Social innovations as a repair of social order

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ABSTRACT

The paper addresses social innovation both as a mode and as a means of social change. It draws on the recent developments in the sociology of repair to offer a critical reading of pro-innovation discourse on the level of EU policy. It is argued that the practices and concepts of social innovation on the level of EU policy can be fruitfully reframed within a repair narrative, whereas the proliferation of the buzzword social innovation warrants a closer look from an innovation studies perspective. Connecting both repair and innovation studies thus offers a more nuanced understanding of current societal transformations and adds to the conceptual discussion of social change and social order.

Keywords: Social Innovation; Social Change; Social Order; Repair; EU Policy Discourse.

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INTRODUCTION

Social innovations have become a popular topic in academia as well as in politics (Moulaert *et al.,* 2013). The concept of social innovation entered the academic discourse in the 1960s and became increasingly popular in the political discourse of the EU, USA and Canada from the 2000s onward. As theoretical concept and political instrument, social innovations are full of promise, either for understanding the dynamics of social change or for adapting to societal transformations and challenges. They combine academic scholarship with political discourse and societal participation. Social innovations are also linked with related terms, such as social entrepreneurship, social challenges, social experiments, social technologies, social engineering, and, of course, social change. A look at the literature quickly reveals that the term social innovation spans across diverse understandings and uses (Edwards-Schachter & Wallace, 2017).

The origins of an analytic understanding in the social sciences bear close ties with issues of social change, e.g., when social innovations are sparked by the ongoing need to address human problems or when sustainable modes of change are to be implemented. The normative understanding that is prominent in the political discourse, e.g., on the level of EU policy, holds that social innovations enable positive, bottom-up processes of change where large scale policy interventions fail. I will argue that in contrast to the dominant theme of novelty, social innovations in the political discourse can be fruitfully studied through the lens of repair (Jackson 2014). In this sense, social innovations are as much about preservation as they are about creation. While the discourse and practices of social innovation in the political arena share many similarities with repair, the recent popularity of social innovations can, on the other hand, be studied as a process of diffusion and hence as the innovation of a political instrument (Pol and Ville 2009).

The following sections will trace social innovations both as a sociological concept for delineating a specific *mode of social change* as well as a political instrument for

implementing certain *means of societal change*. The history of social innovation as a sociological concept will show that neither the term nor its meaning as a mode of social change are particularly new. With respect to the current political popularity of social innovation as a means for societal change, it marks a distinct entrepreneurial bias in line with techno-economic innovations. I will analyse how these two understandings are related and how the sociology of repair and the sociology of innovation may be linked in the study of social innovation. My contribution thus adds to the analysis of the recent "semantic extension" of innovation as a concept and to the detailed study how the role of the "social" is configured within current understandings of innovation (Gaglio *et al.*, 2017).

The first part of the paper will concern social innovation as a mode of social change and as a sociological concept. The second part will take the discourse on the level of EU policy as an example for framing social innovation as a political instrument and as a means of societal change. I will argue that in both cases, social innovations can be considered as ways of repairing social order. This understanding highlights the role of social innovations for maintaining social order, while at the same time they can figure agents of societal change.

SOCIAL INNOVATION AS A SOCIOLOGICAL CONCEPT

In the long history of the term innovation, social innovations enter the discourse in the early nineteenth century, when they "served to label the social reformer or socialist, accused of overthrowing the established order, namely property and capitalism" (Godin, 2015, p. 122). In contrast to its current positive connotations, social innovation was then used as a derogatory term. The connection to political reforms at the same time relates the term social innovation closely to issues of societal change. As we will see, social innovations can often be found in relation to sociological concepts of social change, where sociology has likewise adopted a generally positive notion of social innovation.

Social innovation in sociology is often related to ideas of positive progress, much in line with the "pro-innovation bias" (Rogers, [1962] 1983, p. 92-103; Godin & Vinck, 2017) of innovation studies.

Whether specific social innovations are considered positive or negative is of course a matter of valuation. From a conservative perspective, they threaten to upset the established order and the ruling elites, from a progressive perspective, they promise to reduce societal inequalities and problematic maladjustments. Within sociological theory this resonates with diverging assumptions about the stability of social order, where social innovations are closely linked to issues of social change and levelled against theories emphasising continuity and cohesion. As Coser (1964, p. 211-212) puts it with respect to Durkheim: "It is said that Durkheim [...] did not duly appreciate the import of social innovation and social change because he was preoccupied with social order and equilibrium [...]." According to Coser, Durkheim excluded interesting problems from his theoretical thinking by taking a conservative theoretical stance towards societal change. This is not because Durkheim did not recognize the turbulent social changes surrounding him, but because he "[...] never really attempt[ed] to analyze such crises in their own terms" (*ibid*., p. 214). Indeed, Durkheim had a keen interest in social reform and saw sociology's task in carefully developing and introducing practical interventions.

I take Coser's critique of Durkheim as a general critique of theories that emphasise the conservative power of social structures over processes of change. This critique is voiced elsewhere in the early 1960s, pointing to an increasing uneasiness with such theories. Social innovation is a concept for addressing this uneasiness. One such study situates social innovations within the dynamic transformations of modern societies (Moore 1960). Moore argues for more conceptual clarity in sociological theories of social change, aiming towards distinct and discernible patterns of social change. Especially, he criticises standard structural-functional analysis and argues for an increased consideration of the sources of social change in theories of social change. Moore's

discussion resonates in three points with more recent positions like Beck *et al.* (1994): first, modernisation has increased the speed of social change; second change must be actively engaged with, and third, modern societies are increasingly confronted with consequences of their own actions. Social change is then considered to be a result of increasing tensions inherent to modern societies and social innovations are one of the numerous ways in which those tensions may be reduced.

Such an understanding closely relates social innovations to neighbouring concepts, like social entrepreneurship or social engineering. The role of the entrepreneur, understood in a broader sense as someone "who undertakes to coordinate the activities of others; [...] makes decisions and meets contingencies" (Hughes, 1936, p. 183), becomes a central feature of modern society under the condition of increasingly rapid social change (cf. Drucker, 1957, for social innovations). Popper, for instance, advocates "piecemeal engineering" in contrast to "utopian engineering" when it comes to introducing social change (1945, p. 138-148). Since "piecemeal social experiments" (1945, p. 143) can be controlled on a local level, they promise a more realistic mode of change than large scale utopian approaches that fail to consider the complexities of modern societies.

Social change and the disruptive maintenance of social order

There is an interesting mismatch between the dominant framing of social innovations as agents of social change, even though they are often targeted at maintaining social order. This discrepancy begs closer inspection. I will argue that social innovations often do not resemble the pattern of "creative destruction", which was succinctly coined by Schumpeter (1942, p. 83) but rather operate as forms of disruptive maintenance[1] that seek

[1] The term disruptive maintenance is, to my knowledge, mostly used in technical references and denotes that a service has to be discontinued in order to make necessary adjustments. The analogy to social innovations is therefore quite limited, since social processes cannot be put on hold for repairs to be made. I use the term here to highlight the disruptive aspects of social innovations as well as their role in maintaining order.

to compensate, repair, or resolve the manifold "lags" found in contemporary societies (Ogburn, 1922, p. 200-213). Creative destruction and disruptive maintenance are not opposing terms. They share the destructive-disruptive moment of novelty and of course the maintenance of social order can and must be a creative process. However, in contrast to the progressive notion engrained in creative destruction, disruptive maintenance entails some form of conservatism. Without overstressing the analogy to technical repair, social innovations can be considered as updates or patches that fix specific societal problems or maladjustments, much in the same way that Popper argued for piecemeal social engineering.

Schumpeter's concept of creative destruction is closely tied to the economic exploitation of invention in capitalist societies (1942, p. 81-86). The driving force is the entrepreneur, who makes profits "from doing things" differently (Schumpeter, [1923] 1939, p. 84). The inventor, according to Schumpeter, is typically a different person than the entrepreneur and thus innovation, in contrast to invention, does not rest on the creation of novelty, but on economic exploitation in processes of long term diffusion.

This mode of economic change is fundamentally different from the notion of social change put forward by Ogburn. His hypothesis of cultural lag highlights the need for adaptation to change within a differentiated society. Ogburn locates the forces of change within the "material culture", which he sees as the dominant, but not singular, generator of change in current societies (1922, p. 202). The need for creatively resolving the misalignments between interdependent social worlds, the material and the adaptive culture, then becomes a salient feature of modern societies. Ogburn's hypotheses of a cultural lag and its resolution thus resonate more with the idea of disruptive maintenance than it does with creative destruction. We could even say that Ogburn has identified the societal adaptations, or repairs, to the transformative dynamics described by Schumpeter. Drawing creative destruction and cultural lags together forms an understanding of social change that is also prevalent in more recent approaches such as

reflexive modernisation (Beck *et al.* 1994). Especially the normative understanding of social innovation found in political discourse buys heavily into the notion of reflexively managing the consequences of modernity (Edwards-Schachter & Wallace, 2017).

I will argue that the use of the term social innovation intensely draws on the positive connotations associated with techno-economic innovation in modern societies (Godin, 2015, p. 122-133), whereas the underlying processes of social change might be more aptly described and analysed by concepts such as cultural lag and repair. I will elaborate this by taking a closer look at the recently emerging sociology of repair and the relation of innovation and repair with respect to social change. The sociology of repair provides fruitful connections for understanding social innovations, especially in the political realm, as modes of disruptively maintaining social order.

Social innovations and the sociology of repair

The sociology of repair is a recent conceptual development that taps into diverse strands of research. One major aspect is a critique of the dominant innovation paradigm in science and technology studies (STS). In contrast to the innovation paradigm, which emphasises the creation of stability and order, the repair paradigm – or "broken world thinking" as Jackson (2014) calls it – emphasises fragility and breakdowns within modern technical and social infrastructures and the subsequent need for maintenance and repair. A second aspect draws on the empirical studies of maintenance and repair practices that reveal the creative and sophisticated ways of dealing with breakdowns and disruptions (Henke 2000).

However, Jackson argues that innovation and repair are not mutually exclusive. Rather, repair is an often overlooked element in innovation processes, either since inventions diffuse and need to be adapted to local situations or since the successful diffusion relies on continuously maintaining the integrity of the invention in the face of

counter inventions or material decay. Godin (2017, p. 24) makes a similar argument for innovation studies by pointing out that the diffusion of innovation is itself an inventive process (cf. the notion of re-invention in Rogers, 1983 [1962], p. 146-149). And recently, scholars of social innovations have also hinted at repair as a fruitful concept to study social change (Howaldt *et al.,* 2015, p. 44). For instance, the Aconchego Housing Program in Portugal was featured in the 2010 report for the European Commission, "This is European Social Innovation". The program "matches older people who live on their own with students who are in need of accommodation" (European Commission, 2010, p. 23), thereby seeking to benefit both parties. It can be seen as an attempt to repair the social cohesion of a society in which the young and the old increasingly inhabit mutually exclusive social worlds.

The sociology of repair generally focuses on processes of "mending social order" in complex material-semiotic settings (Henke, 2000, p. 55). It emphasises the situated practices of repair technicians and how they engage with disruptions of the social as well as the technical order (Harper, 1987; Orr, 1996; Graham & Thrift, 2007; Denis & Pontille, 2015). This entails an understanding of repair that differs from a strong notion of repair in which objects break down, like a car with engine trouble that is moved to a specialised repair workshop in order to restore functionality. In the strong notion, repair is spatially and temporally detached from the contexts of use and the instances of breakdown. The sociology of repair does not emphasise this distinction by pitting the specialised workshops of repair against the mundane use and maintenance of technologies. Rather, it asks how repair figures within the matrix of sociomaterial order, how it helps to maintain stability and how it sometimes transforms the relations it is embedded in. It extends repair to instances where the working order needs to be actively recreated or circumvented so as to enable the continuous flow of activities (Schubert, 2019). The important characteristic of repair however remains, *i.e.,* that it is mostly motivated by a conservative interest in recreating a previously disrupted order, in restoration, and not in initiating

larger processes of change – even though all repair processes carry transformative potential (Graham & Thrift, 2007, p. 6). Such a wider understanding of repair holds several interesting aspects for the study of social innovations.

First, the *study of repair resonates with the basic tenets of current societal change* found in Schumpeter (1942), Ogburn (1922) or Beck *et al.* (1994). The sociology of repair does not build on notions of stability and order but gains its analytic perspective from the numerous insights into the fragilities and ambiguities of highly industrialised countries. The technical infrastructures of modernity suddenly seem much less dependable and much more vulnerable than before (Hommels *et al.,* 2014). A common point of departure for the sociology of repair and social innovations thus lies in the recognition of a *dynamic social reality that constantly produces the need for reflexive intervention* to keep things going. Both repair and social innovations thus sit in the middle between the dynamics of differentiation and interdependence, as modes of readjustment and alignment in a "universe, marked by tremendous fluidity; [that] won't and can't stand still" (Strauss, 1978, p. 123).

Second, insights into *repair can shed light on the complexities of diffusing social innovations*. Taylor (1970) noted the inherent resistance to change of established social orders that poses significant obstacles to the scaling of social innovations in space and time (cf. Mulgan, 2006, p. 153). Like with all innovations, the *diffusion of social innovations is a creative process that transforms the initial invention through processes of adoption*. Jackson (2014, p. 227) points out that repair is therefore not an opposite, but a necessary element of the innovation process. The local adoptions of repair enable inventions to grow past the local situations of their creation. The repair perspective thus focuses on the processes of misalignment, disruption and adaptation throughout the diffusion process. Even if this does not entail a breakdown in the narrow sense, it sensitizes for the dynamics of innovations that go beyond the originality of inventions (Godin, 2017). In this

sense, social innovations can not only be conceived as fixes to human problems, but their diffusion itself depends on repair or repair-like articulations.

Third, repair studies highlight that *repair can be used analytically to investigate economic, material-semiotic and epistemic relations* at the heart of modern societies. For one, they reveal specific economies of worth. Repair in many cases is not confined to simple replacements of spare parts according to prescriptions in a manual, but operates in local forms of competent evaluation and improvisation (Henke, 2000, p. 66-69). Should something be repaired or replaced? Is the repair necessary for the intended function? From this perspective, *repair is not only an economic cost/benefit calculation, it ties valuations of longevity or status into the questions if and how something should be repaired*. In addition, the repair of technical devices offers analytic insights into such social structures and dynamics. In the same way that repair should not be considered a strictly technical phenomenon, social innovations should not be conceived as purely social (Degelsegger & Kesselring, 2012). The material-semiotic constitution of repair (Denis & Pontille, 2015) thus mirrors the material-semiotic constitution of social innovations.

By looking more closely into the practices of repair and social innovation, the similarities tend to become more evident than the differences. This is not only true for the above aspects from the sociology of repair as ways to think about social innovations. We can also note that much of the current work on the revival of do-it-yourself and repair cultures follows narratives of social innovation, social movement, sustainability, and counterculture (Rosner & Turner, 2015).

I have so far discussed social innovation as mode of social change and as an analytical concept in sociology. I have also outlined an understanding of social innovation that draws less on Schumpeter's notion of creative destruction for initiating change but rather on an Ogburnian understanding of disruptive maintenance to resolve cultural lags. This understanding was extended with ideas from the sociology of repair and how they might be instructive for the study of social innovations. I will use this as a conceptual

prism to break up the current discourse on social innovations on the level of EU policy. The main aim of this exercise is to critically assess this social innovation discourse by showing how a latent repair narrative is superimposed by a dominant innovation narrative. If social innovations are not only understood as a mode of social change, but as a reflexive means of political agency, they can be conceived as a specific form of repair work that seeks novel means to attain established ends and to resolve the strains of cultural lags. The dominant innovation narrative, however, frames social innovations largely as political instruments or social technologies. This interlocking of repair and innovation has become the dominant mode of funding social innovations on the level of EU policy. Shedding light on this package will help to gain a deeper understanding of social innovation as repair while at the same time questioning the innovation imperative in political discourse.

SOCIAL INNOVATION AS A POLITICAL INSTRUMENT

The study of social innovations has recently sparked growing interest in the governance and policy domain (van der Have & Rubalcaba, 2016). This development is accompanied by a shift from an analytical understanding to a normative conception of social innovations (Edwards-Schachter & Wallace, 2017) and by a turn towards an entrepreneurial/neoliberal attitude (Jessop *et al.,* 2013; Fougère *et al.,* 2017). I will argue that this shift also entails a repair narrative embedded in the framing of social innovations as solutions to societal challenges and that it forms, in combination with the recent entrepreneurial bias from the innovation narrative, a distinct instrumental understanding of social innovations as social technologies that perform disruptive maintenance on societal structures. This argument is based on a previous qualitative study of EU social innovation programmes and publications (Schubert, 2018). The following discussion relates social innovation and repair along two main lines. First, it outlines the framing of social innovations on the level of EU policy as a form of repair. Second, it conceives this

particular form of repair itself as a social innovation, *i.e.,* as the diffusion of a new social technology.

Social innovation as means of repair in the EU policy discourse

Historical research on social innovation shows that despite its long career, the concept received broader attention only recently and that there is considerable variation in its uses (Godin, 2015, p. 122-133). The ambiguousness of the term itself might be instrumental to becoming a buzzword in the late 2000s (Pol & Ville, 2009). But as social innovation becomes popular by remaining vague in the academic realm, it also becomes popular by limiting its scope in the realm of policy. The shift from a diverse analytic understanding to a narrow normative concept reduces interpretative flexibly and purifies the term so it can be inserted into political agendas.

The academic discourse is driven from different fields and revolves around a set of shared issues. Van der Have and Rubalcaba (2016) identify four scholarly communities that show interest in social innovations: community psychology, creativity research, research on social and societal challenges, and local development. These clusters share a basic notion of social innovation first as a process that "encompasses change in social relationships, -systems, or -structures" and second that "such changes serve a shared human need/goal or solve a socially relevant problem." (*ibid.*, 1930). Edwards-Schachter and Wallace (2017) come to a similar conclusion. They discern three thematic clusters within the discourse on social innovation: social change, sustainable development, and the service sector. The three clusters again represent two distinct perspectives on social innovation: first a "characterization of SI as 'transformative' in relation to systemic change" (social change and sustainable development) and second a "more 'instrumental' approach, present in most policy and practitioner narratives, related to the social services provision addressing to societal needs and social market failures" (*ibid.*, p. 73).

The policy discourse narrows social innovation down to such an instrumental understanding, as prominent definitions in EU publications highlight the role of social innovations predominantly for addressing societal challenges. For instance, in the report "This is European Social Innovation" for the European Commission (2010), social innovation is briefly defined as follows: "Social innovation is about new ideas that work to address pressing unmet needs" (*ibid.*, p. 9). The report was compiled by three European social innovation proponents: the Social Innovation eXchange (SIX) at the Young Foundation, the Euclid Network, and the Social Innovation Park, Bilbao. The definition drew upon the Open Book on Social Innovation (Murray *et al.* 2010), where social innovations were defined as "new ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously meet social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations" (*ibid.*, 3) and which was published on behalf of the Young Foundation and the British National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts. Other EU publications from 2010 also use this basic definition, for instance the report of the Bureau of European Policy Advisers "Empowering people, driving change. Social Innovation in the European Union" (BEPA 2011). Later definitions extend the instrumental application of social innovations: "The notion has gained ground that social innovation is not only about responding to pressing social needs and addressing the societal challenges of climate change, ageing or poverty, but is also a mechanism for achieving systemic change. It is seen as a way of tackling the underlying causes of social problems rather than just alleviating the symptoms" (BEPA 2014, p. 8). Even though the instrumental perspective on social innovation dates back to the 1970s (Edwards-Schachter & Wallace, 2017, p. 73), it becomes specifically dominant in the EU policy discourse of the late 2000s.

A closer look at this instrumental understanding reveals that social innovations are not neutral means to final ends, but embody distinct normative dispositions and as such are transformative of the "ends in view" (Dewey, 1939, p. 25). One disposition is that social innovations should be beneficial for society, the other links social innovation with an

entrepreneurial understanding of social change. Societal beneficiality is a prominent *addendum* to the definition of social innovations, since they are "social in both their ends and their means" (European Commission, 2013, p. 6). Social innovations are aimed at "improving human well-being" and in addition "are not only good for society but also enhance individuals' capacity to act" (*ibid.*). Such a normative narrowing of the term first curtails its analytic scope. The "social" in social innovation acts as a normative handle by which the term is inserted into the repertoire of legitimate political instruments. In addition, it demarcates specific conditions of felicity under which social innovations are deemed successful, *i.e.,* fulfilling a social need. Last not least, it contrasts social from economic or technical innovations by pointing out that they are not for profit. The contrast to economic innovations, however, becomes questionable when looking at the entrepreneurial bias of social innovations in EU discourse.

Even though one of the main arguments for social innovation is that they provide solutions to "social demands that are traditionally not addressed by the market or existing institutions" (*ibid.*), the proposed mode of social innovation strongly draws on economic innovation driven by a Schumpeterian entrepreneur: "It is worth adding that one important, but certainly not sole agent type spearheading Europe 2020 social innovations is the social enterprise. Social enterprises are ventures in the business of creating significant social value, and do so in an entrepreneurial, market-oriented way, that is, through generating own revenues to sustain themselves." (*ibid.*, p. 15). The response to societal challenges is specifically framed as a "willingness to take risks and find creative ways of using underused assets" (*ibid.*, p. 16). The political instrument of social innovation is therefore not only *integrated into the policy discourse through a normative notion of the social* but also *deeply engrained with neoliberal ideas through an economic notion of innovation* (cf. Fougère *et al.,* 2017). By promising to tap into creative and transformative potentials on a local level, to create bottom-up grassroots initiatives that address pressing global problems, the discursive framing of social innovations on an EU policy

level at the same time introduces the figure of the entrepreneur, now social entrepreneur, as the prime mover of such change. Even if these social entrepreneurs are not primarily motivated by economic profit, they operate along economic rationales, such as cost/benefit calculations.

This resonates with Drucker's (1957, p. 39-45) claim that the most important social innovation of all in the 20th century was indeed the institutionalisation of business enterprises and rational management processes as predominant forces of societal change. Even though Drucker might be overly optimistic about the potential of enterprise formats to tackle social needs, his distrust in large scale reforms mirrors Popper's earlier call for "piecemeal engineering" to introduce social change (1945, p. 138-148). Both Drucker and Popper subsequently conceive social change more as a task for a diligent social engineer than a creative social entrepreneur. The EU has likewise identified the need to generate more systematic knowledge on social innovations. For instance, the programme Theoretical, Empirical and Policy Foundations for Social Innovation in Europe (TEPSIE, www.tepsie.eu) was funded from 2012-2014. A look through the mentioned EU documents shows that social innovation, however, is largely framed by economic references such as the entrepreneur. Technical references such as engineering or repair are remarkably absent.

But how is this entrepreneurial bias in EU policy related to an understanding of social innovations as repair? My main argument is that the EU discourse frames social innovations predominantly in terms of demand-pull, rather than a supply-push (Godin & Lane, 2013). Whereas the latter is very much in line with Schumpeter's understanding of entrepreneurial invention and creative destruction, the former requires a need to be fulfilled and can be understood in Ogburn's terms as solution to an existing maladjustment (see Godin & Lane, 2013, p. 638-642 on the difference between "needs" and "demands" in innovation studies). Pull-models of innovation have been used in the political realm since the 1960s, albeit with an emphasis on technical inventions to fix

social problems (*ibid.*). Social innovations continue this political uptake on innovations as solutions to social needs, to quote the European Commission (2010, p. 9) again: "Social innovation is about new ideas that work to address pressing unmet needs".

The main argument against a reconsideration of social innovation as repair would then be the novelty aspect, the "new ideas", that are found at the centre of inventions and supposedly not in repair. However, the sociology of repair highlights the creative and original aspects tied in with each repair as long as it transcends simple replacement (Henke, 2000; Jackson, 2014). And of course, repair is not confined to reproductive "restoration" of original states, but extends to more transformative modes such as "remediation" and "reconfiguration" of social and technical relationships (Sennett, 2012, p. 212-220). Like innovation, repair largely develops as an open-ended process, not a predetermined sequence of events. Scholars of innovation have argued on the other hand, that innovation does not require large amounts of creativity or originality but merely any "doing things differently", even to the point of stating that "innovation is possible without anything we should identify as invention and invention does not necessarily induce innovation" (Schumpeter, 1939 [1923], p. 84). Merely referring to creativity then does not suffice to demarcate innovation from repair. It could even be argued that the diffusion of innovation is less creative that most instances of repair, as long as diffusion operates along simple modes of imitation (Tarde, 1903 [1890]). Yet the creative aspect of invention, which the European Commission emphasises by "new ideas that work to address pressing unmet needs", can be understood as an approach to fixing a cultural lag in Ogburn's sense and as forms of disruptive maintenance.

Repair, social innovation and social entrepreneurship are not mutually exclusive in this reading. Rather, the need for repair, for resolving cultural lags and societal tensions, derives from the endless dynamics of modern societies and capitalist modes of production and is addressed in EU policy, among others, by mobilising social innovations and social entrepreneurs. What we can see on the level of EU discourse is, however, an

interesting detachment of the rhetoric of innovation and repair. The dominant use of entrepreneurial vocabulary on the level of EU invokes an understanding of innovation in terms of Schumpeter. The underlying definition of a problematic societal situation, in contrast, follows the concept of cultural lags and the promises of repair. I have argued that this gap can be resolved by drawing on insights from the sociology of repair and to analyse the concrete programs of EU policy not in a framework of innovation, but in one of repair. This way, we can avoid the "pro-innovation bias" from EU policy as well as in innovation studies (Rogers, 1983 [1962], p. 92-103; Godin & Vinck, 2017) and technology studies (Jackson, 2014, p. 226-229). This leaves the question how the term social innovation became popular within the policy discourse (cf. Pel, 2016, for a similar discussion of "capture" dynamics). My answer will look at the social innovation of the term social innovation itself, how it became a legitimate discursive solution to existing societal challenges.

Diffusing the concept of social innovations in the EU policy discourse

How did a neoliberal notion of social innovation as entrepreneurial form of social repair become dominant within the discourse on social innovation in the EU? As previously said, social innovation as a mode of social change has been discussed within the academic literature at least since the mid-20th century. The recent interest in academia and politics dates from the early 2000s and larger EU programmes on social innovation start around the year 2010 (Moulaert *et al.,* 2017). These EU programmes now follow a rather narrow definition of social innovation by emphasising entrepreneurial agency while dismissing or neglecting the broader state of the art in the field (*ibid.*, p. 19-20).

One important actor in this selection was and is the London based Young Foundation (youngfoundation.org). In 2006, the director of the Young Foundation, Geoff Mulgan, published an article that sketches out a programmatic agenda of social innovation that would become a blueprint for the EU initiatives (Mulgan, 2006). According

to Mulgan, social innovations have increasingly accompanied modern societies since the large scale transformations of industrialisation and urbanisation and should now be systematically harnessed to cope with the societal challenges of the 21st century. This again invokes an Ogburn-like understanding of social change in which the transformations in material culture (industrialisation and urbanisation) occasion changes in the adaptive culture, for instance concerning childcare, housing, community development, and social care. Despite these promises, Mulgan identifies a severe deficit concerning the conceptual understanding of social innovations in contrast to economic or technical innovations. At the same time, social and economic innovations share a similar architecture: "Social innovation refers to innovative activities and services that are motivated by the goal of meeting a social need and that are predominantly diffused through organizations whose primary purposes are social. Business innovation is generally motivated by profit maximization and diffused through organizations that are primarily motivated by profit maximization." (*ibid.*, p. 146). Social innovation is thus portrayed as an understudied twin of commercial innovation that differs from its popular sibling only in the normative orientation towards social needs and purposes.

This implies that social innovations are best driven and organised by social entrepreneurs and social enterprises (*ibid.*, p. 147). Linking social innovation tightly to social entrepreneurship creates a specific nexus, in which an economic understanding of innovation serves as the model for social innovation. At the same time, it positions established actors in the field, like the Young Foundation, as central agencies for organising societal change. They coordinate social innovation processes based on a pull-logic of innovation in which "the starting point for innovation is an idea of a need that isn't being met, coupled with an idea of how it could be met" (*ibid.*, p. 149). Mulgan places the entrepreneurial perspective on social innovation within a larger context of societal challenges such as ageing, climate change, health issues or diversity management. The proposed pull-mode of social innovations to solve societal problems is thus accompanied

by a push-mode of social entrepreneurship as a legitimate political resource on the level of EU policy. This calls for an entrepreneurial approach in order to successfully diffuse inventions from the local level to larger formats. It also calls for more research to be conducted on social innovations vis-à-vis the amount of research on commercial innovations.

If we consider Mulgan's programmatic paper from an innovation studies perspective, he proposes social innovation similar to a "standardised package" (Fujimura, 1988), *i.e.,* as a combination of problems and solutions, in order to create a bandwagon dynamic for developing social innovations as a legitimate political instrument. Like the necessary scaling of social innovations, the concept itself needs to be scaled in order to become a legitimate political option. In short, the package contained the following problem-solution combination: *Social innovations represent an untapped reservoir of creative ideas* at the local level. Policy may *harness social innovations for solving unmet social needs* if the *knowledge gap is overcome and local inventions can be scaled up to larger innovations*. Both deficits can be overcome by first generating more knowledge on social innovations and second by drawing on social entrepreneurship for organising the transformative process.

The resonance of the package in the EU policy discourse can be traced through the official documents. For instance, the Open Book on Social Innovation, which was co-authored by Mulgan (Murray *et al.,* 2010), proposed social innovations as an effective measure to tackle pressing problems where existing policies failed, since "existing structures and policies have found it impossible to crack some of the most pressing issues of our times" (*ibid.*, p. 3). The main challenge to social innovation is the main challenge of innovation itself: generate systemic change from small yet successful experiments (*ibid.*, p. 12-13). This document largely mirrors the report by the European Union and the Young Foundation's "Study on Social Innovation" (European Union/Young Foundation, 2010), in which social innovation is framed as an "emerging field", that

"remains ill-understood and poorly researched in comparison to its counterparts in business, science and technology" (*ibid.*, p. 14). These documents state that social innovation is a broad field, encompassing a large variety of empirical cases conceptual approaches, yet they also converge on the social innovation package proposed by Mulgan and the Young Foundation. In addition, Mulgan and the Young Foundation also provided input into the Bureau of European Policy Advisers report "Empowering people, driving change. Social Innovation in the European Union" (BEPA, 2011, p. 9), where "social innovation offers a way forward by providing new solutions to pressing social demands while making better use of available resources" under the conditions of budget cuts. Again, the problems of current societies are coupled with the promises of social innovations and the knowledge deficits on social innovation are coupled with the assurance of creating this knowledge through EU policy programs.

The time around the year 2010, when all these reports were formulated, can be seen as the nascent phase of social innovations within EU policy. From an evolutionary understanding of innovations, they are still in a niche, a protected space where their promises are evaluated before they might become part of the mainstream policy regime (Geels, 2004). Over the following years, the problem-solution package was stabilised in subsequent reports like the "Guide to Social Innovation" (European Commission, 2013), where social innovations are prominently defined as a "process by which new responses to social needs are developed in order to deliver better social outcomes" (*ibid.*, p. 6). The report of the Bureau of European Policy Advisers in 2014 suggests that the social innovation initiatives on the EU level are becoming more noticeable and that there is change within the EU funding and governance structures towards social innovation: "within a few years, policy support for social innovation has moved towards the centre of the political agenda" (BEPA, 2014, p. 9).

The efforts of defining and marketing the package of social innovations as a political means of societal change in the EU, *i.e.* the social innovation of social innovation,

at least created prominent visibility within the EU discourse and according to the BEPA report 2014, they also generated dedicated funding from EU sources, *e.g.* pilot programmes funded by the Structural Funds (*ibid.*, p. 8). The dominance of a neoliberal/entrepreneurial notion of social innovations within this discourse simultaneously generated critical reactions from the scientific social innovation community for reducing and counteracting the broader potential of the concept (Jessop *et al.*, 2013; Fougère *et al.*, 2017).

In sum, we can see that the diffusion, or the popularity for that matter, of social innovations as practice and concept first originates from a growing field of research and action in which social innovation is defined and understood in a plurality of ways (Pol & Ville, 2009). It is because of its lack of an exclusive definition that it can serve as a "boundary concept", linking many different interests and thereby facilitating institutionalisation (Pel & Bauler, 2014). However, on the level of EU policy discourse, we see a diffusion dynamic that pushes a narrow neoliberal/entrepreneurial social innovation package advocated by actors like the Young Foundation. This package draws heavily on the positive connotations of innovation in general and on economic and technical innovation in particular. It emphasises an entrepreneurial approach for fixing current societal challenges while at the same time supporting an instrumental/engineering perspective that makes use of social innovations as social technologies. This is not to say that this approach may not be productive, but it shows that the diffusion of social innovations as practice and concept in EU policy can itself be understood as a contested innovation process.

CONCLUSION

This article had two main aims. In the first part, it elaborated an analytic understanding of social innovations as a mode of social change. It drew on Ogburn's theory of social change and cultural lag in order to disassociate social innovations in EU policy discourse from the dominant techno-economic innovation paradigm and to connect it with the recent sociology of repair. From this reading, innovations and repair are not seen as opposites. Repair practices may be quite innovative or creative, diffusing innovations may depend on local repair and adoption, and inventions may be thought of as a fix for broken or deficient sociomaterial orders. Social innovations in particular can then be conceived as a form of repair or disruptive maintenance. The second aim was to unpack the popular discourse on social innovation in EU policy discourse in the following part. I tried to show how the concept of social innovation in EU policy documents is shaped in a distinct manner: that it carries an entrepreneurial notion of innovation closely related to an economic perspective and a neoliberal agenda, that it also embodies an engineering image of fixing social relations by employing distinct social technologies, that it draws heavily on the positive connotations of techno-economic innovations, and that it is targeted, last not least, at issues of repair much more than on genuine innovative novelty. If social innovation is understood in this way as a normative means of societal change and not as an analytic concept to study different modes of social change, I argued that it can be conceived more accurately in the (politically unfashionable) terms of repair and disruptive maintenance rather than the popular terms of innovation. The 'innovativeness' of social innovations on the EU policy level becomes more obvious when looking at the popularity of the term since 2010, where we could see how the social innovation package was designed and marketed by interested parties such as the Young Foundation.

A more cautious approach to the benefits of organised social innovation seems warranted since research suggests that it is not simply a new and effective governance tool but that it cuts both ways and encounters strong resistance also on the local level (Bartels, 2017). If social innovations are forms of disruptive maintenance, these

disruptions are likely to be countered by conservative forces and institutionalised practices. Focussing on social innovations analytically as a mode of social change and a disruptive maintenance of social order could then help to counter the pro-innovation bias found in (social) innovation studies. A more rigorous analysis of processes of social change lends itself to a comparative evaluation of related terms, for instance social engineering and social technologies that share a mutual heritage with social innovation and whose basic premises still seem to carry some weight in governance circles. Social innovation as a normative means of societal change can then be analysed with respect to changing governance structures, competing rhetorics, and the overall proliferation of innovation as a buzzword in policy frameworks (Osborne & Brown, 2011).

The sociology of repair is a relatively novel and small field, but it can lend a valuable contribution to not only to innovation studies in general but to social innovation in particular. It can also help to bridge some gaps between dichotomous understandings of social and technical repair. Just like innovations are never purely social or technical, repair must always be understood in relational terms. When something is broken, it always initiates a process of valuation on the necessity of repair. Repair, like innovation, is traversed by heterogeneous orders of worth and both shed light onto the mode and means of current social change.

More specifically, a repair perspective can help to unpack dominant innovation narratives with respect to societal change. It can generate inquiries into the active modes of preservation that address societal challenges but without buying into an instrumentalist innovation discourse. This opens up research questions at the intersection of social science, policy and society not only by regarding innovation and repair as two sides of the same coin, but by highlighting the often-neglected issues of maintenance and repair that constitute a central element in processes of change.

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