# Social innovations as a repair of social order

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Abstract: The paper addresses social innovation both as an empirical mode and as a deliberate means of social change. It draws on recent developments in the sociology of repair to offer a critical reading of pro-innovation rhetoric at the EU policy level. It is argued that the practices and concepts of social innovation in European policymaking can be fruitfully reframed within a repair narrative, whereas the proliferation of "social innovation" as a buzzword 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

## Introduction

Social innovation has become a popular term in academia as well as politics (Moulaert et al. 2013). Social innovations are full of promise, luring scholars and researchers with the prospect of a better understanding of the dynamics of social change and policymakers with novel solutions for adapting to societal transformations and challenges. They present a crossroads for academic scholarship, political discourse, and societal participation. Social innovations are also linked to similar, related terms in both everyday and academic use, 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 diverse connotations and applications of the term (Edwards-Schachter and Wallace 2017). I argue that the increased popularity of social innovation itself can be studied as a process of innovation – not so much because of any inherent novelty or originality of the concept – but because of its ubiquitous diffusion as a buzzword in heterogeneous fields such as academia, politics, civil society, and the economy. (Pol and Ville 2009).

This paper traces social innovation both as a sociological concept for delineating a specific empirical *mode of social change* and as a political instrument for implementing deliberate *means of societal change*. The history of social innovation as a sociological concept reveals that neither the term nor its meaning is particularly new. As a mode of social change, it can be traced back to the spread of political or religious ideas and it has received academic attention at least since the 1950s. The current political application of social innovation as an instrument for societal change entails a strong entrepreneurial bias in its definition and use that closely resembles established notions of techno-economic innovations. Thus, as a deliberate or reflexive means of social change, social innovation has become a popular topic within current political debates. After presenting these two understandings, the conceptual and the instrumental, I analyse the ties between them and how the recent popularity of social innovation can be understood from an innovation studies perspective.

The first section discusses social innovation as an empirical *mode of social change* and how it became elaborated as a sociological concept. The second section takes the discourse at the EU policy level as an example for how social innovation is framed as a deliberate and reflexive *means of societal change*. I will argue that in both cases, social innovation can be considered as one pathway to *repairing social order*. This understanding highlights the role of social innovations in maintaining the fabric of social order, while at the same time ushering in social change.

## Social innovation as a sociological concept

Over the long history of the term innovation, the idea of social innovation entered the public discourse in the early nineteenth century, when it "served to label the social reformer or socialist, accused of overthrowing the established order, namely property and capitalism" (Godin 2015, 122). Perhaps surprisingly, and a far cry from its current positive connotations, social innovation was first used as a derogatory term. Its early proximity to political reform also places the term in close quarters with transformational issues affecting society. As we will see, concepts of social change in sociology often contain references to social innovations. Within the discipline at large, social innovation is generally held in high esteem and related to ideas of positive progress, much in line with the "pro-innovation bias" (Rogers [1962] 1983, 92–103; Godin and Vinck 2017) of innovation studies in general.

Whether social innovations are considered a positive or negative mode of social change is of course a matter of perspective. From a conservative standpoint, they threaten to upset the established order and the ruling elite; from a progressive standpoint, they promise to reduce societal inequities and maladjustments in the social order. Within the realm of sociological theory, this divide resonates with diverging assumptions about the stability of social order, where some theorists link social innovations to issues of social change as an argument for studying societal dynamics and others espouse theories that emphasise continuity and cohesion. As Coser (1964, 211–12) 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 considerations by taking a conservative stance towards societal change. Coser's critique of Durkheim also shows that in the second part of the twentieth century, the tides began to turn towards a more positive notion of social innovation and social change, a shift which ultimately led to the current "pro-innovation bias" in academia and society.

### Social innovation as a mode of social change

A brief recapitulation of social innovation is useful in order to situate it as a sociological concept and a particular mode of social change. One early mention by Moore (1960) describes social innovations in the context of the dynamic transformations that shape modern societies . Moore uses the social innovation to make the case for greater conceptual clarity in sociological theories of social change, aiming towards distinct and discernible patterns of social change. He specifically criticises conventional structural-functional analysis and argues for an increased consideration of the origins or recurring sources of social change. In Moore's arguments, social innovations become part of the "resolution of human problems", i.e. ongoing efforts to maintain the basic fabric of society in the face of transformations in the material, normative and cognitive conditions that "provide the basis for recurrent social innovation" (ibid., 813). The persistence of problems is an inherent trait of any social system, since modern societies are riddled with manifold inconsistencies. A central source of social change can therefore be found in the mismatch between social structures and functions. The most promising and popular solutions to achieve a better fit are to be found within the realm of science and technology: "a rational, technical orientation to the natural or social order is an essentially irreversible intellectual revolution" (ibid.). In modern societies, social innovations are therefore grounded in rational, scientific reasoning and disproportionately triggered by the unintended consequences of technical progress (ibid., 817). Moore's brief discussion of social innovation and social change thus outlines a distinct pattern: a) social innovations are *reactions to endogenous societal mismatches*; b) societal mismatches are predominantly *triggered by the (un)intended consequences of technical progress*; c) social innovations are themselves *rational and reflexive modes of coping* with the self-induced dynamics of social change. Moore does not go into greater detail as to how social innovations figure within

processes of social change, but the pattern he identifies resonates with three more recent sociological conceptions: First, modernisation has accelerated social change; second, change requires active engagement; and third, modern societies are increasingly confronted with the consequences of their own actions (Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994). Social change is then considered to be a result of the growing tensions inherent to modern societies and social innovations are postulated as one of many ways to reduce those tensions.

A growing interest in social innovation as a deliberate mode of social change can already be observed in the late 1960s, for example in community psychology (Fairweather 1967; Taylor 1970). This research focuses on the practical matters of creating change on a local level, discussing the difficulties of interdisciplinary cooperation as well as of transforming existing social arrangements and stabilising new ones. As Taylor puts it: "A new mousetrap requires no great revolution in anyone's life style or identity; the consumer simply substitutes the new mousetrap for the old one and life goes on unchanged. But a new social form is not introduced so easily." (1970, 70). The major difference between a technical innovation, like a mousetrap, and a social innovation, like a penal reform, thus lies in the *resistance of established social institutions*, which tend to counter or stall social innovations more than their technical counterparts. This resonates with Moore's further argument that the increasingly rational foundation of social innovations cements their success in modern society. They do not happen "behind the backs" of actors, but as deliberate and directed efforts, more often than not initiated by social scientists and with participation from civil society and stakeholders.

Such an active and deliberate understanding of social innovations brings up close parallels to neighbouring concepts like *social entrepreneurship* or *social engineering*. The role of the entrepreneur, understood in a broader sense as someone "who undertakes to coördinate the activities of others; [...] makes decisions and meets contingencies" (Hughes 1936, 183), becomes a central feature of modern society under the condition of increasingly rapid social change (Drucker 1957). The shifting framework of norms and values requires an active and reflexive adaptation and maintenance of social institutions, the latter in turn becoming a primary locus of power and control. Hughes sees this tendency as a basic feature of capitalist societies where political control is limited and social institutions may not simply persist in their own right without active support. The concept of social engineering, on the other hand, has also been used to discuss the limits of political control. When it comes to introducing social change, Popper, for instance, advocates "piecemeal engineering" in contrast to "utopian engineering" (1945, 138–48). Because "piecemeal social experiments" (ibid., 143) can be controlled on a local level, Popper argues, they promise a more realistic mode of change than large scale utopian approaches that fail to consider the complexities of modern societies.

From this brief discussion, we can see that early concepts of social innovation associate specific notions of *scientific knowledge*, *entrepreneurial agency*, *engineering interventions*, and *societal change* into a durable arrangement for not only analysing, but also for intervening in processes of social change. These interventions, or inventions, to stick more closely to the core concepts in innovation research, target the local level and are set up as experiments. As a mode of social change, social innovations thus have a limited, local scope and their outcome is far from certain. They combine scientific knowledge and entrepreneurial agency to create an engineering-based model for driving social change or, in other words, an understanding of society as an at least partly controllable system of inputs, processes and outputs. As we will see later, this engineering-based model coincides to a large extent with notions of social innovations as political instruments – even though social innovations are often conceived as bottom-up inventions in contrast to top-down political interventions (Whyte 1982).

Yet, and somewhat counterintuitively, the dominant normative understanding of social innovations as bottom-up, progressive adaptations to societal change actually narrows down the analytical scope of the concept. First, because studies of social innovation – like most innovation research – tend to *focus on the production of novelty*, they place more emphasis on the birth of social innovations rather than their diffusion (Rogers [1962] 1983; Godin 2017). Piecemeal social

experiments might stabilise locally over time, but this does not necessarily mean that they evolve into full-fledged "dominant designs" (Anderson and Tushman 1990) or novel "paradigms" (Dosi 1982) as has been argued for technical innovations. However, the diffusion of social innovations as changing social practices is highly interesting from a sociological perspective, since it offers insights into large-scale, transformative processes of societal change (Howaldt, Kopp, and Schwarz 2015). Second, the analytic lens is restricted in the above view because an emphasis on social innovation tends to create an analytic opposition to technical innovation. However, societal change is typically *social and technical at the same time* (Brooks 1982). It would of course be a grave misunderstanding to reduce social innovations to mere consequences of technical innovations or vice versa. In order to understand societal change, social *and* technical inventions, their diffusion and repercussions need to be considered, along with their reciprocal effects. More to the point, the very distinction between social and technical innovation might be largely misleading, since it suggests the existence of two distinct realms: the social and the technical. This distinction has been especially criticised by science and technology studies (STS), where innovations are understood as ongoing *material-semiotic translations* through which durable actor-networks emerge (Law 2009).

In order to shed more light on the relation of social innovation and social change and in order to understand potential specificities of social innovations as a mode of social change in contemporary societies, the next section will situate social innovations within the larger framework of innovation research and social theory.

## Social change and the disruptive maintenance of social order

It is striking that social innovations are predominantly framed as agents of positive social change, even though it would seem they are more often than not targeted at maintaining social order, or, more specifically, at addressing societal maladjustments. This discrepancy begs a closer inspection of the underlying patterns and models of innovation. I will argue that social innovations do not so much resemble the pattern of "creative destruction", a term coined by Schumpeter (1942, 83), but rather operate as forms of *disruptive maintenance*[1] that seek to compensate, repair or resolve the manifold "lags" found in contemporary societies (Ogburn 1922). From a general innovation studies perspective, creative destruction and disruptive maintenance are not opposing terms. They share the same 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 an element of conservatism*. Without wanting to overstress 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 vein as Popper's piecemeal social engineering. We are then confronted with *neither replication nor revolution* but with a form of reflexive social change that interrelates aspects of continuity and change. In order to distinguish the innovation perspective of creative destruction from the repair perspective of disruptive maintenance more clearly, it is helpful to revisit the works of Schumpeter and Ogburn and their distinct models of social change.

Schumpeter's concept of *creative destruction* is deeply ingrained with contemporary notions of innovation. In his 1942 book *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, he states that it is the "process of industrial mutation—if I may use that biological term—that incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure *from within,* incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one. This process of Creative Destruction is the essential fact about capitalism" (83). The Marxist roots underlying this perspective are clear. The driving force behind this process is the

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

entrepreneur, who operates in a techno-economic environment that supplies precise, measurable indicators for novelty and success through profit and diffusion. Profits can be made either by finding new markets, new sources of supply, or new forms of production, in short: "any 'doing things differently' in the realm of economic life" (Schumpeter [1923] 1939, 84). Schumpeter stresses that *doing things differently* does not necessarily entail a strong notion of invention – it does not have to be founded on a fundamentally new approach. The main aspect is that doing things differently results in profit. The inventor, according to Schumpeter, typically differs from the entrepreneur, a person who transforms invention into profit. Thus, as social processes, invention and innovation are not one in the same. Innovation does not hinge on the creation of novelty, but on economic exploitation in long-term processes of diffusion. Innovation processes are immanent in capitalist economies, which are restless in their pursuit of change.

This mode of economic change is fundamentally different from the notion of social change put forward by Ogburn (1922, 200). 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 contemporary societies. One of his prominent examples of a cultural lag and the subsequent need for re-adjustment is the increase in work accidents caused by industrialisation in the late 19th century, a development which prompted changes in occupational safety laws and workman's compensation. Industrial labour is part of material culture, which sets the impulses for change in another realm that Ogburn calls adaptive culture. Unlike the perspective espoused by Schumpeter, for Ogburn the novel regulations cited above are not driven by an intrinsic force that continuously seeks to exploit possibilities for profit but instead occasioned by the perceived need to re-adjust working conditions and legislation. The main motive behind Ogburn's concept of cultural lag is the need to restore a state of harmony, to use a pointed term, between mal-adapted segments of society. This understanding of society is rather functional; interdependent social worlds are mutually aligned – one having to compensate for the effects of the other. Schumpeter's idea of creative destruction, on the other hand, does not strive for harmony or alignment but highlights the continuous dynamic of capitalist transformation. Ogburn's hypothesis of a cultural lag and its resolution thus resonates more closely with the of idea disruptive maintenance than it does with creative destruction.

We could even go as far as to say that Ogburn identified the societal adaptations, or repairs, that mend the destructive dynamics described by Schumpeter. The creative destruction that comes with the dynamics of capitalism is then not confined to the economy and its wealth of competing business ventures. Instead, this destruction reverberates deeply into the fabric of society and occasions the cultural lags and the adjustments that are necessary to "catch back up" to the economy. To be more precise: It is the broad diffusion of inventions and their effects that necessitate an active adaptation and engagement with those same inventions and all that they entail. Even though the latter could be seen as a mere reaction to the former, both should be understood as creative processes in which technical, organisational, economic, political, and social dynamics are re-aligned. Adaptations to cultural lags are no less original than instances of creative destruction. In some cases, they might even require a larger creative effort, because they have to take multiple relevant social dynamics into account in order to facilitate appropriate adjustments. Yet, as Ogburn states, cultural lags are the dependent variable, they follow transformations in other realms and are resolved by restoring – or re-creating – alignment between different realms of society. This productive juxtaposition of creative destruction and cultural lags enables an understanding of social change that is also prevalent in more recent approaches. For instance, the idea of reflexive modernisation (Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994) puts forward a similar view of social change and current societal transformations, where modern societies are continuously required to maintain social order by engaging with the consequences and problems they themselves have created.

Especially the normative understanding of social innovation found in political discourse is strongly linked to the notion of reflexively managing the consequences of modernity (Edwards-

Schachter and Wallace 2017). A brief quote from the Bureau of European Policy Advisers report on social innovation corroborates this argument: "[…] 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, 8). This statement also operates within a semantic frame of repair and maintenance, since it emphasises the need to fix problems and respond to pressing needs. In other words, the report draws an Ogburnian portrait of society, in which the multiple cultural lags may be resolved through social innovations. Yet, in contrast to frequent mentions of innovation, the word "repair" is conspicuously absent in the report, with the exception of one footnote. Given this conspicuous absence, we can suspect that the use of the term social innovation is heavily linked to the positive connotations of technical and economic innovation in modern societies (Godin 2015, 122–33), 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 suspicion by taking a closer look at the emerging sociology of repair and the relation of innovation and repair with respect to social change. The sociology of repair provides fruitful concepts 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 (Jackson 2014). One major aspect is a critique of the dominant innovation paradigm in STS. In contrast to the innovation paradigm, which emphasises the creation of stability and order, the repair paradigm – or "broken world thinking" as Jackson calls it – emphasises fragility and breakdowns within modern technical and social infrastructures and the subsequent need for maintenance and repair: "[B]roken world thinking asserts that breakdown, dissolution, and change, rather than innovation, development, or design as conventionally practiced and thought about are the key themes and problems facing new media and technology scholarship today." (ibid., 222). A second aspect draws on the empirical studies of maintenance and repair practices that reveal the creative, sophisticated ways in which people deal with breakdowns and disruptions. Jackson argues that it is precisely such notions of repair that link the worlds of order, stability, and innovation with those of disruption, fragility and decay. Repair resides in the often invisible performances of "articulation work" (Star and Strauss 1999), the work that is necessary in order to maintain constant exchange between the distributed activities of differentiated societies. In the following, I will draw on these ideas to relate social innovations to issues of repair.

Indeed, this conceptual pairing holds water because, as Jackson (2014, 226–29) argues, innovation and repair are not mutually exclusive. Rather, repair is an often-overlooked element in innovation processes, especially since inventions need to be adapted to local situations in diffusion or since their successful diffusion relies on continuously maintaining the integrity of the invention in the face of counter inventions or material decay. Godin (2017, 24) makes a similar argument from the perspective of innovation studies, pointing out that the diffusion of innovation is itself an inventive process (cf. the notion of re-invention in Rogers [1962] 1983; or the notion of translation in Latour 1986). And recently, scholars of social innovations have also hinted at repair as a fruitful concept for the study of social change (Howaldt, Kopp, and Schwarz 2015, 44).

The sociology of repair generally focuses on processes of "mending social order" (Henke 2000, 55) in complex material-semiotic settings. It emphasises the situated practices of repair technicians and how they engage with disruptions in both the social and the technical order (Harper 1987; Orr 1996; Strebel, Bovet, and Sormani 2019). This entails an understanding of repair that differs from a traditional or narrow notion of repair. From the latter perspective,

repair refers to a material object that breaks down and is then moved to a specialised repair environment – like a car with engine trouble that is taken to a garage –, where specialised knowledge and specialised tools are mobilised in order to restore functionality. Repair is then spatially and temporally detached from contexts of use and instances of breakdown – or as Hughes once put it: "[…] one man's routine of work is made up of the emergencies of other people" (Hughes 1951, 320). 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 social order, how it helps to maintain stability, and how it sometimes transforms the relations it is embedded in*. Equally, it does not reserve the term "repair" for the work of specialised technicians, even if they do constitute the predominant field of study. Rather, it *extends repair to other instances where the working order needs to be actively recreated or circumvented so as to enable a continuous flow of activities*. The important characteristic of repair, however, still remains its primarily 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 and Thrift 2007, 6). Such a broad understanding of repair holds several interesting aspects for the study of social innovations.
First, the study of repair resonates with the basic tenets of societal change found in the writings of Schumpeter, Ogburn, or Beck. Like those conceptions, the sociology of repair does not build on notions of stability and order, but gains its analytic perspective from numerous insights into the fragilities and ambiguities of highly industrialised societies. Especially the catastrophic breakdowns of large technical systems in the 1970s and 1980s led to a profound questioning of their controllability (Perrow 1984; Wynne 1988). The technical infrastructures of modernity suddenly seemed much less dependable, and much more vulnerable, than before (Hommels, Mesman, and Bijker 2014). Because the flawless functioning of technology could no longer be taken for granted, scholars and practitioners began to explore practices of technical maintenance and repair (for a similar interest in the concept of care see Mol 2008). A common point of departure for the sociology of repair and social innovation thus lies in the conception of a dynamic social reality that *constantly produces the need for reflexive intervention* to maintain itself (Vinsel 2017). It is a society where everything is, at least potentially, in flux. Starting with the fundamental premise of social change, rather than social order, is a hallmark of Chicago School sociology, and its early iterations, such as Hughes' work on the active transformation of institutions (1936), can be read as reflections on social innovation avant la lettre. Both repair and social innovations then straddle the line 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, 123). Because this fluidity creates constant friction between separate yet interdependent parts of society, social innovations may figure as means to the "resolution of human problems" (Moore 1960, 813) that emerge from these tensions. In short, social innovations, especially when they figure as instruments of change in the political realm, can be seen as a social fix for the unintended "consequences of modernity" (Giddens 1990).
Second, insights into repair can shed light on the complexities of diffusing social innovations. Taylor (1970) already noted the inherent resistance to change found within established social orders, the social inertia which poses significant obstacles to the scaling of social innovations in space and time (Mulgan 2006, 153). Change and continuity then figure as two inseparable aspect of social innovation. As with all innovations, *the diffusion of social innovations is a creative process that transforms the initial invention through processes of adoption* (Rogers [1962] 1983). Local adoptions of repair enable inventions to spread past the local situations of their creation. The repair perspective thus focuses on the processes of misalignment, disruption, and adaptation occurring throughout the diffusion process. Even if these activities do not signalise a breakdown in the narrow sense, they still sensitise researchers to the dynamics of innovations that extend beyond the origins 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. Indeed, Jackson (2014, 227) points out that repair is not an opposing element, but a

necessary feature of the innovation process. When studying the obstacles to scaling social innovations, the repair perspective can show how they become durable and versatile through adaptation and maintenance.

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 manuals, but operates in local forms of competent evaluation and improvisation (Henke 2000, 66–69). Everyday questions about whether to repair or replace an object or which repair to choose show that repair is more than an economic question or a rational weighing of costs versus benefits. Instead, it also ties valuations of longevity or status into the seemingly simple questions of whether and how something should be repaired. The repair of technical devices also offers analytic insights into such social structures and dynamics. Thus, in the same way that repair should not be considered a strictly technical phenomenon, social innovations should not be conceived as purely social (Degelsegger and Kesselring 2012). Social innovations, because they target change on the level of social practices, interweave both the material and the semiotic fabrics of society (Brooks 1982). The material-semiotic constitution of repair (Denis and Pontille 2015) mirrors the material-semiotic constitution of social innovations. Furthermore, the specific expertise brought to bear in processes of repair and social innovation offers insights into the social structures of repair and innovation communities. Repair technicians acquire, store, and transmit this knowledge within their respective repair milieus, through practical exercise and dedicated narratives (Orr 1996). The literature on social entrepreneurship and social innovations also emphasises that bringing about social change is a highly reflexive process requiring detailed knowledge of social processes (Franz, Hochgerner, and Howaldt 2012).

By looking more closely into the practices of repair and social innovation, the similarities tend to become more evident than the differences. The above-mentioned aspects of the sociology of repair can be applied as a lens well beyond the context of social innovations. We can also note that much of the current work on the revival of DIY and repair cultures follows narratives of social movements, sustainability, and counter culture (Rosner and Turner 2015).

Up until this point I have 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 as a trigger for change and more on an Ogburnian understanding of disruptive maintenance to resolve cultural lags and uphold order. Then I extended this perspective by drawing on ideas from the sociology of repair which are potentially instructive for the study of social innovations. I will now use these arguments as a conceptual prism to disperse the current discourse on social innovations at the EU policy level. 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.

## 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 and Rubalcaba 2016). This development is accompanied by a shift in the understanding of social innovations from an analytical to a normative conception (Edwards-Schachter and Wallace 2017) and by a turn towards a more entrepreneurial, and even neoliberal, approach to the topic (Jessop et al. 2013; Fougère, Segercrantz, and Seeck 2017). I will argue that this shift also entails a repair narrative which is embedded in the broader framing of social innovations as solutions to societal challenges and that this narrative, in combination with the more recent entrepreneurial bias found in the innovation narrative, forms a distinct instrumental understanding of social innovations as social technologies that are used to 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 the narratives of social innovation and repair along two main lines. First, it outlines the framing of social innovations at the EU policy level as a form of repair. Second, it conceives this particular form of repair in itself as a social innovation, i.e. as the diffusion of a new social technology.

## Social innovation as means of repair in EU policy discourse

Historical scholars agree that despite its long career, the growing interest in the concept of social innovation is a recent phenomenon and its use varies considerably (Godin 2015, 122-133; Edwards-Schachter and Wallace 2017). The ambiguousness of the term might have been instrumental to its becoming a buzzword in the late 2000s (Pol and Ville 2009). But as social innovation becomes *popular by remaining vague in the academic realm*, it also gains currency *by limiting its scope in the realm of policy*. The shift from a malleable analytic understanding to a narrow normative concept has reduced the interpretative flexibly and distilled the idea of social innovation to allow it to be easily inserted into political agendas.

While academic discourse on this concept hails from different fields, it seems to revolve 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" 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., 73).

The recent policy discourse narrows social innovation down to an instrumental approach, since prominent definitions in EU publications highlight the role of social innovations for addressing societal challenges. For instance, in the report "This is European social innovation", drafted at the request of 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., 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, Caulier-Grice, and Mulgan 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, 8). Even though the instrumental perspective on social innovation dates back to the 1970s (Edwards-Schachter and Wallace 2017, 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 an end, but embody distinct normative dispositions and as such are transformative of the "ends in view" (Dewey 1939). One such disposition is that *social innovations should be beneficial for society*; another *links social innovation with an entrepreneurial understanding of social change*. Societal utility is a prominent addendum to the definition of social innovations, since they are "social in both their ends and their means" (European Commission 2013, 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 has a number of consequences. First, it curtails its analytic scope. Second, the "social" in social innovation acts as a normative handle that enables the undisputed insertion of the term into the repertoire of political instruments. It demarcates specific conditions of well-being under which social innovations are deemed successful, i.e. fulfilling a social need. Last not least, it sets up a contrast between social and economic or technical innovations by specifying that social innovations are not for profit. This purported contrast to economic innovations, however, becomes questionable in light of the entrepreneurial bias that can be observed for social innovations in the EU discourse.

Even though one of the main arguments for social innovations is that they provide solutions to "social demands that are traditionally not addressed by the market or existing institutions" (ibid.), the above-described understanding of social innovation strongly draws on the narrative of 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., 15). The required response to societal challenges is specifically framed as a "willingness to take risks and find creative ways of using underused assets" (ibid., 16). As a political instrument, social innovation is therefore not only integrated in the policy discourse through a normative notion of the social but also deeply engrained with neoliberal ideas through an economic notion of innovation (Fougère, Segercrantz, and Seeck 2017). By promising to tap into existing creative and transformative potential on a local level, to create bottom-up grassroots initiatives that solve pressing global problems in a specific context, the discursive framing of social innovations at the EU policy level at the same time introduces the figure of the entrepreneur, now "social" entrepreneur, as the prime originator of such change. Even if these social entrepreneurs are not primarily motivated by economic profit, they still operate based on economic rationales such as cost-benefit calculations.

These deeply socio-economic underpinnings of social innovation resonate with Drucker's (1957, 39-45) claim that the most important social innovation of the 20th century was the institutionalisation of business enterprises and rational management processes as predominant forces of societal change. He argues that in contrast to "our old ways of producing social change: reform and revolution" (ibid., 45.), social innovations open up societal change with respect to the means used and ends pursued. Even though Drucker might be overly optimistic about the potential of business formats for addressing social needs, his distrust in large scale reforms mirrors Popper's earlier call for "piecemeal engineering" for the introduction of social change (1945, 138-148). Instead of relying on an individual entrepreneurial genius, Drucker essentially defines social innovation in terms of management ideals: "Above all it is a method that enables us to set objectives and to organize work for their attainment." (Drucker 1957, 41). It could be argued that Drucker and Popper ultimately conceive social change more as a task that should fall to a diligent social engineer than to a creative social entrepreneur. In this same vein, the EU has 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 to 2014. Yet in stark contrast to the proliferation of entrepreneurialism in EU publications, the term engineering is hardly used. This suggests that the EU discourse on social innovations draws more on an economic understanding

of innovations than a technical one by framing social innovations largely in terms of entrepreneurial metaphors.

But how is this entrepreneurial bias in EU policy related to an understanding of social innovations as a form of repair? My main argument is that the EU discourse frames social innovations predominantly in terms of a demand pull, rather than a supply push. 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 and Lane 2013, 638–642 on the difference between 'needs' and 'demands' in innovation studies). Pull models of innovation have been in use in the political realm since the 1960s, albeit with an emphasis on technical inventions to fix social problems (ibid.). Social innovations continue this political take on innovations as solutions to social needs, recalling the words of the European Commission (2010): "Social innovation is about new ideas that work to address pressing unmet needs".

The main argument against reconsidering social innovation as a form of repair would then be the novelty aspect, that is, the "new ideas" at the core of inventions that are supposedly not found in situations of repair. However, the sociology of repair consistently highlights the creativity and originality that accompany each repair (Henke 2000; Jackson 2014) as long as the activity transcends simple replacement. And of course, repair is not confined to the reproductive *restoration* of original states, but extends to more transformative modes such as the *remediation* and *reconfiguration* of social and technical relationships (Sennett 2012, 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 copious amounts of creativity or originality but merely any form of "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 [1923] 1939, 84). Basic variation does not depend on inventive agencies but emerges from the complex interrelations of modern capitalist societies. 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 than most instances of repair, as long as diffusion operates along simple modes of imitation (Tarde [1890] 1903). Yet, the creative aspect of inventions in social innovation, which the European Commission emphasises as "new ideas that work to address pressing unmet needs", can be understood both as an approach to fixing a cultural lag in an Ogburnian sense and as a form of disruptive maintenance.

Repair, social innovation, and social entrepreneurship are not mutually exclusive in this reading. Rather, the need for repair, for fixing 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 at this level, however, is an interesting decoupling of the rhetoric of innovation and repair. The dominant and obviously fashionable use of innovation and entrepreneurial vocabulary in EU policy discourse invokes an understanding of innovation that echoes the ideas of Schumpeter. In contrast, the underlying definition of a problematic societal situation follows the concept of cultural lag and the ensuing need for repair. I have argued that this gap can be can be resolved by drawing on insights from the sociology of repair and analysing the concrete programs of EU policy not in a framework of innovation, but in one of repair. This allows us to avoid the "pro-innovation bias" found in EU policy as well as in innovation studies (Rogers [1962] 1983, 92–103; Godin and Vinck 2017) and technology studies (Jackson 2014, 226–29). Now, we are left with the question of how the term social innovation rose to popularity in the EU policy discourse in the first place (cf. Pel 2016 for a similar discussion of 'capture' dynamics). To answer this question, I will examine the term social innovation as a social innovation in its own right and how it became a legitimate discursive solution to existing societal challenges.

## Diffusing the concept of social innovation in EU policy discourse

So how exactly did the neoliberal notion of social innovation as an entrepreneurial form of social repair become dominant within EU policy discourse? As a mode of social change, social innovation has been discussed within the academic literature at least since the mid-20th century and positioned as a novel format with respect to other forms of change such as reform and revolution (cf. Drucker 1957, 45). More recent political and academic interest in the topic dates from the early 2000s and larger EU programmes geared toward social innovation started around 2010 (Moulaert et al. 2017). Yet these EU programmes follow a rather narrow definition of social innovation, one that is primarily economic or technical and that emphasises entrepreneurial agency and neglects, or simply dismisses, the broader state of academic research (ibid., 19–20). One important actor that has shaped this perspective 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 (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 harnessed to cope with the societal challenges of the 21st century. This perspective invokes an Ogburnian view of social change: transformations in material culture (industrialisation and urbanisation) occasion changes in the adaptive culture. Specific examples of adaptation cited by Mulgan include changes in childcare, housing, community development, and social care. At first, the social innovations in these areas were local experiments, but many have now become institutionalised into the fabric of contemporary societies. Despite these promising examples of successful realignment, Mulgan identifies severe deficits concerning the conceptual understanding of social innovations in contrast to economic or technical innovations. This difficulty persists even though social and commercial innovations actually 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., 146).

To take Mulgan's argument one step further, social innovation, it could be argued, is *the long-neglected twin of commercial innovation* that differs from its more popular sibling only in its normative orientation towards social needs and purposes. The implication here is that social innovations are best driven and organised by social entrepreneurs and social enterprises (ibid., 147). This tight coupling of social innovation and social entrepreneurship creates a nexus in which a techno-economic understanding of innovation becomes the primary 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 where "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., 149). Mulgan places the entrepreneurial model of social innovation within a larger context of societal challenges such as ageing, climate change, health issues, or diversity management. From this perspective, social innovation as a means of social change can also be seen as a 'solution looking for a problem'. The proposed pull mode of social innovations for solving societal problems, then, is accompanied by a push mode that transforms social innovations into a legitimate political resource at the EU policy level.

This push has to overcome a specific gap which, according to Mulgan, lies in the scaling of local creative inventions into durable innovations. In keeping with earlier innovation research, Mulgan also contends that good inventors need not be good innovators (ibid., 151-154; cf. Schumpeter [1923] 1939, 85; Barnett 1953, 299). What is called for is an entrepreneurial approach in order to successfully diffuse inventions from the local level to a larger stage. More research on social innovations should be conducted, the author argues, especially considering the scholarly attention paid to commercial innovations.

Mulgan's programmatic paper thus frames social innovations very much as a "standardised package" (Fujimura 1988), i.e. as a *combination of problems and solutions*, in order to stimulate a bandwagon dynamic for social innovations and their development as a legitimate political instrument. Like the necessary scaling of local social innovations, the concept itself needs to be scaled in order to become a viable political option. In short, the package concept of social innovation lays out the following problem-solution combination: Social innovations represent an untapped reservoir of creativity at the local level. Policymakers may harness the power of social innovations to solve unmet social needs – if local inventions can bridge the gap to become larger innovations. Both deficits can be overcome, first, by generating more knowledge on social innovations and, second, by drawing on social entrepreneurship for organising the transformation process from local to regional and beyond. This standardised package of social innovation figures prominently in EU social innovation policy. In terms of innovation studies, it diffused widely to become a dominant design (Anderson and Tushman 1990) in EU policy discourse.

For instance, the Open Book on Social Innovation, which was co-authored by Mulgan and published by the Young Foundation and the British National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (Murray, Caulier-Grice, and Mulgan 2010), took up the 'package' and proposed social innovations as an effective measure to tackle pressing problems where existing policies had failed (see section 3.1). Whatever the policy issue, the main challenge to social innovation is the same one that stands in the way of every innovation: the ability to generate systemic change from small yet successful experiments (ibid., 12-13). Mulgan and the Young Foundation also provided input for the Bureau of European Policy Advisers report "Empowering people, driving change. Social Innovation in the European Union" (BEPA 2011), where social innovation is depicted as a promising new means of societal change that needs to overcome barriers such as insufficient funding and inappropriate governance structures. This document largely mirrors the report by the European Union and the Young Foundation's "Study on Social Innovation" (European Comission/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., 14). All of these reports state that social innovation is a broad field, encompassing a large variety of empirical cases and conceptual approaches, yet they also converge around the social innovation package proposed by Mulgan and the Young Foundation.

The time around the year 2010, when all these reports were being formulated, can be seen as the nascent phase for the conceptual development of social innovation within EU policy. From an evolutionary understanding of innovations, social innovations still lived in a niche, a protected space where their promises were subject to critical evaluation before potentially becoming part of the mainstream policy regime (Geels 2004). Over the following years, the normative and conceptual package was stabilised in 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., 6). The report of the Bureau of European Policy Advisers from 2014 suggests that social innovation initiatives at the EU level are becoming more noticeable and that there indeed has been a shift within the EU funding and governance structures towards social innovation (BEPA 2014).

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 served to create visibility within the EU discourse and, according to the 2014 BEPA report, they also generated dedicated funding from EU sources. This prevailingly neoliberal and entrepreneurial notion of social innovations simultaneously generated critique from social innovation scholars for its role in reducing and counteracting the concept's broader potential (Jessop et al. 2013; Fougère, Segercrantz, and Seeck 2017).

In sum, we can see that the diffusion, or popularity for that matter, of social innovations as a practice and as a concept first originated from a growing field of action and research where social

innovation is defined and understood in a plurality of ways (Pol and Ville 2009). Precisely this lack of an exclusive definition enables it to serve as a "boundary concept", linking many different interests and thereby facilitating institutionalisation (Pel and Bauler 2014). However, at the EU policy level, we see a diffusion dynamic governed by a far narrower concept, that is the standardised package of social innovation, a conceptual bundle driven by the neoliberal/entrepreneurial notions advocated by actors like the Young Foundation. This conceptual package draws heavily on the positive connotations of innovation in general and on commercial and technical innovation in particular. It emphasises an entrepreneurial approach to fixing current societal challenges and supports an instrumental or engineering-based perspective that makes use of social innovations as social technologies. This summary should not imply that this approach is unproductive, but is instead intended to show that the diffusion of social innovations as a practice and a concept in EU policy can itself be understood as a contested process of innovation.

## Conclusion

This paper pursued two main aims. In section 2, I elaborated an analytic understanding of social innovations as a mode of social change. To develop that perspective, I 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; the diffusion of innovations may hinge on local repair and adoption, and inventions may be thought of as fixes for broken or deficient social or political 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 section 3. Here I tried to show how the concept of social innovation in EU policy documents is shaped in a distinct manner: by an entrepreneurial notion of innovation with clear economic ties and a neoliberal agenda, by an engineering ideal of "fixing" social relations using distinct social technologies, and by positive connotations of techno-economic innovations. Last not least, the concept of social innovation focusses much more on issues of repair 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 for studying 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 more popular term of innovation. The 'innovativeness' of social innovations at the EU policy level becomes more obvious when looking at the popularity of the term since 2010, and the design and marketing of the standardised package of social innovation 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 as a form of disruptive maintenance of the social order could then help to counter the "pro-innovation bias" (Godin and Vinck 2017) found in (social) innovation studies. A more rigorous analysis of processes of social change could include a comparative evaluation of related terms, for instance social engineering and social technologies, that share a common lineage 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 and Brown 2011).

The sociology of repair is a relatively novel and small field, but it can provide a valuable contribution not only to innovation studies in general but to social innovation research in particular. It can also help to bridge some gaps between dichotomous understandings of social and technical repair. Just as innovations are never purely social nor purely technical, repair, too, must always be understood in relational terms. When something is broken, it initiates a process of valuation that considers, even intensely debates, the necessity of a repair. Repair, like innovation, is traversed by heterogeneous orders of worth and both concepts shed light onto the modes and means of current social change.

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