news coverage around the sale was dominated by a sense of disbelief or disenchantment. Another Danish tabloid, *Ekstra Bladet*, quickly dug into the tax-shelter story as one of Meyer’s companies ran the food service operations of the Danish parliament. Now the lunch money of the nation’s politicians was funneled through a letter-box company in Luxembourg to the owners on Jersey Island they proclaimed (Matthiessen and Miles, 2015). How could Claus Meyer sell his life’s work to big finance? In the coming months, Meyer had to explain to multiple journalists that despite his initial concerns, he thought that the sale would enable him to realize his vision of elevating Danish food quality.<sup>3</sup>

Where journalists and readers apparently struggled to understand the sale, Mads Ryum Larsen, a partner with IK Investment Partners, argued that this was a straightforward business decision because Meyer’s company was very ‘consumer oriented’. Larsen argued that it was crucial to the future success of the Meyer brand ‘. . . that the company’s values take front stage, rather than ours and how we operate as a private equity firm’ (Hyltoft, 2014). The consumer orientation that Ryum Larsen alluded to, was the set of company values that supposedly placed the desire for social change above making profits. This brand image, as being seen as a company out to do good, was what made Meyer’s company so valuable and attractive to IK Investment Partners.

This article presents an inquiry into how it came as such a surprise to the Danish media that Claus Meyer sold his businesses to a private equity firm. Why did the Danish tabloid *BT* conclude that Meyer had ‘sold out’? (Jasper, 2014). After all, is a lucrative sale to an investor not the goal for most start-ups? In this article, we illuminate how the Danish media were spellbound by the figure of the social entrepreneur battling the corporate food system – a figure the media had themselves served to create. This investigation will also help us to understand how Meyer and his companies became able to shake off bad publicity more easily than all other Danish gastro-entrepreneurs and businesses. It is the story of how the media’s attempts to satisfy specific public longings served to put the name of a businessman on something as valuable – in public relations (PR) terms – as a Danish postal stamp.

The social entrepreneur is often described as a person who identifies a social problem and takes action to organize social change. The figure of the social entrepreneur is therefore usually considered an unconditional social good. The social entrepreneur is regarded as the antidote to commercial entrepreneurs who have economic profit as their primary objective (Dey, 2014). We take a critical look at this imaginary of the

social entrepreneur as a catalyst for social change. Our purpose is not to criticize Claus Meyer as a person, but rather to show how the media-constructed figure of Claus Meyer as a social entrepreneur is situated within particular economic, social, and cultural forces, and to demonstrate that the media celebration of Meyer as a force for positive social change is what enabled Meyer to dodge bad press, enter into lucrative partnerships with the state and food industries, and not least, appeal to culturally powerful and economically affluent segments of upper middle-class consumers. We wish to spotlight aspects of Meyer-the-myth that have not taken up much space in the coverage of his rise, showing that the dominant narrative of Claus Meyer as a social entrepreneur overstates the possibilities for social change that the social entrepreneur supposedly strives to achieve.

The analysis investigates Danish media representations of Claus Meyer and his initiatives. It is important to emphasize that it is not an analysis of Meyer the person, but of Meyer the media myth. We pursue this analysis by showing how the media helped build up a narrative around Meyer as a person driven by social indignation and disinterested in financial gains, a narrative that fit neatly with a new form of governing promoted by the NNC program funded by the Nordic Council of Ministers, an inter-governmental body for cooperation in the Nordic Region that was a driving force in the initiation and promotion of NNC. This new form of governing did not set out to change Nordic foodways through regulation or setting of standards. Rather, the program envisioned that governments were to create the conditions to foster and enable social entrepreneurs as the agents of social change and Meyer became one of the leading symbols of NNC along with chef Rene Redzepi who co-founded noma with Claus Meyer.

The first part of this article provides the background for NNC and the role of the social entrepreneur as the central figure in the government-supported attempt to create a new food movement in the Nordic region with the figure of the social entrepreneur as the central enabler for social change. To analyze the role of the social entrepreneur, we present the analytical and theoretical framework for understanding the social entrepreneur as a central figure in individualized, moralized, and market-based forms of governing drawing on work by Pascal Dey and Chris Steyaert (Dey, 2010, 2011, 2014; Dey and Steyaert, 2010, 2012). Dey, and Dey and Steyaert, argue that the figure of the *Social Entrepreneur* plays a central role in a neoliberal re-organization of society. We examine the role of media representations in constructing and disseminating the figure of the socially and morally engaged food entrepreneur's role as a catalyst for social change and how it corresponds to the figure of the neoliberal social entrepreneur.

We then move on to an analysis of Danish media coverage of Claus Meyer and how it made Meyer into a prime example of the figure of the social entrepreneur who is driven, not by a desire for profits, but by social indignation. The purpose of this analysis is therefore two-fold. We want to provide a critical analysis of the role of the social entrepreneur as it has unfolded in NNC and, second, we want to highlight the role of the media in building such mythical and oftentimes highly uncritical narratives of social entrepreneurs. In this regard, we contribute to a body of literature that critically engages with the social change potential of the moral and social entrepreneur in the food sector (Hollows and Jones, 2010; Johnston and Goodman, 2015; Lewis and Huber, 2015; Müller and Leer, 2018; Phillipov and Gale, 2018; Wheeler, 2018).

Before we begin analyzing the role of the social entrepreneur in NNC and the Claus Meyer media narratives in Denmark, it is worth noting that Meyer is only one of many examples of mission-driven food companies that have become so successful and financially valuable that they are sold in multi-million deals to big investors. Ben and Jerry's was taken over by Unilever in 2000, Coca Cola bought the juice company Odwalla in 2001, and Annie's Homegrown was bought by General Mills in 2014 (Mitchell, 2015). These companies all have in common that they began as small operations headed by one or a few charismatic front figures whose declared purpose was to foster social change one ice cream, one juice, or one macaroni and cheese at a time. Just like Meyer, these entrepreneurs were perceived as selling out when their companies were sold to private equity or multinational corporations (Mitchell, 2015; Strom, 2016; WIRED, 2000). This analysis thus addresses a broader societal tendency.

## **New Nordic Cuisine and the social entrepreneur**

NNC is closely associated with the restaurant noma in Copenhagen, which opened in 2003. At noma, Claus Meyer and head chef René Redzepi developed a menu focused exclusively on Nordic ingredients. The year after its opening, the restaurant hosted a symposium with Scandinavian chefs which resulted in a Manifesto outlining 10 principles and goals for a NNC sponsored by the Nordic Council of Ministers (2004). The first goal was to create a cuisine that 'express[ed] the purity, freshness, simplicity and ethics associated with the region' and the creation of a cuisine reflecting the changes in seasons and the use of ingredients 'whose characteristics are particularly excellent in a Nordic climate'. Overall, the Manifesto's aim was to (re)discover the Nordic terroir and rethink Nordic food culture, while also living up to 'modern knowledge of health' and meet ethical standards of animal welfare and 'sound production' (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2015).

In addition to promoting the production values reflected in the Manifesto, the figure of the social entrepreneur was crucial in enabling the NNC program's goal to 'initiate, facilitate and coordinate activities grounded in the New Nordic Food Manifesto from 2004' (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2015). As the Nordic Council of Ministers (2015) put it:

The programme has had a clear idea not to be a pop star in the show, but to be the invisible puppeteer providing the stage for the main characters. The pop stars are the social entrepreneurs, the agents of change, and they need the limelight to succeed. (p. 8)

The role of public institutions such as the Nordic Council of Ministers was therefore not to promote the principles of the Manifesto through regulation and legislation. Instead, they set out to support and encourage the initiatives of individual social change agents who were in turn expected to change the values and behaviors of consumers.

Thus, NNC as outlined in the program from the Nordic Council of Ministers involved a two-step process in which locally based, seasonal, and 'traditional' production methods, with a focus on terroir, simplicity, freshness, purity, and ethics at the core of the program (Strand and Grunert, 2010: 6). The second step was to encourage and facilitate

entrepreneurs to enact these values and principles in practice through the market. The social entrepreneur becomes the vehicle for transforming agri-food production from industrial mass market production to highly differentiated, seasonal, small batch production. The public sector operates as a facilitator but avoids any direct intervention through the setting of standards, regulations, or legislation. In fact, suggestions for a common Nordic label or certification for New Nordic Foods have been strongly opposed by those behind the New Nordic Manifesto who argue that such initiatives would stifle the creativity and democratic debate surrounding what constitutes New Nordic Food (Kolle, Mørk, and Grunert, 2014: 27).

Claus Meyer, who was widely popular in Denmark due to his cookbooks and his TV cooking shows on Danish national television, was a driving force behind NNC, both as one of the founding fathers of the New Nordic Manifesto and as a central figure in the promotion of NNC in Denmark. Whereas noma and chef Rene Redzepi became the symbol of NNC abroad, Claus Meyer played a key role in popularizing NNC in Denmark beyond the cultural avant-garde in the big cities through frequent media appearances and his different business ventures including catering, delis, and bakeries.

Meyer is therefore a good example of what the Nordic Council of Ministers envisioned as an enabler of NNC through market-based entrepreneurship. Thus, Claus Meyer's existing celebrity status also made him an obvious candidate for this entrepreneurship-based food movement. Before we turn our attention to media representations of Claus Meyer and his business activities, we will seek to situate the figure of the social entrepreneur within broader social transformations.

## The neoliberal social entrepreneur

The popular press and literature tend to focus on the presumed positive effects of social entrepreneurship. In this article, we take a critical look at the social entrepreneur and especially the role of media in the making of this figure. Our analysis draws on a critical conceptualization of the social entrepreneur developed by Dey and Steyaert (2010, 2012) and Dey (2010, 2011, 2014). Dey and Steyaert regard the social entrepreneur as a central aspect of a neoliberal project (cf. Harvey, 2005) where social problems become individualized and the market is assumed to play a central role in the delivery of social services (Dey and Steyaert, 2010, 2012). They situate the social entrepreneur within these broader currents of social change characterized by the *marketization of society* where doing good and profit motives are not opposites, but rather a win–win relationship.

The marketization of society involves the withdrawal of the state from direct provision of various kinds of welfare services and to govern instead by shifting responsibility of devising solutions to social challenges to the individual, to civil society, and to the market (Dey, 2010). Dey points out that the withdrawal of the state from welfare services is limited to direct involvement in carrying out these services, not that the state withdraws from governing (Dey, 2014). Thus, Dey argues that neoliberalization is not a process of state withdrawal from governing, but the introduction of a new form of governing (cf. Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Dardot and Laval, 2017; Foucault, 2008; Harvey, 2005). The marketization of society is another form of regulatory technology where the state enables social entrepreneurs to discipline the population to do the 'right' thing: '... the rationality

of social entrepreneurship hails individuals in the social domain to adopt a responsible stance and an entrepreneurial attitude towards the alleviation of social problems' (Dey, 2010: 2). The social entrepreneur symbolizes the shift from political engagement to problem-solving, from collective action to individual effort, and from democratic structures to social mission (Steyaert and Dey, 2010: 91). By depoliticizing the social, new spaces are created for market-based solutions driven forward by individual entrepreneurs whose products and services promise social change. This is very much in line with how the Nordic Council of Ministers envision their role in the promotion of NNC, not as regulators, but as enablers of social entrepreneurs as outlined earlier.

While narratives of social entrepreneurs celebrate the will of the individual and his or her steely moral fabric as a catalyst for social change, they do not question whether the market is the right mechanism to bring about desired changes; rather, they see the market as the most important mechanism for delivering societal improvement. The social entrepreneur, as a figure, operates in other words as a critique of the state's ability to deliver social services effectively and serves to emphasize the moral deficit of society and individuals, while the tendency of the market to produce and aggravate economic, environmental, and social problems are ignored.

The question is, however, how the social entrepreneur and the marketization of society are made meaningful in practice. Dey and Steyaert argue that social entrepreneurship is connected to a series of technologies of power in which personal identification with the social entrepreneur's narrative of self-determination and vision for a better society is central. This narrative of personal transformation unites people around moralized forms of being that often have religious or spiritual undertones and partake in a kind of messianic worship of the entrepreneur who takes matters into her or his own hands (Steyaert and Dey, 2010: 91).

The media play an important role in the construction, promotion, and diffusion of such narratives. Social entrepreneurs rely on social media as well as traditional media to spread their message. Meyer, however, did not have a major social media presence as NNC started in the early days of this new communication technology. Newspapers, television shows, magazines, however, were central to the construction of Meyer as an influencer, much in line with for example Jamie Oliver. Therefore, the empirical material for this article draws on more traditional media sources, especially national daily newspapers. The role of these newspapers in constructing Meyer as a social entrepreneur on a moral and spiritual mission, along with an uncritical stance on the marketization of society that NNC's social entrepreneurs, and in particular Claus Meyer, represents, are the elements to which we now turn our attention.

## **Media representations of Claus Meyer as the figure of the social entrepreneur**

Our empirical material comes from media coverage of Claus Meyer from the five major Danish national newspapers during the period from 2010 to 2018, leading to over 1200 results in the Danish media database Infomedia. In selecting articles for further analysis, we disregarded articles that appeared to be written on the basis of generic press releases. We paid particular attention to articles that were more biographic in nature and often

included interviews with Claus Meyer or his business associates as these articles show how the work of journalists helped construct Meyer-the-myth. The analysis proceeds as follows. First, we examine the personal transformation narrative that underpins the making of Claus Meyer as a social entrepreneur in Danish media. Many of these portraits and interviews repeat narratives about his childhood, other transformative periods of his life and reflections on the future. This is a typical ugly duckling narrative that depicts Meyer's rise to the top despite the difficulties of a troubled childhood and youth. The transformation narrative is, however, not only about personal ambition, but also by the addition of moral and spiritual elements. A third element in the construction of the media narrative is the representation of Meyer as a person with a disinterest or even a disdain for money and that this social mission positions Meyer as going against the interests of the established food industries. Our argument is that these three elements in media representations of Meyer are central to the construction of Meyer as a social entrepreneur. They construct Meyer as an anti-establishment figure despite his close collaboration with government and industry. We argue that these elements could have deserved critical interrogation from the media, but that such critical interrogations were muted or 'smoothed' out by the media in their efforts to position Meyer as an agent of social change.<sup>4</sup>

### *The 'personal transformation' narrative*

In the news stories about the roots of Claus Meyer's entrepreneurial drive, the narrative starts with a troubled childhood. Meyer is portrayed as an almost archetypical hero who overcomes a difficult childhood lacking love and recognition at home, but who fights the insurmountable odds to stand victorious in the end (Pedersen, 2014). The reports about Claus Meyer, often presented in detail by Danish media, describe a childhood in a dysfunctional family which provides the fuel for his social indignation:

The story of Claus Meyer [. . .] begins with a child who grew up on Lolland [A Danish island perceived as a place of high unemployment and social problems] in a family without parental love, care and support. A child that rarely received praise and recognition at home, a mother and father who poison each other's lives and end up in divorce. It is the story of how the wretched food culture of his parents came to represent everything that is wrong with Danish cuisine and dining culture, and about compulsive eating and becoming overweight in his teens. (C. Andersen, 2011)

The story's denouement comes when young Meyer goes to live with a family in France where he is introduced to French gastronomy – his first encounter with 'good' food:

It was here he discovered how the slow, sensuous meal becomes a mirror of the importance of the emotional presence among those sitting at the table, just as the tasteless yet bountiful fast-food dishes they gobbled up in his own family was a mirror image of the exact opposite. (C. Andersen, 2011)

It is obvious that these snipes posit a strong connection between conceptions of what constitutes good food and what constitutes good families. Where the lack of 'good' family values in Meyer's childhood expressed itself in tasteless food and fattening

compulsive eating, the reader is offered a positive counter image where scrumptiousness and unhurried leisure around the dining table become the foundation for good family relations.<sup>5</sup>

Based on the above narrative, one could come to believe that Meyer would decide to buy a small farm and dedicate himself to an idyllic rural life far removed from the stressful and hectic lifestyle that comes with TV appearances, charity work, restaurant openings, social projects, book launches, and the like. But Meyer, and here we find the key characteristic of the social entrepreneur, is rather presented as a workaholic whose ‘entrepreneurial spirit’ is ‘awe-inspiring’ (Dahlager, 2014). The reason for this compulsiveness is Meyer’s mission to drive social change, which according to the portrayal of Meyer can only be created by the extremely diligent. Meyer is described as a tireless firebrand who ‘always gives his 600 percent’. His calendar is always fully booked. He is always at work: ‘When he cooks at home, the menu should preferably include 6 courses . . .’ (C. Andersen, 2011). The social entrepreneur must never sit idle or compromise.

The Claus Meyer narrative instills a rather particular, and for most of us, unattainable moral ethic where the individual is always taking matters into his own hands and never half-heartedly. These media portraits do not discuss whether his wife, children, and assistants take care of grocery shopping, assist in cooking and contribute ideas, proofread his books, clean the house, or attend parent–teacher conferences. Instead, the entrepreneur creates himself *ex nihilo*. The social and moral mission is what drives the entrepreneur to always overperform. This narrative normalizes a lifeform where the boundaries between work and leisure become blurred (Dey and Steyaert, 2012). Another narrative could have focused on his stress levels or how he manages to unite his busy work life with having three kids (a focus that would almost certainly have been more prominent had he been a woman), or how he honed a sense of ruthless competitiveness (a narrative frequently employed to portray top politicians or business leaders). Such elements conveniently slide into the background when it comes to portraying the diligent, male, white, social entrepreneur. Where it seems fair to say that Meyer’s strongest skills seem to be in forging collaboration between state, private, and commercial actors – as well as his ability to act as charismatic front figure in very different settings by suiting his message to the targeted audience – these skills are rarely discussed in news stories about his life and exploits.

### *The spiritual and charismatic leader*

Another aspect of the social entrepreneur is a certain flirtation with religion and spirituality. Here again Dey and Steyaert (2010) point to a particular aspect that is often present in the portrayal of the neoliberal social entrepreneur:

the grand narrative of social entrepreneurship relies on a stream of religious thought which positions the subject matter as the other of late capitalism’s disenchantment, as an antidote to displaced idealism and the end of grand utopias or history altogether. (p. 91)

Religious allegories abound in the news stories around Meyer and NNC, and much more than one would expect in the comparatively atheistic Denmark. Meyer is dubbed



the ‘high priest’ of NNC and he himself uses metaphors of light to describe his project (Dahlager and Christensen, 2010). It is worth noting that the NNC Manifesto, drawn up by Meyer among others, has 10 principles (commandments), and it was signed by 12 Nordic top chefs who were to spread the message as modern-day apostles. The iconography is also present in news articles. In the article ‘You can encounter God in the bread’ from 2011, a picture shows Meyer appear from the sea with a fish in hand – a not so subtle reference to Christ. Meyer often describes his work as a mission or calling – and especially when the interviewer is from the Christian daily *Kristeligt Dagblad*. In one article, he describes his mission as an attempt to ‘generate respect for Creation’ and relates how God appeared to him at Amager Faelled (a green recreational space close to downtown Copenhagen), telling him to bring back the faith to the people (Nygaard, 2010). The message here is not that Meyer is crypto-religious, but rather that the media narratives about him, and about the social entrepreneur in general, remarkably often contains religious and spiritual connotations. The spiritual and religious elements in these portraits not only present Meyer as driven by a higher mission, but also position him as the chosen one; the man who will fundamentally change our food system.

With the term *calling*, we see a noteworthy distinction between the commercial and social entrepreneur, and this distinction makes it useful to think of the social entrepreneur as a *charismatic leader* in the Weberian sense. According to Weber, a key characteristic of the charismatic leader is that he repudiates any sort of involvement in the everyday routine world (Weber, 1968). This description fits well with the public image of Claus Meyer who, according to himself, ‘isn’t very organized’ (C. Andersen, 2011). Furthermore, Meyer lives in what is, according to the newspaper *Politiken*, ‘. . . a hefty house that with its creative disorder signals that the people residing here cannot be bothered with moving piles, as long as there are other projects of more interest’ (C. Andersen, 2011). Rather than using these piles as a clue to understand why Meyer’s business empire has repeatedly teetered on the verge of collapse, the disorder is used to portray a creative businessman who is above the trivialities of daily routines. This understanding of the charismatic businessman is probably also why a journalist chooses to describe Meyer’s frequent tardiness as a virtue:

[Meyer] is delayed because he arrives directly from a run. His t-shirt is drenched and he himself is hot as a woodstove. No, he isn’t going to take a shower. Firstly, he needs to calm down, he says, and enters his enormous kitchen to fetch some water and ice cubes. He walks around the big, scratched dining table to get his pulse down, but then he is ready. Gone is the meeting that stretched out and delayed his schedule. Gone is the run. He is here. Now. (C. Andersen, 2011)

This long-form article is a good example of how the Danish media often put a positive, even reverential, spin on everything relating to Claus Meyer. It is hard to imagine that a politician, a bureaucrat or simply a ‘regular’ businessman would be celebrated for arriving late and sweaty for an interview, or for living amid disorderly piles of paper. The seemingly awe-inspiring presence indicated by the staccato phrasing that ends the above quote is usually reserved by this newspaper for pop music icons or religious worthies. Meyer-the-myth is thus placed in a category far removed from the profit-oriented business figure, and he comes to be represented instead as someone whose way of life ought to inspire us all.

## *Disdain for money*

The Meyer narrative also fulfills another main element in Weber's characterization of the charismatic leader. Weber observed that 'Pure charisma is specifically foreign to economic considerations. Wherever it appears, it constitutes a 'call' in the most emphatic sense of the word, a 'mission' or a 'spiritual duty.' In the pure type, it disdains and repudiates economic exploitation of the gifts of grace [...]' (Weber, 1968: 244). This disdain for profit-seeking motivation and behavior is also central to the characterization of the social entrepreneur as different from the commercial entrepreneur (Dey and Steyaert, 2010). This unwillingness to describe one's work as motivated by a wish to make money appears again and again in Meyer's descriptions of his own work:

I think flashing one's wealth is revolting. I have rarely taken money out of my business over the years. But I do allow myself the luxury to run a couple of companies that don't turn a profit. And then we have a summer house in Udsholt<sup>6</sup> with a fantastic view of the sea. Had we bought a house on the other side of the road, we would probably have paid a few hundred thousand less. And then there is the cottage in Sweden. We only use it four weeks a year, but these are on the other hand among the happiest weeks of my life. [. . .] We fill the car with the best produce I can get, and then I cook every single day during the summer. That is luxury to me. (Frank, 2013).

Here, it is tempting to compare Meyer with Steve Jobs who often stressed that he did not draw a salary from Apple, even though he was provided with a private jet and other trivialities (Jobs, like Meyer, also made judicious use of religious references). Meyer is allowed to portray himself as a person of wealth who is revolted by materialist longings. Again, our aim is not to condemn anyone for indulging in such pleasures, but merely to point out that through figures such as Claus Meyer, the press normalizes the desire to own three homes by presenting Meyer as someone more concerned about social benefit than profits. As relayed unquestioningly by the journalist: 'It isn't that I am ashamed of getting something out of it myself, but it requires that others get more benefits than I' (Dahlager, 2014). In fact, the media repeatedly presented Meyer as not interested in the economic aspect of his business. In November 2010, the Danish tabloid *BT*, published a portrait of Meyer following the sale of his companies. In the article, people close to him emphasized his financial success as almost coincidental: 'All in all, Meyer acts from his heart, not the wallet'. This is backed up with testimony from long-time friend and food writer Søren Frank: 'he does not get a kick out of being famous or wealthy, but rather from starting up something and feelings that he makes a difference for others' (Pedersen, 2014).

This repetition of his disinterest in the financial aspects of his business, while playing up the social impact is all the more noteworthy, as Meyer openly recognized the economic value of his own mythological status when he addresses more business-oriented audiences. The financial daily *Børsen* quotes his speech at their annual Gazelle conference (fastest growing business awards) in 2014:

. . . the ideological approach has also had other more tangible advantages for the business, he explains with a boyish smile. I have always sought to build my businesses around a vision, because it is easier to get people to run that extra mile even if they don't get paid, he says, followed by bursts of laughter from the audience. (Christiansen, 2014)

An interesting aspect of the coverage by Børsen is that Meyer's statements are both introduced and followed by journalistic smoothing out, akin to what is referred to as *repair work* in science and technology studies (Denis et al., 2016). Meyer's remarks are presented with a 'boyish smile' and give rise to 'bursts of laughter'. Had the journalist chosen different words such as a 'brutish' instead of 'boyish', the remarks would have appeared altogether more sinister. The journalist from Børsen makes an active effort to downplay what could otherwise have been regarded as a cynical remark, especially when coming from a business owner who at the time had been involved in several labor disputes around minimum wages and unionization. Such efforts to smoothen potentially controversial remarks show that the making of the social entrepreneur not only requires the promotion of positive narratives but also suppression of more disturbing ones.

So far, we have shown that media accounts of Claus Meyer tend to emphasize his personal transformation from neglected child to a determined and diligent social entrepreneur whose mission is informed by spiritual and religious references as well as a dislike of wealth. The media not only conveyed a message from Meyer. They were actively involved in positioning Meyer-the-brand as an exemplary social entrepreneur that fits well with the stated purpose of the Nordic Council of Ministers program for NNC to enable and encourage social entrepreneurs as the driving force in its promotion and popularization. Furthermore, the representation of Meyer as *never in it for the money* conveyed a story of Meyer who would never be afraid of speaking truth to power if it went against his values.

## Discussion

While the media regarded the sale of his companies to a private equity firm in 2014 as a paradox, it may be more relevant to ask whether it is not the media's surprise that should be regarded as paradoxical? Did Meyer really challenge established food industries, the state and the logics of capital, as the media seem to have assumed? NNC, Meyer's plan to redefine Nordic food production and culture, enjoyed strong financial and political support from the Danish state and other public funds since its inception. The Nordic Council of Ministers sponsored the conference where the manifesto for NNC was conceived and approved by an exclusive forum composed primarily of chefs, business leaders, bureaucrats and researchers. Shortly after the publication of the manifesto, the Nordic Council of Ministers granted 50 million DKK to the initiative (Dahlager, 2015). The Danish food industry giants Arla Foods and Carlsberg also contributed financially to the conference. Since the launch of NNC, Meyer has also received considerable financial support from well-established financial investors and industries not least in connection with the OPUS project, an ambitious research and development project to develop a 'New Nordic Diet' (NND). The project received 100 million DKK from the Nordea Foundation in 2009 (amounting to indirect state-support as such funds are tax-exempt in Denmark). The Danish Agriculture and Food Council, the national association of agricultural and food industries, and one of the most powerful lobby organizations in Denmark, supported Claus Meyer in 2008 by providing financial support to a series of TV shows titled *The Taste of Denmark* with the explicit goal to '... expand the

awareness of Nordic cuisine and fortify the position of Denmark on the gastronomic world map' (Bjerrum, 2008).

It is thus surprising that the Danish media have developed an understanding of Claus Meyer as an example of someone fighting against the established food industries. The financial flows into NNC activities and Meyer's businesses show a different picture. Claus Meyer received significant support from public funds and established players in the food industry, but the Danish media nevertheless presented Meyer and NNC as being in opposition to big finance and the agro-industrial complex. One can thus argue, in line with Dey and Steyaert, that NNC and the Meyer narrative moved the focus away from a critique of the existing structures of power in the food industry and helped shift the responsibility for a better diet onto society and the individual consumer placing Meyer as the example to follow. Thus, Meyer and NNC, who are commonly portrayed as antagonists of neoliberal trends, are perhaps better understood as agents for the marketization of society.

Despite his proclaimed goal of being committed to social issues, Meyer's companies have been plagued by the same kind of animosity between management and workers that is seen throughout the industry. Meyer's companies have been involved in a number of labor conflicts related to a lack of collective bargaining agreements, illegal use of foreign workers, and food safety scandals. One such instance played out in the early 2010s when Meyer's bakeries were embroiled in conflicts over poor working conditions (Andersen and Christensen, 2012). In connection with that controversy, a former communications adviser to Claus Meyer, wrote that '[Meyer] . . . will make many contortions to avoid expensive collective bargaining agreements. He will seek to extinguish fires as they occur and hope that he will be able to charm his way through, which he probably will'. 'Claus Meyer is', noted Sperling, 'made of Teflon' arguing that the goodwill that he has accumulated as a media darling over the years protects him from this otherwise bad publicity (Sperling, 2012). Once again, the narrative of Meyer as an entrepreneur on a social mission rather than a profit seeker played to his benefit.

At a point, the celebration of NNC reached such heights that it seemed no longer related to food. This was clearly, if inadvertently, expressed by a food critic from the major liberal newspaper, *Politiken*, who wrote in a review of the now famous restaurant noma in 2010: 'Whether the food tastes good is simply the wrong question to ask' (Dahlager and Christensen, 2010). The same slightly Kafkaesque qualities can be found throughout the media coverage of NNC and Meyer. In the national Danish Broadcasting Corporation's interview with Meyer and Grønlykke following the sale of their companies to the private equity fund, the national broadcaster DR uncritically stated that

The two men share a vision that has roots in the Danish cooperative movement of the 1800s. The private equity take-over is a step on the road to consolidate the companies before taking them public . . . and hopefully then return them to the consumers. 'it would be beautiful if the consumers who support us could become co-owners of the company. It could be a modern and beautiful form of cooperative movement' says Jacob Grønlykke. (P. K. Andersen, 2015)

However, this transformation from a private equity owned corporation to a cooperative organization has so far not materialized and there is, as far as we know, no concrete

plans for how such a re-organization would occur although it was rumored in early 2021 that IK Investment Partners had hired the investment bank Carnegie to prepare a sale following some tumultuous years (Rudbeck and Thomsen, 2021). The media coverage of Meyer and NNC has gone far in its celebration of social entrepreneurs when they uncritically let them compare a corporation owned by a tax-sheltered private equity firm with the Danish cooperative movement. There are marked differences in ownership structures and decision-making between these two organizational forms, which the journalist either is not aware of, or chooses to ignore, when such a statement is relayed without critical questioning.

The news coverage examined in this article never took Meyer to task to explain the less than stellar labor practices in his companies or whether a corporation is really comparable to a cooperative; these are examples of how the media smoothed out and silenced less favorable stories about Meyer's business activities. The media instead played a central role in building up the goodwill referred to by Meyer's former communications advisor, and by extension contributed to the brand value of his business. To be regarded as driven by a moral and social mission rather than profit is a highly valuable aspect of the Meyer business and something that IK Investment partners realized was a good investment. A brand that can uphold its value despite labor conflicts, food safety controversies, and the like is indeed an appetizing investment.

## Conclusion

Claus Meyer has received much positive press coverage in Denmark since the early 2000s. We argue that the massive and positive press coverage reflects how the narrative of Claus Meyer – as the self-made social entrepreneur – fits dominant contemporary notions of how to achieve social change that serves both the entrepreneur and governments seeking to promote the marketization of society as a regulatory technology. Claus Meyer has become the embodiment of a confluence of social entrepreneurship narratives that are popular with affluent and powerful social classes. In the media's stories about Claus Meyer, we see nostalgia for a past unspoiled, for traditional family values, the desire to pierce our superficial lives with an authenticity ethos, the search for the quasi-religious, the distaste for profit over social mission, and not least the celebration of the exceptional individual who overcomes an adverse childhood to become the shining beacon to lead the rest of us. These media narratives have made Meyer a mythical figure that embodies and propels our desires and they primarily serve the interests of the state, industry, politicians, and affluent consumers. Meyer's approach to social change appeals to the state because it supports an agenda where citizens are expected to take greater personal responsibility for their own health and social sustainability through reflexive consumption. It assists in outsourcing responsibility from the state to the individual citizen. Meyer himself explains that his idea for NNC grew out of his collaboration with the Ministry of Food and Agriculture in the early 2000s when then-minister Ritt Bjerregaard wanted to develop a new food quality label. This attempt of the state to regulate was dismantled when a right-wing government took power in 2002. It left Meyer, in his own words, ' . . . pent up with rage which translated into his relentless development of NNC in the years thereafter' (Dahlager, 2015). Thus, the political context for the emergence of

NNC as an attempt to address the shortcomings of the Danish diet was the retreat of the state from direct intervention.

NNC, however, was developed in close collaboration with government institutions and big national agro-industrial players that saw new business opportunities in the branding of Danish agri-food products. In the past decades, numerous food companies have launched products using ‘New Nordic’ or simply ‘Nordic’ in their product names.<sup>7</sup> The bread company = Kohberg launched a new bread named New Nordic and Carlsberg launched an alcohol-free beer under the name Nordic Pilsener. The New Nordic name thus enabled many larger food industries to benefit from the popularization of NNC.

Last, but not least, the press has been able to create a great deal of hype around Meyer’s persona and mission, based on well-worn platitudes about health, authenticity and sustainability, for the upper echelons of society hungry for health fads and ways to atone for their carbon emissions. The OPUS project took this to new heights as they attempted to develop a New Nordic Diet (NND). The NND’s main message was that Danes lacked – and especially that the lower classes of society lacked – gastronomic *Bildung*. This required a reprogramming of the individual’s psyche to almost prefer locally grown beets over industrially produced sausages instinctively. Meyer’s message over the years has always been that we need to spend more of our budgets on quality ingredients, and by drawing on fears of pollution and global warming, it has by now become legitimate – and in certain social circles even mandatory – to spend more money to fulfill our gastronomic desires and social obligations.

The social entrepreneur operates within a market-based system for products and/or services. The social entrepreneur does not challenge this approach to social change but reinforces the notions that social change is the responsibility of the individual and that the market is the right mechanism for transforming society – and in a market-based society, profitability is an imperative. This points to the issue of asking whether gastro-entrepreneurs can avoid ‘selling out’, as one article in the online magazine *CivilEats.com* asks (Mitchell, 2015). This, we argue, is the wrong question to ask.

Instead of being surprised that Meyer ‘sold out’, the media should have taken a moment for critical introspection. How were they themselves able to rule out such an outcome? Meyer did with his company what the market mandates: he built a strong brand that can make a profit. In the media narratives analyzed above, such critical engagement with the market-orientation of the social entrepreneur was rarely ever attempted. The paradox is not how Meyer would end up selling his company and brand to a private equity firm. The paradox is rather that the journalists were confounded by this. After all, they were central contributors to the making of Meyer-the-brand.

Whereas NNC has gained worldwide attention for its focus on local ingredients, seasonal variation, and gustatory creativity, neoliberal social entrepreneurship and its individualization and marketization of the social have been part and parcel of NNC since its inception and Meyer became the example par excellence. The encroachment of market-based social entrepreneurship as a technology of government (Spicer et al., 2019) is a phenomenon receiving wide-spread attention in critical circles. Nevertheless, entrepreneurship programs are now introduced into education programs ranging from early childhood education to lifelong learning (McCafferty, 2010). This expansion of social


entrepreneurship must continually be critically assessed, and much excellent work is carried out to this end in critical social sciences and humanities.

Within food studies, there is a further need to engage critically with social entrepreneurship, both its promises and limitations. The rise of celebrity chefs, greatly aided by social media platforms in the past decade and the proliferation of food shows on streaming services such as Netflix, provide a rich field for critical scholarship (Leer and Klitgaard Poulsen, 2018; Leer and Krogager, 2021). Whereas mainstream media represent celebrity chefs and food entrepreneurs as change-makers, critical scholarship should scrutinize and examine the relations of production, consumption, and evolving power relationships that these entrepreneurs represent and perhaps (re)produce, and, not least, how the media produce narratives encouraging us to disregard these relations.

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## Notes

1. In 2015, the state attorney determined that the private equity firm that bought Meyer's companies was using a tax-shelter base in the Cayman Islands. Meyer had run the concession for the canteen operations in the Danish parliament in 2014. The discovery led several political parties to call for a cancellation of the contract with Meyer (Matthissen, 2015).
2. Jacob Grønlykke was the CEO of another successful Danish food enterprise, the family-owned Løgismose that IK Investments bought together with Meyer's company.
3. After Meyer sold his Danish business empire to IK Investment Partners, while maintaining a minor role in the business, he moved to the United States where he is mostly known for his Great Northern Food Hall at the Grand Central Terminal in New York City and his culinary school in Brownsville, Brooklyn established through his philanthropic organization The Melting Pot Foundation (Bellafante, 2017). Meyer's venture in New York City is in many ways an attempt at replicating the model that made him the most famous food entrepreneur in Denmark of the past two decades. His venture into the United States is, however, beyond the scope of this article.
4. Claus Meyer has also emphasized the social mission of his involvement in New Nordic Cuisine: 'I felt the world was in need of chefs who cared about inequality, social inclusion, biodiversity, the quality of our groundwater, resources for future generations, climate change' (Askew, 2019).
5. These values are in line with former Danish minister for food and agriculture, Dan Jørgensen, who launched a campaign aiming to make parents spend more time cooking, to include their children in the process (because children are central to the good life), and not to spoil their meals by watching TV while eating.
6. Udsholt is part of an exclusive summer resort area north of Copenhagen.
7. Politicians have also sought to associate themselves with Claus Meyer over the years. For example, the Minister of Education, Christine Antorini, launched a reform of the public school system under the name 'New Nordic School' in 2011. The reform met with lukewarm

reception. One influential academic noted that the reform was a rebranding with very little content:

There is very little content in the New Nordic School initiative. The ability to find a suitable scaffolding [the association with New Nordic Cuisine] for the government's education reforms has a reverse proportionality with its quality, creativeness and historical consciousness. (Larsen, 2012)

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