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Social innovation: opportunities and challenges of a new form of Utopia

Gilberto Marzano, Mirosław Grewiński (ed.)
Introduction to Social Innovation

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The topic of social innovation is particularly relevant in the contemporary society where, nowadays, "innovation" is "a mantra uttered with sometimes irritating frequency by leaders and managers through the world" (Dearlove & Crainer 2016, p. 1). In fact, innovation is one of the hottest topics in all fields: science and technology, management, industry, and business. "Innovate or perish" is an imperative that we can widely find in literature (Rhaiem 2012, Gilbert 2014, Yigitcanlar 2016).

Two factors are mushrooming the literature on innovation: the widespread of digital technologies and globalization. In the last few years, there has also been a certain interest on the theoretical aspects of innovation and some past philosophical-economic concepts, such as Schumpeter's theory of 'creative destruction' (Schumpeter 1942), have been recently reconsidered (Kleinknecht 2016).

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However, the aim of the ebook edited by Marzano and Grewiński is neither theoretical nor managerial or business-oriented. It focuses on social innovation and analyzes the various aspects that characterized this specific form of innovation.

In the premise, the Marzano and Grewiński define innovation as a process that encompasses any act of introducing new ideas, devices or methods not necessarily motivated by profit maximization. They consider social innovation as the capacity to respond to emerging social needs through new solutions and models without the primary aim of pursuing profit. For the authors, social innovation is essentially the application of knowledge to satisfy social needs and improve the quality of life. Accordingly, social innovation requires a multidisciplinary approach since it is the application, and often the integration, of outcomes coming from different disciplinary scopes, e.g. economics, management, medicine, pedagogy, and computer science. They wrote:

"Social innovation is a multifaceted and multidisciplinary concept that involves many academic disciplines, the principal of them are management science and economics, as well as sociology, social pedagogy and computer science. Social innovation appears a means for improving social capital in both profit and non-profit sectors and refers ethic norms, such as fair business practices and respect for worker rights, or values, such as justice, solidarity, cooperation" (p. 11).

The publication consists of five chapters. The first (pp. 13–45) is entitled "Multiple Facets of Social Innovation" (Authors: Gilberto Marzano, Mirosław Grewiński, Arkadiusz Karwacki and Gabriela Sempruch) and provides a picture of the whole by defining the concepts and the fundamental factors that lead (or should lead) the social innovation process: "the aim of this kind of innovation is the greater wellbeing of people and/or of society as a whole" (p. 14).

Discussing the social innovation scope, authors argue that: "[…] it would be a mistake to claim that social innovations should not and cannot be achieved in the area of social policy, or that they cannot contribute to the improvement of people's living conditions and the effective satisfaction of previously unsatisfied needs, within the same framework of systematic approach to best practice that is applied to the search for innovations in other fields of knowledge and practice" (p. 15).

In this chapter, the significant case of T. Prestero, who tries to solve the problem concerning the availability and reparability of incubators in Africa, is also mentioned. But social innovation can be realized through any initiative that seeks to fill a need still overlooked by politicians and economic traders, such as "programs directed at increasing citizens' involvement in public matters and their assumption of ever-greater responsibility for satisfying social needs and increased quality of life" (p. 24). On a large scale, this presupposes a collective enterprise not only in research but more importantly in focussing on the needs whose satisfaction can produce substantial progress in our lives. "The issue of social innovations is the subject matter of a discourse […] that is both scientific and practice-related" (p. 42). Critical thinking and creativity, in the noblest sense of the terms, constitute in fact the motor of society's development and therefore should represent the first aim of our education system. "The perspective of social policy allows for their

definition as new, more efficient and/or effective ways of addressing social problems, based on co-creation and cooperation between people and institutions from various sectors, which at the same time act as a lever for social progress" (p. 22).

The second chapter (pp. 47–74), entitled "Innovative Social Policy — New Paradigms And Challenges" (Author: Mirosław Grewiński), illustrates the evolution of the concept and practice of social innovation. In Europe more than anywhere else, these social innovation practices will represent the major challenge of the coming decades because of the great demographic changes that invest directly the primary problems of the population and require an intelligent restructuring of the economy and organization of work. Inclusion policies will be designed according to a dynamic perspective, taking into account the ability of society to innovate and reform itself. "To effectively respond to current social challenges emerging on the European continent, there is a need of continuous changes and reforms of social systems" (p. 51). This requires the development and testing of new paradigms in social policy. "Extremely important is investment in early child education and long-term effects of activities, also in the context of intergenerational transfers. The latter priority is indicated as one of the main objectives of the investment-oriented approach in social policy which is aimed at minimising the intergenerational transfer of poverty and promoting the intergenerational transfer of knowledge" (p. 58). This of course implies a gradual abandonment of the neoliberal paradigm. All these issues strictly relate to the Lisbon Strategy EU 2020 and to its ambitious purposes (to increase the professional activity of Europeans and the number of people with higher education degrees; to reduce the number of people living in poverty and the school-leaving rate of the EU).

An outstanding example of social innovation is evidently given by the Internet and, more generally, by the role that new media play in our lives. The third chapter (pp. 75–102), "Social Media and Social Innovation" (Author: Sabahudin Hadžialić), deals with precisely this topic, because it seeks to define the role that the media have and, more generally, can have on the process of social innovation. The reasoning developed here, as indeed that of the other chapters, contains not only an analysis of the present but also a project for future. The point is that social interaction is the basis of every society (p. 76); every change of the first involves naturally a change in the latter. The use of media and social networks contribute significantly to mould people's opinion and contemporary social dynamics. This obviously represents a powerful barrier against any attempt of ideological manipulation; it can also produce trust of citizens in society and in the mechanisms that regulate it, with constructive and positive effects on social life. "Social innovation is the presumption of social development, but only if it is based on methodological approach focused on the needs of post-modern society, focused on direct democracy" (p. 77). The revolution involved in this process is that information consumers also become information producers: "For example, today everybody, thanks to social networks, can be a journalist — create, comment and improve his/her own skills within the certain field" (p. 76). Even the possible solutions to a given problem can be discussed through and on social media, which become so "a modern Agora" (p. 81).

But, beyond any superficial and easy enthusiasm, we must always keep in mind that social innovation is an ideal concept, an imperative, not a mere fact; and that not all practices that present themselves as socially useful and progressive are actually such. Social innovation presupposes a priority of the project on the fact. The fourth chapter (pp. 103–118), "Is Social Innovation A New Form Of Utopia?" (Authors: Gilberto Marzano and Carlo Scaini) connects the concept of social innovation to a philosophical and political theme: the improvement of mankind and its living conditions, or "utopia", understood (in the way of Thomas More) not necessary as ou-topia (a non-place), but primarily as eu-topia, (a good place that should be realized). The idea of progress, which has been a peculiar figure of modernity (and in fact "modernization" also means "progress"), seems to find its realization primarily through technological innovation that, predisposing the basic tools of human action, is the basis of other forms of innovation (political, economic, social). This is evident, in particular, in relation to information and communication technology (ICT). The process of social innovation implies the ideal of early modernity's science: that of shared, verifiable knowledge, which essentially serves mankind. At the same time, it should avoid the aberrations that have characterized some moments of the modern conception of science: the practice of social innovation must never lose sight of human fallibility, but also of the enormous positive potentials that lie in it: "social innovation is spread everywhere, from public services to private enterprise, rural communities, microfinance, and so on, and is presented as the best construct for understanding, and producing, lasting social change through new ideal approaches that involve exchanging ideas and values, shifting roles and relationships, and blending public, philanthropic, and private resources" (p. 115).

Finally, the fifth chapter (pp. 119–129) is titled "Social Telerehabilitation For Older Adults: A Social Innovation Opportunity" (Authors: Gilberto Marzano and Velta Lubkina) and analyzes how social innovation could have a positive impact on the living conditions of elderly persons. It represents a very important question, since in every EU Member State and EFTA Member State the share of the population aged 65 years and over is increasing rapidly. The most recent scientific studies show that "technology can allow" elderly persons "to maintain their independence and autonomy, assist them to stay healthy, and serve to counteract their reduced capabilities"; but the authors of this chapters point out that "the majority of computer programs for the care of the elderly can help in alleviating the caregivers' burden, and can help caregivers to perform tasks from a distance, with such features as: Health monitors which continuously monitor pulse, skin temperature, and movement […]; Pressure mats which check if a person mobilises from a bed or a chair […]; Door alerts for patients who wander at night […]" (p. 125).

From all the foregoing it appears that this book is very valuable both for the topicality of its themes and the scientific results that emerge.

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