Key Note Speech Frances Westley on 'The History of Social Innovation'

Speaker:

FW Frances Westley

I represent the Waterloo Institute for Social Innovation and Resilience, at the University of Waterloo. What I’m going to try to do just in the next 15/20 minutes is explore the theory and practice in social innovation that have been developing in different parts of the world, link these to some of the base disciplines that inform them, and present a little of the work we’ve doing at the Waterloo Institute for Social Innovation and Resilience.

Most of you will be familiar with Steven Johnson’s book “Where Good Ideas Come From”. He, and fellow complexity thinker, Brian Arthur who wrote the book “The Nature of Technology” both take a complexity perspective on innovation. They point to key concepts within complexity theory, particularly those of emergence and bricollage, and the adjacent possible that illuminate how innovation originate, develop through the piecing together of old ideas into new forms, and combine and recombine with ideas or things or inventions that are separate but associated close to the originating idea, in proximity to it, as it were.

If the new theories of social innovation are themselves treated as an emergent innovation, we can identify events and ideas that have been the building blocks and also the patterns of combination and recombination. Among the building blocks are social sciences, particularly sociology and political science, economics, complex adaptive system theory itself, with its roots in physics and biology, and system ecology (influenced by system theory).

Within these root disciplines ideas that privilege system change, such as social movement and some of the basic theoretical frameworks of Anthony Giddens that illuminate the dynamics of cross-scale interaction fit well with complexity theory. Elements of political science, economics and sociology have also generated more focused theory and research within business schools. This has resulted in the development of the fields of finance, entrepreneurship, corporate social responsibility, innovation theory, strategy process, and leadership, all domains in which there are now established research traditions with implications for social innovation. System ecology undergirds the increasingly more detailed understanding about how complex adaptive systems (particularly ecological systems) work, how they adapt and transform. Resilience theory is a direct descendant of system ecology, adding an understanding of the phases and stages of resilient systems. This theoretical approach also includes and integrates some of the innovation theory of Schumpeter in the notion of adaptive cycle and infinity loops and represents an increasingly well articulated attempt to link social and ecological theory in understanding system transformation. Finally, there’s been considerable work around complexity management and leadership that brings together so complexity approaches and organizational/management theory.

One of the exciting things about this Social Frontiers conference is that NESTA has brought together a group of researchers and practitioners who have built research and action agendas that are distinctive but linked. In this conference we have an opportunity to explore the paradigms and epistemologies that are underpinning these distinctive approaches. There’s a rich set of ideas out
there that we’re using and we’re combining and in fact have deep roots. So although social innovation isn’t really a field yet, it’s a set of new interests that are deeply grounded in tradition.

The distinctive foci of work currently underway in social innovation would appear to be six: 1) social entrepreneurship and social enterprise drawing on corporate social responsibility in entrepreneurship; 2) innovation process drawing on innovation theory and strategy process; 3) institutional entrepreneurship drawing on complexity management, leadership and also complexity theory, as well as some of the sociological cross-scale analysis theories; 4) social technical transitions and multi-scale interactions drawing on innovation theory and Giddens’ cross scale analyses; 5) resilience and social-ecological transformation drawing on system ecology, complexity theory; 6) the social economy drawing on political economy and social movements theories. This is not an exhaustive list; there are potentially other schools of thought. Additionally some of the thinking certainly that’s going on now around linking design thinking to social innovation and this is expressed in the work that is supporting design labs, change labs, and social innovation labs.

These separate foci are associated with a number of centres, all of which are represented here. These include Skoll (Oxford- social entrepreneurship and social enterprise), Nesta (London), SPRU (Southampton), Drift (Rotterdam), Stockholm Resilience Centre (Stockholm) and CRISES (Montreal). There are obviously others important centres of social innovation including the Bertha in South Africa (Capetown). A number of new centres are emerging in Europe, accelerated, I think, by the recent grant competition sponsored by the EU.

WISIR situates itself in that institutional entrepreneurship innovation space. We take a fairly broad complexity perspective. Our definition, and we know that definitions abound, focuses on changing the system dynamics that created the problem in the first place: “social innovation is any initiative product process, programme, project or platform that challenges and over time contributes to changing the defining routines, resources and authority flows of beliefs of the broader social system in which it is introduced; successful social innovations have durability, scale and transformative impact.” And I want to really underline that this definition is not either superior or inferior to any of the others that are out there. It’s just a definition that is routed in the epistemology and approach of the researchers working at WISIR. As such, it causes us to look at certain parts of the dynamic and process of social innovation, to privilege certain approaches or lenses in exploring it. And I believe that there are others out there that are building equally valid insights with other definitions, so we don’t really want to get into struggling about which definition is correct. I think this is the time to begin to think across them and find the points of connection and integration.

At WISIR, our approach is the basis of a number of on going research projects. We began, 6 years ago, with case-based qualitative work. Our particular focus at that time was on the role of institutional entrepreneurs in the process of complex system change. We leaned heavily on innovation process frameworks in these cases, linking our work with models of innovation process in complex organisations that are continuously innovating. Such models point to the key role of middle management as actors who are able to question the strategic context, framing opportunities for those working at the frontlines, where problems demand innovation, identifying those of importance to the overall strategy of the firm and selling these to the strategic apex. While social innovation represents a heightened level of complexity, we identified actors, who we refer to as institutional entrepreneurs, who play a similar role in broader problem domains. As such they represent a key ingredient in the transformation process in attaching good ideas into opportunities occurring in the political, economic, cultural and legal systems. But the role of institutional
entrepreneurs remains pivotal in connecting the resource of a new idea with an opportunity that’s happening at a broader institutional context.

This led us to distinguish the difference between scaling out and scaling up. Scaling out really means, for us, the movement of an idea across different organisations, different communities, and different individuals. In this sense, scaling out is related to the diffusion of innovation. But one of the things that we began to see, looking at institutional entrepreneurs, that that was necessary but not sufficient. So many efforts to scale out did not result in system transformation; instead it simply place more demands on the social entrepreneurs who were trying to do it. An innovation could spread from one community to the next, but ultimately, when the social entrepreneur no longer had the energy to keep the initiative going, the broader system resistance would slowly erode whatever change had been made and the transformational impact would be limited.

So we began to see in looking at a number of different organisations that there was a point where most social entrepreneurs actually felt like they either had to connect to or become institutional entrepreneurs or system entrepreneurs; they had to switch gears because they were frustrated by the limits of scaling out. The process doesn’t always occur sequentially – some social innovators work simultaneously at scaling out and scaling up, but the skills for scaling out and scaling up are somewhat different. It is not always that the same person has both sets of skills. We found that asking whether the social innovator was engaged in scaling up, out or both was useful in illuminating how broad social transformation happens.

Further case studies raised the possibility that the starting conditions of the founding organisation or invention were fairly prophetic in terms of the pathway it needed to take as it scaled up. In some cases it appeared that the very strength of the idea turned into a weakness when you tried to scale it up; so the very precision of a particular programme when you tried to actually position it in the much broader system could become a rigidity preventing social innovators associated with the initiative from adapting it to the demands of the larger system. Or, conversely, the very broadness and multiplicity of innovative ideas in a membership organization cannot be scaled without narrowing the organizational focus, which risks losing some of that support base crucial to the organization. If you want to hear more about this project, you might attend the session with Nino Antadze.

The insights from the pathways project, made us think what would happen if we took longer historical time frame. We started with ideas which in recent years have transformed our society for better (the internet, the National Park System in the US, female contraception, mass education, microfinance) or for potentially for worse (derivatives markets, residential schools for aboriginals in Canada and Australia, intelligence tests). Informed by Brian Arthur’s hypothesis that technical innovations are stimulated by the discovery of a new scientific phenomenon, we tried to track these ideas back to their origin, which in the social realm was as likely to be a political philosophy or a religious idea, as a scientific breakthrough. We then mapped this through time and across scales, similar to those used by the DRIFT group – niche, regime, and landscape. These maps have already, even at this early stage of the research, yielded some interesting and unexpected results. Some of these are the important role of conflict in driving the innovation to adapt and transform, the impact of the adjacent possible, those proximate regimes that provided ideas, technologies which wove in and out to the focal innovation pathway like the strands of the rope. Individual social innovators, both social entrepreneurs and institutional entrepreneurs where present, but over time, the initiative passed from one group to another. Global events such as the world wars, provided shocks which
caused innovative ideas and initiatives to permutate and expand, no matter what the problem domain. Last, but not least, it appeared that in these cases as well that the starting conditions are prophetic. Similar to Max Weber’s famous statement in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, that while the bird or the religious spirit has flown the cage of the Calvinist doctrine of hard work, still the cage remains, we are finding evidence the originating idea continues to characterize successful ideas. For example the internet, which was set up during the 60s by people working for the government but who shared the ethos of the counterculture, is still, despite many transformations over time, characterized by vigorous debates about freedom from centralized control.

Even now some 40/50 years later we’re seeing that same ethos informing debates about WikiLeaks, and Edward Snowdon. Again, we have another presentation Katharine McGowan’s going to dig in somewhat more deeply to this project, if you’re interested.

The last project that I wanted to speak to you about is the notion of starting a social innovation database. We’ve been inspired by this by work that’s going on at the Stockholm Resilience Centre where they’ve formed a web based database on Regime Shifts; a key piece in understanding how systems transform. Through at this point, long histories of case-based work, Biggs and Petersen have isolated a set of key variables that help to code regime shifts in linked social-ecological systems. They posted these variables and the invitation is for people working all over the world to come in and to formulate their cases so that they fit into that particular model. And then the database is opened and people can begin to look across cases. I think as researchers in social innovation, we’re nearly there. From our perspective at WISIR we are close to identifying the particular pattern or patterns of variables that characterize successful social innovation. What I’m partly hoping is that out of this particular workshop we will be challenged in those and add to those and refine those. But if we can establish such a model and build such a platform we can begin to build a database that can be used to produce further comparisons and insights. Linking such a database to others, such as the Regime Shift Data Base, can begin to illuminate the relationship between innovation, social-ecological crises, and resilience.

Of course, across all these different projects we’ve had to grapple with methodology, something that always comes up when you’re really trying to consolidate a research domain, starting from all these different approaches. And after a considerable struggle we found ourselves, consistent with other researchers working in the complexity paradigm, realizing that it was less about a preferred methodology and more about a research journey. One kind of methodological approach just doesn’t cut it for a very complex problem. We are in the process of developing a model which a constant movement back and forth between the notion of expert-driven research on the one hand and participatory research on the other, and between theory building and theory testing on the one hand and application on the other. Wherever the research locates him or herself initially, chances are that he or she going to move around. So, in this manner, we at WISIR began with that case-based research, moved into some grounded theory, moved into a number of practice contexts where we’re working in our local area and helping agencies and groups to accelerate their innovations, and then back to theory again as we’re doing with these historical cases.

Finally, I think we all hunger for that “simplicity on the other side of complexity”. When we’re in an emerging field like this we look for the consolidation; we are eager for theory, for empirical evidence, for application. But I would partly urge us not to move too quickly on that. When you
think about that notion of the adjacent possible I think we’re actually right where we need to be at this point. We start from multiple rich, source disciplines; we have well developed thematic areas in which we work. We’re coming together in a workshop like this to find a way to exchange ideas and learn about more. And we have practitioners here too because most of us move back and forth, from theory to practice. This is because openly I think we are all infused by a very similar ethos; we do want to understand social innovation but we have chosen this particular area of research because we would like to see the breakthroughs in problem domains that are confronting our planet and our society.

We’d like to see, in a sense, small p transformations that happen without big politics, that happen without revolution in the streets but that happen in an urgent and immediate way, because we feel that many of the broad systems that we are looking at are broken. I think we have a real chance to contribute to that transformation. In a workshop like this we can really accelerate. We can leap forward, in a sense, in terms of our understanding and I think it really just depends on us continuing to be open for a little while longer to the differences as well as the similarities between us. We need to really engage each other epistemology and understand how they relate to our own. We need to avoid getting trapped in the methodological orthodoxy that has plagued so many disciplines. We need, instead, to remember that we are part of an enterprise that is larger than research itself, but which gives research a profound and fundamental purpose.

Thanks very much.

[Presentation ended at 00:19:05]