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Social Innovation, Informality and Social Sciences

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Abstract

This presentation examines social innovation in a critical perspective. It associates innovation and informality by suggesting that informal collective behavior be regarded as a radical form of collective social innovation. Why “radical”? Because in our societies, social sciences carrying a positivist view of the world, have established a rational and formal representation of reality placed under the protection of protective states or welfare states. In these societies, the notion of innovation and particularly of social innovation is largely associated with a conservative perspective of adaptation and improvement. It should instead be associated with radical societal transformation. Today, there is a need to go beyond this limited perspective of innovation by recognizing that social innovation is intimately tied to the processes of recognition of the power of informality in society.

1. Introduction

This presentation examines social innovation and development from the critical perspective developed by C. Wright Mills (1959). This perspective is that of a “New” *Sociological Imagination*. It is the theoretical basis underlying the work we are developing within our international research group. This group brings together colleagues from Canada, the United States of America and Mexico, to deal specifically with the topic of informality.

As part of a research group called RECIM (*Research network on informality within metropolis* (www.Recim.info)), we are investigating the growth of informality within the context of globalization. This work stems from multiple empirical studies examining various forms of informality, including informal work, informal housing, illegal immigration and various forms of trafficking.

This work has also led to a corollary line of investigation on broader disciplinary trends that, over the last 50 years, have largely ignored the notion of informality. This reflects the fact that as intellectuals (teachers, researchers) in social sciences, we have been partners in the vast projects pursued by Nation States – focused almost solely on “development”. This vast project—some would say: this “Promethean” project—has led us to minimize, if not to ignore a fundamental human dynamic: the importance of informality in societies. For example, Nation States have treated poverty or immigration through planning, rationalization, and formalization of societies and behaviors.

The significance of informality resurfaces today, at a time when the social and economic foundations of welfare states and their interventions are increasingly being challenged. Informality, long operating stealthily, is increasingly prominent as the reach and prominence of welfare states declines.

2. Informal collective behavior as a radical form of collective social innovation

In this presentation, I would like to associate informality and innovation by suggesting that informal collective behavior be regarded as a radical form of collective social innovation.

Why “radical”? Because in our societies, social sciences carrying a positivist view of the world, have established a rational and formal representation of reality placed under the protection of protective states or welfare states. In these societies, *the notion of innovation, and particularly of social innovation, seems to me associated with the conservative perspective of adaptation and improvement. It should instead be associated with radical societal transformation.* The notion of innovation is currently viewed as a panacea and a solution to institutional, organizational, or democratic roadblocks affecting most societies within a context of increasing globalization dominated by ultra-liberal and strictly financial capitalism. I would like to emphasize, in this understanding of innovation, that it can only lead to “more of the same”, that is to say to maintain or improve an institutional, organizational or political order. It can therefore be seen as an element of conservatism, rather than a radical critic. That is why I draw upon the *Sociological Imagination* of C. Wright Mills to frame a renewed definition of innovation.

I would argue that there is now a need to go beyond this limited perspective of innovation by recognizing that social innovation is intimately tied to the processes of *recognition of the power of informality in society*². Informality marks a seismic shift in the field of social science and in the institutional constructions that they have helped to build over the last 50 years. This shift is driven by movements of people worldwide, migrations, demographic changes, as well as by everyday social relationships. *That* is informality and the new innovation!

However, in this perspective, we must first reflect upon the production of our representations of society and State. We must also reflect upon the role that social sciences have played, and continue to play, in this production of representations. It is at this junction that these renewed reflections on informality make us question the approaches of social sciences during the last half-century. Social sciences have somehow been called upon to “give meaning” to societies undergoing “modernization”, in the name of progress and development. They have provided a rational, formalized representation of reality which superseded and removed, at least temporarily, the existing religious representation. But they play the same fundamental role of “giving meaning.”

The 1950's and the 1960's could be regarded as the years of decolonization and development during the Cold War and the confrontation of two imperialisms. They were also the *years of State-led societal planning*, where the State acted as the main driving forces behind reconstruction or development. Social sciences became functionalist, positivist, evolutionist, and systemic, in response to solicitation by imperialist States, be they capitalist, socialist or social democratic. They were also solicited by States in the process of decolonization, and by major international institutions promoting peace and development. In Canada and Québec, these years mark the period of “quiet revolutions” in which social sciences – such as economy, sociology, demography or psychology- were tasked with planning social and economic investments, education, health, and State pensions. Social sciences were further legitimized by statistical tools and associated technologies.

In this regard, the effort of formalization of society by the State can be viewed as a success. If I consider Canada and Quebec, formalization by the State has built a well-functioning society not primarily because a benevolent State oversees the welfare of society (through its policies and programs), but fundamentally because of the contemporaneous operation of a parallel and efficient informal system. The significance of informal practices, operating in the background, largely fell from view due to research foci driven by State initiatives through programs of research funding. Researchers and public communicators (journalists, etc.) lost sight of informality, confining the manifestation of innovation within a State logic, and thereby preventing any recognition of the more ‘spontaneous’ forms of innovation (i.e. informality). It is only by taking into consideration the importance of informal practices that we will begin to grasp this social innovation, and its fundamental anthropological dynamism.

² I develop these ideas in Frédéric Lesemann, 2010, 2011

3. The need to escape state-centric epistemologies

To escape the narrow conception of innovation, it is essential, as Neil Brenner (1999: 51), but also David Harvey, have argued, to transcend “the “*habitual spatial assumptions*” of state-centric epistemologies”. As they have stated, “A state-centric epistemology has dominated the modern social sciences... The State is viewed as the container of society, of socio-economic and political-cultural relations of a society made of territorial communities in which the boundaries of social relationships are defined by coherent space with the Nation State”³. This epistemology has imposed a hold from Nation State on the imaginary.

As long as traditional concepts continue to frame our perspective, we impede access to informality and radical social innovation. We therefore need to change the paradigm, understand that the informal, the irrational, and innovations are manifested everywhere and do not only occur in the societies of the South, where they are traditionally seen as dominant. In fact, informality is a universal phenomenon and informal and radical innovations have always existed. Only the imposition of social sciences, in support of the State, and supported by the State, have blinded us to their existence, only acknowledging them as symbols of irrationality and underdevelopment.

It is an anthropological viewpoint, rather than one based on sociology of the State, or work organizations and social movements, or even political sciences, that can allow us to access the reality of informality and the strength of its social ties. This change of viewpoint, and its way of renewing representations and fostering a critical reading of reality is a departure from a voluntaristic and adaptative vision of innovation.

I will illustrate these ideas with three examples:

a) Concerning immigration and immigration areas: Doug Saunders (2010) in *Arrival City, The final migration and our next world* speaks of the *transitional urban spaces* that the cities of immigration represent. “They are not just the sites of potential conflict and violence, but also the neighborhoods where the transition from poverty occurs, where the next middle class is forged, where the next generation’s dreams, movements and governments are created. At a time when the effectiveness and basic purpose of foreign aid have become matters of deep and well-deserved skepticism, I believe that these transitional urban spaces – arrival cities - offer a solution”. “It is here, rather than at the ‘macro’ State or ‘micro’ household level, that serious and sustained investment from governments and agencies are most likely to create lasting and incorruptible benefit”(p. 3). “Arrival cities are widely

³ Defined in this manner, a state-centric epistemology has dominated the modern social sciences... The state is viewed as the container of society... to various modes of anthropological (territorialized cultures), sociological (fixed communities), and economic analysis in which the concept of the state is not explicitly deployed... The concept of society has implied that the boundaries of social relations are spatially congruent with those of the territorial nation-state (Brenner 1999:46). There has been a pervasive questioning of the territorial nation-state as a preconstituted geographical unit of analysis for social research... long been locked into a **state-centric** ‘territorial trap’ in which state are viewed as the self-enclosed geographical containers of socio-economic and politico-cultural relations... Need for challenge the ‘iron grip of the nation-state on the social imagination’ (*Id.* 40).

misunderstood and distrust – dismissed as static ‘slums’ rather than places of dynamic change” (p. 55). “We have to combat the myth of marginality” (p. 57).

b) In the area of work and its regulation, we must consider that “the meaning of a ‘job’ has changed dramatically: the informal economy, previously considered a parasitic irrelevance on the edge of the ‘main’ industrial economy, now represents a quarter of all jobs in post-communist countries, a third in North Africa, half in Latin America, 70% in India and more than 90% in the poorest African Countries. It’s a form of labor that offers none of the social-security benefits or long-term guarantees of industrial work, but to its immense benefit, it is a form of work that is available to almost everyone who comes to the city, that is providing better livelihoods for rural migrants than the old lifetime-job economy”. (p. 41)

c) Alain Tarrius (2001), in an article named: “*Au-delà des États-Nations: des sociétés de migrants*” (Beyond Nations-States, migrants’ societies) speaks of the “circulatory territories” or bottom-up globalization, exemplified by the movement of groups of migrants around the western Mediterranean (France, Italy, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Spain). These ‘mobilities’ are driven by major collective commercial initiatives, removed from codes, laws and regulations of “official” economic trade. The author sees there a “new form of migration in phase with the reorganization of global economy...”. These regions are circulatory territories, where collective cosmopolite memories are produced, and where exchange practices lead to emergent trans-boundary, intercultural and interethnic values. This happens in parallel to official policies focused almost exclusively on the process of integration in the Nation, as if these people lived on the margins of society.

We could add to these examples of Mediterranean migrations, migrations within the Americas: the integration of Chicanos in Los Angeles or Chicago, or the Bolivians and Peruvians in Argentina. These are fundamentally all individual and collective strategies aimed at participating in the economy, while surviving in the sweatshops. But they are also strategies of social inclusion in an emerging middle class that will require probably two generations to achieve its full potential.

In my mind, collective social innovation is defined by its free-form nature, allowing circulation, fluidity of people, ideas, etc. rather than by more static *structures* and stable organization. This encompasses the concepts of networks, flows, diasporic phenomena, crossbreeding, cross-cultural societies (see Marc Abélès, 2008: 100). We must, as intellectuals, escape the State-centrism as well as the market-centrism, or the *civil- society- centrism*. In order to conceive of a “radical social innovation”, we have to think of a governance of societies that places at its center, the recognition of the proliferation of deterritorialized groups, of diasporic diversity, of translocal solidarities. The North-South relations are being reversed; the center-periphery, rural-urban, developed- underdeveloped divisions have faded. Thus, it is necessary to destroy the sacred aura of the State, to dereify it, as it must be done with business and its markets. We must observe the boundary spaces where legality and illegality meet, where the informal and transgressive clash with the official and established. It is in this way that informality closely relates to radical social innovations. This is where they come together!

4. Towards a “transnational informality”

The specificity of the informal resides, from this point of view, in its “transnational” character; it resides in forms of identities that are inherited or reinvented and that are structured in more or less diffused networks. Therefore we have to reintegrate in our analysis the social practices that were constitutive of social life well before the creation of the modern State. *The transnational practices are accomplished by escaping, at least partially, the control or the action of mediation by the States; they subvert the national territoriality imposed by the State.* This can be labeled as “transnational informality” (Alejandro Portes 1999). The States may qualify them as clandestine, parallel, illegal, secret, spontaneous and so on. This may be an informal that is legal or illegal, especially if we think of the mafia networks that have always had, at least in their origin, a territorial and cultural shared identity. These social spaces are equipped with more meaning, affectivity, functionality and therefore allegiance than the space of the State which is then subverted but never totally ignored. Therefore we have to discover this reality, without immediately resorting to a normative position, even though I fully acknowledge that they can also be spaces of exploitation and extreme violence.

But this is a separate question: that of the nature and the actors of the regulations that are inseparable from the formal as well as the informal. It includes, obviously, radical social *innovation*.

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