The (A)Politics of Social Innovation Policy in Europe: Implications for Socio-structural Change and Power Relations

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The CRESSI project explores the economic underpinnings of social innovation with a particular focus on how policy and practice can enhance the lives of the most marginalized and disempowered citizens in society.

The (A)Politics of Social Innovation Policy in Europe: Implications for Socio-structural Change and Power Relations

By Daniel Edmiston

Creating Economic Space for Social Innovation

The (A)Politics of Social Innovation Policy in Europe: Implications for Socio-structural Change and Power Relations[1]

Abstract

Social innovation is often conceived as a unifying policy concept around which cross-sectoral stakeholders can coalesce and organise. The emphasis placed on 'new' and 'novel' approaches to social problems is presented as a departure from established modes of thinking and action that transcend existing political and socio-economic divisions. Rather than focusing on the alignment, complementarity or institutional hybridity through which support for social innovation is procured, it is important to consider the tensions that are avoided, accommodated and ignored in the social innovation policymaking process. To do so, this brief working paper examines the (a)political character of social innovation policy in Europe and what implications this has for affecting socio-structural change and power relations to tackle marginalisation. The purportedly cohesive conception and pursuit of social innovation across policy domains and structural levels, obscures from the fact that social innovation is a nested micro paradigm within the prevailing European political economy. A transference or realignment of power towards the powerless is central to the political project of social innovation in Europe. Without it, social innovation policymaking garners and gives credence to a conciliatory politics of need provision that focuses on 'pragmatic solutions' to 'political problems' regarding the redistribution of resource, power and opportunity.

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Despite its essentially contested character and utility, social innovation is an increasingly popular policy concept that is drawn upon by a variety of cross-sectoral and partisan stakeholders at a range of socio-structural levels (Sinclair and Baglioni, 2014; Ayob et al., 2016). Whether conceived as a public service reform agenda; strategy for economic growth; policy approach to civic social renewal; or all of the above, it is uncharacteristically well-received and supported by political administrations across Europe given its relatively nascent status and salience. It's ostensible capacity to generate political and policy consensus lies in its diffuse and indefinite character as an essentially (and perhaps necessarily) contested, or rather collaborative concept (Gallie, 1956; Ziegler, 2015). The varied motivations and applications encouraging interest in social innovation are considered to be one of its key assets and strengths in mobilising resources towards addressing societal challenges across Europe (European Commission, 2013).

This is largely due to the positive inflection and treatment social innovation receives in the policymaking process across Europe (Evers et al., 2014). Within political and policy discourse, social innovation is presented as an opportunity to 'improve' outcomes and opportunities in a way that positively affects social dynamics and outcomes (Mulgan et al., 2007; Phills, 2008). Based on analysis undertaken as part of the CRESSI research project, it is clear that social innovation policy,

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including its origins, operation and effects, is contextually and historically contingent (Edmiston, 2015b; Edmiston and Aro, 2016). The policy concept of social innovation invariably intersects with established institutional logics that mediate its significance, salience and efficacy in mobilising networks of resource and action to tackle marginalisation. In this respect, the heterogeneity of goals, activities and outcomes supported through social innovation belie its purported coherence and unanimity as a policy objective at the EU and domestic level.

As argued elsewhere in the CRESSI research project, social innovation entails 'the development and delivery of new ideas and solutions… at different socio-structural levels that intentionally seek to change power relations and improve human capabilities' (Nicholls and Ziegler, 2014: 2). Social innovation is often conceived as a unifying policy concept around which diverse stakeholders can coalesce and organise. The emphasis placed on 'new' and 'novel' approaches to social problems is presented as a departure from established modes of thinking and action that transcend existing political and socio-economic divisions. However, effective measures to foster social innovation require political, economic and social transformations that realign or displace existing power relations and socio-structural dynamics. In certain instances, this can (and perhaps should) generate conflicts between the differing operational functions and ideological interests underpinning social innovation. For example, measures that pursue some degree of social innovation may not necessarily cohere with strategies for economic growth or support the role of the welfare state in need provision (Brandsen, 2014).

With this in mind, rather than focusing on the alignment, complementarity or institutional hybridity through which support for social innovation is procured, it is important to consider the tensions that are avoided, accommodated and ignored in the social innovation policymaking process. To do so, this brief working paper examines the (a)political character of social innovation policy in Europe and what implications this has for positively affecting socio-structural change and power relations to tackle marginalisation.

To varying degrees, social innovation policies at the EU and domestic level exhibit a tendency to operate within the established confines and power relations of the institutional centre. The value and role of social innovation in European public policy is often instrumentally conceived in a manner that aligns (or at least does not jolt too strongly) with the existing socio-political and economic settlement of a given institutional context. As a result, European public policies *as* and *for* social innovation seem predisposed to institutional and cognitive capture that limits their transformative potential (Edmiston, 2015a; von Jacobi et al., 2017).

In seeking to identify how policy might best foster disruptive social innovation, public bodies are faced with a perennial challenge: how to unsettle and destabilise the institutional dominance upon which, thus far, publicly-sponsored social innovation has been so greatly dependent. That is, how to mobilise resource and activity that is essentially systemic without compromising the means and ends from which social innovation derives its value.

Examination of EU and domestic contexts suggests that, despite a plurality of applications and motivations, public policy agendas supporting social innovation rely upon and exploit hybrid networks of power that risk reproducing, rather than altering existing socio-structural relations (Mann, 1986). From this, it is possible to understand how social innovation as a policy paradigm is

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situated within broader regimes of power that can either serve to stifle or enable its potential. Nicholls and Teasdale (2016) examine the interrelation between different policy fields to explore the significance of social enterprise as a policy paradigm in England and the extent of continuity and change observed over time. They argue that the micro-paradigm of social enterprise is nested within a meso paradigm linked to the mixed economy of welfare, which is, in turn, nested within a 'neoliberal' macro-paradigm. As a micro paradigm:

> *'the framework of cognitive and normative ideas behind social enterprise policies were clearly nested within, and shaped by, the ideational material cascading down from the neoliberal macro-paradigm. Ideational changes at the level of the micro-paradigm were not Kuhnian shifts, but rather an accommodation of normative differences between political parties within a coherent overall paradigmatic framework'* (Nicholls and Teasdale, 2016: 15).

Similarly, bi-partisan and cross-sectoral interest in social innovation as a policy paradigm operates within a broader macro-economic and political framework. However, contrary to policy treatment of social enterprises as 'nested' at the micro level, political and policy discourse presents social innovation as a transversal policy paradigm and opportunity to address the mobilisation of resources and activity at the macro, meso and micro level.

Particularly at the EU level, the policy paradigm of social innovation emerged from a recognition of the need to address structural factors in a manner that could contribute towards 'smart, sustainable and inclusive growth' (European Commission, 2015). Whilst the systems of power that structure inequality and marginalisation are problematized within such a framing, the utility and application of social innovation in public policymaking is conceived and supported in minimalist and revisionist ways at the micro-level.

Figure 1: Social innovation as a transversal and nested policy paradigm
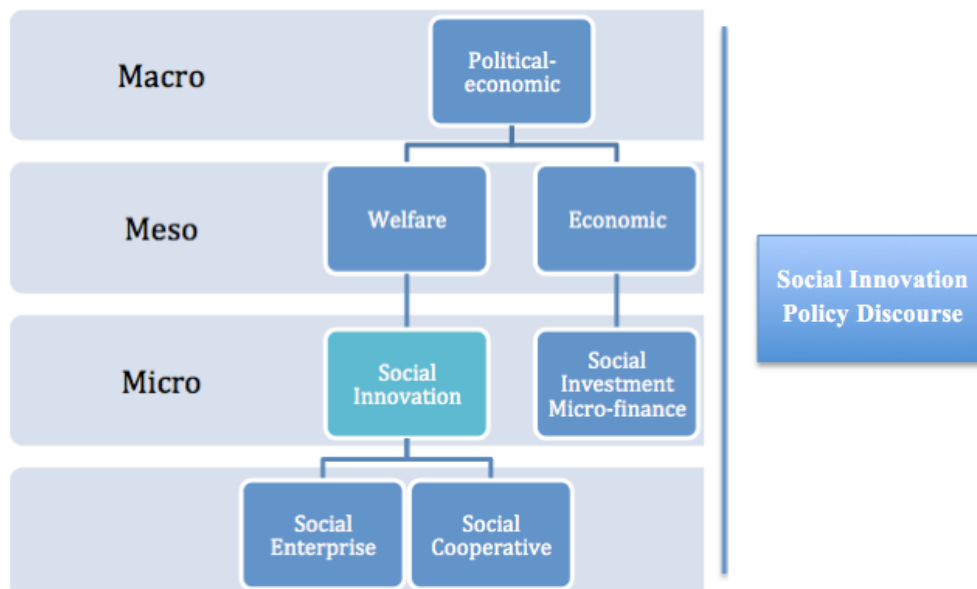
Source: Adapted from Nicholls and Teasdale (2016)

In spite of the rhetoric, this excludes meso questions concerning the role of the market economy in need provision. Equally, it distracts from the increasingly reductionist approach taken to welfare

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state spending and assistance that characterises a great deal of European public service reform (Edmiston, 2014). The purportedly cohesive conception and pursuit of social innovation across policy domains and structural levels, obscures from the fact that social innovation is, in reality, a nested micro paradigm within the prevailing European political economy. Whilst it has more recently been used to reenergise other micro paradigms (e.g. social enterprise), and re-frame meso paradigms surrounding welfare provision, social innovation public policymaking overwhelmingly operates in a way that aligns with and legitimises the existing neoliberal socio-economic and political settlement. This tendency within social innovation policymaking can be understood as a process of 'centralised decentralisation' in the mixed economy of welfare that reflects a reluctance to unsettle and displace the institutional dominance that structures marginality (Edmiston and Aro, 2016). In this respect, social innovation can be understood as an applied policy idea that is embedded within fundamental assumptions that form the prevailing policy paradigm and policy options available (Béland, 2005). Invariably, this dominant policy framework shapes and constrains debated policy alternatives and the ends towards which social innovation as a policy concept is put. This reflects a broader instrumentalisation of need provision, which EU social innovation policy operates within and, in certain instances, contributes towards (Grisolia and Ferragina, 2015).

Within the policymaking process, the power to identify, define and address societal challenges tends to lie at the political and institutional centre. Examination of EU and domestic social innovation policy suggests this has significant implications (and limitations) for addressing socio-structural disadvantage (Edmiston, 2015a; Edmiston and Aro, 2016; von Jacobi et al., 2017). For example, work integration social enterprises are often presented as a public policy initiative to foster social innovation. Policies and funding to support work integration social enterprises give legitimation to and shape wider perception of institutions whilst also shifting cognitive frames associated with unemployment and disadvantage. In addition, social innovation policymaking tends to encourage and support stronger networks of coordination between the public, private and third sectors. As an ancillary objective, these networks of collaboration are put towards a variety of ends. Central to these policy initiatives is an attempt to influence the structure, perceptions and capacity of social networks within the social economy. Overall, EU and domestic public policies have supported social networks in a way that contributes towards incremental social innovation through the fulfilment of pre-defined policy objectives.

Table G.1: Social Innovation Dynamics in the Social Grid Model

Social Force	Dynamic Effect	Social Innovation (Example)
Institutions	Influence the structure of social networks	Build bridging social capital
	Make values socially relevant for cognitive frames	Influence regulatory norms
Social Networks	Establish collective power to shape institutions	Increase political mobilization
	Shape and diffuse cognitive frames	Deepen focused activism
Cognitive Frames	Provide legitimation and shape the wider perceptions of institutions	Build a social movement for change
	Shape perceptions of network structures	Change value perceptions of cultural material

Source: (Nicholls and Ziegler, 2014)

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There has been a long-standing interest in the development of the social economy and the opportunities this presents for democratic and social renewal through political mobilisation and civic engagement that tackles marginality (Evers and Laville, 2004; Pestoff, 2008). Ayob et al. (2016) draw a distinction between weak, utilitarian approaches that focus on the aggregate social value of innovations (Mulgan et al., 2007; Phills, 2008) and stronger interpretations that centre on the radical practice of collaborative action to restructure existing power relations leading to the social inclusion of marginalised groups (Moulaert et al., 2005; Moulaert et al., 2010). Ayob et al. (2016: 649) suggest that this latter approach bears a strong resemblance to co-production, aligning around common themes of empowerment, societal change and collaboration.

Whilst more radical conceptions of social innovation have been partially adopted through the principle of co-production in social policymaking, these initiatives have, on the whole, been rather perfunctory and superficial. Within European social innovation policy, there has been little, if any, regulatory or financial support given to social networks that strengthen the collective political power of marginalised populations. Without these political networks of action, disadvantaged individuals and communities have little power to shape dominant institutions and cognitive frames that so profoundly affect the extent and character of social exclusion. A series of measures do encourage the incorporation of marginalised views and experiences into the policymaking process, but the agenda setting and decision-making centre remains largely unchanged in terms of the solutions to marginalisation deemed appropriate and necessary. If public policymaking in Europe continues to neglect the political mobilisation of those most negatively affected by structural inequalities (of power, resource and opportunity), social innovation is unlikely to fulfil its transformative promise. As demonstrated in CRESSI research on social innovation, policy measures that stifle effective social and community development, struggle to support marginalised populations to shape and diffuse the cognitive frames and institutions that structure marginalisation (Edmiston and Aro, 2016). Not only does this constrain social innovation as a transversal policy mechanism, it also limits it potential as a nested policy paradigm that seeks to contribute towards more modest, incremental change.

According to Mann (2013: 1), power entails the 'capacity to get others to do things that otherwise they otherwise would not do'. In this regard, a transference or realignment of power towards the powerless is central to the political project of social innovation in Europe. Without it, social innovation policymaking garners and gives credence to a conciliatory politics of need provision that focuses on 'pragmatic solutions' to 'political problems' regarding the redistribution of resource, power and opportunity. Within such a setting, social innovation policy runs the risk of de-politicising the causes of and solutions to marginalisation.

At present, there is broad recognition in social innovation policy of the limitations and deficits arising from the existing socio-political and economic configuration. This is put towards a variety of different ends that have a number of positive social and economic outcomes for some of the most marginalised and disempowered citizens in Europe. However there is nonetheless a political disinclination to identify and address the specific actors, institutions and processes that prove so fundamental to the structuration of disadvantage at the macro-level. The diffuse, complex and dynamic operation of power is often poorly conceptualised in social innovation policymaking. Whilst the disadvantageous features of the social/market economy are widely acknowledged and seen as a motivation for supporting social innovation, the power relations comprised in this are

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poorly understood or accounted for in policy instruments designed to tackle marginalisation. The failure of EU and domestic public policies to acknowledge or attend to this, limits the potential of social innovation to its pragmatic means i.e. effectiveness and efficiency. Equally, social innovation policymaking sidesteps the problematic material and symbolic significance of power, including its impact on the forms of inclusion and exclusion it produces. This constrains the potential of social innovation policy in its capacity to critique, contest and disrupt existing power relations. In doing so, social innovation policy fails to problematize the social structuration of disadvantage, at least in a way that is willing to identify and displace institutional dominance and sites of power.

In this respect, the apolitical nature of social innovation policy is both a vice and virtue in the political economy of welfare and marginalisation. On the one hand, the neutral framing of social innovation in public policy dissuades questions concerning culpability, accountability and responsibility regarding marginalisation. For example, questions such as: who is responsible for rising levels of poverty and inequality? How should they be held to account? And what role can the market economy play in contributing towards inclusive growth going forward? Institutional neglect of these questions essentially dissimulates political choices surrounding social innovation in the policymaking process (Grisolia and Ferragina, 2015: 167). On the other hand, the apolitical nature of social innovation policy makes it possible to accommodate a plurality of social, political and economic interests in mobilising resources and action (albeit remedial) to tackle marginalisation.

The multiple framing of and pursuit of social innovation in public policy, makes it possible to encourage collective action *for* a particular outcome or activity, but this equally detracts from mobilising resources and individuals *against* the structural determinants of exclusion. For some, this may not present a practical or principled challenge to its efficacy. To the contrary, Ziegler (2015) suggests that a focus on contestation may actually obscure complementarities between differing approaches to social innovation, which may in turn, stifle the incremental advancement of its utility in value deliberations concerning social justice. However, the collaborative framing of social innovation (both in policy and practice) does present a number of risks. If utility maximising approaches are understood as complementary to, or perhaps not in conflict with, more radical approaches to social innovation, this runs the risk of presenting both approaches as compatible or mutually conceivable. As demonstrated in the case of EU social innovation policy, this is not the case, with the former superseding and providing grounds to delegitimise the latter. In this respect, EU social innovation policy can be understood as having 'inherently political dimensions' (Ayob et al., 2016: 649), that function to de-politicise the causes, effects and solutions to marginalisation. 'Innovative' solutions are presented that not only fail to unsettle, but actually serve to consolidate, the prevailing political economy of inequality across and within EU member states.

As a result, the political agency and subjectivity of marginalised individuals is often overlooked in social innovation policymaking; as is their capacity to resist the institutions, ideals and processes that shape and constrain their capacity to define and pursue their ends. Going forward, it seems that the political subjectivity and collective action of marginalised groups is a key resource for ensuring social innovation policy is able to tackle the structural determinants of marginalisation and thereby contribute towards systemic and 'positive' social change (cf. Dey and Steyaert, 2016). This presents a particular challenge for public policy in trying to overcome the paradox of embedded agency that characterises both institutional entrepreneurship and social innovation (Garud et al., 2007).

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Existing research on social innovation policy suggests the majority of activities and initiatives supported through EU and domestic institutions tend to be small, localised and short-term. In many cases, projects are 'either discontinued after a few years, or faced an uncertain future in the short term' (Brandsen, 2014: 9). In addition, research indicates that the activities supported are numerable, but diffuse: 'characterised in almost all its fields by a multitude of small operators and initiatives rather than by a small number of big players (Terstriep et al., 2015: 80). This has been variously explained by the poor level of infrastructure for social economy organisations, the high level of reliance on project-based funding and dependence on institutional support that is subject to political fashions (Brandsen, 2014). One possible solution to addressing the apolitical nature of social innovation policymaking, and scaling the capacity and impact of projects funded through public institutions would be to foster a greater degree of collective identification and political action amongst marginalised populations.

At present, many social innovation policies seek to improve the human capabilities and empowerment of marginalised individuals through localised and collective action. These measures tend to focus on acts of self-organisation that develop individual and collective competencies to improve outcomes and affect (confined) change in the socio-material, rather than socio-political, position of marginalised communities. Whilst these measures have the potential to create new mechanisms and platforms of collective need provision, they also 'may shift questions of welfare away from that of fulfilling social rights to how most effectively to deliver collective needs' (Endo and Lim, 2016: 12). To effectively scale social innovation and resist the instrumentalisation of need provision, public policies must move beyond diffuse, isolated instances of self-organisation and empowerment.

To foster systemic social innovation, public policies must engender collective identification amongst marginalised individuals so that they are able to identify how their individual disadvantages are shared and connected to broader regimes of production, consumption, inequality, welfare and power. In doing so, it would be possible to foster collective material and post-material transformations that effectively resource and politicise social innovation as a policy concept. This would advance a social innovation paradigm that entails collective action *for* measures that seek to fulfil human capabilities and social needs. However, it would also encourage measures that venerate and foster collective action *against* those institutions, networks and cognitive frames that structure social disadvantage (Dey and Teasdale, 2013cf.). Without a policy approach that offers systemic solutions to overcoming marginality (through problematizing its structuration), social innovation policy runs the risk of being co-opted as another tool of oppression that distracts from, and thereby legitimises persistent inequalities of resource, power and opportunity.

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