

Civil society and social innovation in the public sphere: a pragmatic perspective¹

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This article proposes a new theoretical approach for the study of social innovation processes promoted by civil society actors in the public sphere, based on French pragmatic sociology. It begins with a discussion about the current place of civil society initiatives in public action. Debate about civil society involvement in the public sphere is then explored, showing to what extent the French pragmatic sociology can provide a new understanding of this process. Finally, an analytical perspective is proposed, which relates the discussions about collective action of civil society, social innovation and public action, presenting some assumptions that can help to better comprehend processes of co-definition and co-dominium of problematic situations in public arenas.

Keywords: social innovation; civil society; public arenas; pragmatic sociology; actor-network theory; sociology of public problems.

Sociedade civil e inovação social na esfera pública: uma perspectiva pragmatista

Este artigo propõe uma nova leitura teórico-analítica para o estudo dos processos de inovação social promovidos por atores da sociedade civil na esfera pública, com base na sociologia pragmática francesa. Parte de uma discussão sobre o lugar das iniciativas da sociedade civil na ação pública na atualidade. Em seguida, faz uma incursão no debate sobre a incidência da sociedade civil na esfera pública, buscando evidenciar em que medida a sociologia pragmática francesa pode auxiliar para uma nova compreensão desse processo. Finalmente, relaciona os debates sobre ação coletiva da sociedade civil, inovação social e ação pública, sob uma ótica pragmatista, propondo um enfoque analítico particular para compreensão dos processos de codefinição e codomínio de situações problemáticas em arenas públicas.

Palavras-chave: inovação social; sociedade civil; arenas públicas; sociologia pragmática; teoria ator-rede; sociologia dos problemas públicos.

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La sociedad civil y la innovación social en la esfera pública: una perspectiva pragmática

En este artículo se propone una nueva lectura teórica y analítica para entender los procesos de innovación social promovidos por los actores de la sociedad civil en la esfera pública, basándose en la sociología pragmática francesa. Parte de una discusión sobre el lugar actual de las iniciativas de la sociedad civil en la acción pública. A continuación, se hace una incursión en el debate sobre la participación de la sociedad civil en la esfera pública, para demostrar que la sociología pragmática francesa puede producir una nueva comprensión de este proceso. Finalmente, se propone un marco analítico que busca relacionar los debates sobre la acción colectiva de la sociedad civil, la innovación social y la acción pública, desde una perspectiva pragmática. De esta forma, se destacan algunos supuestos analíticos que pueden enriquecer la comprensión del fenómeno y ayudar a entender mejor los procesos de co-definición y co-dominio de situaciones problemáticas en las arenas públicas.

Palabras clave: innovación social; sociedad civil; arenas públicas; sociología pragmática; teoría actor-red; sociología de los problemas públicos.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social innovation has gained considerable interest, both as praxis and in the scientific field. A body of specialized scientific literature is now being formed (Bignetti, 2011; Phillips et al., 2014; Nicholls et al., 2015) and social innovation is considered a crucial issue in government and public policies agendas (Sinclair and Baglione, 2015). Nevertheless, when analyzing the scientific production on social innovation, it is possible to observe that this subject remains underexplored in the field of public administration.

In a recent review of the literature regarding social innovation in the field of public administration, Rana et al. (2014) present important contributions. The authors performed demographic analysis on 185 articles published between 1991 and 2013 on the ISI database, as well as content analysis on 105 of these articles. They were able to confirm that studies concentrate on analysis of isolated initiatives and specific projects. The majority refers to the area of information and communication technology (ICT) and just a small amount (14.5%) use theoretical approaches or analytical frameworks. In addition, the authors show that there is a strong geographical concentration of universities and authors in the production of articles on the field. Just three authors published three or more articles during the period analyzed and more than half of the articles (55%) were focused in four developed countries: USA, UK, Canada and Germany. From the list of most published countries there are none from the global South.

These findings suggest some shortcomings in the international theoretical *corpus* on social innovation, which this article will explore. Firstly, it is clear that there is little or no dialogue between the literature on social innovation and the fields of sociology or political science, meaning that the political dimension of social innovation is underexplored. In studies that specifically address the relationship between civil society and social innovation, a managerial and economic approach to the phenomenon prevails. This is focused as a way for civil society to become involved in the public sphere and to “collaborate” with the government in solving problems, mainly through the co-production of public services (Galli et al., 2014; Cook, 2015; Healey, 2015). From this perspective, social innovation is endorsed as a way to promote greater efficiency in public management and as a viable

and more economical alternative to perform and spread sociotechnical innovations in certain niches, involving companies, universities, public agents, stakeholders and civil society.

In this analytical option — although there is a political and scientific consensus about the contribution of social innovation promoted by civil society actors as a way to respond to public problems — the authors do not explore much of “how” this social innovation occurs and its consequences. How do social innovations emerge and spread in public arenas? How do different initiatives of social innovation promoted by civil society relate to public action and to what extent do they address public problems? What lessons can such initiatives add to the field of public administration?

The aim of this article is to present foundations to answer such questions. The first step is to discuss the role of civil society initiatives within public action — understanding ‘public action’ as a ‘collective action’ in which various public and private actors participate, emphasizing the role of civil society actors as protagonists in promoting social innovations in public arenas. Following this, the article explores the different paradigms and aspects of the debate on the action of civil society in the public sphere, highlighting recent contributions of the French pragmatic sociology. Finally, a new theoretical and analytical perspective is proposed, which relates the debates about collective action of civil society, social innovation and public action, presenting some analytical assumptions to build another view and a new understanding on the phenomenon of social innovation in public arenas and on their consequences.

2. FROM GOVERNMENT TO PUBLIC ACTION: WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY?

The study of public action refers mainly to the field of public policies. This field emerges as an autonomous area from Harold Lasswell’s work *Politics: who gets what, when, how*, which was curiously influenced by the American pragmatist philosophers (Lasswell, 1936). Emphasizing the “how to govern”, opposed to the political science classical concept of “good government”, the author defines public policies as the materialization of governing. The field of public policies inherits from pragmatism a focus on the action, which still persists today. This makes public policy studies mostly prescriptive, with the aim of contributing to research that can generate information, evaluation and improve governments (Boullosa, 2013).

On the other hand, it is clear in the field the prevalence of a normative conception of government. In this conception, the “act of governing” is primarily associated with agents of the State or its administrative apparatus (often understood as single unit) and whatever they choose to do or not to do — to use Dye’s famous definition (1972). Only recently, since the emergence of the debate on public governance (Gaudin, 2002; Osborne, 2006), the analysis started to point out changes in piloting public action, emphasizing the influence of different actors and networks and of several decision-making levels that establish, among themselves, relations of cooperation and competition.

By looking at the field of public policy studies, it is safe to say that it still fundamentally focuses on understanding government action from a prescriptive standpoint, highlighting the characteristics and practices of a well-functioning government. Even in the case of Brazil, where there are many experiences of participatory governance, the predominance of studies centered on the rational analysis of public policies is still observed — as discussed, among others, by Farah (2011) and Boullosa (2013).

Studies that deal with the different sources of influence in public policies, other than the State or the formal constituted authorities, or those that go beyond a functionalist reading are still scarce.

Recently, however, the proliferation of sources of political influence has made the term “public policy” lose ground to the notion of “public action” (Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2007). The latter goes beyond government action in response to a public problem. It is a “collective action” promoted by different public and private actors, in different scopes and decision-making levels. The notion of public action offers a new interpretation for public policies and for the roles of the State and the government, understanding that there are changes in the criteria of distribution of these roles between actors and institutions, in the conditions of legitimacy and in the foundations and strategies of the political subjects (Thoenig and Duran, 1996; Milani, 2008).

This new interpretation is not recent and, although it is growing, is not widespread yet. In 1927, in his work *The public and its problems*, John Dewey discusses and presents a criticism towards the rigidity of a merely theoretical or technocratic conception of the State. The author proposes an alternative interpretation, in which the emergence of the democratic State and the government are related to forming “publics” that arise from the practice of association and from taking into consideration the consequences related to that practice. For Dewey (1927:131), a public organizes itself when “indirect consequences are perceived, and when it is possible to project agencies which order their occurrence”.

Dewey’s conception of a democratic State is a forerunner and, at the same time, connected to our times. It allows reconnecting dimensions traditionally separated by classical theories of State that are also separated in the field of public policy. According to Dewey (1927), the foundation of a State is the public recognition of the consequences (or problems) of the associated action that occurs in everyday practice. In other words, the construction of common interests and their publicity, on the part of different public, are the bases of the democracy. This process of building public interest occurs especially through collective action on different scales or public arenas. In this sense, Dewey (1927) separates and also relates civil society and political society, assuming the importance of the former for the development of the second, as did Gramsci and his successors (Cohen and Arato, 1994).² However, Dewey goes beyond highlighting and exploring how these relations are produced and their importance for the foundation and strengthening of a democratic State and government.

This article builds on this conception of “public action”. It considers that — as Dewey (1927) and his followers have argued — a systematic and continuous research on the conditions that affect associative life, and its dissemination is a central element to produce a greater understanding of the formation of public, on ways of coping with public problems and on how to solve them. That is, the study of civil society and its practices in the public sphere can bring important lessons on public action today and on the advances and limits of the experiences of social innovation promoted by these actors in the public arenas.

² The focus here is not on defining the concept of civil society, nor on discussing its relationship with the State, debates that would escape the scope of this article. The aim is to uncover, based on Dewey’s pioneering ideas, how the role civil society plays in the field of public action is understood. For a discussion on the origin and evolution of the concept of civil society, see Alves (2004). Regarding the relation between civil society and the State in Brazil, see Lavalle and Szawako (2015).

3. (RE) DISCUSSING THE ACTION OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE NOTION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

The field of studies on the different forms of civil society's "collective action" in the public sphere is quite extensive and has been built since the beginning of the twentieth century by different authors and disciplines, such as sociology and political science. As Cefaï (2007) clarifies, today this field is made up of different paradigms that appear not only as "theoretical axioms", deriving perspectives of analysis, but also give rise to different "grammars of public life", and not only one — rules and categories that organize the scene of collective action, both for ordinary actors and for experts and scientists.

These different paradigms, which coexist in the field, have been built over time from different theoretical approaches and distinct institutional and geographical contexts, which have not always been in dialogue. Each perspective develops in relative isolation from the others, and until recently there was little interaction between them. Without elaborating on each one of the paradigms, their particularities and differences, which would surpass the objectives of this article, chart 1 presents a synthesis of the four main paradigms of the studies of collective action: (i) collective behavior; (ii) structural rational; (iii) new social movements, and (iv) the most recent and still emerging paradigm, formed by studies related to pragmatic sociology, which is discussed in this article.

Chart 1 shows that for each of these perspectives there is a way to interpret civil society actions and its impact on the public sphere. As Cefaï (2007:21) states, "every perspective is a way of seeing and also of not seeing". This is because each of them implicitly imposes its own meaning on the nature of collective action, its protagonists, its motivations, the rationality of its actions, its objectives and strategies. Although the field is multi-paradigmatic, it is undeniable the predominance of two main paradigms until the 1980s.

The structural rational paradigm — composed of the rational choice theory and by the resource mobilization and the political mobilization schools — has the greatest extent and diffusion. It is predominant in English-speaking countries and has greatly influenced studies of the so called "Third Sector" or the "Nonprofit Organizations" (Anheier, 2005), widely spread especially in business schools and schools of economics around the world. The emphasis is on "rational actors" (in the sense of instrumental rationality) supported by organizations or networks that seek to use the available resources and political opportunities as effectively as possible, by forming interest groups that can be heard through the media and public opinion, and guide the decisions of the authorities on legislation and public policies (Cefaï, 2007).

On the other hand, in Europe and in many countries of Latin America, until the 1990s, especially in the disciplines of sociology and political science, there is a strong influence of the "New Social Movements" paradigm (Cohen and Arato, 1994). This paradigm, rather than emphasizing instrumental rationality, is concerned with analyzing the action of conscious actors, their capacity to create new identities, and also the power relations involved in the social construction of these identities. There is an interest in understanding the collective control on the process of production of cultural patterns (Cefaï, 2007). The social actor (and their action) is then seen as a producer and not just as a product or a consumer of the situation.

CHART 1 PARADIGMS, AUTHORS, THEORIES AND CONCEPTS IN THE STUDY OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

| PARADIGMS | DEFINITION OF COLLECTIVE ACTION | LEVEL OF INSTITUTIONALIZATION | MAIN SUBJECTS | MOTIVATIONS/STIMULUS | FOCUS | COORDINATION | RATIONALITY | STRATEGIES AND INSTRUMENTS | MAIN THEORIES |
|---|--|--|--|--|--|--|---|--|--|
| CLASSIC OR COLLECTIVE BEHAVIOR | Effect of tensions and pressures of the structure ("social agitations"). Self-production of society. | Low level. Emphasis on spontaneous actions. | Crowds, public, masses. | Frustration/pressures (gap between the expectation and the reality). | Solve a problem (overcome a restriction) and promote social change. | Alignment by contagion or suggestion (inclusive out of norms). | Little rationality (influence of emotions or irrationality and spontaneity). | Shared belief, charismatic leadership, communication | Theory of Collective Behavior. |
| Main authors: Park; Tardie; Smelser | | | | | | | | | |
| STRUCTURAL RATIONAL | Rational actors supported by organizations that seek to use available resources and political opportunities. | High level. Focus on the organizational capacity, mobilization, selection of incentives and cost reduction. | Entrepreneurs, interest groups, movement organizations, movement industries | Interests of individuals, groups, organizations | Fight and competition for resource appropriation. | Collective benefits and cost-benefits calculation. | Instrumental rationality | Communication, organization, resource mobilization, advertising and other managerial tools | Rational Choice Theory Resource Mobilization Theory Theory of Political Mobilization |
| Main authors: Olson; McCarty; Zald; Tilly Ganson; Obershall McAdam | | | | | | | | | |
| NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENTS | Both culturally oriented and socially conflictual action of a social class defined by its position of domination or dependency in the way it appropriates historicity. | From the form of movement to institutionalization (creation of new meanings). | Social movement (from the individual to the historical subject), Social classes in a broader vision. | Collective identities, changes in cultural orientations, society's capacity to act changing itself | Production of historicity. Changes in social relations, rules and ethical standards. | Cooperation based on cultural and identity projects. | Reflective ability of the subject. Action led by values (substantive rationality — ethics of conviction). | Political fight to access decision making power. | Theory of New Social Movements |
| Main authors: Habermas; Offe Touraine; Mellucci | | | | | | | | | |
| PRAGMATIC SOCIOLOGY | Result of the coordination between a plurality of ways to engage and several forms of association. | From the action to the practice, the coordination, convention, rule (relationship between micro and macro) | Subjects (human and non-human) Acting people (situation of interaction, practice) Networks. | Multiple | Forms of expression, operation and consequences of collective actions (practices) | Argumentation Justification Agreement Disputes Controversies | Multiple rationalities, engagement regimes, modes of existence | Problematisation Publicization Argumentation Critical capacity Collective inquiry | Convention Theory Theory of Critical Capacity Actor-Network Theory Sociological Ballistic Public Problem Sociology |
| Main authors: Boltanski and Thévenot; Cefaï; Chateauraynaud; Latour; Callon | | | | | | | | | |

Source: Adapted from Ribeiro, Andion and Burigo (2015).

However, in the last decades, several authors point out the need to overcome these geographical and paradigmatic barriers, building bridges between these approaches and going beyond the classic dichotomies they created (Cohen and Arato, 1994; Cefai, 2007; Gohn, 2007; Chateauraynaud, 2016). Along the same line, this article confirms the importance of taking this diversity into account and not taking for granted a single model of analysis of collective action. Thus, these paradigms and theories are not seen as restrictive but rather a guide to finding clues in research.

The pragmatist perspective (summarized in chart 2), and explored in this article, is associated with this understanding. It tries to reconcile the creativity of the action and the forms of social regularity in the analysis of social dynamics, focusing on practices. The collective action, in this perspective, does not result only from the aggregation of rational choices, as in the Rational Paradigm, nor it is just a by-product of collective identities or causes, as in the Paradigm of New Social Movements. The pragmatist perspective is understood as the result of a process (always provisional) of coordination between a plurality of public and regimes of engagement (Cefai, 2009). In this sense, besides the origin and motivations (interests or causes) of collective action, it is important to investigate its forms of agency, its operation and also its consequences (Frega, 2016).

CHART 2 PRAGMATIC SOCIOLOGY

Under the umbrella of the pragmatic sociology there are different approaches such as the Economy of the Conventions (Livet and Thévenot, 1994), the Sociology of Critical Capacity (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006), the Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2012) and the Sociology of the Public Problems (Chateauraynaud, 2011; Cefai and Terzi, 2012; Cefai, 2014; Quéré and Terzi, 2015).

Considering the differences among these approaches, it is possible to argue that all of them took part in a re-foundation of the social sciences which happens in Europe from the 1980s, particularly in France (Cefai, 2009). Such studies are particular because they emphasize a new ontology and methodology to understand the “social”. They conceive the reality as a “nexus of practices” (Frega, 2016). Despite their particularities, these studies found inspiration in similar approaches such as symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, action theories, theory of situated democracy and, later on, in the American philosophical tradition called “pragmatist” (Barthé et al., 2013). The contribution of John Dewey stands out, as well as the influence of William James, George Herbert Mead and of Joseph Gusfield. Based on those authors, the following list shows some of the common assumptions of pragmatic sociology:

- *Aims to transcend the classic oppositions of sociology* between individual and society, agency and structure, interest and value, rationality and norm. As defined by Frega (2016), focusing on practices means highlight an intermediary dimension of social structure that is placed between the micro scale (the level of individual actions and interactions) and the macro scale (the level of social totalities). The practice sends back to the social, institutional and technical dimensions in which the action is embedded.
- *Invites to look at society in a new way, observing how it operates and is organized* — beyond the notions of class, role, culture or power position — taking into consideration a plurality of forms of engagement and agency of human and non-human beings in the world.

Continue

- *Interests and values are not understood as explanatory factors per se.* Interests and values are research objects, elements subject to discussion. The question is how justifications and interests are built, through process of dispute and controversies during proof situations.
- *Refuses the idea of a rational and uniform individual.* The authors use notions of “subjects”, “people”, “actants” that can be single people, objects, moral, institutional and/or juridical entities. For human beings, pragmatic sociology emphasizes the variety of their dimension, logic and justifications.
- *Takes it seriously the justification and critique produced by the actors themselves.* As stated by Cefaï (2009:16) “a pragmatist procedure follows the experiences and perspectives of the actors”. For Latour (1999:19), “actors know what they do and we have to learn from them not only what they do, but how and why”.
- *Reconciles creative acting with social regularity* and it is interested in multiple paths of collectives emergency and long processes through which the establishment comes to change. It seeks to connect, in a systematic way, the observation of the specific situations to more general considerations regarding the macro-social configurations.
- *Takes into consideration the historical temporality of phenomena,* respecting the indetermination regarding internal processes of social change, in the present as well as in the past (anti-determinism).

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Public arenas are the main *locus* in which collective actions as practices emerge and unfold. The idea of public arena here is different from that traditionally conveyed by classical authors like Habermas (1984) and Arendt (1991) to define “public sphere”. These authors use a more formal and normative idea, seeking to conceptualize the public sphere and establish its limits in relation to the private sphere. Rather than emphasizing this separation, pragmatist studies focus on the hybridization or passage between these spheres. To that end, the focus is on understanding the experiences of “public problems” and their “public”, following John Dewey’s tradition previously explored. As highlighted by Cefaï (2002) and Chateauraynaud (2011), public arenas can be seen as “political laboratories” composed of individual, organizational and institutional actors who commit themselves to a collective effort to identify and manage public problems. So it is not a place of consensus, but a patchwork of ways to judge, to see the world, and to exist.

Considering what has been explored so far, it is possible to say that the pragmatist approach allows us to conceive another way of seeing “public action”, the space where it takes place and the role of civil society in this action. Moreover, such an approach offers clues to understanding its impact in terms of social innovation in public arenas. This discussion will be elaborated further below.

4. THE CURRENT DEBATE ON CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL INNOVATION IN THE PUBLIC ARENAS: WHAT IS THE CONTRIBUTION FROM A PRAGMATIST ANALYSIS?

Despite theoretic advancement in the field, there is still no consensus around a definition of social innovation, with a predominance of a plurality of concepts (Bignetti, 2011). On the other hand, the polarization of analytical perspectives identified in the field of studies on collective action also seems to take place in the debate on social innovation. Authors such as Pol and Ville (2009), Cajaibe-Santana (2014), Lévesque (2014) and Montgomery (2016) show that two major approaches predominate in the international literature that present different interpretations about social innovation.

The “Neo-Schumpeterian” approach is prevalent in English literature where authors describe social innovation as a new idea or combination that responds to social needs (Mumford 2002; Murray, Caulier-Grice and Mulgan, 2010; Nicholls, 2010). On this approach, social innovation is an answer to solve concrete social problems. It favours a more instrumental and functionalist conception of the phenomenon, emphasizing the process of “creative destruction” promoted by social entrepreneurs.

A second approach, more present among French-speaking authors, which we may call “institutional”,³ seeks to understand social innovations not in an isolated way, but from a long-term perspective. Social innovation is seen as the engine of change in mental paradigms, in the forms of interpretation and in the cognitive frameworks of a given society (Heiscale, 2007; Lévesque, 2014). Social innovations within relationships, organizations and institutions are interpreted as vectors for the promotion of new development models.

Chart 3 synthesizes and compares these two theoretical strands. Considering their contribution, this article adopts the assumption that it is necessary to break the polarity and transcend the opposition between methodological individualism and institutional approach to better understand the processes of social innovation in public arenas. As stated by Cajaibe-Santana (2014) and Lehtola and Stahle (2014), collective (and not just individual) action and macro-structural dynamics mutually influence social innovation processes.

As discussed, the pragmatist perspective in social sciences made it possible to reconcile the autonomy of the individual in “construction of the social” with the “social built” (Latour, 2012), aspects traditionally seen as opposites. However, the dialogue with such studies is almost absent from the *corpus* of literature on social innovation and also among those studies that deal specifically with the incidence of civil society in these processes.

This finding was confirmed after a literature revision⁴ of 63 articles published in the last five years on the ISI and Scopus databases, relating the themes of civil society and social innovation. The analysis of the content of these works shows that most articles refer to case studies and are about social innovation initiatives in specific niches/sectors. The most productive authors have their affiliation in developed countries, especially the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada and Spain. In Brazil, only three articles that address the country’s reality were found, which are in Portuguese and are from the field of political science (Bauer, Lotta and Galvão, 2013; Almeida, 2014; Lavallo and Szwago, 2015). None of them directly address the issue of social innovation and all refer to experiences of civil society participation in the public sphere. Although it is known that there is a tradition in Brazil in terms of civil society participation in the public sphere, it is possible to say that few authors work in this subject using the perspective of social innovation, especially in the area of public administration.⁵

³ Some of the most important works in this approach are those carried out within the *Centre de Recherche sur les Innovations Sociales (Crises)*, created in 1986 at the University of Québec in Montreal, under the leadership of Benoît Lévesque. Today, it is formed by an interinstitutional network of researchers from several universities in Québec who develop reference studies on the subject.

⁴ Literature review conducted in April 2016, based on 99 articles and reviews published from 2012 to 2016 relating the terms “civil society” and “social innovation” in these databases in the field of social sciences. After eliminating articles that did not specifically address the theme, 63 articles were analysed.

⁵ Research done on the Portal da Capes in May 2016, in order to access articles published in Brazil, confirmed this evidence. Using the keyword term “social innovation” only seven articles were identified published from 2012 to 2016 in the area of applied social sciences. Of these, only two were written by Brazilian authors and published in national journals (Moura, Machado and Bispo, 2015; Gómez et al., 2015). Both dealt with case studies on successful social innovation initiatives in the microcredit and tourism sector, respectively.

CHART 3 DOMINANT THEORETICAL STRANDS IN THE FIELD OF SOCIAL INNOVATION

| Strands | Neo-Shumpeterian | Institutionalist or regulation |
|--|---|---|
| Representative authors | Geoff Mulgan Robin Murray Julie Caulier-Grice | Benoit Lévesque Juan-Luis Klein Denis Harrisson Marie-Bouchard Frank Moulaert |
| Epistemology and inspiring paradigm | Utilitarianism/Rationalism Emphasis in the agent and his action | Dialectic/Neomarxism/New Social Movement Focus on changing development models |
| What is social innovation? | New idea that works and respond to a social demand | Change in cultural and institutional standards |
| How does social innovation occur? | Through cycles that involve: diagnostic of the problem, proposition of new ideas of solution, prototyping and testing, support, diffusion and systemic change | Process that demands collaboration and consensus between a plurality of actors and logics |
| Strategies and tools | <i>Design thinking</i> Crowdfunding Use of methods from management, arts, and design Promotion of creativity to serve social needs | Strengthening of social and solidary economy, public governance, coproduction of services, co-construction of public policies |
| Main subjects | Social entrepreneur Organizations | Organizations Institutions Networks |
| Social innovation and social change | Social change as consequence of the social innovation cycle | Social change as transformation in the modes of production and consumption and in the development models |

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

In general, the studies analyzed aim to conceptualize social innovation and to illustrate its different forms when it comes from initiatives of civil society. These forms range from a kind of social innovation fostered and promoted by the State itself, as is the case in China (Jing and Gong, 2012), through various experiences of coproduction of public services in specific areas — such as transportation, clean energy, school meals, housing etc. (Seyfang and Longhurst, 2016; Galli et al., 2014; Gonzales et al., 2014). They also deal with more open forms of collaboration and experimentation, involving the private sector — such as the living labs (Franz, Tausz and Thiel, 2015) — and the government, aiming at co-creation of public policies (Klein et al., 2012; Merickova, Nemeč and Svidronova, 2015). In these examples, an emphasis on the functional and economic dimensions of social innovation is perceived, which is generally viewed as a way for civil society to contribute to government and public

policy. In this perspective, the political dimension of social innovations and their consequences in terms of social change are little explored.

These gaps support the argument that the dialogue with some of the lines of thought of the pragmatic sociology, particularly the Actor-Network Theory (Callon and Latour, 1981; Law, 1999; Latour, 1994, 1999, 2012, 2014) and the Sociology of Public Problems (Cefaï 2002, 2009, 2012 e 2014; Chateauraynaud, 2011; Cefaï and Terzi, 2012; Quéré and Terzi, 2015), allows to consider more realistically the political dimension of social innovation. These theories invite us to look at social innovation in a different way, connecting it to the dynamics of social change promoted by the mobilization and participation of different collectives in the solution of public problems. Social innovation starts to be understood as an opportunity of expanding the capacity of groups and of the society itself to reinvent, i.e., to create their own rules and conventions and also new social practices, becoming more creative and politically autonomous (Andion, 2014).

Study social innovation using this perspective means to investigate this process of co-definition and co-dominium of problematic situations, by observing the “day-to-day politics” of the different collectives mobilized around public problems (Cefaï and Terzi, 2012). Notwithstanding, how is this operated in analytical terms? More than presenting a new concept for social innovation, the idea is that the theoretical approaches proposed in this article offer new assumptions to analyze the phenomenon, which are presented as follows.

5. CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL INNOVATION IN PUBLIC ARENAS: ASSUMPTIONS FOR A PRAGMATIST ANALYSIS

Pragmatist studies propose a new understanding about social and its dynamics of change that is taken here as a starting point. In this regard, the Actor-Network Theory (ANT) is pioneer in proposing a redefinition of what is meant by “*social-logy*” defined as the “science of the life in common in the world” (Latour, 2012:18). This reframing of the discipline is accompanied by a new demarcation of ‘social’ which is seen “not as a special domain, an exclusive sphere or a particular object, but as the result of a particular movement of re-association and re-aggregation” between beings and objects (Latour, 2012:25).

The ANT then starts from the critique of dominant epistemic perspectives in sociology, to propose a new interpretation of social or a “sociology of associations”. The task of this sociology would be to promote analytical approaches able to collect and reconnect the dynamics of ‘social’, which is being built by these interacting entities (human and non-human) that form the networks. Thus, the work of the social scientist would be to retrace these connections, concentrating more on circulations and flows than on immutable essences. For this, it is necessary to follow the actors themselves (and their modes of existence), because they are not only informants, they are also able to elaborate their own theories.

This new way of interpreting social dynamics from sociotechnical networks has been widely applied in studies on the emergence and diffusion of innovation (Akrich, Callon, Latour, 2002), and in a less expressive way in the field of social innovation (Neumeier, 2012). As Cefaï (2014) suggest, ANT draws attention to this “sociotechnical ecology of democracy” and the need to elucidate the interplay between legal technical devices, scientific experiments and political and institutional innovations. The understanding of networks also helps to think about the new organizational forms of civil society that act at the same time as channels: (i) of exercise of representation and authority; (ii) of sociability and

coexistence; (iii) of connections between institutions, people, norms and objects; (iv) to concentrate and diffuse symbolic, human and material capital (Cefaï, 2009).

On the other hand, ANT focuses less on monitoring “*in loco*” situations of coping with public problems. This scale of analysis is further explored by recent approaches of the Sociology of Public Problems (SPP), inspired by the pragmatist philosophers. Although they share with ANT authors this new understanding of social and its dynamics, SPP authors are less interested in the dynamics of sociotechnical networks than in the political processes that form them.

As Quéré and Terzi (2015:2) explain, the analysis of activities related to the emergence of problems and their public offers a privileged way to understand the “political forms while they are being constructed” and their dynamics of change. It is a situational analysis of social being constituted or, an examination of the public facts while they are developing (Chateauraynaud, 2011). For this, understanding the emergence, the constitution and dynamics in the public arenas becomes the main challenge. Then, the question that arises is “how do ordinary actors transform social reality?”

Answering this question requires monitoring situations as they occur (Cefaï, 2002), seeking to follow the different public arenas, their scenes and situations, from a longitudinal, multi-scale and multi-actor perspective. It is about understanding the relationships between different moments and places in the process of publicizing a public problem. In this way, the micro and macro levels of the phenomenon of social change are not seen as opposites, since it is at the micro level (from situation to situation) that the macro level is formed, that it becomes reality and gains objectivity, through practices, devices and institutions without which it could not be visible and described (Latour, 2012; Barthé et al., 2013).

How can such conceptions be applied in the analysis of social innovation promoted by civil society actors? Facing this question means to relate analytical scales and perspectives traditionally considered as dichotomous, which gives rise to new assumptions discussed below.

A. ASSUMPTION 1: SOCIAL INNOVATION IS EMBEDDED IN SPACE (TERRITORY) AND TIME (HISTORY), SO THE TRAJECTORY OF PUBLIC PROBLEMS CONFIGURATION MATTERS FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION

Most of the current literature on social innovation assumes that the processes of social innovation promoted by civil society actors are characterized as individual or collective enterprises that disrupt the *status quo*, generating new solutions for social problems. However, such literature hardly questions this process and its emergence, nor does it relate to the socio-historical framework, territorial context or practices in which it is embedded. The pragmatist authors, on the other hand, emphasize the importance of reconnecting the micro-sociological analysis with an examination of the macro-structural dimension. Considering this scale in different forms — whether it is “sociotechnical ecology” (Latour and Weibel, 2005), “public culture” (Cefaï, 2009), or “field of cause” (Chatauraynaud, 2011), the authors agree on the importance of taking it into consideration in their research.

This is because at the same time that collective action of civil society can be a catalyst and accelerate “public culture”, the latter also influences this action, accelerating or limiting social innovation (Quéré and Terzi, 2015). In other words, social innovations do not occur in a vacuum, nor do they emerge from zero. They rely on fields of cause, arguments, meanings and practices created about the public problem over time in a determinate space. Therefore, it is necessary to take into account the long path of configuration of public problems that is built in different public arenas (whether in the

media, science, politics or in juridical norms). This clarifies the process of conversion, translation and/or stabilization (Latour, 2012) that occurs with the public problem over time, as well as its key spokespersons, statements, perspectives and issues of controversy.

The analysis of this “dynamic of transformations”, of the disputes and protagonists they reveal are ways to show the forms of expression and the extent of the criticisms produced by civil society collective mobilizations (Chateauraynaud, 2011). Methodologies are being developed in order to perform these analyses. ANT authors, such as Venturini (2010a, 2010b) and Latour (2014), propose a cartography of controversies. In SPP, Chateauraynaud (2011:19) develops a “sociological ballistics”, showing that the expression and scope of a cause in the public sphere are always products of a “political work” characterized by uncertainty and unpredictability. In order to capture its dynamics, the author proposes a “pragmatics of social change” that takes into account the anchoring of the actors in its environment, the contingent events and that the protagonists act in “fields of forces”, with pre-established social frameworks, which influence the possibilities of change.

These works show that the paths of a public problem and the solutions given to this problem are not linear, as some classic studies on social innovation seem to affirm, suggesting that successive initiatives of social innovation would lead to a systemic change, in an evolutionary perspective (Murray, Caulier-Grice and Mulgan, 2010). Conversely, the pragmatic sociology shows that trajectories of public problems are permeated by unforeseen, ruptures and setbacks that must be considered by researchers. Inspired by Gusfield (1981), the authors show that public problems (objects of social innovation) are products of symbolic constructions (Cefai, 2014). They emerge, become objects of dispute and controversy, lead to mobilizations, complaints, accusations, are interpreted and studied, are stabilized and their solutions are institutionalized or new controversies are opened. All this takes place in different “fields of force” embedded in territories, in which relations of power and interests are in dispute. Therefore, taking it into account seems important for a more realistic interpretation of the dynamics of social innovation in public arenas, their scope and limits. However, it should be emphasized that a macrostructural perspective is not enough in itself, an aspect that will be addressed next.

B. ASSUMPTION 2: SOCIAL INNOVATION EMERGES IN “FIELDS OF EXPERIENCE” ON PROBLEMATIC SITUATIONS

In addition to considering the “fields of force” where social innovation is, the aforementioned authors stress the need to locate the global (Latour, 2012). This means that understanding the process of coping with public problems presumes taking into account their “fields of experience” (Cefai, 2014:25). These are formed by what is lived and felt by the actors directly involved with the “problematic situations”. As Cefai (2014) suggests, the tip of the iceberg — official investigations, scientific experiments, media reports, rules and conventions that are considered on the macro scale — are based on the politics of daily life that must be considered by the researcher.

For this, it is necessary to combine the cartography of the controversies and the arguments with the use of qualitative methods of systematic observation of the experiences, such as the ethnography, for example. The challenge is to follow the experience of the actors, seeking to understand the processes of emergency and diffusion of social innovations, their practices, their consequences, as well as their limitations. This implies, as Quéré and Terzi (2015:2) suggest, to value empirical studies whose task is to observe and describe, as closely as possible, the development of “public inquiry”.

The notion of “public inquiry” refers to Dewey (1927) and to the concept of social inquiry. This research capacity, which is not exclusive to specialists, refers to the condition of the public to perceive the consequences of problematic situations, to name them, to identify them, to interpret them, to build knowledge and to propose solutions for them. In this sense, ordinary citizens are capable of an “attitude of cognition” (Cefaï, 2014:24) and of adopting methods to deal with public problems. The systematic observation of these “fields of experience” allows to conceive an experimental approach to political practice based on a participatory conception of democracy and assuming its character of indeterminacy (Quéré and Terzi, 2015). This is because not every confrontation of a public problem and not every solution given produces a process of change in what is institutionalized. Thus, it is necessary to relate the processes of social innovation with the broader notion of social change.

C. ASSUMPTION 3: RECONNECTING THE PROCESSES OF SOCIAL INNOVATION AND SOCIAL CHANGE IS IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND THEIR CONSEQUENCES

The inter-relation between the micro and macro scales allows to forge another comprehension of social innovations, as practices, as well as their ranges and limits. For this, the pragmatist studies focus on the “power of institution” (Cefaï, 2009) of the collectives, betting on a *reflective* and *consequentialist* perspective. This means that monitoring how the dynamics of coping with certain public problems in different arenas (spatial and temporal), may lead to a better perception of how civil society produces its “critical capacity” (Chateauraynaud, 2011), its repertoires of argumentation and political action. It is not a question here of explaining the process to better control it, in a functional perspective, but in the expectation of better comprehending the dynamics by which the public redefines or not the “horizons of possible” (Cefaï, 2009) in different fields of cause and territories.

The authors mentioned also suggest the existence of diverse modes of engagement and justification (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). It is therefore important to take into account the “proof situations” (Chateauraynaud, 2011), or the moments of “controversies” (Venturini, 2010a, 2010b), in which benchmarks and certainties are questioned and challenged, giving place to new meanings of justice. This implies paying attention to how the actors involved react to historical bifurcations, the arguments, positions, and actions they take, how they build their vision, and defend points of view about the future (Chateauraynaud, 2016).

It is noted that the more recent works take distance from an optimistic view, characteristic of American pragmatists of the early twentieth century. Chateauraynaud (2011), Cefaï (2014) and Quéré and Terzi (2015) insist that the democratization of the political order is not a warranty, but a conquest, and does not occur under any conditions. In this sense, it is important to observe the processes of “problematization” and “publicization” that facilitate the establishment of “public inquiry” in the experiences of problematic situations.

For Quéré and Terzi (2015), public inquiry requires the natural attitude to be questioned. In this sense, the processes of “problematization” that occur in moments of evaluation must be followed. This is because it is through criticism that the references of certainty are doubted and that more lasting social innovations can be promoted, creating new repertoires of arguments and practices, as well as new ‘publics’. Observing how to produce or what prevents this public inquiry and its consequences is then a way to decode the dynamics, limits and significance of the processes of social innovation in public arenas.

6. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This article presented a theoretical-analytical proposal for a better understanding of the phenomenon of civil society collective actions that aim to promote social innovation in public arenas. The current debate on “public action” was presented, followed by the discussion about the different paradigms and perspectives that explain the incidence of civil society in this action.

Then, the scientific debates on the phenomena — “public action”, “civil society collective action” and “social innovation” — were exposed highlighting their gaps. From these gaps the article proposes another look at civil society collective actions and its incidence in terms of social innovation in public arenas and suggests an original analytical approach to the study of this phenomenon. The proposal is built on the dialogue between authors of the Actor-Network Theory and the Sociology of Public Problems. Based on this framework, three analytical assumptions are suggested, opening new possibilities of interpretation of the phenomenon discussed here, in order to inspire research and bring new agendas to the debate.

This article does not exhaust the theoretical-analytical possibilities offered by the pragmatist perspective, nor does it consider all limitations of its application in specific empirical contexts. Nevertheless, based on the considerations presented here, it is possible to say that this contribution offers “another lens” that seems inspiring and very fruitful to describe and better interpret the practices of civil society actors in promoting social innovation in different fields of cause and territories.

Developing this framework, expanding its diffusion in the *corpus* of scientific literature and improving it by submitting it to the necessary “sociological reduction” (Guerreiro Ramos, 1996) seems to be an important task for the field of public administration in Brazil. Brazil is a country of many experiments in terms of social innovation, many dilemmas concerning this practice and it has the elements needed to contribute more with its theorization. This would have consequences in the scientific, but especially in the practical field of public administration. As Dewey (1927) points out, the construction and development of a democratic State and the formation of its public depend essentially on freeing the process of “public inquiry” and the dissemination of its conclusions. It is to contribute in this direction that this article is proposed.

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