

That New Car Smell: Social Innovation, Maintenance and Civil Society

Dan Gregory, Spring 2016



Social innovation uncontested

Over the last decade and more, the term ‘social innovation’ has become an increasingly popular and uncontested term, at least in theory. Social innovation is now commonly defined, more or less, as “new ideas that simultaneously meet social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations.”¹

This idea of ‘social innovation’ has arrived through the convergence of two schools of thought. The first places significant emphasis on *means* – the social relations that enable new ideas to emerge. Benoit Godin has observed how this tradition is at least two hundred years old, with its origins in the radical socialism of the nineteenth century². Similarly, Noorseha Ayob, Simon Teasdale and Kylie Fagan date the heritage of the term to the late 19th century. In fact, both innovation and social innovation have surprisingly long histories, and as somewhat pejorative terms. As early as 1548, King Edward VI of England, issued a declaration *Against Those That Doeth Innouate*³ and in 1858, William Sargant published a scathing and somewhat belittling attack on *Social Innovators and Their Schemes*⁴.

The second tributary is focused on the *ends* of social innovation – finding new solutions to *knotty* or *gritty* social problems. Pol and Ville tell us that “an innovation is termed a social innovation if the implied new idea has the potential to improve either the quality or the quantity of life”⁵. Phillips et al define the term as “A novel solution to a social problem that is more effective, efficient, sustainable, or just than existing solutions and for which the value created accrues primarily to society as a whole rather than private individuals”⁶. Godin suggests this more teleological approach has emerged in the 21st century as a response to the rise of interest in *technological innovation*⁷.

¹ http://www.academia.edu/8851336/Social_Innovation_on_the_Rise_yet_another_buzzword_in_time_of_austerity

² http://www.csiic.ca/PDF/SocialInnovation_2012.pdf

³ <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo2/A69318.0001.001?view=toc>

⁴ <http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/006514272>

⁵ <http://youngfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/TEPSIE.D1.1.Report.DefiningSocialInnovation.Part-1-defining-social-innovation.pdf>

⁶ http://ssir.org/articles/entry/rediscovering_social_innovation

⁷ http://www.csiic.ca/PDF/SocialInnovation_2012.pdf

But over the last decade or so in the UK and US, these two streams have converged and we seem to have arrived at a sort of consensus, which has coincided with, or perhaps facilitated, the increasing popularity of the idea. Ayob et al's bibliographic research concludes that "only 2,190 of the 44,100 academic articles listed in Google Scholar were published before 1989, and only 4,150 before 1999. It was, therefore, not until the turn of the 21st century that the concept became widely used."⁸

In 2002, Mumford defined social innovation as "the generation and implementation of new ideas about how people should organize interpersonal activities, or social interactions, to meet one or more common goals"⁹ thereby acknowledging the significance of both means and ends. Similarly, in 2006, one of the UK's leading lights of social innovation, Geoff Mulgan, described the term as encapsulating "innovative activities and services that are motivated by the goal of meeting a social need and that are predominantly developed and diffused through organisations whose primary purposes are social"¹⁰. Murray et al have defined social innovation as: "innovations that are social both in their ends and in their means"¹¹. It seems we now find a relatively uncontested and also a rather uniformly positive use of the term: critiques of social innovation are few and far between.

Yet no social innovation has ever scaled!

In 2015, however, the Chair of the Australian Centre for Social Innovation, Dr. Nicholas Gruen, made a remarkable declaration at a conference in Brazil that "No country has significantly scaled a piece of social innovation". In enthusiastic response to this claim, US social impact investment expert Steve Goldberg echoed this position on Twitter, emphasising that "Social innovation has not scaled. Full stop."

In the face of thousands of years of social history, progress and innovation, under what conditions could these statements be justified from the perspective of these two venerable experts? We are all familiar with the existence of schools, hospitals, libraries, sports clubs, charity shops, recycling projects, credit unions, fun runs, bike workshops, co-operatives, unions and babysitting circles. Over many decades, these social innovations, and many others, have transformed the social relations between us and each with the aim of benefiting society. They were all new ideas once and have all subsequently scaled or replicated across much of the planet. They have become an integral part of the furniture of our lives.

In this context then, the position of our two respected experts must surely blow apart the supposed consensus around what social innovation means today. These statements can only stand up to any scrutiny if social innovation is understood very differently to, and much more narrowly than, the definitions above. Only then could it possibly be true that no social innovation has ever scaled.

⁸ Forthcoming

⁹ <https://socialinnovationresearch.wordpress.com/definitions/definitions-list/>

¹⁰ <https://socialinnovationresearch.wordpress.com/definitions/definitions-list/>

¹¹ https://www.nesta.org.uk/sites/default/files/the_open_book_of_social_innovation.pdf



In the shadow of the valley

While academics have identified increasing consensus around what social innovation means *in theory*, what has been happening *in practice* in the field has surely influenced, and can help us understand, Goldberg and Gruen's perspective. Over the past decade, in the UK and the US in particular, many influential policymakers, politicians, grant-making trusts and foundations have come to explicitly champion the idea of social innovation and have directed significant funds towards supporting practice in the field.

Innovation has now become a key criteria for many grant-makers when they come to appraise the merits of social programmes. The UK Government has funded a rash of *social innovation* hubs, labs, accelerators, incubators and catapults. In the United States, President Obama established the Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation within the White House. Stanford, Duke, Brown, Oxford and Cambridge Universities have established social innovation research centres. Social innovators' ability to *disrupt* old models and markets has been lauded by Ministers across the political spectrum.

In this way, social innovation has evolved from something which has been observed as a phenomenon to something which can be consciously pursued as an activity – it has thus been instrumentalized. At the same time, the term has become increasingly associated *in practice* with the kind of social ventures which share characteristics associated with businesses in the field of *technological* innovation:

- start-ups housed inside business *incubators* or *accelerators* inspired by Silicon Valley models;
- based in urban areas populated by the so-called *Creative Class*, such as East London;
- exploiting digital technology, through the creation of new apps, or the harvesting and exploitation of personal, 'Big' or 'Open' data;
- seeking successive rounds of venture capital-style investment to grow and scale; and
- disproportionately led by relatively privileged, young graduates.

In recent years in the UK, far more public, media and policy attention has been focused on this variation of social innovation than it has on other activities which fall within the wider definitions explored above.

By way of illustration, we can compare the public and media attention given to the phenomena of *hackspaces* and *makerspaces* to that given to *Men's Sheds*. Men's Sheds are a "larger version of the typical man's shed in the garden – a place where he feels at home and pursues practical interests with a high degree of autonomy. A Men's Shed offers this to a group of such men where members share the tools and resources they need to work on projects of their own choosing at their own pace and in a safe, friendly and inclusive venue. They are places of skill-sharing and informal learning, of individual pursuits and community projects, of purpose, achievement and social interaction."¹² The idea of Men's Sheds has scaled rapidly since 1995 and there are now over 100 in New Zealand, over 100 in Ireland, over 350 in the UK and over 1,000 in Australia alone¹³. In contrast, there are only 1239 estimated active hackerspaces worldwide¹⁴ and only around 300 makerspaces in the whole of the United States. Meanwhile, Google search results for "Makerspaces" throw up 519,000 results, "Hackerspaces" 307,000 results but "Men's Sheds" only 79,800 results.

Hence, suburban or rural social innovations which might involve older generations, which work with more established technology, or which don't require significant investment but which may scale or replicate themselves more slowly, organically or through open source principles, do not receive the same levels of attention as their hipper, urban counterparts and are often not even recognised as social innovation. There may also be two other significant factors at play here which serve to narrow the meaning of social innovation in practice.

First, the very quality of *newness* which is integral to the concept of innovation may eliminate certain activities which could otherwise be recognised as socially innovative. Is it possible that the likes of Gruen and Goldberg fail to recognise occasions when social innovation has scaled, simply for the reason that once something has scaled it is less new and therefore no longer regarded as innovative?! The creation of the UK National Health Service, inspired by co-operative models of mutual self-help in South Wales in the early 20th Century, for example, is perhaps simply too long ago to be of much interest to those championing social innovation today. So it is airbrushed from the now short history of social innovation.

Second, it is presumably easier to recognise social innovation when it announces itself. Self-styled, self-conscious social innovation undertaken by social innovators in social innovation catapults is easier to spot than some old men gathering in a shed in a provincial backwater. If today's self-styled, urban, tech-based social innovation start-ups are what the likes of Gruen and Goldberg mean when they refer to social innovation, then their claim that no social innovation has ever scaled becomes far more credible.

¹² <http://menssheds.org.uk/what-is-a-mens-shed/>

¹³ <http://menssheds.org.uk/find-a-shed/>

¹⁴ https://wiki.hackerspaces.org/List_of_Hacker_Spaces



The horse and the unicorn

The rise of this new, narrower, what we might call *Goldberg-Gruen* conception of social innovation, however, brings with it two consequences.

First, the excitement and hype associated with this recent, self-styled, hip, urban, technological version of social innovation serves to distract policymakers and resource allocators from the critical *maintenance* work of civil society, charities and communities which hold our very economy together. Charities, voluntary and community groups, social enterprises and informal social action are worth billions of pounds a year to the UK economy and make up the critical foundations of our society¹⁵. But the fetishisation of innovation and the attraction of shiny social innovation baubles divert the gaze of politicians, public officials and funders from the boring and essential maintenance work undertaken every day by food banks, homeless shelters, furniture recycling projects, credit unions and citizens' advice bureaux across the country.

As resources are directed towards this self-conscious social innovation, critical maintenance work is starved. Funders would rather fund new projects but not the core costs, overheads or ongoing costs associated with established models of care. This puts our underlying social infrastructure at risk, undermining the stability of civil society. Under the tyranny of innovation, Caroline Mason from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation has felt the need to point out what has been forgotten by many - that some grant-making foundations do not see themselves as *agents of social change* as, rather, they "provide the bread-and-butter funding that is currently about the only thing preserving the very survival of many communities around the country"¹⁶. Similarly, Julia Unwin in her seminal *Grantmaking Tango* points out how "Despite all the talk about innovation and change, a significant proportion of all funding is designed to maintain activity at current levels, in the same style or expand it."¹⁷ But Unwin and Mason

¹⁵ <https://data.ncvo.org.uk/>

¹⁶ <http://www.thirdsector.co.uk/analysis-trusts-foundations-doing-right-thing/fundraising/article/1348592>

¹⁷ <https://www.jrf.org.uk/file/36660/download?token=4SJm2lp>

are perhaps rare, independently minded, honest voices in the field, and rather less prone to be seduced by the rhetoric of social innovation than some others. Meanwhile, many civil society actors do indeed understand the disproportionate emphasis on innovation over maintenance but prefer to remain quietly uncritical in order to curry favour with resource allocators. A significant proportion of charities admit to pretending to be innovative in order to attract funding when they know what they are doing is really nothing new¹⁸.



David Edgerton shone a light on the interplay between innovation and maintenance in a different context in *The Shock of the Old*, highlighting the ongoing valuable work of the horse long after the development of other innovative modes of transport, or in describing how Ghanaians adapted European cars - “At dusk, bright intermittent light from welding illuminates streets all over the world, issuing from maintenance workshops”. Edgerton’s work suggests that sacrificing maintenance at the altar of innovation is counterproductive, not least as innovation needs maintenance! Of course everything was innovative once! But social innovations ultimately (albeit on a much slower timescale than the VC-driven time horizon) have two futures – they either fail or scale – and successfully scaling or replicating an idea requires adequate maintenance. A number of recent and much heralded social innovations reveal this critical but too often forgotten role of maintenance:

- Lion Lights¹⁹ is a social innovation invented by a young African boy called Turere who realised that lions were afraid of venturing near farms when someone was walking around with a light. This led to him create a solar-powered lamp to scare predators away. Turere’s *realisation* would not have been possible, or indeed necessary, had his community maintained the knowledge which humankind previously understood for millennia: that animals are scared of fire.
- PlaqueChecker is a mobile app that “makes it possible for you to beautify your smile right from home”. The start-up business has received investment from a Social Incubator funded by the UK Government department which previously used to fund volunteering, social enterprise and

¹⁸ Forthcoming survey from www.flipfinance.org.uk

¹⁹ https://www.ted.com/talks/richard_turere_a_peace_treaty_with_the_lions?language=en

community organising. PlaqueChecker may or may not offer advantages over the technology of the mirror but either way, it still relies upon the critical maintenance tool of the toothbrush in order to be effective.

- In response to the floods in Northern England in recent years, the community in the town of Pickering have been widely praised for a socially innovative approach to flood management. The community came together themselves in response to the flood risk and placed material at the head of the valley to stem the flow of water and reduce the risk and frequency of flooding. Much like Lion Lights, this approach would hardly be innovative if knowledge of ancient approaches to flood management had been better maintained.
- NESTA, the UK's very own "innovation charity", have suggested that local public authorities could use sensors in waste bins to trigger alerts to medical professionals if vulnerable pensioners have not put their rubbish out for a fortnight²⁰. This social innovation would offer significant promise to reduce financial pressures on local health economies, reduce health risk and save lives were it not for the fact that many local authorities are currently unable to maintain bin collections at the usual frequency due to their own significant financial pressures.
- Libraries in the UK have been urged to *pivot* into becoming "ideas stores", "discovery centres" or "community hubs" which, much like the bins, could be a social innovation if it wasn't for the fact that many libraries are closing or unable to maintain their usual opening hours. In fact, this idea was also suggested decades ago by Edward Sydney, librarian of Leyton, between 1934 and 1950, who argued that the library should be 'the headquarters of all local cultural activities'²¹

The argument here is not that these, or other much heralded social innovations, are not worthwhile ideas or that they should not be pursued²². Rather, the point is that social innovation is sometimes rendered far more difficult, or even only becomes necessary, as a consequence of society's failure to recognise or invest adequately in maintenance.

Against "Social Innovation"

The second consequence of this fetishisation of a narrow version of social innovation is that the longer-term, more ad-hoc, more organic role of civil society, social enterprise and social action in shaping markets and the state is being overshadowed, forgotten and undervalued.

Again, this puts civil society at risk. The Goldberg-Gruen conception of social innovation and its associated thirst for scale is intertwined with a relatively recent Anglo-Saxon free market capitalist model and inspired by the timescales and ROI requirements expected by the venture capital industry. If social innovations are unable to attract *follow-on-funding*, forecast exponential growth models and provide exits for investors within six or seven years, then they will be seen to have failed.

This model can be particularly inappropriate for civil society organisations where sometimes, scale is not even desirable if an organisation's primary purpose is to render themselves unnecessary by resolving a social problem. On other occasions, the ambition for a social innovator (self-styled or otherwise) may be that their idea is adopted by the state, by the private sector or by other charities and social enterprises. In these circumstances, scaling the organisation that originally pioneered the

²⁰ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/council-spending/12194023/Councils-could-snoop-on-elderly-residents-with-sensors-in-their-bins-to-see-if-they-put-out-the-rubbish.html>

²¹ <http://www.lirjournal.org.uk/lir/ojs/index.php/lir/article/viewFile/506/575>

²² Umair Haque is more critical, suggesting that "Most innovation, well, isn't: it is "unnovation," or innovation that fails to create authentic, meaningful value"

social innovation (and enabling the delivery of returns to investors) is not the point. Much genuine and sometimes accidental social innovation takes time, and neither does it require investment from VCs or other investors.

While it is argued here that disproportionate excitement around narrow, self-styled “Social Innovation” brings significant dangers, it is important that we do not throw the baby out with the bathwater. We can still attach significant value to social innovation more widely and seek to reclaim the term. Just as Paul Du Gay’s *Against “Enterprise”* (but not against ‘enterprise’ for that would make no sense.) was focused “on one particular conception of enterprise”, then we can offer a critique of “Social Innovation” but not against social innovation, as that would make no sense.

We need to reclaim social innovation beyond that activity which advertises itself as innovative, smells sort of innovative and says innovative on the can but which has been synthesised in a lab. Market research has shown that one of our favourite odours is *that new car smell*. Consequently, and thanks to the miracle of enterprise and the invisible hand, for under 10 dollars you can now buy a spray that recreates that smell of a brand new car. But it’s not the real thing – it’s a simulacra, an illusion of the magic of something that’s truly new and exciting. Perhaps that’s where we are with “Social innovation” today?

The ideology of social innovation

So policymakers’ and funders’ fixation on a narrow conception of social innovation has come to overshadow the critical maintenance work of charities, social enterprises and community groups and their longer-term role in shaping markets and the state. But civil society organisations have said little in response: there has been no coherent or sustained defence by civil society leaders of their critical wider role in the face of these risks - to their organisations, to their beneficiaries and to society more widely.

Sometimes, if you are lucky enough to be invited to the right launch events or drinks receptions, it is possible to pick up low level grumbling and private admissions of frustration with policymakers’ obsession with all things innovative, with one particularly narrow conception of social innovation, and with related social investment models. But little, if any of this criticism reaches the public sphere or is communicated openly by representative membership bodies.

Part of the reason for this is that the language of social innovation appears to transcend ideology, enabling its advocates to easily deter or deflect criticism. On one hand, “social innovation” immediately suggests the kind of social change and social progress for which the left would advocate. When a right-of-centre Conservative government is adopting and championing this language, it seems churlish to object from the socially-minded left. Yet, on the other hand, and as explored above, the practice of social innovation as supported by the current UK Conservative government favours the well-educated and the privileged, and is modelled on some of the most aggressive models of capitalism, inspired by Silicon Valley VC funds and incubators. From the economically-minded right, what’s not to like, apart from the name!?

In this context, Moolaert has noted that social innovation has a “very strong politico-ideological significance” but one which is “quite ambiguous”²³. This capacity of social innovation to somehow appeal across the ideological spectrum is one of the reasons that the idea and the practice has received such little critique. Jill Lepore argues that “The idea of innovation is the idea of progress stripped of the aspirations of the Enlightenment, scrubbed clean of the horrors of the twentieth century, and relieved of its critics.”²⁴

²³ http://www.e-elgar.com/shop/the-international-handbook-on-social-innovation?_website=uk_warehouse

²⁴ <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/06/23/the-disruption-machine>

But a handful of academics have questioned whether there is indeed some hidden ideology behind the curtain, suggesting that social innovation functions as a sort of cover for reform of the welfare state and the privatisation or rationalisation of public services. Phill et al, for example, express a concern that social innovation “might simply become a convenient buzzword to forward neoliberal ideology in a time of austerity... social innovation might soon turn out to be simply another way to juxtapose the qualifier “social” to the private sector jargon in order to avoid heated discussions on structural inequalities”²⁵. Evgeny Morozov refers to a wider but related idea of “Solutionism” to “describe the global obsession with ‘fixing our world,’ preferably with technological solutions or band aids while ignoring the deeper dynamics of the problem.” Ferragina worries that “the all-innovating and self-empowering jargon currently in vogue might disguise a dangerous inattention to structural inequalities, adversely affecting health outcomes across the board, but especially of the poorest”²⁶

While a few academics may well be on to something here, only one or two politically savvy practitioners in the field have pointed out the issue of social innovation’s seemingly ideological neutrality. Remko Berkhout relates his experience of attending a social innovation conference in London in 2015 and highlights on the “serial avoidance of politics.”²⁷ Berkhout characterises the content of the conference as “Here’s some money and the odd award for you to ‘innovate’ your way to helping people deal with a collapsing economy and a social safety net that’s disappearing...” These voices are rare. But of course, they are not new. In 1858, Sargent’s *Social Innovators and their Schemes* included the allegation that “The first and most universal characteristic of the social innovator is a profound ignorance, and often a violent abhorrence, of political economy”.²⁸

Social innovation, maintenance and civil society

Oscar Wilde argued that “charity degrades and demoralises... It is immoral to use private property in order to alleviate the horrible evils that result from the institution of private property.”²⁹ Wilde railed against the benevolence of “keeping the poor alive” and urged us instead to “reconstruct society on such a basis that poverty will be impossible.” The problem here, of course, is that while we build this wonderful new society through the promise of social innovation, what happens to the poor in the meantime? Should we leave them to die? Do we simply ignore the question and throw our energies into shaping the society of the future?

Or do we value and defend the critical maintenance work of charities, volunteers, community groups and social enterprises that deliver care and support for those who have been left behind by the economic models of the past?

So it is possible to cherish both social innovation and maintenance.

On one hand, we need social innovation. Every day, social innovators - including many who would never call themselves by that name - are developing new technologies, new apps, new models of social care, new models of clean energy production, new jobs, new urban spaces, new rural collectives and new suburban clubs and societies. But not everything new is good. We need to distinguish and reclaim value from novelty and progress from innovation. We must not be seduced by one narrow conception of social innovation and we must adopt the appropriate means for achieving progressive ends.

On the other, we also need to look after those who have been left behind by the economic models of the past. Maintenance is not only for Conservatives. We must maintain our existing social infrastructure

²⁵ http://www.academia.edu/8851336/Social_Innovation_on_the_Rise_yet_another_buzzword_in_time_of_austerity

²⁶ http://www.academia.edu/8851336/Social_Innovation_on_the_Rise_yet_another_buzzword_in_time_of_austerity

²⁷ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/transformation/remko-berkhout/irresistibly-biased-blind-spots-of-social-innovation>

²⁸ <http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/006514272>

²⁹ <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/wilde-oscar/soul-man/>

where it has value - not everything that is old should be left to wash away. Perhaps social innovation may help us eradicate poverty one day. In fact, as Margaret Mead might say, it's the only thing that ever will. But for now, sadly, we still need food banks, homeless shelters and drug and alcohol treatment centres. Even Jesus – who was generally a pretty positive kind of guy – thought that the poor would always be with us. So we must fight to maintain our critical social infrastructure which supports those who have fallen through the cracks in society.

In short, civil society organisations must stand up for, and take pride in, their role in maintaining, repairing and refreshing our social infrastructure.

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