

THE UNANSWERED QUESTION: SOCIAL INNOVATION AND SOCIAL CHANGE

HOW SOCIAL PRACTICE THEORIES CONTRIBUTE TO A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF PROCESSES OF SOCIAL CHANGE AND WHY WE HAVE TO FOCUS ON THE EMBEDDEDNESS OF ANY INNOVATION IN A DENSE NETWORK OF INNOVATION STREAMS.

To understand the relationship between social innovation and social change is highly important in order to unfold the potential of social innovation. A recourse to social practice theory and the theory of Gabriel Tarde help us to understand the complexity of innovation processes. It opens up a new perspective on the embeddedness of social innovation and the governance of social change processes.

Jürgen Howaldt

INTRODUCTION

Though there is widespread recognition of the need for social innovation and a long history of academic debate, there is no clear understanding of how social innovation leads to social change. Thus, in their analysis of European projects of recent years, Jane Jenson and Denis Harrison reach the following conclusion: “Although social innovations pop up in many areas and policies and in many disguises, and social innovation is researched from a number of theoretical and methodological angles, the conditions under which social innovations develop, flourish and sustain and finally lead to societal change are not yet fully understood both in political and academic circles” [1, p. 7].

SOCIAL INNOVATION AND THEORIES OF SOCIAL CHANGE

The terms “social innovation” and “social innovator” first appeared more frequently at the beginning of the 19th century – and hence long before the technological and economic appropriation of the term “innovation” [2]. Semantically, from the outset, they were closely linked to processes of social change and societal transformation as specific forms of social change. Without their content being precisely defined, they were widely used, primarily in Britain and France, with both a positive but also a negative connotation in discourses about a socialist transformation. The main focus was the fundamental transformation of the social system and the structures that support it: in other words, the transformation of the order and institutional structure of society as a whole. With the rise of the concept

of social reform in the mid-19th century, social innovation acquired a connotation associating it more closely with intended transition or transformation processes that affect part of society, with an intention orientated towards problem-solving, such as in the fields of education, working conditions, and equal opportunities.

In the 20th century, William F. Ogburn is often cited as the first sociologist who explicitly addresses the importance of social innovations, as part of his theory of social change. He sees inventions and innovations – understood as “a combination of existing and known elements of culture, material and/or non-material, or a modification of one to form a new one” [3, p. 56] – as being the most important cause of change. Social change is understood as an emergent innovation process, in which new innovations – being it technological or social ones – can be the trigger.

Even more important for a better understanding of the relationship of social innovation and social change is a recourse to Gabriel Tarde, the long-forgotten classic exponent of a sociology of innovation. Tarde’s approach allows us to widen a perspective, which was narrowed to economic and technological innovations by Schumpeter, and after him by the sociology of technology, to include the wide variety of social innovations. In the social theory of Gabriel Tarde, development and change stem from inventions and initiatives, which are imitated and thus become social innovations [4]. Social imitation is therefore kept in motion by innovation, and social change is explained via initiatives and inventions that are imitated.

The strength of such a concept of social innovation that is grounded in social theory is, that it enables us to discover how social phenomena, conditions and constructs come into being and transform. The countless and nameless inventions and discoveries change society and its practices through equally countless acts of imitation, and only as a result do they become a true social phenomenon. “In the realm of the social, everything takes place as invention and imitation, with imitation forming the rivers and inventions the mountains” [4, p. 27]. For Tarde, imitation is the central mechanism of social reproduction and of social change. “All similarities of social origin that belong to the social world are the fruits of some kind of imitation, be it the imitation of customs or fashions through sympathy or obedience, instruction or education, naïve or carefully considered imitation” [4, p.38]. Since imitation always involves variation as well, imitations simultaneously transform innovations into social structures and practices. Added to this are individual initiatives and rebellions against prevailing morals, customs, rules – interruptions or crossings of imitation streams – which are transferred and imitated from person to person, leading to social innovations [5].



Social innovations open up opportunities for the development of new social practices. For example, the “Kennismakerij” a centre for knowledge creation in Tilburg (Netherlands), where potential social entrepreneurs can meet and exchange ideas (photo: Eva Wascher)

SOCIAL INNOVATION AND THE DYNAMICS OF SOCIAL PRACTICES

Combined with the practice-theory perspective on the dynamics of social practices and social change, this approach opens a new perspective on the role of social innovation in processes of social change. Defining social innovation as a new combination or figuration of social practices allows integrating the many different meanings of social innovation and offers a new perspective on the relationship of social innovation and social change. This understanding of social innovation as a new combination or figuration of practices in areas of social action, prompted

by certain actors with the goal of better coping with needs and problems than is possible by use of existing practices also implies a specific understanding how social innovation leads to social change. An innovation is therefore *social* to the extent that it *varies social action, and is socially accepted and diffused in society* (be it throughout society, larger parts, or only in certain societal sub-areas affected).

The societal and governance systems, in which the social innovations are embedded, are complex and the problems addressed are *deeply rooted in established practices and institutions*. Against this background, SI-DRIVE developed the concept of the *practice field* defined as a general type of different initiatives within one thematic area at meso level for analysing the complex interactions of different innovation activities. While an initiative is a single and concrete implementation of a solution to respond to social demands, societal challenges or systemic change (e.g. Muhammed Yunus’s Grameen Bank which lends micro-credits to poor farmers for improving their economic condition), a practice field describes general characteristics common to different projects (e.g. micro-credit systems). The practice field approach allows analysing the processes of diffusion beyond the micro-level of single small scale social innovation initiatives and a data collection at a more societal level, where wider user groups and a certain societal impact has been reached and where moments of societal change are observable. At the same time, the approach allows us to study the interplay between micro or small scale developments and their merger at the macro-level.

SOCIAL INNOVATION AND SOCIAL CHANGE – A COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP

Against this background, the global mapping of the SI-DRIVE project revealed the capacities of social innovations to modify or even re-direct social change and to empower people – i.e. to address a wide variety of stakeholder groups, as well as the broader public, in order to improve social cohesion and to allow for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. The mapping shed light on the great many, often nameless but still important, social innovations responding to specific and every-day social demands or incremental innovations.

However, these initiatives and projects are diverse and complex in their aims and effects. Like any innovation, social innovations too, regardless of their protagonists’ intentions, are in principle ambivalent in their effects, and new social practices are not per se automatically the “right” response to the major social challenges and the normative points of reference and goals associated with social transformation processes. With their orientation to the solution of social and ecological problems that cannot be sufficiently dealt with via traditional forms of economic and government activity, many social innovations to a certain extent carry out repair

1005 Cases of Social Innovations

Policy Fields with corresponding Practice Fields

EDUCATION & LIFELONG LEARNING (178 CASES)

- Reduction of educational disadvantages - 44 Cases
- New learning arrangements, interactive education - 41 Cases
- Entrepreneurship education and promotion - 18 Cases
- Alternative forms of educational activities and training - 17 Cases
- New strategies and structures for lifelong learning - 17 Cases
- Occupational orientation, early pupils career planning - 15 Cases
- New digital and virtual learning environments - 13 Cases
- Quality improvements, setting of new educational standards - 13 Cases

ENVIRONMENT & CLIMATE CHANGE (72 CASES)

- Alternative sustainable food production and distribution - 24 Cases
- Protection and restoring of ecosystems & biodiversity - 19 Cases
- Re-use and recycling - 17 Cases
- Sustainable (strategic) consuming, sharing economy - 12 Cases

EMPLOYMENT (136 CASES)

- Job search support & matching - 43 Cases
- Training & education - 31 Cases
- Social entrepreneurship - 26 Cases
- Workplace innovation & organisational innovation - 20 Cases
- Working conditions and working environment - 16 Cases

TRANSPORT & MOBILITY (59 CASES)

- Managing multimodality - 16 Cases
- Transportation for people with reduced mobility - 13 Cases
- Smart Working, Smart Commuting - 11 Cases
- Fostering alternative transport modes - 10 Cases
- Citizen initiated public transport - 9 Cases

POVERTY & SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT (140 CASES)

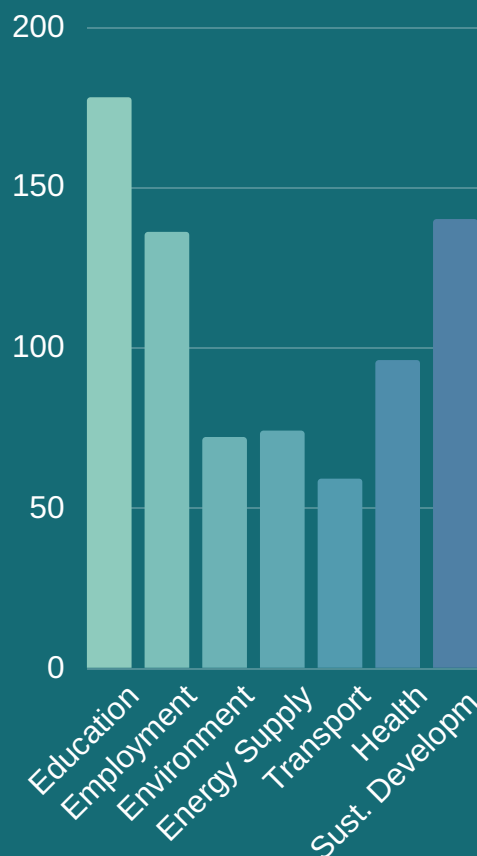
- Disadvantage, vulnerability, discrimination - 44 Cases
- Lack of integrated support to the poor or excluded - 20 Cases
- Sub-standard or dangerous accommodation - 15
- Inadequate financial resources - 14 Cases
- Un-nutritious or unhealthy food - 14 Cases
- Unemployment or under-employment - 12 Cases
- Inadequate good quality work - 11 Cases
- Place-specific poverty or exclusion - 10 Cases

ENERGY SUPPLY (74 CASES)

- Energy collectives - 34 Cases
- Providing examples and inspiration - 16 Cases
- Energy services - 12 Cases
- Local (domestic) production of energy - 12 Cases

HEALTH & SOCIAL CARE (96 CASES)

- New models of care - 44 Cases
- E-health, m-health - 21 Cases
- Shift in care location - 16 Cases
- Integrated care delivery - 15 Cases



functions without fundamentally changing the prevailing practices and associated institutional structure. Moreover, many projects and initiatives do not develop the hoped-for impact on society and instead often remain limited to the local, experimental level (see article on social innovation on the rise). Other initiatives adopt a wider perspective, and orientate their actions towards the major social challenges and the establishment of related new forms of cooperation between different actors and across sectors, combined with a redefinition of the relationship between social and economic value. They generally aim to modernise existing structures. Only a few initiatives have an explicitly transformative aim in the sense that they want to contribute to a fundamental change in practice formations and the institutional structure of society. Given this, and the fact that the long-term impacts on existing practices and institutions have hardly been examined, so far, the question of the relationship between social innovations and transformative change has now also become a key question for social innovation research [6].

GOVERNANCE OF SOCIAL CHANGE PROCESSES

Such an understanding of the role of social innovation in processes of social change has implications for the governance of social change processes. A policy informed by practice theory therefore focuses on social practices and social innovations instead of on technologies and the external influencing of attitudes, behaviours and decisions. It starts with the disruptive contradictions between

established ways of life and forms of practice, and between social problems and existing problem-solving deficiencies and relies on enhancing society's ability to reflect in observing and actively shaping transformation processes. Social practices – and hence social innovations too – are always the result of complex emergent processes, over which no single actor has control. Politics does not intervene in this process from outside, but is instead part of the social arrangements which configure the social practices. It focuses on empowering actors to suspend established routines and patterns and appropriate learning governance formats. Instead of a linear, sequential view of the relationship between invention, innovation and diffusion, transformative change is seen as the social, collaborative reconfiguration of social practices, which is fed from the interplay between multiple invention and imitation [5].

The shift in perspective on social innovation directs the focus towards the experimental shaping of social learning processes, onto mechanisms of imitation and hence onto non-linear, non-sequential forms of spreading, institutionalisation and routinisation. The question of how social transformation processes can be set in motion steers attention towards “real utopias”, understood as “institutions, relationships and practices which can be developed in the world as it currently is, but which anticipate the world as it could be and help move us in this direction” [7, p. 11].

REFERENCES

- [1] Jenson, Jane/ Harrisson, Denis (2013): Social innovation research in the European Union: Approaches, findings and future directions. Policy Review. Internet: https://ec.europa.eu/research/social-sciences/pdf/policy_reviews/social_innovation.pdf [Last accessed 09.07.2015].
- [2] Godin, Benoit (2012): Social Innovation: Utopias of Innovation from c.1830 to the Present. Project on the Intellectual History of Innovation. Working Paper No. 11. Internet: http://www.csiic.ca/PDF/SocialInnovation_2012.pdf [Last accessed 08.07.2015].
- [3] Ogburn, William F. (1969): Erneute Betrachtung des Problems der sozialen Evolution. In: Kultur und Sozialer Wandel. Ausgewählte Schriften. Herausgegeben und eingeleitet von Otis Dudley Duncan. Luchterhand: Neuwied, Berlin, pp. 50–67.
- [4] Tarde, Gabriel (2009): Die Gesetze der Nachahmung. Suhrkamp: Frankfurt a. M.
- [5] Howaldt, Jürgen/ Schwarz, Michael/ Kopp, Ralf (2015): On the theory of social innovations: Tarde's neglected contribution to the development of a sociological innovation theory. Beltz Juventa: Weinheim und Basel. Internet: http://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/41963/ssoar-2015-howaldt_et_al-On_the_theory_of_social.pdf?sequence=1 [Last accessed 25.09.2017].
- [6] Howaldt, Jürgen/ Schwarz, Michael (2016): Social Innovation and its Relationship to Social Change. Verifying existing Social Theories in reference to Social Innovation and its Relationship to Social Change (D1.3). Dortmund. Internet: http://www.sfs.tu-dortmund.de/cms/Medienpool/small_publications/SI-DRIVE_D1-3-Social-Change_final-260416.pdf [Last accessed 07.05.2017].
- [7] Wright, Erik O. (2017): Reale Utopien. Wege aus dem Kapitalismus. Suhrkamp: Berlin.