



**Social innovations as
drivers of social change –
Tarde's disregarded contribution
to social innovation theory building**

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Abstract

Intensified study of the subject of social innovation – which has been largely practice-driven – has revealed conceptual weaknesses which in turn demand a deeper (continued) social-theoretical foundation of social innovations as an independent innovation type within a microfoundation of the social realm. To this end, this article attempts to use the social-theoretical approach of Gabriel Tarde as a scientific conception of active social life to aid the analytical identification and classification of social innovations and the development of a corresponding scientific and social policy perspective. With recourse to Gabriel Tarde's microsociological and practical sociological agenda, it can be shown that and how social innovations change social practice, thus becoming the actual drivers of transformative social change, and what requirements result from this today for social practice and (innovation) policy.

“Social innovation is a term that almost everybody likes, but nobody is quite sure of what it means” Pol and Ville (2009)

1 Introduction

In social practice and related discourse on the future, in view of the great social challenges (climate change, unemployment, inclusion,...), there is a clearly identifiable trend of focusing on social innovations. At the same time, the relationship between social innovations and social change remains a largely open question.

Aside from the importance that the term “social innovation” is currently gaining as a model for a new (innovation) policy, its *analytical and diagnostic potential to explain social change in terms of a microfoundation of the social realm* has been largely underestimated until now. “As before, rather than being used as a specifically defined specialist term with its own definable area of study, social innovation is used more as a kind of descriptive metaphor in the context of phenomena of social change and the modernisation of society” (Howaldt/Schwarz 2010, 49). There is still no theoretically grounded concept that is suitable for empirical research. The result is “an incoherent body of knowledge on social innovation with the consequence that there is a lack of clarity of the concept of social innovation” (Rüede/Lurtz 2012, 2).

Given this situation, we aim to outline how Gabriel Tarde's social theory can be of benefit in developing a theoretically grounded concept of social innovations, and how it can be reinterpreted in terms of sociological practice theory. For Tarde, social macrophenomena such as social structures, systems and social change are “easy to describe, but hard to explain, because the true complexity resides in the microphenomena” (Gilgenmann 2010, 2). His basic idea is to explain social change “from the bottom up”, and not objectivistically, like Durkheim, “from the top down”, in terms of social facts and structures (*ibid.*, 7). Recourse to Tarde helps overcome the restriction of the concept of innovation to purely economic aspects.

Ogburn's conception provides important input into a better understanding of technological and social innovations on the one hand and social change on the other (see section 2). But it is only through recourse to the social theory of Gabriel Tarde that the potentials of a sociology of innovation for the analysis of social change become visible (see section 3). Taking his microsociological

approach as a starting point, key implications can be outlined for a theoretically grounded understanding of social innovation, and for an innovation policy that builds on this (see section 4).

2 Social innovation and social change – perspectives on a theoretical foundation

Theories of social change have been at the core of sociology since its beginnings. So far, however, no consistent and paradigmatic theory has emerged. In particular, theory has difficulties with social change that is not continuous and linear (cf. Weymann 1998, 17). In so far as sociological theories deal with processes of change, they do so almost universally from the perspective of the *reproduction, but not the transformation of social order*. Social change in the sense of fundamental transformations at macro level, which sweep over us as mega-trends, or as a sequence of phases separated by (epochal) upheavals, belongs to the field of sociological diagnosis of the times. This can manage completely without social theory and at the same time is often mistaken for it (cf. Osrecki 2011).

Whereas – based mainly on Ogburn's theory – a *specialised sociology of change* has developed (cf. Schäfers 2002), with few exceptions *social innovation as an analytical category* is at best a secondary topic both in the classics and in current social theory approaches and concepts of social differentiation and social integration, social order and social development, modernisation and transformation. Apart from a few exceptions (cf. in particular Mulgan 2012; Harrison 2012; Hochgerner 2009), the social sciences seem to a large extent to refuse to “present and list as social innovations the relevant social changes” which they have discovered and studied (Rammert 2010, 26). This is all the more astonishing given that Ogburn not only makes “cultural lag” – the difference in the time it takes for the comparatively “slow” non-material culture to catch up with the faster-developing material culture – his starting point and systematically differentiates between technological and social innovations (and inventions) as critical factors in social change, he also emphasises that use of the term “inventions” is not restricted to technological inventions but also includes social inventions such as the League of Nations. “*Invention is defined 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. [...] By inventions we do not mean only the basic or important inventions, but the minor ones and the improvements. Inventions, then, are the evidence on which we base our observations of social evolution*” (Ogburn 1969, 56 ff.). Thus Ogburn is convinced that in the interplay of invention, accumulation, exchange and adaptation, he has discovered the basic elements of “cultural development” (56) and hence – like Darwin for biological evolution – has developed a model to explain social evolution.

Following on from this, therefore, the debate mainly centres on the question of whether social innovations are a prerequisite for, a concomitant phenomenon with, or consequence of technological innovations. Here Ogburn is wrongly made the chief exponent of a technological interpretation of social change. Starting from an interrelationship between “material” and “non-material elements of culture”, he assigns to “innovations in the non-material field” the character of “secondary changes” in the sense of an “adaptation to a change in the material field” (*ibid.*), which as an “invention in the field of technology or a discovery in applied science” have an extraordinarily large coefficient of effect and therefore result “with great likelihood in changes in other cultural fields” or even in the “formation of completely new social institutions” (67).¹ In this original interpretation, social change is understood as a process of diffusion of innovations and hence as the imitation or adoption of a (technological or social) invention by others or as an emergent innovation process, where social innovations are primarily ascribed the function of a (delayed) adaptation in the sense of a “cultural lag” (Ogburn 1969, 64).

1 Quotations back-translated from German.

At the same time, it is overlooked that in his later work, Ogburn referred to an important misunderstanding of his concept. In an essay published in 1957, he writes:

“In most of the examples I gave at that time, the starting point was a technological change or a scientific discovery, and the lagging, adaptive cultural element generally was a social organisation or an ideology. These examples led some researchers to think the cultural lag theory was a technological interpretation of history. Yet when the cultural lag theory was published, I pointed out that the independent variable could just as well be an ideology or other non-technological variable [...].”

So the fact that the technological changes always came first was simply due to the fact that at a particular point in time, only certain observations were available; but it is not an inherent part of the theory” (Ogburn 1969, 139).^{2,3}

Yet precisely these aspects of Ogburn's conception, which could have formed the basis for a comprehensive theory of innovation, remained largely ignored in a setting in which there was a one-sided focus on the sociology of technology.

Only in recent years has a new understanding of the innovation process become more important, in which openness towards society is central (FORA 2010, 15 ff.). Individual aspects of this development are reflected in terms and concepts such as open innovation, customer and user integration, (innovation) networks, multi-stakeholder dialogues and “the new power of the citizenry” (Marg *et al.* 2013). The development of “robust design concepts” (Groß *et al.* 2005) and institutions that combine research and innovation with “post-conventional forms of participation” (Marg *et al.* 2013, 8) are explicitly the subject matter of, for example, transition management, transdisciplinary sustainability research, governance research and particularly also network research. Thus, at the same time, social innovations come into view as a type of innovation that is distinguishable from technological innovations and has its own subject area, sphere of influence and field of application (cf. Howaldt/Schwarz 2010).

However, it is *not* possible to define social innovations – as Rammert (2010) proposes – solely by their relationship to a social reference system. Rather, what is at issue is the substantive core of the innovation object. With social innovations, the new does not manifest itself in the medium of technological artefacts, but at the level of social practices. If it is accepted that the invention and diffusion of the steam engine, the computer or the smartphone should be regarded differently from the invention and social spread of a national system of healthcare provision, the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) or a system of microlending, then it stands to reason that there is an intrinsic difference between technological and social innovations. While it is true that all innovations, regardless of their object, can be viewed as a social phenomenon, this does not obviate the need to empirically research the commonalities and differences between these two types of innovation. Even if, in reality, both types closely connect with each other in socio-technological systems, the need for analytical distinction does not disappear. This is all the more urgent given that existing sociological innovation research, which has emanated mainly from the sociology of technology, centres on the investigation of technological innovations: “If one asks what are the relevant innovations of the last 100 years or if one reads lists of the most important innovations, the answer usually is a series of technological inventions” (Rammert 2010, 25).⁴

2 Duncan also highlights this clarification in his introduction to Ogburn's works: “It is wrong to characterise Ogburn's theory of social change as a ‘cultural lag theory’. He did not regard the cultural lag theory as a ‘fundamental element of the theory of social evolution’” (Duncan 1969, 21). He goes on to state: “Ogburn makes it quite clear that one should in no way assume that all lags are initiated by technological inventions, to which social forms must subsequently sooner or later adapt. This statement results only from a generalisation of empirical findings for a particular historical period, and even for this period it is not said to be valid without exception” (ibid., 22).

3 Back-translation from German.

4 For many years, this one-sided technology orientation has found expression in an innovation policy that concentrates on supporting leading-edge technologies. The many reasons for this trend are founded for example in the various models of economic growth theory (cf. Hirsch-Kreinsen 2010).

In this perspective, it becomes more important to devote greater attention to social innovation as a mechanism of change residing at the micro and meso level. The reasons for this are obvious. Firstly, the shortcomings of older models of social change and of an economically and technologically focused innovation model become increasingly apparent when dealing with the key social challenges. Secondly, new forms of social self-management, of the “criticism that actually takes place in society” (Vobruba 2013, 160), of protest movements that aim to shape society (Marg *et al.* 2013) and new social practices in social life and related governance – understood as necessary social innovations – are evidently becoming increasingly established.

In the context of the broad social debate surrounding sustainable development and necessary social transformation processes (cf. WGBU 2011), the question of the relationship between social innovations and social change arises again: how can processes of social change be initiated which go beyond the illusion of centralist management concepts to link social innovations from the mainstream of society with the intended social transformation processes?

3 Tarde's microfoundation of social change

Recourse to Tarde, the long-forgotten classic exponent of a sociology of innovation, is helpful in gaining a better theoretical understanding of the relationship between social innovations and social change. His achievement consists in explaining social change “from the bottom up”, and not objectively, like Durkheim, “from the top down”, in terms of social facts and structures (Gilgenmann 2010, 7). Tarde's contribution to the microfoundation of a sociology of innovation can be used to assist in developing a concept of social innovation as a social mechanism of change residing at the micro and meso level. This seems all the more necessary given that Tarde's social theory – with a view to its implications and potentials for the analysis of innovation – has not been systematically explored until now.

Recourse to Tarde's social theory, which at core is a *sociology of innovation*, 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. At the same time, this reveals the blind spots of an economically narrow view. Because Tarde places the laws of the practices of imitation at the centre of his theory of social development, the associated microfoundation of social phenomena provides vital input into an integrative theory of innovation. It enables us to discover how social phenomena, conditions and constructs come into being and transform. The key to this is to meticulously trace social inventions and innovations as well as the associated social practices of their imitation.

This character of Tarde's social theory, referring strongly to the social prerequisites for invention and imitation, is also underlined by the fact that unlike Schumpeter, for whom the *innovator* in the social figure of the entrepreneur is the focus of interest, for Tarde it is inventions which are understood to be the central “driver” of social development. For Tarde, these are the many small inventions and ideas “*which were difficult or easy to arrive at and mostly went unnoticed at the time of their arising, which therefore are usually almost exclusively inglorious and nameless*” (Tarde 2009b, 26).

These 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” (ibid., 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” (ibid., 38).*

Since imitation always also involves variation, imitations simultaneously bring 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.

“Researching the ‘many small inventions’, according to Tarde, is a matter for a sociology which ‘has become a truly experimental science’” (Balke 2009, 151). If change must be viewed as a contingent phenomenon which resists any general (macro) theory because in every reproducing action and in the dependence in principle of social structures on negotiation (Joas 1992, 60), there is at the same time the possibility of change and hence a gigantic field of possible transformations, then the benefit of a microfoundation of the social realm consists precisely in decoding the phenomena which shed light on the diverse processes of order and change in the social world. These are the many small social inventions, ideas, initiatives and innovations via which social change and the tension between diversity and cohesion are recursively constituted.

If social micro units are accorded constitutive importance for the dynamics of society, it becomes possible to describe social change not simply as a trend in the sense of a transition from one state at time t to another at time t_1 , but to see it as an independent non-deterministic reality. Thus social innovations can be understood as a “starting point for creating social dynamics behind technolog-

ical innovations” (Geels 2006, 6), as change that arises as a result of constant changes by inventive and imitating actors (cf. Tarde 2009c, 67). With Tarde, social change can be traced back to the effects of small and micro units. Change is explained “from the bottom up”, in current discourse on social transformation processes as a fundamental prerequisite for “substantial change” (Paech 2012). This is about understanding how “alternative values and lifestyles [...] to a significant degree have spread from the bottom up” (Schneidewind 2013, 139). Its emergence from unintended and intentional deviations from the ideal of imitation provides the possibility of linking micro and macro perspectives (Gilgenmann 2010, 7), i.e. a view of individuals in their society with a view of the society.

While the macro perspective looks at how social facts and constructs impact on social life – that is, it refers to the power of structures, institutions etc. to shape actions (cf. e.g. Hasse/Krücken 2005, 17), the microfoundation of the social realm focuses on the “law of their formation”, and reveals how structures are formed and transformed. The key to understanding lies in social innovations, which spread through society as a result of imitation practices and bring about social change, i.e. a “process of change in the social structure of a society in its constitutive institutions, cultural patterns, associated social actions and conscious awareness” (Zapf 2003, 427). These are non-teleological, highly contingent processes.

Tarde devises and pursues an *analytical agenda* that makes social innovations the starting point for understanding social conditions and how they change. Accordingly, “the real causes of change consist of a chain of certainly very numerous ideas, which however are different and discontinuous, yet they are connected together by even far more numerous acts of imitation, for which they serve as a model” (Tarde 2009b, 26). Social imitation is therefore kept in motion by innovation (Keller 2009, 233). Development and change are enabled by invention, by successful initiatives that are imitated and hence become (social) innovations. “Social transformations are explained by the individual initiatives which are imitated” (Tarde 1902, 1 – as quoted by Michaelides/Theologou 2010, 363), they are the directing, determining and explanatory force, the “key drivers of social transformation processes” (Moebius 2009, 269).

4 Challenges for a new understanding of innovation and a new innovation policy

Based on Tarde’s concept of innovation, key conclusions can be drawn with regard to a new understanding of innovation which contributes to the necessary theoretical foundation of the term and the associated innovation policy concepts.

4.1 Social innovations as drivers of social change

Social innovations are a central driver and element of social change. Hence it is not surprising that they occupy a key position in the debate concerning the major social challenges and associated necessary social transformation processes. It is important here to look at the findings of research on the genesis of technology and in particular at those approaches which tackle questions of transition management and sociotechnical system change (cf. Geels/Schot 2007). Geels and Schot pursue a multi-level approach (MLP) by distinguishing three levels: niche innovations, the sociotechnical regime, and the sociotechnical landscape. They understand “transitions as outcomes of alignment between developments at multiple levels” or “as changes from one sociotechnical regime to another” (*ibid.*399) Starting from these basic assumptions, they develop a typology of transformation processes which differentiates according to the availability of resources (internal/external) and the degree of coordination. Whereas “endogenous renewal” is performed by actors within the existing regime in the form of consensus-oriented and planned efforts as a response to perceived pressure using resources internal to the regime, the “reorientation of trajectories” results from a shock. In contrast, an “emergent transformation” results from uncoordinated pressure from outside of the system boundaries, while “purposeful transition” is initiated from outside the existing regime as an intended and coordinated transformation process (*ibid.*401).

These considerations allow a closer inspection of the relationship between social innovation and social change. Seen in the light of Tarde's approach, new practices of social action would first be discovered and invented at the micro level, in social niches and (protected) action contexts, and from there be imitated and spread by particular actors or networks of actors,⁵ in the process of which they also change. Furthermore, new social practices can develop outside of the prevailing imitation streams. Together with changes in the sociotechnical landscape which exert pressure on the predominant sociotechnical system (e.g. through environmental changes such as climate change) or systemic dysfunctions (financial crisis, unemployment, social inequality,...), these developments can result in destabilisation of the system from two sides and open up "windows of opportunity" for niche innovations, which are then transformed context-dependently and ultimately institutionalised as new social practice in the sense of a social innovation.

With regard to the need for a comprehensive transformation of the western economic and growth model, Meadows *et al.* (1972, 173) pointed out "that social innovation can no longer lag behind technological innovation."⁶ Likewise, the directed, rapid and far-reaching transformation which is demanded with the notion of sustainable development explicitly addresses radical changes at the level of political governance and social practices that go far beyond technological innovations. Transformative social change here is no longer understood to be a largely uncontrolled outcome of gradual evolutionary developments (cf. Osterhammel 2011), but as something which can in principle be shaped by society, i.e. "by the actors and their innovations" (Schneidewind 2013, 123). To rely on new technologies alone to achieve this is regarded as insufficient on account of the problem-shifting, secondary consequences and rebound effects which frequently accompany them. The necessary transformation – which is already emerging in many areas, yet at the same time is also comprehensively blocked – needs to be shaped by society and demands new concepts of welfare, diverse social innovations and an as yet unattained level of international cooperation (cf. WGBU 2011).

This makes it necessary to place the transformation of ideas and initiatives as an independent form of innovation at the centre of social self-management and organisation processes and real-life experiments embedded in them as well as imitation processes going beyond them, and, relating to this, at the centre of a "truly experimental science" (Tarde 2009a, 101).

4.2 The importance of successful imitation in the spread of social innovation

Tarde can therefore also be used to bring about an important shift in perspective. Rather than constantly producing new individual inventions, it seems more meaningful to creatively reconfigure the potentials of existing inventions through social practice. "The qualities that in any age and in any land make a man superior are those which make him better able to understand the discoveries already made and exploit the inventions already devised" (Tarde 2009b, 251). In this context, the wealth of a nation for Tarde is rooted in its ability to "use the knowledge of its time in a particular way" (*ibid.*, 254). If, like Tarde, one seeks to explain a situation from the imitation practices of people, the specific cultural frameworks need to be decoded.

At the same time, inventions can also be adopted from other cultural groups. Not only Tarde, but later Ogburn too emphasises:

"But the inhabitants of a cultural group can also come into possession of inventions, without making inventions themselves, by importing them from other countries. In fact, most inventions found within a specific area are imported [...]" (Ogburn 1969, 62),⁷

and points to the Renaissance in Italy, which owes its creativity to the inflow of ideas from antiquity.

5 "Niche innovations are carried and developed by small networks of dedicated actors, often outside the fringe actors" (Geels/Schot 2007, 400).

6 Back-translation from German.

7 Back-translation from German.

With the shift in perspective from inventions to social practices of imitation, the key question in the context of diffusion is how new social practices come into being from the imitation of social practices. The concept of imitation underpins an understanding of innovation which focuses on social practices. Only these can be imitated. Practices of organisation, consumption, production and so forth become the central object of Tarde's conception of imitation. This includes the manufacture and consumption of technological artefacts. The imitative spread of social ideas or initiatives tends to combine with other inventions to form increasingly complex and more widely acting social innovations. Imitation always also involves variation, and to this extent imitations constantly bring innovations into social structures and constructs.

4.3 The diffusion of social innovations

With regard to the current debate surrounding the importance of social innovation, the question of the possibilities for its (fast and sustained) spread or diffusion is central. Rogers, who has decisively influenced research on the diffusion of innovations, also regards Tarde as a source of inspiration for his own ideas and believes him to have been far ahead of his time (cf. Rogers 2003, 41). Rogers' approach to diffusion, which is still predominant in the business context, exhibits a series of links to Tarde which can assist in understanding the mechanisms by which social innovations spread. At the same time, however, Rogers' reinterpretation of Tarde has contributed to a problematic narrowing of diffusion research. His references to Tarde are by no means "slightly different concepts" (Rogers 2003, 41), rather they are a serious change of perspective. Whereas Tarde's sociology is interested in the genesis of the new as social practice, Rogers takes innovation (as generally rational problem-solving produced by science and technology) for granted and focuses on its "transfer" into different areas of application. Thus Rogers severs the direct connection between invention and innovation, through which an invention first becomes an innovation – and therefore a social fact – and reduces the creative process of imitation to its adaptive function. According to Rogers' definition, the innovation precedes the diffusion process. Diffusion focuses on the related rejection and acceptance behaviour, i.e. the innovation gains acceptance instead of being produced.

The associated diffusion research asks, with regard to the intended target groups, how the innovation can be substantively modified and prepared for information and communication purposes so that the adaption rate can be increased and/or accelerated. It attempts to develop push strategies aimed at speeding up the introduction of solutions into society (outside-in processes). The pro-innovation bias is constitutive for diffusion research. Diffusion research therefore generates an asymmetrical communication relationship between developers and users of problem solutions / innovations. Society itself as the original source of innovation and creativity is a blind spot in diffusion research. On the other hand, if one starts with Tarde's understanding of the relationship between invention and imitation, then that which Rogers defines as diffusion of an idea, technology etc. appears as a process which initiates new acts of imitation and triggers cultural learning processes while interrupting existing imitation streams and advancing social change. Inventions open up new opportunities, expose problems and shortcomings in established practices, initiate processes of learning and reflection, and ultimately enable new social practices. To this extent, with any invention, one should enquire about its potential to trigger such imitation and learning process and hence generate new social practices. Only through the development of new or changes in existing practices do their effects unfurl, do inventions become innovations and hence social facts. In reality, therefore, the process of diffusion is a process centred on changing patterns of behaviour that sets social learning processes in motion which are triggered by new inventions.

The internal logic of these processes of imitation and social learning, which Tarde makes the focus of his attention, therefore determines the innovation process. The unpredictable dynamics of the self-organised interaction of heterogeneous actors dealing in various ways with innovations requires “more realistic assumptions about decision-making processes” (Schröder *et al.* 2011, 28) and an approach that ultimately inverts Rogers' perspective. Whereas traditional diffusion research offers ex-post explanations of how individual innovations have ended up in social practice, the goal here is to develop approaches to understanding the genesis of innovations from the broad range of social practice, and which to this extent are concerned not so much with the transfer and modification of isolated singular innovation offerings but rather with multiple innovation streams, fed by an evolutionary interplay of invention and imitation: the “cycle of interlinked and recurring (repeating with variations) actions” (Tarde 2009a, 73).

4.4 Wisdom of crowds and new forms of governance

If we join Tarde in pointing to the social embeddedness of any invention in a dense network of imitation streams, then social innovations are first and foremost ensemble performances, requiring interaction between many actors. Above all, they need the wisdom of crowds. As the opening of the innovation process to society is a key characteristic of the new innovation paradigm (cf. Howaldt/Kopp 20012, 45), there is an accompanying increase in the experimental processes which take place not only in the separate world of scientific laboratories but also in society (Krohn 2005). Social innovations and their actors, who critically, exploratively and experimentally depart from the prevailing “mental maps”, the established rules, routines, pathways and models in politics, business and society – such as the economisation of all areas of life and an inevitable link between prosperity and growth (Leggewie/Welzer 2009; Jackson 2012, WBGU 2011) – who call these into question and in a “competition of ideas” lead the way to changed, alternative social practices and lifestyles, are the basis and relevant drivers of transformative social change (cf. e.g. Jonker 2012).

The perspective of a conception of social innovation founded in social theory therefore focuses on the interfaces between the self-referencing social sectors of government, business and civil society, which are distinct from and largely shielded from each other, on their respective rationales of action and regulatory mechanisms, and on the associated problems and limited problem-solving capacities. Regarding the governance question of how these interfaces should be reconfigured, established patterns of control and coordination are added to, expanded and remoulded via aspects such as self-organisation, intersectoral cooperation, networks and new forms of knowledge production. The associated processes of “cross-sector fertilisation” (Phills/Deiglmeier/Miller 2008, 40 ff.) and convergence of sectors (Austin *et al.* 2007) increasingly enable a kind of blended value creation (Emerson 2003) while at the same time promoting a “moralisation of markets” (Stehr 2007). Such cross-fertilisation and convergence processes require and enable far-reaching social innovations, which set in motion and spur the necessary blending of boundaries. In view of the complex interdependencies between the different social sectors, system levels and levels of action, social innovations are necessary separate from and in addition to technological and economic innovations “in order to reach systemic synergies, productivity growth, increasing returns und steadily growing incomes” (Hämäläinen/Heiskala 2007).

Changing social practices is generally a drawn-out, contingent and self-managing process which, as Tarde points out, is subject to its own “laws” – the laws of imitation. Previous attempts to “manage” such processes through policy have generally proven to be decidedly difficult. A comprehensive innovation policy, which in addition to supporting new technologies also focuses on social innovations and enabling actors “to suspend established routines and patterns, as only then can new ideas and behaviours thrive” (Adolf 2012, 40), on the necessary “freedom” to do this and the opportunities “to share objectified and personal (implicit) knowledge” (*ibid.*, 41), is only in its infancy and requires above all a deeper understanding of the workings and modes of action of social innovations.

One of the key tasks in this regard is a necessary redefinition of the relationship between policy and the “new power of the citizenry” (Marg *et al.* 2013), civil society engagement, the many and diverse initiatives and movements “for the transformation of our type of industrial society” (Wel-

zer 2013, 187). “A central element here is to enable citizens [in the sense of empowerment – authors’ note] to share in responsibility for the future, which should not be equated with personal responsibility in the neoliberal sense” (Rückert-John 2013, 291).

4.5 The ambivalence of social innovations

From this point of view, however, the ambivalence of social innovations is easily obscured. The concept of innovation is not suited to distinguishing “good” and “evil”. The decisive difference is new and old. “The normative linking of social innovations with socially highly esteemed values, which is often found, ignores the fact that in each case according to the differing perspectives concerned and prevailing rationality, different goals and interests certainly can be pursued with a social innovation, and that accordingly, depending on whose interests are involved and the social attribution, these in no way have to be considered ‘good’ per se in the sense of socially desirable in order to be called social innovation – ‘there is no inherent goodness in social innovation’ (Lindhult 2008, 44). Their benefit and their effects, depending on the point of view, just as in the case of technological innovations, can indeed be ambivalent” (Howaldt/Schwarz 2010, 61).

New social practices cannot per se “be regarded as the answer to the problem of sustainable development” (Rückert-John 2013, 294). Consequently, also when evaluating social innovations, advanced standards (cf. also Stiehs 2013) should be applied and a process of social discourse set in motion which allows an exchange of different perspectives and rationalities and considers socially relevant interactions, via which they are given “an orientation towards sustainability” (Rückert-John 2013, 294). Necessary here too, therefore, is an innovation impact assessment and the selection of those social innovations which have the potential for a system change leading to a sustainable society. The broader question, however, is how do social inventions or ideas become social innovations, how can ways and opportunities for their diffusion and the accompanying drawn-out, contingent and self-managing processes be analysed and shaped, if this is a phenomenon that is fundamentally distinguishable from technological innovations?

5 Endless frontiers

If the question of the relationship between social innovations and social change has currently become a core issue for scientific discussion and for the politically practical shaping of social innovations, then recourse to Tarde highlights their importance as a central element of a non-deterministic explanation of social change and a key element of social transformation processes. Because Tarde places the practices of imitation – and its laws – at the centre of his theory of social development, reference to the associated microfoundation of social phenomena provides vital input into an integrative theory of innovation. As a forceful scientific conception of active social life (cf. Toews 2013, 401) it enables us to discover how social phenomena, conditions and constructs come into being and transform.

A sociological innovation theory must therefore examine the many and varied imitation streams, and decode their logics and laws. From this perspective, the focus is always on social practice, since it is only via social practice that the diverse inventions etc. make their way into society and thus become the object of acts of imitation. Social practice is a central component of a theory of transformative social change, in which the wide variety of everyday inventions constitute stimuli and incentives for reflecting on and possibly changing social practices. It is only when these stimuli are absorbed, thereby leading to changes in existing social practices which spread through society and construct social cohesion via acts of imitation, that they drive social transformation. Thus new perspectives open up on an understanding of innovation which adequately capture the diversity of innovations in society.

The great challenge for contemporary innovation policy lies in exploiting these potentials. Nearly seventy years ago, in his 1945 report to President Roosevelt, V. Bush directed the pioneering spirit towards exploring the “endless frontiers” of natural science research, hoping that this would promote social welfare.⁸

“It has been basic United States policy that Government should foster the opening of new frontiers. It opened the seas to clipper ships and furnished land for pioneers. Although these frontiers have more or less disappeared, the frontier of science remains. It is in keeping with the American tradition – one which has made the United States great – that new frontiers shall be made accessible for development by all American citizens” (Bush 1945).

Today we need a fundamental broadening of perspective. Firstly, challenges are presented on a global scale. Overcoming them requires a global perspective. Secondly, the major challenges are in the social sphere. Thus the Vienna Declaration (2011) states:

“The most urgent and important innovations in the 21st century will take place in the social field. This opens up the necessity as well as possibilities for Social Sciences and Humanities to find new roles and relevance by generating knowledge applicable to new dynamics and structures of contemporary and future societies.”

As the conditions were created in the middle of the last century – based on a systematic innovation policy – to explore the potentials of the natural sciences and to make them usable for society, so at the beginning of the 21st century we need just as great a pioneering spirit in the search for new social practices that enable us to secure the future and allow people to live “a richer and more fulfilled human life” (Rorty 2008, 191).

The observations set out above make it clear that increased attention to social innovation is necessary to develop the potential for new social practices beyond the hitherto dominant growth ideology. To this extent, a new model for innovation policy is required that directs its focus from technologies onto social innovations and systemic solutions and onto a corresponding empowerment of actors, thus transforming it into a comprehensive social policy.

8 “[...]without scientific progress no amount of achievement in other directions can insure our health, prosperity, and security as a nation in the modern world.” “The Government should accept new responsibilities for promoting the flow of new scientific knowledge and the development of scientific talent in our youth. These responsibilities are the proper concern of the Government, for they vitally affect our health, our jobs, and our national security. It is in keeping also with basic United States policy that the Government should foster the opening of new frontiers and this is the modern way to do it. For many years the Government has wisely supported research in the agricultural colleges and the benefits have been great. The time has come when such support should be extended to other fields” (Bush 1945).

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