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Social Innovation in Agriculture and Food: Old Wine in New Bottles?

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Abstract. In the literature and in current public discourse, innovation is usually taken to mean technological innovation, which is carried out through the figure of the entrepreneur. This editorial introduction first goes back to the emergence of the notion of social innovation, dedicated to including other processes, actors and purposes. It reminds us that the notion has been shaped by the crises that faced societies from the 1970s and presents the two fields of research that have anchored the notion in different theoretical positions. We highlight how the food and agricultural sector illustrates the three current meanings of social innovation, despite the fact that the general literature on social innovation usually focuses only on a few types of initiatives. We explain how the papers of this special issue demonstrate that agriculture and food represent an exemplary empirical terrain to push forward thinking in the field, such as the need for a better understanding of 'social innovation in the making' or of the processes of innovation scaling. This introduction thus not only consolidates a collection of contributions to the area of research on social innovation in the sociology of agriculture and food, but it also frames a new and potential contribution of sociology to the literature on social innovation.

Why social innovation and where does it come from?

Innovation covers a wide range of practices and processes, but despite this, from public perceptions to policy and science, innovation often is conceived of from the angle of technological innovation. In other words, what is new consists of new products, methods of production or processes more efficient than the existing (OECD, 1992). Moreover, innovation is supposed to be due to entrepreneurs, as central actors developing (technological) inventions and placing them in the market, in the line of thought of Schumpeter (1912). First appearing in the 1970s, the notion of social innovation was conceived as an opening of these notions to include other processes, actors, values and results. In an initially very critical posture opposing technical progress and its impacts, the concept has come into its own through more diverse approaches. The multiplication of prolonged crises at the beginning of the 21st Century sparked opposing reactions: on the one hand, a renewed interest in social innovation and the participatory innovative processes it encompasses began to be seen around the world (Klein et al., 2016); on the other hand, some academics critiqued social innovation as an 'institutional notion' that masks the disengagement of States from social

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policies. Nonetheless, a business vision of this innovation process is spreading and is highly supported by policy-makers (Laville, 2014).

In the first part of this editors' introduction, we show that the notion of social innovation has two different roots, closely linked with the crises that modern democratic societies have faced since the end of the 1960s. We highlight the two fields of research that inform these roots. In the second part, we present the diversity of meanings of social innovation and explain how these dynamics can be seen in the agricultural and food sector. In the third part, we present the main theoretical and methodological challenges that studying social innovation brings and how this special issue, anchored in sociology, contributes to the existing literature and debates.

Two roots, two bodies of research

The development model initiated during the Trente Glorieuses, those 30 years of growth following World War II, relied on the synergies between Market and State in democratic modern societies (Laville, 2014). During this time, the role of the State and public policy was to provide an enabling environment for technological innovation, along a fordist model of regulation, in order to help develop mass consumption (Levesque et al., 2014). However, at the end of the 1960s, this social contract faced a cultural crisis in which the values that undergirded the Market-State synergy were put into question. This crisis, affirmed in the 1970s, reactivated social movements and brought about the notion of social innovation to name initiatives that came mostly from civil society. The cultural crisis was followed by an economic crisis in the 1980s, which led, independently and first following industrial or innovation economics (Freemann, 1987), to conceive of and implement another vision of social innovation. This line of development consisted of understanding and improving the social dimensions (e.g., labour organisation, acceptability and impact) of technological innovations within enterprises and markets. We can see both approaches to social innovation in the agricultural and food sector.

As early as the 1970s, indeed, social protest moved beyond class struggles and displaced social movement critiques towards consumption and lifestyles, in societies marked by strong sociodemographic evolutions such as urbanization, feminization of the work force and erosion of the welfare state. The environmental and feminist movements brought new questions to the public stage, denouncing the damages of technological progress and pushing for quality of life improvements. The new trend in these social movements no longer consisted only of political activism. It was supplemented by a search for alternatives and a desire to change the "here and now' through social experiments that were conducted outside of the world of entrepreneurs and scientists (Touraine, 1981). This pragmatic research on local alternatives supplanted an ambition of radical change and the notions of social innovation and civil society became substitutions for the term 'social movement' (Laville, 2014). The set of socio-economic experiments emerged as social innovations building solidarity economies. Very active in South America and Europe, this movement contributed to the renewal of the agricultural and food sectors, through fair trade, organic farming, critical/responsible consumption or alternative agri-food networks (Seyfang and Smith, 2007). Social innovation was then characterized by a raised awareness of new societal

challenges (e.g., ecology, well-being) and of the necessity of citizen participation in the elaboration of new solutions to social problems. The roots of this formulation of the notion thus sparked a controversy: for some, social innovations afford a critique of capitalism (Boltanski and Chiappello, 2005); while for others, they support the emergence of a new paradigm of social change. Social innovations in solidarity economies are aspirational in their desire to change society while trying to repair the dysfunctions of the mainstream model, which is what fair trade does (Raynolds, 2000). These innovations, whether targeting social needs or aspirations, opened a new chapter in the sociology of social movements. Envisioned as 'new social movements' (Touraine, 1981), they were taken to mean actions, thus shedding their historical meaning of movements as struggles against a situation or a category (e.g., social class). These movements as innovations aim to transform societies both through contestation and the construction of concrete innovative alternatives. In the 1980s and the 1990s, they provided rich empirics for institutional economics and reactivated the applied field of solidarity economy (Laville, 2014). Moreover, collaboration on this topic between regulation economists, institutional economists and sociologists of social movements, led to the creation of the CRISES[1] in the 1990s. Based in Québec where many social innovations have been developed, this interdisciplinary research centre first introduced the consideration of consumer relations within the notion of the consumption wage-labour nexus that underlies regulation theory (Boyer and Saillard, 2001). The latter enlarges the analysis of economic activities to the relations between citizens and the State (Bélanger and Levesque, 1991; Gendron, 2013). Specialized in social innovation, CRISES has produced a lot of empirical studies, gathered in a dedicated collection of books (see, for example, Klein et al., 2016). Developed in close collaboration with socio-economic actors, this stream of research on social innovation stressed three characteristics of social innovation: the role of institutional and local contexts in the emergence of these innovations; the importance of learning and coordination processes which underlie changes in practices; and the co-production of new rules and norms (Klein and Harrison, 2007). In this perspective, these works contributed to the renewal of research on industrial districts, innovative milieu and local productive systems (Moulaert and Sekia, 2003), with specific attention paid to the inclusion of the marginalized (Moulaert et al., 2005). They also showed how innovations often come from the daily life of organisations and citizens, which stands in stark contrast to investment policies in the 1980s that favoured technological innovations by enterprises and entrepreneurs. This stream of research also showed that local social innovations can generate results which go beyond the initial frame of the initiative and problem, or effect changes in upper-level institutions (markets, policies, science). In that sense, these authors argue that social innovation can produce social transformation (Klein et al., 2016).

Independently, another vision of social innovation emerged from the economic crisis of the 1980s. This crisis confirmed the necessity to move away from the model of mass production and to engage in building a service and knowledge-based economy (Delaunay and Gadrey, 1987; OECD, 1996). A series of organisational changes aimed at taking into account the social dimension of technological innovations, within enterprises (Gershuny and Miles, 1983) (e.g., the quality of

[1] Centre interdisciplinaire de recherche sur l'innovation sociale.

working life) or in their relations with their environment (corporate social responsibility). In this context, the notion of social innovation referred to specific situations in which the elaboration of changes, beyond their implementation, implied end-users, or was even carried out by them. Actor-network theory (ANT), an approach used in the sociology of sciences and techniques, supported the emergence of this second vision of social innovation, as a social process concerning markets and enterprises (Muniesa, 2015). Michel Callon, one of the founders of ANT, used the notion of social innovation to address the situation in which Japanese citizens, affected by a contamination of rice fields, both participated in the diagnosis of the problem (pollution from industries neighbouring the rice fields) and in the finding of solutions (Callon, 2007). In this case, innovation is based on the intersection between individual concerns and social and civic issues. It is born of a collective construction that values the experiences and knowledge of users. Callon and Rabeharisoa (2008) argue more broadly that markets and technologies enable 'concerned groups' to emerge, who can invent solutions to the identified problems via a circular process combining humans and non-humans through socio-technical networks. This second vision of social innovation also contributed to a new line of research in innovation economics, stressing the role of systems of innovation as a socio-technical device made up of institutions, actors, rules and networks that frame and favour technological and organisational changes (Spielman, 2006).

These two fields of research around social innovation have been progressively building an alternative to the linear, centralized model of innovation that is conceived through technological innovation. Here social innovation values the skills of end-users, and innovation is open, democratic, and participatory (Joly et al., 2013). In this most recent period of research, these two research streams are cross-fertilizing ideas. The first stream has been integrating a more business-oriented approach, in relation to the recognition and support of social innovation in public policies. The second one has been extended to new categories of actors and types of processes, giving more space and importance to the democratization of innovation. In the current context in which social innovation has been introduced in public policies, these two fields of research cross each other around three main meanings of social innovation, which we explore in the next section.

Current meanings and illustrations in the agricultural and food sector

In 2009, the notion of social innovation was introduced into European policies. At the end of a seminar organised at the time by BEPA[2], the President of the European Commission declared that "the financial and economic crisis has increased the importance of creativity and innovation in general, and social innovation in particular, as a factor for sustainable growth, job creation and strengthening competitiveness." However, social innovation is not just another response to the crisis, nor a response to all types of problems. In its 2013 Social Innovation Guide, the European Commission defines social innovation as "the development and implementation of new ideas (products, services, models) in response to social needs and that create new social relationships or collaborations" (European Commission, 2013, p. 6). It is also specified that social innovations

[2] Bureau of European Policy Advisers.

must be "designed by and for society" in order to improve well-being. The definition adopted in France by the Conseil supérieur de l'économie sociale et solidaire (High-council on social and solidarity economy) in 2011 was along the same lines: "social innovation consists of developing new responses to new or poorly met social needs under current market and social policy conditions, by involving the participation and cooperation of the actors concerned, in particular utilizers and users" (CSESS, 2011, p. 66).

In a recent review of the literature, Richez-Battesti et al. (2012) propose three different ways to envision social innovations that make sense for the current period. First, social innovation should be a modernization tool of public policies dedicated to giving a better answer to social problems. This refers to new modalities of State intervention, particularly through the use of private-public partnerships and the implication of citizens in defining some actions dedicated to the well-being of community, as in the use of participatory budget. Food policy councils in North America and Projets Alimentaires Territoriaux in France, which are multi-actor devices (including the city or district level policy-makers) set up to discuss and implement collective actions around food (e.g. local sourcing for food catering) at the local level (city, district), are good examples of this type of social innovation.

Second, social innovation can refer to the development of social enterprises and social entrepreneurs who implement economic activities that should achieve both economic and social objectives. In the agricultural and food sector, a growing number of social entrepreneurs offer local products to consumers in urban areas, often with the help of ICT but maintaining meetings at designated pick-up points to foster social links between producers and consumers.

Finally, bottom-up initiatives, often citizen-driven, emerge locally to answer social needs that are not satisfied by public policies nor markets. In the more radical tradition, these innovations carry with them an aspiration for social change (Bouchard, 2015). Community-supported agriculture and equivalent systems (e.g., AMAP in France, GAS in Italy), community gardens, and eco-villages, which constitute the most cited examples in the literature on social innovation, illustrate this third vision.

In sum, the field of social innovation is heterogeneous, presents many paradoxes, and revives the old debate around initiatives for "strong" or "weak" solidarity (Laville, 2014). The current trend in today's societies, according to Laville, is a movement towards social business where actors are not fundamentally breaking with dominant economic paradigms with their innovations, but are rather incrementally making business practices more socially responsible. In that sense, there would be a trend towards the second mode of social innovation (social entrepreneurship). In the food and agriculture sector, we see all three modes of social innovation with different actors promoting those models that fit best with their visions of current and future food systems. Given this rich empirical diversity within food and agriculture studies, this special issue takes up this question of social innovation with an interest in better understanding what is new about the experiences that are presented here and how might be able to recognize the transformative potential of social innovation. We do this by responding to some open questions that were revealed in recent reviews of the literature on social innovation.

Open issues and recent developments to be consolidated

Richez-Battesti and al.'s (2012) review highlighted several questions that are understudied in the literature on social innovation. First, understanding the conditions of emergence of social innovations has not been systematically documented; this is particularly true for bottom-up initiatives (the third type of innovation). Open questions include: who are the concrete actors, individual or collective? How are they anchored in ordinary life? Who initiates the new rules and practices aimed at solving socio-economic problems, at responding to social needs or to aspirations for change? The sociology of social movements' tradition considers 'historical subjects' and not concrete actors or ongoing dynamics. New social movement theory opened a new way to examine the current trends, by questioning the movements through which individuals structure the link between their individual situation and the global process within which they mobilise their collective action (Pleyers and Capitaine, 2016). Nevertheless, the focus is made on activists and mobilisations and does not question how these mobilisations produce social innovations. There is a need, in sociology, for revisiting methods, theories and empirical situations that will better enable us to study 'social innovations in the making' and the role of 'ordinary actors.' The second question addressed in a recent special issue proposed by Bucolo et al. (2015) is related to the diffusion of social innovations. Empirical studies, still rare, argue that the vectors and processes of swarming (out-scaling) and of transformation of upper-levels (up-scaling) are not linear (in terms of timing or in terms of actor chains, from inventors to end-users) and nor are they necessarily coordinated by a central agent (as the entrepreneur) or social force. In sum, the paths of social innovations need further study if we are going to understand how they are making future worlds possible in the present. The third question that deserves more attention is about mechanisms for measuring the success or evaluating the impact of social innovations in a way that does not reduce the social value of these innovations to an apology for serving economic or political interests.

The literature within the ANT stream began to provide the first insights into answering these questions. Drawing on the contributions of ANT and the science and technology studies (STS) field more broadly, and combining them with insights from evolutionary economics, a body of literature generally referred to as "transition theories" emerged in the 2000s. These theories extend these first insights into social innovation by trying to understand how major transformations take place in the way that societal needs are met - such as housing, energy, education, health, food. The approach is that of a multi-level analysis taking into account transformations linked to interactions between different socio-technical systems (Geels and Schott, 2007). It envisions niche sources of radical innovations (micro level), a regime (meso level) composed of norms, rules, knowledge, political actors that ensure the stability of dominant practices and technologies, and a landscape (macro level) representing the context formed by institutions, flows, global politics and events, and the social values over which the actors have little control. The work referring to this approach has been prolific because of its ability to take into account multiple levels of change in historical context, but nonetheless there are a number of critiques that are raised against it. For example, some authors argue that is neglects the diversity of actors, their relationships and their strategies (Geels, 2011). The agri-food sector appeared as a good example to address this diversity

in a multi-level perspective while giving attention to daily practices in niches (Grin, 2012). Nevertheless, analysed cases of niches most often present dynamics carried by "alternative" actors opposed to the dominant system and carrying radical innovations (Maye and Duncan, 2017). They then tend to obscure the processes of change initially brought about by actors involved in ordinary life; indeed, Callon's work on concerned groups was more effective in describing these dynamics. Another critique addressed to the MLP is that the transformations in the dominant system are analysed as being linked to the opening of windows of opportunity in the socio-technical regime (cf. McAdam et al., 1996), under pressure from the landscape and/or niche levels, but without any precise visualization of the underlying social mechanisms that are working at multiple levels from different vantage points (Smith, 2007). If the agri-food sector provides opportunities to go beyond this critique (Bui et al., 2016), the social innovation perspective also calls for a new lens.

Indeed, the special issue proposed by Bucolo et al. (2015) on social innovation diffusion showed how the trajectories are plural and non-linear, giving an important place simultaneously to networks, objects and devices which all are also vectors of social transformation. Works gathered in that special issue calls for more empirical evidence on "the importance of mediation or translation mechanisms to build multi-stakeholder coalitions capable of promoting innovation in different economic and social environments" (Bucolo et al., 2015). 'Promoting innovation' has then no longer to be only understood only in terms of propagation but also to be analysed in terms of capacity for influence, transformative or regulatory scope at higher scales. From this perspective, Bucolo et al.'s special issue also calls to deepen the role of researchers studying these processes in building the legitimacy of innovation, contributing to its capacity to influence.

Surprisingly, across the literature on social innovation, sociology is weakly mobilised and innovation remains black-boxed from the point of view of the people and relationships that construct it and produce new rules. From an STS perspective, the social dimension of innovation always co-produces the technological dimension. Moreover, the economic dimension of social innovation is not fully explored - beyond alternative solutions presented as "fairer" or more "efficient." Finally, if the literature on social innovations is still very limited in its analysis of the agriculture and food sector beyond CSA (and equivalent) systems, it demonstrates that there is a large gap in to fill in order to begin to account for the creativity of urban environments and other forms of innovation in the agricultural and food sectors. It is this gap that we hope this special issue will begin to fill.

Contributions of the special issue

The first two articles in this issue focus on two major social movements with an international dimension, analysed as social innovations, thus extending the first approach developed in history around these innovations. Both articles are anchored in the same analytical framework, built as part of a European project and focusing on social transformation through social innovation. However, they do shed light on different dimensions of social innovation as a social movement, based on two cases that have not yet been studied from this angle.

The first paper, by Paula Juarez, Florencia Trentini and Lucas Becerra, proposes a new reading of an international social movement: La Via Campesina, which opposes the agro-industrial

model and seeks to empower local peasants. While the majority of social movement literature is focused on urban issues in developed countries, this paper addresses a social movement born in developing countries and structured around rural development issues. The paper explores the strategies through which the social movement is a driver of social transformation at different levels, from micro to macro. It shows how its strategies rely, in particular, on the production of narratives against the agro-industrial model and its global impacts, which give meaning and direction to local learning and transformative actions. The case thus goes beyond the divide between local and global and highlights how reading La Via Campesina's activities as social innovations can be understood as the meeting point between two levels in interaction.

The second article, by Guntra Aistara and Balint Balasz, deals with seed exchange networks in different countries, which, without being federated, are part of an internationalised struggle for the re-appropriation of seeds by farmers. Based on observations of these networks over several years, the article focuses on the conditions of emergence and influence of these networks. The authors show how the materiality of seeds supports the development of new social relationships that they themselves structure new ways of doing things, of organizing, of learning, and of thinking; which in turn are sources of transformation in different fields (e.g., agriculture, ecology, and politics). The materiality of agri-food systems comes in here to remind sociologists of its relevance, at a time when it is precisely threatened by dominant social and ecological (re)production models.

Les Levidow's article is a dive into the heart of social innovations carried out by citizens around urban agriculture in London. The author describes in detail the trajectories of several initiatives; he shows how the aspiration to build a community not only structures interdependencies between actors and activities, at the service of people and their transformation, including the most fragile, but is also a source of transformations in the social and institutional environment, despite resistance. While raising various questions and issues around these initiatives (place given to volunteers, support for spin-offs rather than growth, etc.), Levidow offers at the same time a rich insight into creativity within urban food systems. This article also demonstrates how the diversity, experimentation and learning within community settings are key affordances of 'multi-actor social agency.' The latter is shown as being fundamentally important to the out-scaling of social innovation, that is, in inspiring community-focused experimentation in many different communities at the same time but always in locally-adapted ways.

Emerging from a different empirical site, Dona Pickard demonstrates that some factors are necessary for the emergence and development of social innovations in urban areas. Beginning with the observation that urban agriculture is often presented as a social innovation, she presents the case of Plovdiv (the second largest city of Bulgaria) where this is actually not the case. She demonstrates that, in this post-communist country, the deficit of social capital at the local level, and the distance between the residents and the centres of decision-making about public space, limit the development of urban agriculture as a social innovation. Building on Lefebvre's idea of space as being known, perceived or lived, she underlines the strong domination of a known space by the central authorities as opposed to a perceived space at the individual level (production for individual

nourishment only). The lived space, a result of dialogue between local authorities and residents, is not only non-existent, but it is not valued. This does not allow the development of a new type of governance of the space nor the sharing of common change objectives around urban agriculture, which would give it the character of a social innovation. Dona Pickard's article is thus interesting not only because it reminds us that actions, classified *a priori* as social innovations, are not necessarily so; but also because if offers a counterbalance to the research coming from Western Europe, underlining the necessity of taking context into account within social innovation research. Lara Maestripieri, Toa Giroletti and Antonello Podda continue this discussion, by seeking to deepen our understanding of the outcomes of another assumed social innovation – solidarity purchasing groups (SPG). These groups are often considered to be the equivalent of community supported agriculture (CSA in North America, AMAP in France), whereby producers and consumers agree in advance, through a contract, to purchase products that are produced seasonally and in specific geographically bound territories. The article shows, first, that the concept of SPG differs from the much-studied CSA model in that while solidarity is a principle, agency still lies mostly with the consumers. Thus, the ability of Italian SPGs to reduce the marginalisation of producers by enrolling them in the functioning of the system is not fully achieved. Based on a large consumer survey, the results presented in this article remind us again that social innovations do not exist *a priori*. An activity must be analysed in its context and according to its internal organization, in order to understand the innovative nature and social outcomes. These results are important for future research on the development of indicators that can adequately evaluate a social innovation.

Urban food systems and their role in the emergence of social innovations are also examined in Cordula Kropp's paper, which examines a diversity of initiatives around local food in a number of large German cities. This contribution confirms the central place of the *urban* in the development of these innovations. It is no longer a question here of analysing the conditions of their emergence, as Levidow did in the London cases, but of better understanding their transformative potential. Kropp shows that this transformative dimension is at the centre of the motivations of the founders, members and clients of the initiatives, all of whom are explicitly seeking a transformation of their social worlds. This leads her to speak of an "urban food movement," whose impacts she seeks to evaluate at different levels, by taking up the five impact dimensions of a social innovation by Haxeltine et al. (2017), that was already mobilized in this special issue by Guntra Aistara and Balint Balasz to understand the innovations in seed exchange networks. Here again we see similar tensions as those revealed by Levidow in the London urban social innovations (e.g., viability conditioned by the use of volunteer work). However in the German cases, the movement is reduced to innovation within niches, benefiting only the upper classes, and does not achieve transformative change in the dominant socio-technical regime. However, one point emerges very clearly from this analysis, which is that some movement founders to do not aim to change the dominant regime but are only interested in consolidating alternatives by producing data on their various impacts (e.g., ecological, social, cultural) that go beyond the economic dimension. This approach shows that the change will come from networking

and institutionalizing alternatives within the dominant regime, rather than waiting for a radical regime replacement. This article usefully underlines the limits of a linear use of the multi-level perspective that describes the vocation of niches to be modifying the dominant regime.

Adanella Rossi and Ricardo Bossi have also mobilised the multi-level perspective to analyse and compare the transition pathways promoted by different niches of social innovation around the wheat and bread sector in Italy. The approach is enriched here by contributions from social practice and social movement theories, which facilitate the identification of certain factors and mechanisms enabling niches to modify the dominant socio-technical regime. In particular, the authors point to the key role of intermediation, provided in the case of the wheat and bread sector by researchers and local authorities. These intermediaries facilitate the anchoring of the innovation in the relational, technological and/or institutional dimensions of the system. However, they also show that anchoring can dilute the transformative potential of certain social innovations and invite a better understanding of the conditions under which anchoring will be truly transformative. Their insights into the timing of consensus versus dissensus throughout the life of collaboration echoes the Juarez et al. article in that it demonstrates the importance of using a variety of techniques and a mix of 'outsider' or 'hybrid' actors in ensuring long term change. This is an important element that ties the literature on innovation to that of social movements, socio-technical change and social transformation – thus positioning social innovation squarely within these processes.

Taken together, the articles in this special issue contribute to the emerging research agenda on social innovation in the sociology of agriculture and food. Beyond demonstrating the usefulness of diverse approaches of social innovation to enrich our discussions of alternative agri-food networks within the sociology of agriculture and food, they offer new empirical terrain that can forward the research agenda. This agenda opens up the black box of social innovation so to pose the questions of: what is innovative about these experiences; and what is the social concern. By posing these questions in future research, we can also look at those evaluation mechanisms that would enable more nuanced understandings of how actors are re-valuing food and agriculture within both urban and rural change processes. Better understanding how the new is known and how the social coalesces and maintains its meaning will in turn be important not just for better understanding broader social change processes from an academic perspective, but it will also provide evidence and advice on how to intervene in these processes in order to ensure that the actors' values are respected. Finally, taken together, the articles in this special issue confirm the usefulness of the agriculture and food sector to help advance the theorization of social innovation.

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