

Research Event “Social Innovation”, 14.12.2023, Centre Marc Bloch (Berlin)

(Report, Sanja Beronja)

On December 14, 2023, the Centre Marc Bloch hosted a research event entitled “Social Innovation”. Often criticized as a “buzzword” that is loaded with a normative character and promoted by international organizations and politicians, social innovation has gained multiple meanings over time for different actors and audiences. The event gathered researchers and practitioners from Germany, France, and Italy to reflect upon and share their experiences with this notion and to deconstruct it.

The event opened with the introductory keynote by **Prof. Simone Baglioni** (University of Parma). In an enlightening speech, he showed the plurality of definitions associated with social innovation, which are representative of the sociopolitical environments in which they were produced:

“Social innovation means fostering inclusion and wellbeing through improving social relations and empowerment processes: imagining and pursuing a world, a nation, a region, a locality, a community that would grant universal rights and be more socially inclusive.” (Moulaert, MacCallum and Hillier 2013:17)

“Social innovation is a distinctive and effective response to address unmet needs motivated by a social purpose which enhances social assets and capabilities.” (Sinclair and Baglioni 2014:472)

“New ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously meet social needs (more effectively than alternatives) and create new social relationships or collaborations.” (BEPA 2010:9)

He recalled the historical development of the concept: designed in the 1960s in the context of the welfare state, the concept was initially used to emphasize the focus of public policies on social change and human empowerment. This understanding can be found in works by Moulaert and his colleagues, where social innovation was seen as a way to imagine human empowerment. However, a shift can be observed in the 1990s, in the context of the remodelling and retrenchment of the welfare state. Social innovation is conceived in the 1990s as a tool to question public measures, to make them more “accountable” and to invite public policies to “reinvent themselves”. This point has been criticized by Moulaert and his colleagues who see in this altered conception of social innovation the risk of commodification of the State. The concept was appropriated in the context of the European Union, in particular by the Commission, thanks to José Barroso and his think tank BEPA. Their definition of social innovation is built on a “caring liberalism”, ensuring a more limited role for the State, greater reliance on private actors, and the centrality of the principles of market-based economies. From the Commission’s vantage point, “social innovation” helps reducing the costs of the Welfare State and fits well with its emphasis on a plurality of stakeholders.

Prof. Baglione summarized the common features of social innovation as follows:

- A way of meeting a need (or series of needs not yet taken care of). The identification of emerging needs is one of the key positive dimensions of policies designed on the basis of social innovation.
- The novelty of the action (its content, but also the process),
- The creation of an opportunity by people who have a need,
- The notion of empowerment as the beneficiaries become active players of social processes,
- Public policy development.

The criticism of social innovation is that, while it addresses specific problems, it fails to address the root issues of inequality, poverty, etc. But this critique raises the question: do we want and need social innovation to solve everything?

This speech led to a lively discussion among participants, moderated by **Olivier Giraud (CNRS, LISE)** and **Nikola Tietze (CMB/LISE)**, that touched upon the topics of the fight against inequality, contradictions between particularism and universality, the public–private divide, etc.

The participants were then invited to share their thoughts on social innovation, stemming from their professional practices and to give an example of a practice of social innovation.

Jeanne Deghilage and **Anna Gardes** from the [General Direction for Social Cohesion](#) in France, an interministerial public administration entity, shared their experiences which are closely related to the institutional context in which they operate. The conception of public policies targeting various publics is produced internally by the Direction itself, rather than relying on outside consultants - however, there are multiple collaborations at the local level, with local institutions, as well as with other ministries. They also spoke about challenges, such as lack of direct access to users (the access is provided by the network of partner associations), as well as the dependence on political will and context for implementation. The Innovation Mission was created two years ago to enhance the capacity of public servants to innovate and improve the delivery of policy, by providing special tools: user-based approach, public policy design methods, etc. The goal is to remain as close as possible to the field, and to detect needs, risks, and opportunities. They also shared an insight into a successful practice: ‘Heures de lien social’.

Thibault Guyon from [Institut Godin](#) recalled the history of this concept in the programme of the institute. The institute’s involvement in social innovation dates back to 2011, when it was contacted by local authorities from a French region who sought to better understand the notion of social innovation, which was present in public discourses, but also quite vague and lacking concrete applications at the time. Institut Godin became progressively more involved, combining two approaches. The first one could be called ‘socio-territorial approach’ (close to Moualart). The second one is a more sociological approach, which conceives social innovation as a category of public action. The interest is in understanding how this category is used by various actors and how it has been institutionalized. He shared an example of the project on energetic precarity, which was considered a success by different partners who were involved. The factors leading to the success are numerous, and could be summarized as follows: convenient political timing, an existing, but loose institutional framework, and adequate complementarity of project partners. Finally, the project was incarnated by an entrepreneur and a director who could be described as an “entrepreneur-frontière”. This concept applies well to describe his capacity to bring together and to involve actors from very

different institutions and social groups. Guyon underlined, for social innovation programs, the problem of creating the conditions for the sustainability of projects.

Mickaël Barth from [Avisé](#) presented their structure and work. A national operator based in Paris with a strong network of regional partners, Avisé's mission is to support associations of social and solidarity economics and help them build their competencies and capacities for action. They also support them in scaling and maximizing their social impact. Avisé is however mindful of the necessity for scalability and does not push to advance projects if there is no local need. The second axis of Avisé's work is focused on the financing of projects, especially at the seed stage. This is always a challenging task for many associations and Avisé places great emphasis in explaining to the managers of funds such as foundations the need to contribute more resources and invest over longer periods of time. Barthe also shed light on the tension between disseminating successful projects all over the country and the risk of perturbing existing network of local associations.

Pierre-Yves Baudot from Irisso (Université Paris-Dauphine) presented his research on social innovation, which is structured around three key social transformations: internationalization, convergence (reference to subjective rights in public policy), and consultation. They are indicative of structural transformations that shape State action in general and social innovation in particular. For him, social innovation is not an additional measure or concept but rather the sole modality of contemporary public policy. He presented two cases related to his research on disability policies: *Assistance au projet et parcours de vie* (APPV): a project that demonstrates the transformation of the profession of social worker, who now act as a support to beneficiaries in the determination of their individual project. The second example is "Job coaching": the idea behind this project is to reverse the relationship between the beneficiary and the employer.

These projects were implemented top-down. The decision to support structures implementing these projects was taken on the political level and they are financed by regional agencies and the Ministry of Work. Although not labeled as social innovation, these projects are a good example of structural transformations of welfare state policies, as mentioned at the beginning. Simultaneously threatened by social and workplace transformations and embedded in path dependencies created by public policies put in place at the beginning of the 20th century, these structures face a situation where their very existence is threatened, leading them to adopt some radical changes: the firing of some of their employees, the development of new types of contacts with their beneficiaries and the adoption of new funding arrangements. This has led, in turn, to new path dependencies. Ultimately, the following changes can be observed:

There are major transformations of the welfare state: public policies transform the subject and his/her autonomy. Autonomy becomes an object of work between the individual and social work; it is collective, and it is accompanied. The other side of the coin is that responsibility rests with individuals who are often poorly equipped and confronted with multiple obstacles to full social and economic integration. It is up to them to produce a life project. He concluded by pointing out the paradox of change: policies change individual cases, but lead to no change in more structural power relations.

Sekou Keita, on behalf of the [Institut für Arbeitsmarkt- und Berufsforschung](#), presented the work of his institute which covers both academic production and political counseling (Politikberatung). His team works on migration. He pointed out the specificity of beneficiaries of the projects undertaken by his team: in the context of refugees in Germany, there is a question of urgency. There has been a permanent emergency response, with refugees arriving since 2015, followed by the COVID-19 pandemic and then the war in Ukraine in 2022. One of the key questions raised during his speech was the question of capacity: do some categories of refugees want or should work? He gave an example of Ukrainian women who came to Germany with children. Many of them wish to return to Ukraine and cannot or will not work because they need to look after their children. He also discussed the administrative obstacles faced by migrants. He mentioned initiatives, such as “Start with a Friend”, as well as the initiative encouraging entrepreneurs to hire refugees. With regard to social innovation, he pointed out the difficulties to generalize local projects of migrant integration, to adequately fund the skills required for these projects under precarious job conditions, to put the project evaluation criteria in line with project schedules and tasks, to counter the de-professionalization in social innovation projects.

The lively discussions during the research event made it clear that studies of social innovation offer a rich conceptual and empirical contribution to analyses of public policies in the 21st century. The discussions raised questions about the plurality of actors and approaches, the political and societal dimension of the concept, the evolution of the role of the state, and the various criticisms of the concept. This showed the very rich potential of descriptive and analytical studies of “social innovation” moving forward.