General introduction: the return of social innovation as a scientific concept and a social practice

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In recent years, social innovation has become increasingly influential in both scholarship and policy. It is the conceptual foundation for community-based trusts, think tanks, corporate management practices and government funding programs in every continent, leading to a wide range of projects and international networks which recognize past failures of conventional service delivery to tackle poverty and social exclusion, and seek to promote new ways of doing things, grounded in the social relations and experiences of those in need. It is the great inspiration for many social movements, associations, bottom-up initiatives to claim improvements in their human conditions, their community life and their place in society. It has found a home in policy at the highest level, for example in the US Whitehouse's Office for Social Innovation and Civic Participation, through the creation of the National Secretariat for Solidarity Economy in Brazil and in the European Commission's Innovation Policy programmes. It has become a lead term for corporate social responsibility, business ethics and the revisiting of the role of social enterprise and the social economy in socioeconomic development. The growing importance of the idea reflects wide and profound dissatisfaction with recent directions and outcomes of 'innovation' in technology, markets, policy and governance systems, and particularly a sense – to remain polite – that the benefits of such innovations

have not been distributed as generally or as equitably as they should (see Jessop et al., Chapter 8). This also holds for changes in socio-political regimes. Social innovation as a governance change with more bottom-up participation, protection of the rights of 'common' citizens and collective decision-making systems has indeed increasingly become a mirror to reflect on the consequences of macro-institutional changes such as the privatization of banks and social services, deregulation of markets at the expense of the satisfaction of collective needs, the heralding of elite consumerism as a value system, etc.

In much policy and management discourse, social innovation refers broadly to innovation in meeting social needs of, or delivering social benefits to, communities – the creation of new products, services, organizational structures or activities that are 'better' or 'more effective' than traditional public sector, philanthropic or market-reliant approaches in responding to social exclusion. Particularly successful forms of social innovation in this sense, which to many people represent 'iconic' examples, include microfinance and popular education – game-changing initiatives which have travelled well beyond their original geographical and social contexts to find permanent institutional homes in the public services of many countries (see for example Ashta et al., Chapter 6; Dubeux, Chapter 22; Fernandes et al., Chapter 29). Equally important, and part

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of the continuously evolving dynamic nature of social innovation, are practical lessons drawn from social enterprises and the third sector economy, as several chapters in this volume demonstrate (e.g. Defourny and Nyssens, Chapter 3; Calzada, Chapter 16; Fraisse, Chapter 27; Klein et al., Chapter 28).

THE PURPOSE OF THE HANDBOOK

The purpose of this handbook is, in part, to honour such initiatives. However, it is also to present a coherent methodological perspective on social innovation, one which attends – both conceptually and practically – to multi-scalar structural, political and cultural forces which produce social exclusion but also hold the potential for social change and socially innovative initiatives. As such, it develops a line of thought, investigated and progressively enriched collectively by many of the contributors to this volume over the past thirty years (see Moulaert et al., Chapter 1), which connects societal wellbeing and progress with the shape and organization of society – relations of power, solidarity and affect between individuals and social groups.

Fundamental to the understanding of social innovation that we present here is that it means *innovation in social relations*. As such, we see the term as referring not just to particular actions, but also to the mobilization-participation processes and to the *outcome* of actions which lead to improvements in social relations, structures of governance, greater collective empowerment, and so on. Thus many of the chapters refer to such actions as 'socially innovative strategies' and at the same time consider their processual nature, the way they contribute to the

transformation of governance systems and community dynamics in different life spheres (biosystem, economy, society and polity) as well as the articulations between them (see for example Lévesque, Chapter 2; Hulgård and Shajahan, Chapter 7; Van Dyck and Van den Broeck, Chapter 9; Parra, Chapter 10; Andersen et al., Chapter 14; Andersen and Bifeldt, Chapter 24; Martinelli, Chapter 26; Espinoza, Chapter 30; André, Chapter 31).

The handbook is framed by three generic and interrelated features of social innovation: satisfaction of needs, reconfigured social relations and empowerment or political mobilization. The power of this three dimensional framework rests with its ability to simultaneously acknowledge and connect the material, social, political and discursive dimensions of exclusion processes with collective action to the benefit of human development in different life spheres of the human world. We are concerned with social innovation (SI) not only as a descriptor for a set of practices but, more importantly, as an emerging phenomenon, a theoretical construct and an ongoing field of research within a world of social transformation.

SI occurs because socially innovative actions, strategies, practices and processes arise whenever problems of poverty, exclusion, segregation and deprivation or opportunities for improving living conditions cannot find satisfactory solutions in the 'institutionalized field' of public or private action. As demonstrated in many chapters of the handbook (for example Tremblay and Pilati, Chapter 5; Vitale and Membretti, Chapter 13; Midheme, Chapter 15; André et al., Chapter 18; Kunnen et al., Chapter 21; Gibson-Graham and Roelvink, Chapter 33) in all continents, most countries, regions, cities or even urban districts where socio-economic-political-cultural-environmental problems

or opportunities for improvement touching the existential and living conditions of people have arisen, socially innovative approaches and solutions emerged that shared a common profile, one in which the social and political empowerment of people is fundamental to meeting their unmet needs; in which improving material conditions and changing social relations are intimately and necessarily connected. Accordingly, social innovation can also be viewed as a general, shared 'consciousness' about the nature of problems that modern societies face and the ways that they should be confronted. It is from this perspective a real challenge to the reading of innovation in technological and organizational terms only (see Jessop et al., Chapter 8).

Social Innovation is also a scientific construct as the concept has not only emerged 'spontaneously' from the social field per se or from the practices of certain actors, but also from the need for researchers investigating the phenomena described above to capture analytically the essence of innovative initiatives, experiences and processes that have been historically or more recently engaged for facing structural problems of social exclusion and inequality. Several chapters in the book address the (need for) theorization of social innovation. Chapters 1 and 8 explain the genesis of the concept and how in different periods and contexts it has received a more disciplinary or interdisciplinary content; a more process or agency-based interpretation; how it is connected to social change, to societal challenges and to micro-logical behaviour addressing very particular needs. All chapters in Part II explain the need for theoretical *particularity* according to the role of social innovation in territorial development (Van Dyck and Van den Broeck, Chapter 9; also Oosterlynck and Debruyne, Chapter 17), sustainable development (Mehmood

and Parra, Chapter 4; Parra, Chapter 10), multi-level governance and political transformation (Pradel et al., Chapter 11). Methodological improvements – including revisiting the different roles of theory – are addressed in Chapter 12 (Hillier presenting a Deleuzean perspective), the chapters on action research in Part IV (Chapters 19–25) and the methodological chapters in Part VI (Chapters 32–35) which establish transdisciplinary methods for SI research in which theory-building as a component of action research plays an important part.

SI research is an ongoing field of research for at least three key reasons. Firstly, most of the social problems in our societies are far from being solved, and new ones are likely to arise as globalization, competitive pressures and free-market policies will continue to shape the socio-economic functioning of the society. At the same time constructive visions on how human development can be furthered are revealed on a daily basis and need collective action and implementation. Consequently, new socially creative approaches and initiatives will be needed and will continue to emerge and feed the knowledge accumulated by the researchers. Secondly, research methodologies on social innovation are far from being stabilized or agreed upon by all researchers and stakeholders, and debate, controversy and imagination will be the key to methodological improvement. But perhaps this is a normal condition if researchers and field actors endeavour to improve their knowledge of 'what is going on' in society and step forward, together with other SI actors, to design, negotiate and implement new solutions. The final reason is probably the most important and also the most challenging for researchers: it is about how to position themselves in the 'social arena' and how to contribute to its transformation. Here, undoubtedly, cross

learning and dialogue among researchers and field actors should continue.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

The concerns outlined above are reflected in the way the book unfolds. We have divided the chapters into six parts, each of which has its own introduction outlining the individual chapters and the relations between them in more detail.

Part I ('Social innovation: from concept to theory and practice') demonstrates the relevance and prospects of the social innovation concept and its theorization to a range of topical life spheres, policy fields and practices. The increased proliferation of social innovation discourse is closely linked with the absence of an integrative framework for social innovation approaches. As a result, social innovation is often seen as a set of tools to provide instant solutions to pressing problems. The assortment of perspectives, coupled with the propensity for reductionist views and the need to overcome this propensity, has been the inspiration for the chapters in this part. The part explores social innovation from an epistemological perspective and highlights the social, economic, political, environmental and ethical importance of asserting its place as a key element of an alternative development strategy. In that sense, social innovation is presented as a driver of transdisciplinary research as well as a guide for steering collective action in a diversity of life spheres.

Part II ('Social innovation theory: its role in knowledge building') presents a series of theoretical dialogues which place social innovation in relation to various fields of scholarship. Social innovation has a deep and complex conceptual heritage, which has been informed by – and has informed – debates within sociology, economics, geography, urban studies, political science, philosophy and more. Social innovation, in this sense, has become a key concept driving a body of knowledge with a strong interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary character. The contributions in this part address the value of theorizing social innovation and putting it in dialogue with related concepts (territorialization, sustainable development, multilevel governance, strategic planning, etc.). The chapters in this part do not intend to formulate a definitive theory of social innovation; this would indeed be contradictory to the epistemic diversity that is inherent in the transdisciplinary reflexive methodology that is adopted. Instead they discuss a number of conceptual elaborations and theoretical explorations that provide building stones for this methodology – summarized especially in Chapter 8 but also in Part VI of the book.

Part III ('Instructive case studies in social innovation analysis') supports the aim of this handbook to help refine conceptual and analytical instruments by utilizing them in empirical research especially addressing questions of how socially creative strategies can develop to address social exclusion or materialize opportunities for human development of various kinds. The focus here is on practice, in the form of six case studies which nicely capture some characteristics of socially innovative action. Of particular interest in this part is how widely varying actors and strategies, in a diversity of sociocultural and socio-political contexts, can materialize social innovation (in all its dimensions) at the local and regional levels. These case studies provide inspiring tales of tribulations and triumphs in the initiation of socially creative strategies. They also go beyond mere storytelling by analysing the societal dynamics, change potentials and actual impacts of these socially innovative actions and processes.

Part IV ('Social innovation analysis: methodologies') is about the conduct of research. It emphasizes throughout the importance of the researcher's position in relation to the 'what', the 'how' and the 'who' of the research. That is, social innovation, as a form of social change and empowerment, cannot be understood 'objectively' – and no more can our analysis of it. As such, the part pays special attention to various forms of participatory and action research. Such approaches see the creative production of knowledge and the pursuit of social goals as intrinsically linked, and as such they problematize the 'researcher's' relationships (of power and affect) with those 'researched'. Ongoing reflection on whose knowledge researchers and other SI actors are producing and using, to what end and for whose benefit, becomes central to the process of enquiry.

Part V ('Collective action, institutional leverage and public policy') explores a crucial issue at the interface between social innovation research and social innovation action and processes in the 'real world': SI's capacity to mobilize collective action and leverage institutional resources at a broad scale or to feed into society-wide dynamics (social services, social economy, regional governance model, social movements, diversity policies). The relationship between state institutions and social innovation is complex and can be fraught with tensions as well as opportunities. Certainly, both policy and public funding are crucial to the emergence and success of many socially innovative actions and practices; moreover the sustainability of such practices often requires institutionalization at a higher scale or level which, in turn, may both shape the path for local development and allow for other people, in other places and social contexts, to learn from situated experience. Documentation and analysis, as represented by these chapters, can make an important contribution to these collective learning and (mainly tacit) knowledge diffusion processes.

Part VI ('Frontiers in social innovation research') considers new directions in social innovation research, with particular reference to *meta-theoretical* frameworks that shape our understanding of what it is that we – as researchers interested in social change across multiple fields and spatial scales – are doing and in which society and social change processes we are doing it. Trandisciplinarity, holistic research methodologies, pragmatic collective action and more are discussed as to their potential contribution to better integrating the 'research side' (understanding the reality) and the 'action side' (changing the reality) of SI. Highlighted throughout this part is the question of ethics – not the formal research ethics that form part of academic governance, but a more reflexive ethics that places research foci, discourses and methods in the context of the world that we live in, and the one that we wish to live in. This question of ethics cannot be handled by researchers by themselves but should be addressed in collaboration with all actors involved in a SI initiative or change process (Chapter 34). This is why we have summarized the basic methodological style in SI research as 'trandisciplinary reflexivity' (Chapter 32). Methodologies enacting this style such as holism in the old institutionalist tradition (Chapter 33) and an enriched sociology of knowledge and practice approach (Chapter 35) would fit this style.

OPENING THE FIELD

The chapters in this handbook illustrate the extraordinary richness of social innovation as an area of research, action and social change. They also show the non-trivial

relationships between 'knowing' and 'theorizing', 'hoping' and 'doing', 'experiencing' and 'institutionalizing' whenever the 'social matter' and its possible transformation through research and action are the focus.

The conviction shared by the editors and contributors is that this handbook is a step in consolidating our understanding and promotion of social innovation. As such, we believe that it provides material, analysis and insights to demonstrate that social innovation is neither a 'miracle' or a 'chimera', nor a vain quest. It is at the heart of our *present and future core societal concerns*, and it challenges all of us, be we 'committed academics', 'social and political actors', 'activists' or 'ordinary people' (i.e. the people and communities who are precisely the most affected by social problems or preoccupied by fostering new modes of human development). Research and action together have opened the window on new beliefs and practices by providing documented insights on 'how things may change'; we maintain that this implies a commitment to finding the 'right' balance between 'research on action',

'action in research' and 'research through and by action'. A vast program indeed, challenging for generations of researchers, but a genuinely promising one.

We hope that the varied, complementary contributions to this handbook inspire readers by showing a positive, practical and analytically forceful alternative to many contemporary discourses and practices of market-led innovation and economic development. While social innovation analysis is by necessity rigorously critical of these often dominant discourses and processes, it highlights at the same time the capacities and commitment of the thousands of organizations, networks, social enterprises and movements representing millions of people working for SI. In providing a collection of SI research, this handbook reflects upon what has been learnt through more than three decades of social innovation research efforts, socially creative initiatives and their relationship to social change processes; it also opens questions and raises challenges for further creative research. We therefore hope that it will encourage many of our peers and students to continue 'the good work'.