

Social innovation futures: beyond policy panacea and conceptual ambiguity

Position paper for the Eu-SPRI Forum



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0. ABSTRACT

Social innovation is once more an increasingly popular notion circulating as an apparent means to solve the Grand Challenges of the 21st Century. But this common-sense idea of social innovation is based on a quasi-concept, where processes of innovation are absent. To restore some academic rigour to this important concept, we argue more attention need be paid to these innovation processes in social innovation, and that there is value in using innovation concepts drawn from other areas of innovation studies (disruptive innovation, innovation systems, institutional innovation and socio-technical transitions) in highlighting how small-scale social experiments can ultimately lead to the solution of pressing societal problems. Through a subtle critique of the current policy conception of social innovation, it is possible for Innovation Studies in general, and the Eu-SPRI Forum in particular, to help provide better insights into social innovation processes and ultimately to lead to better support frameworks and interventions for promoting solutions to these Grand Challenges.

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1. THE EMERGENCE OF THE NOTION OF SOCIAL INNOVATION

Scholars of innovation studies cannot help but notice the emergence of the concept of social innovation in predominantly policy spheres (Jenson & Harrison, 2013) but also increasingly in academic literatures (*cf.* Edwards-Schachter *et al.*, 2012; Benneworth & Cunha, 2014). Social innovation is not a particular novel concept or activity: the notion of social innovation has existed in various incarnations for almost two centuries (Godin, 2012). Likewise, Drucker (1987) noted how the rise of the contemporary industrial society was dependent on the development of a set of social innovations – including the rise of the idea of ‘management’ – that had slowly coordinated widespread social change. So how can we make sense of the rapid re-emergence of this concept in the early 21st century, and what can the concept bring to innovation studies in general, and more specifically to research and innovation policy studies?

In this position paper, we argue that social innovation has been identified by a range of stakeholders as being vital for delivering a substantial set of macro-changes, the so-called Grand Challenges of the 21st Century. In the case of Europe, the current overarching Europe 2020 strategy effectively frames social innovation as a mechanism for responding to non-economic elements of these Challenges. Through the ubiquity of the smart specialisation concept (*cf.* McCann & Ortega-Argilés, 2013) as an *ex ante* conditionality for Structural Funding (Foray *et al.*, 2013), every region and Member State is encouraged to work social innovation into their territorial development strategies. A tremendous volume of activity is taking place in the field of social innovation, with think tanks and consultants becoming increasingly active in ‘scripting’ these behaviours through best practice models, user guides and checklists (*cf.* Leadbeater, 2007; Mulgan, 2007; Murray *et al.*, 2010). And latterly, with policy-makers and practitioners starting to ask the question of how to best define the concept, and indeed to call for a clear singular definition (Vienna Declaration, 2011), academics are also starting to come to grips with this notion (Djellal & Gallouj, 2012).

This position paper argues that something has been lost in this rapid rise of the concept and that is its conceptual clarity. All these demands for better definitions – we argue – derive from the fact that it is a holding concept into which all kinds of meanings and values have been imbued, creating huge conceptual ambiguity. It is expected to carry the weight of delivering social justice and sustainable development, drawing it to all kinds of cognate concepts such as social enterprise, social entrepreneurship and the social economy from whence any meaningful notion of innovation has been lost. In this position paper, we argue that a first step to sorting out this conceptual confusion means distilling out its intellectual elements specifically related to innovation, and teasing these out into their respective disciplinary strands, using a ‘subtle critique’ methodology.

On that basis, a future research agenda should attempt to build links back to these more traditional approaches to innovation, and equip the concept with deep nuanced understandings of innovation and hence to empower inform policy-makers and practitioners to unlock its true social development potential. This is not purely around bringing the concept of social innovation to the field of innovation studies, but also, critically, about allowing the study of social innovation to benefit from the accumulated insights of our field. And although the Eu-SPRI Forum has

previously recognised the importance of the grand challenges as drivers and contexts for science, research and innovation policy (Kallerud *et al.*, 2013), we are struck that this rather comprehensive document makes no specific reference to social innovation nor social change. We contend that the time is ripe for the Eu-SPRI Forum to embrace social innovation in its scholarly community and provide some much-needed intellectual leadership to this research domain with vital future salience.

2. SOCIAL INNOVATION AND THE RHETORIC OF THE GRAND CHALLENGES

The meteoric contemporary rise of the concept of social innovation cannot be divorced from the wider policy context in which it emerged, of increasing awareness by policy-makers that there are a number of looming threats to social order (such as demographic ageing, global security, climate change and resource scarcity). Macro-scale concepts such as Sustainable Development or Local Agenda 21 had proven unsuccessful in initiating widespread social change geared at adapting to these 'Grand Challenges' (STEPS, 2010; Van den Hove *et al.* 2012). It is against this backdrop that the rise of social innovation must be seen, intimately bound up with the rhetoric and use of 'grand challenges' as rationale for policy intervention (Reid *et al.*, 2010; Amanatidou, Giesecke & Warnke, 2013; Kallerud *et al.*, 2013). The orientation of policies to deal with 'global intractable problems' or 'global challenges' is by no means new, dating back to the Club of Rome report *Limits to Growth* (1972) which likewise explicitly names social innovation, in parallel to technical change, to change political processes and structures to better accommodate sustainable development. There are nonetheless some novel features in how 'global challenges' are addressed, primarily in terms of a new mission-led approach to innovation policy. This has broadened its orientation from stimulating exclusively economic competitiveness towards serving these more societal goals of solving these problems (BEPA, 2009; Depledge, Bartonova & Cherp, 2010; Cagnin, Amanatidou & Keenan, 2012; Amanatidou, Giesecke & Warnke, 2013).

The Vienna Declaration (2011), which sought to create a common scientific basis for social innovation research, stated the 'major societal challenges' as being central to the concept.

'The necessary co-ordination of scientific as well as practical activities in the wide domains of employment, RDI (Research, Development and Innovation), climate change, education, and social inclusion will be impossible without major changes in social practices in the domains of business, the civil society, and the state'. (p.1)

It also referred to the 'indispensable transition from an industrial to a knowledge and services-based society' where 'fundamental societal changes require the inclusion of social innovations in a paradigm shift of the innovation system'. The conference voiced some themes that had been evident since the 1990s, as requiring a multi-dimensional plan of action focused on social innovation particularly at the boundary of particular spheres (economic, ecological, social). These dialogues, often under the name of sustainable innovation, have sought to find alternative and better ways to meet existing needs and to more effectively address the unintended consequences of industrial development upon society than previously (STEPS, 2010; Howaldt & Schwarz, 2010).

It is tempting to link the rise in social innovation within recent 'macro' narratives of Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) that emerged within the EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation 'Horizon 2020' related to the responsive and adaptive answer to grand challenges (Owen, Macnaughten & Stilgoe, 2012; von Schomberg, 2013). The concept of RRI acknowledges the power of research and innovation as a mechanism for genuine and transformative change to shape our collective future. Nevertheless, RRI is primarily concerned with new forms of innovation governance in technological domains (shaping the way technologies are implemented in society to produce the best public outcomes) rather than new forms of innovation per se (Stilgoe *et al.*, 2013).

In words of Geoghegan-Quinn (2012),

'Research and innovation must respond to the needs and ambitions of society, reflect its values and be responsible ... our duty as policy-makers (is) to shape a governance framework that encourages responsible research and innovation' (cited in Owen *et al.*, 2012).

In that sense RRI is far closer to a new paradigm in public engagement with science, a deepening of relationships and responsibilities of societal stakeholders for granting scientists and innovators' 'license to practice' (Benneworth, 2009). There is a clear confusion here in the growing paradigmatic hegemony of the idea of Living Laboratories within Europe as a means of driving innovation. These highlight the need to stimulate 'business-citizens government partnerships as flexible service and technology innovation ecosystems; integrating technological and social innovation in an innovative 'beta culture' (Helsinki Manifesto, 2006; EC, 2009). Living Laboratories obscure the questions of whose needs, rights and responsibilities are heard in these arenas behind roles of lead users in supposedly democratic, open innovation processes (*cf.* Chesbrough, 2003; Von Hippel, 2006). More clear regarding the use of the term social innovation is the report 'Fostering Innovation to Address Social Challenges' (OECD, 2011:14), affirming that

'The multidimensional package of existing social challenges and the systemic failure in fostering social innovation clearly call for a reform of the research and innovation system governance' with participation of multi stakeholders (e.g. universities, research institutes, private companies, government, civil society, citizens).

'Today's social challenges are numerous, complex, and urgent, from ageing societies, climate change, to energy efficiency and security. There is a wide consensus that the disconnection between economic growth and well-being is increasing. At the same time research and innovation have become one of the main engines of growth. However, these two overarching trends have not yet been reconciled: there is a clear lack of exploitation of innovative solutions to address these social challenges. Failing to mobilise innovation to address some of the issues that affect populations at the global and local level has very high opportunity costs. Social innovation can be away to reconcile these two forces, bringing growth and social value at the same time' (OECD, 2011, pp. 7-8).

Weber & Rohrer (2012) maintain that a new policy for transformative change is emerging focused more in the role of research, technology and innovation towards societal challenges

rather than economic growth. Given these emerging conditions of unsustainable growth and rising social innovation, social innovation is identified with new forms of self-management and numerous innovative bottom-up initiatives proposed to help groups and communities cope with marginalization and deprivation (Boyle & Harris, 2010; Moulaert et al., 2013; CE, 2013). But at the same time, social innovation is also related to current and hegemonic conceptualizations around how we think about and perform innovation assumptions about social change and core values of social justice (STEPS, 2010; Smith, Voß & Grin, 2010). Social innovation is at the centre of the paradoxes between sustainable aspirations, production and consumption models associated to discourses on economic growth, efficiency and competitiveness.

But this is a very different concept to precisely pin down in ways that make clear what social innovation is and what it is not. It can be tempting to reverse-apply the label to things that appear to be successful non-market solutions to societal problems. Whilst the ‘transition towns’ concept is a social innovation devoted to solving the challenge of resource scarcity, its unintended gentrification effects may work against urban inclusion, arguably as important a challenge (North & Longhurst, 2012). Some voices gain more legitimate positions in policy-making while others are marginalized or silenced. This implies that policy-making takes into account certain discourses that construct specific versions of social innovation while excluding others. Dominant social constructions of social innovation may therefore have implications for how undesirable consequences of innovation are addressed when strategies of social innovation are implemented. This implies that the contexts in which texts are located and discourses are generated are important and must be taken into consideration when exploring discourse and discursive effects (Seegercrantz & Seeck, 2013).

In this sense, it is necessary to advance in our understandings of social innovation (Neumeier, 2012) beyond the pejorative denomination of buzzword (Pol & Ville, 2009) or catchword (Godin, 2012) and provide an answer to the ‘desperate quest for a definition’ that is usually attributed to social innovation (Djellal & Gallouj, 2012: p. 121). But this is surely unsatisfactory – if social innovation is a coherent innovation concept then it must have a set of underpinning processes and antecedents by which that change is achieved – or not. As a first step in dealing with this confusion, we argue that it is necessary to look at the ways in which the notion have been used in practice and identify the innovation processes this involves.

3. THE PROLIFERATION OF THE NOTION IN PRACTICE

From the institutional perspective, social innovation resides in the interpretive processes whereby choices are experienced, imagined, evaluated, and contingently reconstructed by actors in ongoing dialogue with unfolding situations (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, Scott, 2008). An ample research literature recognizes innovation studies as a policy-oriented field (Mytelka & Smith, 2002; Nill & Kemp, 2009; Cagnin, Amanatidou & Keenan, 2012; Godin, 2013). Godin (2012) claimed that social innovators contributed to the French revolution and maintained that social innovation is a political concept that has been rehabilitated recently in response to the dominant and hegemonic discourses on technological innovation (Edwards et al., 2012).

Social innovation appears to be at the core of the deliberative learning processes for social change on the macro, meso and micro levels, identifying the struggles and contradictions to deliver social justice (to redress identified systemic inequities?) for moving onto more socially and contextualized sustainable paths (Hämäläinen, 2004; Stigl, 2007; Stirling, 2007). Social innovations can therefore be seen as dealing with the basic needs and welfare of society, individuals and communities (Fairweather, 1972; OECD, 2001, 2011; STEPS, 2010). Social innovations often require radical changes in accepted role behaviours or the social structure of existing social organizations and institutions and, in this sense,

‘the greatest obstacle to creating needed change in technological societies are the very values and social organizations that man himself has created...’ Fairweather (1972:1).

As a consequence of this, it is clear that the current social innovation paradigm covers a range of very different activities involving very different underpinning processes oriented towards very different kinds of societal change. Social innovation may refer variously to:

- A neo-Castellian urban movement (Pickvance, 2003) in which innovative forms of governance contribute to wider social goals (Moulaert *et al.*, 2005; Gerometta *et al.*, 2005).
- A change in the organisation of allocative processes which restructure the economy, and have attendant social consequences (Drucker, 1987),
- Experiments in delivering social services to hard-to-reach (socially excluded) groups (Phills *et al.*, 2008)
- Innovation that takes place outside state or market organisational forms, in the social, charitable voluntary or community sector (Haugh & Kitson, 2007)
- Innovation that takes place in an organisational setting or with a logic that is not dominated by market and profit-seeking values (Munshi, 2010) (note: this may be a co-operative firm, *cf.* Novkovic, 2006)
- An innovation system that has strong systematic linkages between firms, industry, universities and society (sometimes referred to as the Quadruple Helix, *cf.* Leydesdorff, 2012)
- Innovation in the public sector around the improvement of public service delivery (Mulgan, 2006)
- Innovation in the institutional forms by which public services are delivered (e.g. public-private partnerships) or even the private sector (Gerometta *et al.*, 2005; Gallie *et al.*, 2012).

Although these are obviously talking about different things, these definitions of social innovation are all clearly heavily cognate within a conceptual field with a loosely defined scope (Howaldt & Schwarz, 2010). Starting from a single perspective, it is possible to understand how other elements fit into the underpinning process with which that perspective is concerned. Neo-Castellian urban movements are typically focused around innovative forms of deliberative governance and decision-making beyond the state, in public-private platforms, and which is characterised by a concern with more than pure profit (Moulaert *et al.*, 2005). But at the same time, these different perspectives are not readily resolvable into a single conceptual framework – although there are overlapping concepts, they do not use identical concepts in identical ways (Iizuka, 2013). Because social movements are primarily concerned with social justice,

public and PPP activity that works against social justice does not count as social innovation, even where viewed from its own public sector innovation perspective, it clearly fulfils a set of criteria for social innovation. Rather than all these perspectives forming the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that can with sufficient ingenuity be slotted together to reveal the true definition of social innovation, they form a confused conceptual fog within which nothing more than a tantalising fleeting glimpse of social innovation can be caught (*cf.* Neumeier, 2012).

4. TOWARDS A ‘SUBTLE CRITIQUE’ OF THE SOCIAL INNOVATION CONCEPT

A key contention we are making is that there is a problem with the concept of social innovation as promoted by policy communities as part of its recent meteoric rise in popularity with policy-makers. Martin & Sunley (2003) identified the problem that arose when an academic theory becomes an uncritical socio-economic development idea, in tracing how the idea of industrial clusters had become a chaotic concept. Likewise, Böhme & Gløersen (2011) demonstrated how the EU-mandated idea of ‘territorial cohesion’ travelled between very different policy concepts and evolved into six largely unrelated concepts that had a greater degree of internal consistency. Jenson & Harrison (2013) argue that this situation applies to social innovation, and draw on Bøås & McNeill’s (2004) idea of quasi-concepts:

“a concept which is more than simply a slogan or buzzword because it has some reputable intellectual basis but may nevertheless be found vulnerable on analytical and empirical grounds. What is special about such an idea is that it is able to operate in both academia and policy discussions” (McNeill, 2006 (*sic*), p. 336 quoted in Jenson & Harrison, 2013, p. 15¹)

Indeed, Jenson suggests that this indeterminate quality makes social innovation meaningful as a concept, in that it can act as a rallying point for a movement and provide a means of navigating complex and changing ideas (Jenson, 2010a,b). As Bøås & McNeill add, these concepts arise in an interaction between policy-makers and academic researchers, and that policy-makers have a strongly functionalist logic in separating out policy interventions from wider issues of politics. But social innovation research is intimately embedded in questions of social justice, questions which researchers such as Moolaert *et al.* (2005; 2009) have foregrounded in their own research. Likewise, social innovation embodies values and meanings that may be at odds with or even compatible with profit-motives embedded in technological innovation (*cf.* Murray *et al.*, 2010). Following Benneworth & Cunha (2014, forthcoming) we therefore identify a first underlying tension in the social innovation concept between these narrow views of “social innovation as discrete improvements to social service provision” from wider views of “social innovation addressing problems with social service provisions by improving social justice”.

Secondly, Moolaert (2009) makes a further distinction between four distinct disciplinary domains within which research into social innovation has taken place. He notes that communities have

¹ The Jenson & Harrison report claims that this quotation originates in McNeill, 2006, but consulting the original McNeill paper reveals that the quotation is entirely embedded in a quotation from that antecedent paper.

evolved within management science/ social sciences, arts & creativity, territorial development and political science/ public administration in which social innovation is a core theme. His likewise argues that these different fields each have different areas of focus, from understanding social capital, to its role in social creation, through to social service provision in government (the concern of the latter two disciplinary fields). Each of these have their own ontological foundations and internally coherent logic, and therefore especial caution need be taken in transferring ideas, heuristics and concepts between these domains without regard for their ontological compatibility (Legendijk, 2003; Jenson & Harrison, 2013).

A third area of conceptual confusion relates to the situation of social innovation and its relationship to other concepts of solidarity and social justice (*cf.* Cunha & Benneworth, 2013). Maclean *et al.* (2013) situate it alongside discourses of social entrepreneurship, with entrepreneurship providing the mechanism by which the idea or innovation achieves the wider societal change. There is also an overlap with a concept of a social enterprise, an activity which provides social services without necessary subscribing completely to a market framework (Brackertz, 2011). Westley & Antadze (2010) argue that social innovation can be present (although not necessarily) in social enterprise and entrepreneurship. There is also a relation with the social economy (Amin *et al.*, 2002) which is the non-economic circuits which govern and shape resource allocations in contemporary mixed economies. Although these are all cognate fields of study, in these fields innovation is not the primary concern or process, and in some cases it simply be a way to respond to changes in these domains.

In short, the portmanteau concept of social innovation in its current context embodies fourthly tensions that require addressing before theoretical progress and cohesion can be made. The first of these relates to fuzziness between normative-policy goals and objective-scholarly understanding: the phenomenon of 'policy-based evidence-making' (Torriti, 2010) or policy-led theorising (Lovering, 1999) is well-understood and some elements and framing of social innovation are of more relevance and utility to policy and practitioner communities; more explicitness is required in this regard. Secondly, there is a fuzziness in the actual ontological foundations of the way social innovation and its constituent concepts are used between different disciplinary communities. There is clearly a need to avoid 'thin concept borrowing' (Hassink, 2007), particularly in those fields such as public administration whose primary concern is not innovation *per se*. Thirdly, there is a fuzziness in the extent to which these concepts are concerned with innovation *strictu sensu*, and the degree to which the focus is on social change, and not on a co-ordinated and managed change process, indeed, the extent to which this is about social **innovation**. Finally, some fuzziness clearly originates from fuzzinesses inherent in different innovation studies traditions that themselves use the term social, drawing on concepts social capital, social learning and social knowledge exchange, where a discursive fluidity in the meaning of 'social' connives at conceptual ambiguities.

Our diagnosis of this underlying problem is that these conceptual tensions and fractures arise because of the speed of its ascent has prevented the 'subtle critique' necessary (in the language of Legendijk) to create ontologically rigorous concepts. To reclaim the policy concept for the

academic domain, it is therefore necessary to 'sort out' this fractured jumble, reframe discussions to be explicit about normative, ideal type and desired outcomes, and restore some conceptual thickness to the way innovation is evoked. Although we have developed a conceptual critique of the problems afflicting the social innovation concept, we stress that this is not purely a concern for the scholarly community. Indeed, growing dissatisfaction with the contradictions in the Living Laboratories concept as a means of stimulating social innovation demonstrate the extent to which thin, fuzzy quasi-concepts have hindered the development of effective and efficient interventions to stimulate social innovation (Dutilleul, Birrer & Mensin, 2010; Edwards-Schachter & Tams, 2013). According to Jouen (2008) the imperative in a situation of resources scarcity is to advance in more effective actions for social innovation beyond a chaotic social experimentation. Therefore, it seems important to reflect upon the construction of social innovation in policy-making and whether such constructions open up opportunities to minimize unintended undesirable conditions and consequences of innovation.

5. WHERE ARE THE KEY INNOVATION IDEAS IN SOCIAL INNOVATION?

We have identified that there are three key fractures in the concept of social innovation, and this forms the basis for our prescription for determining a prospective research agenda for a more coherent field. As a first step there must be an immediate concern with re-placing the notion of "innovation" more centrally in this field. What is common to the field of innovation studies is understanding what affects innovation processes, and how that shapes the change trajectory. Different disciplines place different emphasis on connections, networks and systems (e.g. technological/ national/ regional corporate) innovation systems, access to scarce resources, the impact of policy, or even the impact of place. It is therefore firstly necessary to understand which elements of innovation studies are salient to the architectures and contexts of social innovation processes. On the basis of this first step, it is then necessary to reintegrate these conceptual elements into a coherent – and innovation-centric – theory of social innovation.

It is beyond the scope of a 5,000 word position paper to do justice to this theme, and indeed we claim that a more comprehensive effort is needed within the wider Eu-SPRI Forum community to achieve this. Nevertheless on the basis of our previous work (*cf.* Edwards-Schachter *et al.*, 2012, Benneworth & Cunha, 2014) it is possible to preliminarily identify key areas of innovation studies within which social innovation needs re-embedding. Edwards-Schachter *et al.* (2012) argue that there is a need to develop a theory of 'socio-technological innovation', without necessarily suggesting how that might emerge. Benneworth & Cunha (2014) contend that all flavours of social innovation involve combinations of four processes, namely a (1) mass change in how an activity is organised, (2) collectively co-ordinated, (3) involving novel societal institutions, and (4) changing societal power relations. Bringing these two positions together, we propose a value in trying to base a theory of socio-technical innovation around these four processes, drawing on concepts in the extant technological innovation literatures.

5.1 System change: social innovation as radical innovation

The first process is the mass change of how an activity is organised, what Markard & Truffer (2008) call “a classic research field in the innovation literature” (p. 596), exploring how new products emerge that are radically different from their predecessors and which have substantial effects on market and industry structure and composition (Watts, 2001). Baumol *et al.* (2007) argue that radical innovation is one of the main drivers of the dynamism of capitalist economies, representing the means by which economies emerge successfully from crises and stagnation (cited in Dodgson *et al.*, 2011). Keupp & Gassman (2013) maintain that resource constraints can act as a trigger to radical innovation in the manufacturing sector, highlighting the issues that need addressing if radical innovation is to succeed creating new organisational routines, knowledge bases and markets/ users. Constraints affecting knowledge, the most important to radical innovation, can be addressed through knowledge recombination strategies. However, structures and relationships between incumbents and challengers affect both the way radical innovation succeeds as well as the paths along which those innovations evolve (Ansari & Krop, 2012).

5.2 Collective co-ordination: social innovation as innovation system

The second process is in collective co-ordination between diverse actors, both deliberate and emergent, creating and securing access to the new knowledges necessary to stimulate innovations. There are a variety of innovation system literatures which provide interesting lenses through which to consider social innovation, and indeed, some social innovation research is starting to mobilise the notion of social innovation systems (*inter alia* Huddart (2012), Levesqué, (2012), Phillips *et al.* (2013)). At the same time, these preliminary readings fail to show the nuance in the understandings in systems relationships and the limits to systems conceptualisations that have emerged in innovation systems literatures. Different innovation system literatures are applicable to different ‘flavours’ of social innovation. Regional innovation systems literatures (*cf.* Cooke *et al.*, 1997; 2000; 2005) and in particular the understanding of their placing within wider networks and processes provide a means to understand global-local interactions. Technological innovation systems literatures provide a parallel perspective for understanding how innovation is co-ordinated across these wider networks and the effects that this has on structuring local places (Markard & Truffer; 2008; Coenen *et al.* 2012; Binz *et al.* 2014). IS literatures can therefore help to understand one of the hidden issues in social innovation, how particular local place-specific innovations can achieve their wider desired social effects in terms of shifting power relationships.

5.3 Recurrent activities: social innovation as institutional innovation

The third key issue for social innovation studies is in having processes to explain recurrent action at a distance and path-dependency, in terms of the development of new social institutions which support that social innovation. Whether defined in terms of formal/ informal institutions (North, 1990) or Scott’s distinction of regulative, normative and cultural cognitive (2011). Much work in innovation studies has problematized the notion of institutions for being fuzzy, residualised or normative, and these are clearly issues for social innovation (Van den Broek & Smulders, 2014). Whyte & Sexton (2011) argue that the key concern of institutional approaches to innovation studies are institutions as an intermediary level between the organisational and the societal levels. They

cite Vermeulen *et al.*'s (2007) distinction between regulatory structures, professional bodies and collaborating competitors in shaping the environment for innovation in the Dutch concrete sector. Key in Vermeulen *et al.* is highlighting the role of these intermediary-level institutions as providing spaces of resistance by established interests to these novel innovations, a key issue for social innovations in challenging social injustice where incumbents enjoyed privileged positions.

5.4 Changing power relationships: social innovation as socio-technical transition

The final innovation literature is that of socio-technical transitions, which can provide additional insights into the issue of changing societal power relationships. The transitions literature emerged from a long-standing interest in innovation studies in the social shaping of technology and attempts to completely deconstruct implicit linear model heuristics unconsciously framing STI studies (*cf.* Sorensen & Williams, 2002). This was added an extra impetus by the realisation in the context of the grand challenges that there was a more interactive relationship between societal evolution and technology (Geels, 2010; Alkemade *et al.*, 2011). Better understanding these intermediary stages was a vital precondition for conceptualising how small and promising experiments could drive this wider socio-technological transition (Markard *et al.*, 2012). But at the same time, it was important to avoid allowing a simplistic neo-linear model of upscaling to emerge in multi-level models of transitions (*cf.* Geels, 2002) and to retain a sense of sensitivity for place-specificities in the diffusion of innovations (*cf.* Coenen *et al.*, 2012). The 'upscaling' of social innovations and the achievement of socio-technical transition to more environmentally sustainable as well as socially-just societies is a key concern for social innovation, and therefore attention need be paid to the compatibility or contradictions in the values of actors driving change and the values that become embedded in the successfully-adopted social innovations.

6. TOWARDS A FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION

In some senses it is artificial to make a distinction between these four domains because the concepts also have overlapping concerns, for example in institutional studies in understanding how incumbents react to radical technologies (*cf.* for example Hill & Rothaermel, 2003). Nevertheless we contend that these four perspectives provide a promising starting point for attempting to reinsert the notion of innovation as a serious, complex and contested academic notion to the emerging field of innovation studies. There are also other debates within the field of innovation studies which can benefit from this perspective, and in particular, we are struck by a need to develop a structured dialogue with the emerging field of Responsible Research and Innovation (*cf.* section 2). We argue there are five questions that deserve fuller reflection and consideration to achieve that goal, and develop a future research agenda for social innovation in the mainstream of studies of research and innovation.

- How can we better understand and conceptualise the extent of the 'fuzzinesses' in the current policy concept of social innovation?

- What are the underlying innovation concepts that are invoked by social innovation
- What might a more coherent set of social innovation definitions and principles look like?
- What might policy approaches or proposals based on these principles look like?
- What kinds of future research agendas are necessary to address the shortcomings in contemporary social innovation approaches?

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