



Social innovation in cultural heritage: an unsought but found concept

J. Fernández Fernández

University of Oxford & UCL Institute of Archaeology

Introduction

In this paper, we analyse the concept of social innovation in practice, setting forth the reasons according to which we consider its usefulness in the sciences of heritage. In the first section, we will analyse the binding character of this concept. Then we will explain how – on the basis of an experimental process – we subsequently arrived to the concept as a necessity. Finally, we analyse in a critical form as this reveals that it is necessary to undertake a conceptual revision of the sciences of heritage if we wish to connect these to certain trends and debates of our time.

Social innovation, a binding concept

When using the concept of social innovation applied to cultural heritage, the first question that one might ask oneself is about its suitability or use. We have already stated in previous articles that a certain controversy exists around a single definition of social innovation; however, we have also explained that certain common denominators exist, such as, for instance, that innovations seek to meet a variety of social needs resulting in new means of organisation and cooperation, in which the citizenship plays a crucial and active role. Calling upon the philosophy of G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, one might say that this is an exoconsistent concept (consistent

in relation to other concepts) more than an endoconsistent one (consistency among the components of the concept itself), and this has to do with its binding function. Social innovation is a kind of ‘glue’ that enables various ideas of various fields of investigation or operation to connect/to be connected. What do a community museum, a citizen laboratory or a hacker have in common? Surely it would be easier to search whatever makes them different, though if we seek to find what binds them, we need to appeal to binding concepts, such as social innovation.

An unsought but found concept

Social innovation was totally unknown to us only a couple of years ago. We then started up an ecomuseum together with a group of collaborators (La Ponte-Ecomuséu), with the main idea of preserving, disseminating and investigating the cultural heritage of a small rural community (Santo Adriano, Asturias, Spain). In addition to these purposes, the idea was also to create employment from the basis of endogenous, underutilised resources in an area with serious structural problems of development and demography (Fernández et al. 2015). Therefore, this point of view connected two aspects: cultural heritage and rural development. If we add to this that the project also represented a means to create a community meeting point, pro-

mote education and training, collaborate with other organisations, contribute to sustainable development, etc., we were at the very core of social action. Moreover, bearing in mind that the project had been set up by an independent and self-administered civil organisation in an area with no other previous similar initiatives, we were thus innovating as well. In short: we were performing social innovation, even though we were not conscious of doing so.

So, what were we exactly?: an ecomuseum, an association, a cultural centre, a social enterprise, a self-employment workshop? All this and, at the same time, none of this in particular. When working with cultural heritage, we resort to the 'New' Museology in search of answers to our queries and the most 'modern' term that we found, for lack of anything better, was the term 'ecomuseum', although to this day we are aware that it is difficult to distinguish the majority of ecomuseums from any conventional museum. We place 'new' (museology) between quotation marks because its origin dates back to the sixties of the twentieth century and it is somewhat odd that we haven't been able to find anything more suitably 'modern' for the period since then, 50 years on, during which the main characteristic has been the rapid and frantic changes. In short, the term 'ecomuseum' appeared to us somewhat obsolete but we found nothing better.

At this stage we perceived that we were lacking something that we were unable to name. And we began to discover it when searching outside the context of the sciences of heritage, in terms, expressions and ideas in which our acts fit best, such as a citizen laboratory, expanded research and education, new commons, a new economy of knowledge, etc. – concepts and definitions that truly helped us to name what we were

doing, an entire emerging field of a new social economy, which is starting to take shape aside from the conceptual framework of the sciences of heritage. We actually found more similarities with Local Cambalache de Asturias, Medialab Prado or Colaborabora in Madrid than with the Ecomusée du Creusot-Montceau, although we called ourselves 'Ecomuséu' (ecomuseum in the Asturian language). And when trying to find an even more general and binding idea under which all of the innovative projects could be included, we discovered that these two words seemed to summarise best all that was being undertaken – and that we were trying to do – in this new field: social innovation.

Therefore we have not originated from an academic debate nor from a scientific congress, neither from an experts panel discussion. Our experience simply led us to the concept and only this proves why it is useful. If what we are looking for is to share experiences and knowledge, to discover spaces that enable us to be self-reflective, to create synergies and advance towards the construction of a collective intelligence, we need concepts that are neither excessively specific nor exceedingly lax, that is to say, binding. This helps to know where to look, to understand with whom we share true similarities beyond nominal illusions or restricted fields of knowledge.

This is not a minor matter. The use of certain concepts can deter the emergence of others, condition the practices or avoid reflections about certain matters. It is also necessary to innovate in these concepts and in how to correctly name things.

Conclusions

From all of the foregoing, we draw two main ideas on which we must

reflect.

1. From our practical experience, it has proved difficult for us to find within the sciences of heritage an adequate conceptual rhetoric to connect with the 'activism', the dynamics and social forces of contemporary basis. There should be a specific field to connect the debates on cultural heritage with the new emerging trends within science, social economy and innovation, a 'New Heritage Science' adapted to the specific needs of present realities.

2. We encounter the concept of social innovation importing it from other areas and fields of knowledge. It is scarcely used in cultural heritage and this does not mean that this sector is not socially innovative – which it is – yet something much more serious: reflection on its importance is not taking place and no bridges are being built towards other areas of knowledge, sciences, fields, experiences that, on their part, are doing so. If heritage is to be connected to emerging grassroots movements, to the social, political and scientific realities of our time, it appears that we should start renovating our conceptual repertoire.

In order to open the necessary debate and reflection, we have implemented the HESIOD (Heritage and Social Innovation Observatory) project (www.hesiod.eu), in which we are trying to meet similar experiences that, seen as a whole, will enable us to draw preliminary thoughts on social innovation in the field of cultural heritage.

References

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