EP.4_What can we do to make social innovation truly transformative

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Sustainability unwrapped, a conversational podcast about responsibility, ethics, inequalities, climate change, and other challenges of our times, where science meets practise to think about the roles, and how to make our society more sustainable, one podcast at a time.

Hello, dear listener, and welcome to this podcast from the Hanken series, sustainability unwrapped. My name is Martin Fougere. And I'm an associate professor in management and politics at Hanken. And I will host this podcast entitled, what can we do to make social innovation truly transformative?

Social innovation is often presented as one of the keyways in which our societies can address barriers sustainability challenges. Thus when thinking about sustainability transitions, or indeed transformations for sustainability the concept, the process, and the delivery of social innovation, all hold considerable promise in contributing to desirable change. Yet there are very different understandings of what social innovation is, and also what it should be.

With the two guests who are invited with me here today, we all believe that social innovation should be fundamentally transformative of society. And that is why the core question we want to address is, what can we do to make social innovation truly transformative? So in order to get clarity on what we can do to make social innovation transformative, I am delighted to welcome today here with me, two scholars whose work is centred on social innovation.

Frank Moulaert is Professor Emeritus of spatial planning at the department of architecture, urban design, and regional planning at Catholic University of Leuven. Welcome, Frank.

Happy to be here, Martin, and Angeliki.

Yes, and Angeliki Paidakaki who is an urban and housing researcher with a background in economics development studies and spatial planning, and who is based also at Catholic University of Leuven in the research unit planning and development from the department of architecture. Welcome Angeliki.

Thank you Martin, thank you for the invitation. I'm happy to be here.

I'm also very happy to have you both here. And one reason why I'm particularly excited to have this podcast with you two, is that I find your work particularly inspirational.

Frank, you are one of the most influential contemporary scholars of social innovation, and your contributions are invaluable in understanding what social innovation is, and importantly, of course, how it can be transformative of society. And I think here perhaps the first key distinction needs to be made of the outset. To simplify the debate on social innovation, Frank you have established a clear distinction for example in your recent co-authored book, Advanced Introduction to Social Innovation, between two main approaches to social innovation.

So on the one hand, there is the Anglo-American approach, where social innovations are typically targeted at particular social problems, with an emphasis on very pragmatic solutions deemed more effective than alternatives. On the other hand, there is a more radical approach, which you call the Euro-Canadian approach, and is more explicitly interested in political transformation to refer to the title of a recent book co-edited by Angeliki.

Both of you position your work quite clearly in this more radical approach that aims for political transformation, and here I must say also that I find Angeliki's empirical studies, several of which co-authored with Frank, who has been her supervisor. I find these studies to be particularly useful in illuminating the counteragent money possibilities of social innovation. For example, in the context of New Orleans post-Katrina that Angeliki has worked on in her thesis, or in relation to pro-refugee housing alternatives that she works on now.

In some, you both advance a transformative role for social innovation, one that aims for radical social change. And importantly, I think that in your work you both drive this notion that through their theories, researchers can play and do play a central role in making social innovation truly transformative. So the we in the title of this podcast, what can we do to make social innovation transformative, primarily refers to researchers, to us as free for example and other researchers.

But of course our actions in many other roles such as activists, civil servants, consumers, donors, innovators, investors and managers, for example, may also contribute to making social innovation transformative. So while the discussion is mainly framed in terms of the role of researchers, please feel free to also refer to other roles where relevant. So with this, and sorry for this quite lengthy introduction. But I would like to ask you the first question, which is, how can the theoretical work on social innovation help in making social innovations contribute to political transformation? And let us start with Frank and continue with Angeliki.

Yeah, it's like a title for the whole lecture or for a series of lectures. But I will try to be concise. First of all, I don't like to separate theory from the other components of scientific practice, like empirical research, action research, and so on. In social innovation research, the three obviously go together. Still yeah, we can recognise a specific role for theory, or specific roles for theory.

One being that a theory can be considered as a summary of observations, empirical conclusions, we have made and drawn in the past. It's like a synthesis of insights that we acquired before. Theory can also be prospective, looking forward, trying to extrapolate, or making hypotheses about what we learn from the past, and what it means to towards the future, or towards other places.

That's why in social innovation theorising, we rely very much on holism, for example, and pragmatism because there the competitive element plays an important role. Feedback and feed-forwords relations play an important role, and so on. And so having explained this, yes, I believe that theory can play an important role in building useful alternatives, or in playing a role for alternative governance systems work, for example.

So let's go back to the political transformation, and why it is needed. And to make things a bit too simple, oversimplified, we could say that the political system today, the political allocation system, how our political decisions are made to the favour to the benefit of the citizens, that political system can be considered as a kind of dual combination of, on the one hand, market for votes. I mean, people go to vote every once in a while. The regularity, the candour, differs very strongly among nations and regions. And, on the other hand, an allocation system that is based on economic and social efficiency criteria.

Now, these social efficiency criteria are increasingly dictated by micro-economic criteria, like cost efficiency, productivity, feasibility with respect to individual needs, and so on. So we should say that basically society, and its political system today, is very firmly embedded in the market economy. I mean, Polanyi was developing his theory explaining how the economy was embedded in society for a very long time. And he explained how this embedment took place.

Now, I would go a step further, and say that society, and its political system, is very much embedded in the market economy because, in its functioning, it applies principles of the market. It applies principles of efficiency, behaviour, and so on, and so on. That means, with respect to the relationship between citizens, between people, between human beings, let's say, that individualism has been strengthened, has been put forward, as a very prominent value in human behaviour, economic behaviour, political behaviour, social behaviour, and so on.

That also means that the image of a society, which should be deregulated, to the extent that the market can move freely, that this is also pushed forward as a principle in a very active way. It also means that economic efficiency is increasingly pushing aside, or superseding social efficiency. Social efficiency meaning that the resources of a society, of a community, should be mobilised and transformed in a way as to satisfy the needs of the large majority of the population. And ideally the whole population, in a way. And what are the consequences of this kind of embedment of society in a market economy? Well, society has, to a large extent, become a market. And society is, to a large extent, run according to market allocation principles. Find a job, find a house, find an income, friends coming exactly, or mainly, from professional environments, and so on. And I can keep going on this.

And that's part of it. Part of this embedment of society in the market economy, there is a mismatch between needs, people's needs, individual and collective needs. We won't go into details. Housing is an excellent example, of course. And to supply. This mismatch is translated in common terms as poverty, homelessness, and so on.

In macroeconomic terms, it means that there is an income distribution that has become so skewed that it is no longer possible for, let's say-- depends on the country, of course-- for one third of the population to easily acquire a house, or an premises to live. Another consequence of this adverse embedment is that communication is made, in society, is mainly based on market signals. The price system, I already pointed that. Efficiency norms-- would you really do this? Is it really efficient what you are doing? Is it worth doing it?

I mean, this is a very covered up economic logic behind elementary human reasoning, in a way. And then, maybe most important, is the individual reaction pattern. What we used to call in microeconomics the pursuit of the consumer surplus in whatever we do. So this micro-economic principles are penetrating, or diffusing, throughout the whole social fabric, throughout the whole social tissue, in a way. And so what that means for the production system in a society, which is embedded in an economy, is that the production is predominantly done for the market. Is predominantly done for fictive needs, for fictive commodities, and not to satisfy real needs. What are solutions for this?

So I'm gradually coming to social innovation, don't worry. What are the solutions for this? At a macroeconomic level-- and we don't go into detail here. I already evoked it. We have to go back to real Keynesian redistribution policy, at the level of income, and at the level of wealth. If you mention this in a public forum today, people start laughing at you. And they say this is impossible.

At this point, I'm rather pessimistic about the possibility. And another very important activity, if I can call it an activity, that should take place, at the macro level, is social green deals. I would say social green deals, not green deals. I do not believe that we can reach sustainability on the basis of new technologies. I hate silent traffic jams. I mean, I have this horrible image of traffic jams, with all electrically driven cars. I mean, there's still traffic jams. They still put an enormous burden on the resource provision, and on nature, and so on. They still put an enormous burden on the nerves and the social capacities of all those

drivers, who probably, in those traffic jams, will remain as aggressive as they would have been in noisy traffic jams. Anyway, at the micro level, and also the most meso level-- but this is not a lecture; this is an answer to a question. In a way we talk about, and we deal with, social innovation. In most of our work for the last 30 years, we have said that true social innovation is based on three dimensions.

And these three dimensions should be connected to each other to make social innovation work in its ambitions. It's about need satisfaction of individual and collective needs for those who need them, who see their needs not satisfied. It's about building social relations, rebuilding social relations, superseding individualism, and so on. And it's about social-political transformation, mainly through capacitation, making people, citizens, political beings again.

As to needs, we need needs revealing systems that go beyond the lack of transparency of the market. I mean, this is another discussion. Some analysts would say the market makes allocation transparent, but it's exactly the other way around. But let's leave this out for now. So we need needs revealing systems that offer alternatives to the markets. Fora, public forums. I mean, we can learn from the Greeks there. What happened in the Agora, 2,000, 3,000 years ago, were to a large extent, political discussions. They may have been elitist, but it's still a model from which we can learn.

A more contemporary example, which is very popular-- or was very popular-- in France there were recently-- maybe still exists-- the états généraux where the people are brought together to discuss particular issues in the domain of agriculture, public transport, you name it. Another, yes, I made some notes here. Another alternative needs revealing system is occupation. Occupation of wasteland, occupation of public space that has been used for private or semiprivate purposes illegally, in a way. Let's turn things around. I mean, many private actors would use public space for private purposes, which I consider illegal, obviously.

Another example, a third example-- and the last one for our purpose today-- of a revealing system that is an alternative to the market is setting up pilot projects of alternative strategies, alternative options. A very convincing example today is the short chain supply systems in agriculture. Bring the farmer to your home. Bring the farmer to your marketplace, and so on. So nice news about the COVID crisis is that short chain supply systems in agriculture have been very successful, certainly in my hometown, and also in many other places. So this is about satisfaction of needs, and how we can reveal needs in a political way that is an alternative to the market.

As to social relations building, which we believe is the core of social innovation theory, and action research, is about how to learn, or to learn again, to cooperate in an ethical way. Thousands of experiments across the world are trying this today. You have Atlas's of social innovation experiments, social economy experiments all over the world. You can check this through Google. It's a very interesting exercise to make.

So if we say that we have to learn again to cooperate in an ethical way, what does that mean? We have to respect people. We have to respect other people in a much more ethical way. Not pretending that you're listening to a person, but really trying very hard to understand what the person say. Rediscovering practices of mutual aid, this is practiced all the time in many of the pilot cases. I want to return now to concrete examples because that would lead us too far, and maybe it can come back, or Angeliki can give some examples when she talks about her social resilience cells. I don't know. I don't want to manipulate you, Angeliki but it would be an opportunity.

Reciprocity, sharing, and so on. Many of these categories of social human behaviour have been analysed in very great, great detail, and in a very empirical way by anarchist writers, like Kropotkin and Bookchin. I mean, for me Kropotkin, for the future of human society, is even more important than Darwin. And that's a very interesting provocation, I would say. And then the last dimension of social innovation, which directly relates to social political transformation. Although, you understand that the two others are also very important. No decent politics without respect. No decent politics without mutual aid between parties, between fractions, and so on.

So the last I mentioned, social political transformation. We have gone very far in studying experiments of bottom linked initiatives, which is a model in which grassroots initiatives learn from especially lower level, local state departments, and vise versa. They learn how to cooperate, to respect each other, to develop agendas together, to develop learning tract trajectories together. We have done a lot of work recently on the commons, landed commons, in Leuven from a social innovation perspective, in which we have dynamized the governance process and made it much more operational

And we understand that many of the initiatives will work or will fail if depending on the collective learning process is done in an atmosphere of full respect, in an atmosphere of abandoning power positions, in an atmosphere of willing to exchange resources. And that this is really the way of learning Deep Democratic Governance. Deep Democratic Governance is a term that is used in more radical planning approaches, for example. So yes, social innovation, in its three dimensions, can really help us to build bridges to social political transformation.

We are far from where we would like to get, but we're learning. And after all, if you look at the long term history, from the first revolts of the unions, the cooperatives, the workers organisations to the establishment of an acceptable welfare state, more than a 100 years passed. So it's a very short period in the long view historical perspective.

Yes, thank you, Frank, for this introduction to social innovation theory, as it were. And actually the three dimensions that need to be combined with social innovation, which you introduced very, very clearly here. So that's I think a great start to understand what we are talking about here. And I would like to ask then Angeliki about, well theory, as Frank was saying, you cannot fully separate theory from practice.

So maybe we can combine the question of social innovation theory, and its connection to empirics. And more specifically, I would like also Angeliki to address how she has selected her empirical cases, and how they interplay between the empirical cases, and the various ideas or theories, works. So Angeliki.

Thank you, Martin. I would like to serve my take on your first question, how can the theoretical work on social innovation help in making socially social innovations contribute to political transformation? Basically add some extra remarks on top of what Frank already explained. So I think first, we need to define what we mean exactly by political transformations. In my opinion, political transformation translates into the institutional leverage of social initiatives. So the formation of open and democratic governance arrangements, and the development of a new welfare state that incentivizes and finances, with fixed subsidies, a diverse terrain of social initiatives, innovative initiatives.

Now, in light of my interpretation of political transformation, which actually corresponds more to the third dimension of social innovation that was defined and explained by Frank Moulaert and his colleagues, then the theoretical work that could be useful for social innovations to trigger political transformation, should unpack further these third dimension. Namely, in my opinion, researchers should study in more details, and across different contexts, the macro physics of governance formation processes co-led by

social innovations. And reflect on them, and come up with useful concepts that reflect better those complex mechanisms.

So already prominent scholars belonging to the radical or Democratic tradition of the social innovation debate have placed the focus on this dimension on empowerment, and the social political transformative potential of social innovations, like Frank Moulaert, Diana MacCallum , Marisol Garcia, Marc Pares, Santi Eizaguirre Anglada, Marc Pradel and many others have given numerous examples of those bottom-linked governance interactions in different spaces. . Now those scholars have understood that socially innovative actions cannot take place in a vacuum. But they need to be embedded in this bottom link the governance structures, in order to have a lasting impact on the functioning of democracy.

Now, this embeddedness mainly translates into the recognition and constant promotion of the central theme of those initiatives, by powerful institutions like state authorities and elected officials, through sound and productive regulatory and legislative frameworks. And new governance arrangements that can only be materialised through this constant and various interactions, and modes of collaborations between social innovations, and those institutional structures. Now, to deepen and widen our knowledge within which social innovations perform new political positions, and opt for governance re-configurations through collective advocacy strategies, those institutional interactions between social innovations, and innovation initiatives with institutions scholars, scholars of social innovation, should study this dimension deeper across contexts. And further enrich it, and further inform it.

Now there is an increasingly prominent concept within the scholarship that was developed when studying social innovations through these lenses. And this is the concept of bottom-linked governance. Bottom-linked governance refers to this new and more productive modes of cooperation between civil society organisations and institutions. As I mentioned before, across territorial scales. And really has drawn the attention recently of social innovation scholars because of its precise, positive, analytical, action oriented sociopolitical transformation potential.

Now, other concepts that could further impact this third dimension of social innovation are those of social resilience cells, egalitarian city, the new welfare state, additional capital, and so on. And I would like to explain what I mean with those concepts. Social resilience cells are defined, at least when studied within the housing systems, as affordable housing providers, or housing policy implementers, who mobilise different discursive and material practises in their aim to influence both politically, and by their housing initiatives, the recovery profile of post-disaster cities. Now, this concept elevates resilience from a single capacity system to resist shock, and bounce back, or bounce forward in a linear multi-directional way to a highly politically sensitive, social transformative process, with various bounce forward machinations and trajectories, steered and materialised by a hidden machine of social resilience cells.

Therefore, the concept reaches and clarifies the concept of resilience by revealing and making verifiable, but hidden features of these, which this is the political ones. So my PhD research, my use of the socially embedded SRCs, it further re-politicised the resilience discourse by busting discursive myths about ideal recovery processes, which are disconnected from the needs and practises on the ground revealing the multi-directionality of recovery trajectories. And very importantly, raising key issues about the normative role of the state within this heterogeneous landscape of social resilience cells in housing systems.

So very importantly, the concept shifted the debate away from a social justice approach to the allocation of housing by building a narrative of resilience equity that translates into a just redistribution of resources, and cultivation of empowerment across various social resilience cells who struggle for the right to

experiment with recovery re-development strategies. Now, two other concepts that emerge throughout my PhD research are those of the egalitarian city, and the welfare state.

So when we talk about political transformation, what do we expect? So in which direction? So one could be that we want more egalitarian cities. How I define an egalitarian city is the city where all neighbourhoods are recognised for the unique housing and social needs as well as for their particular social demographic, and physical characteristics. And where social resilience cells, public authorities, politicians are responsive to the specific needs of those communities.

Also through the central utilitarian city lens, the new welfare state then is the one that incentivizes and finances with deep subsidies these diverse terrain of social resilience cells in a more socially just way, while at the same time securing equal access to basic goods and services for all. Now creating an egalitarian city calls for massive social investments, and fundamental legislative and policy reforms, which liberate all social resilience cells through equal treatment and sufficient capitalization or incentivization.

Now finally, the concept of endogenous and exogenous institutional capital cast light on this governance building fermentations within social innovative initiatives, as well as between those and institutions.

Now for example, an endogenous institutional capital of pro-growth social resilience cells is the pragmatic market mediated strategic partnerships, or informal interactions for information exchange. Where exogenous institutional capital of pro-growth SRCs is the maintenance, or growth, of pro market, pro regulation public institutions, or profit oriented public private partnerships. Whereas an endogenous social capital of alternative counter-hegemonic SRCs are considered those of solidarity based alliances, or movement formulation, former joint ventures for development, and so on. Whereas exogenous institutional capital of alternative SRCs are considered more open, transparent, inclusive, public participation forums, human centred public private partnerships, and so on.

Now after this long explanation on what kind of theoretical work we need to steer and inspire political transformation led by socially innovative initiatives. I believe that these new concepts that we developed as scholars can be inspirational for those initiatives who are open to serve, reflect-- to use those concepts for the development of new discourses, for new claims, for advocacy purposes, network expansion, interaction with state agencies, et cetera. And those concepts can be relevant, not only for the socially initiatives that we study for our research, but for similar other ones across the world who serve commonalities with the initiatives under study. And who can re-approach as well their ambitions, strategies, and practices, adjusted to the context in which they are embedded.

And also those concepts are very useful as well as an instrument for awareness raising. They can be used to raise public awareness on the merits of open and inclusive urban governance, inspire future urban savers, equip local, regional, national, international policy officers, and policy makers, with a new knowledge on the nature and the role of socially innovative initiatives. And new welfare state forms. Now, with respect to here's a question--

Perhaps-- yes, I could perhaps comment a little bit here. I think one thing that really comes through in both of your discussions is the question of scale, and the question of know the macro level-- meso and micro levels. And so there's this concept of bottom-linked governance, which connects at least micro and meso. Then the question of the welfare state, which is more a macro question, which is also part of the political transformation that you see related to social innovation.

When Frank was saying that, on the state level-- I mean, that social innovation is mainly on the mizo and micro levels. So these are very interesting comments. I mean, it's also about how difficult it is to study

social innovation because it's a multi scale phenomenon. And it is also something that can be translated from one context to another, but there are of course difficulties in doing that. As Angeliki was suggested. Everything is embedded in a context, and when you try to use certain concepts like New Welfare State, for example in a very different context, it might be you need to translate the concept, and so on.

So these are some of the difficulties with social innovation research. I think it makes sense for us now to continue with the question of what kinds of empirical cases can we have? I think we'll have to be a bit briefer in the answers in general, if we want to address some of the other questions later on. But of course, this question of empirical cases, and how to study them, is really crucial. So let's move on to that question. And Angeliki please go ahead.

OK. Yes, now with respect to the question of what kinds of social innovation we should study empirically, if we want to advocate for more transformative social innovations, I would say that we need to find cases where all the three criteria of social innovation are met. And especially focusing or underscoring the third dimension. That's the political essence of social innovations, and their interactions, and thinking environment in terms of access to necessary resources, financial, institutional, et cetera.

Now, with respect to the second question that you had, how I selected my empirical cases, this always depends on the specific aims, and expected outcomes of each research project. For example, for my PhD research, my aim was to reconstruct the notion of resilience by studying it uncovering the heterogeneity of housing actors. So I used the 10 year recovery of post-Katrina New Orleans as a analytically significant cchronological platform against which I could examine how resilience, as a capacity and as a process, was imagined and re-imagined, applied and reapplied, by the heterogeneity of housing actors in the early and late recovery years. Constantly changing the recovery trajectories, and the redevelopment of priorities.

So since I developed the concept of social resilience cells before field work, I had in mind to map out and study a sample of pro-growth, pro-equity, local materialising social resilient cells. In the first part of my fieldwork, the unit of my analysis were the discursive and material practices of social resilience cells. So I interviewed the sample of social resilient cells, trying to uncover the recovery discourse of my interviewees, and capture the various interpretations of the mechanisms, and practices affecting the rebuilding profile of the city.

And in the second part of my fieldwork, the hints of my analysis were the social capital of all those social resilience cells, their assets, their rebuilding footprint. I wanted to gain a deeper insight into the nature, and the ability of all those three social resilience cells. Now for my post-doctoral research, the aim is to examine the integrative role and social-politically transformative potential of those alternative social resilient cells in Europe.

In the post-2015 double refugee affordable housing crisis, and the selection of my case studies, which were Vienna, Madrid, Athens, Berlin, Stockholm, was premised on three criteria. First, a high percentage of refugee population looking for accommodation. Second, the emergence of socially innovative responses to housing needs for refugees, and with this a political transformative potential. And third, a high housing costs overburdened rate.

So I chose to interview those organisations who were active in the field of housing for refugees and other vulnerable populations, and how individually, and also in collaboration with other social initiatives, advocated and lobbied for adequate housing for all. So I had in mind this third dimension of social

innovation, and focused on the political essence of those social innovations. Now, with respect to the third part of your question, I will give you an example.

In my PhD research, to analyse how housing actors and their networks deal with challenges, such as housing exclusion, neighbourhoods under-investment, in times of post-disaster recovery, I developed the concept of social resilience cells before field work. I did that by bringing different literatures in dialogue with each other. Political ecology, housing strategy, system innovation and research, governance, and participation. And then the concept was further elaborated, clarified, and reinforced with empirical evidence from post-Katrina New Orleans.

But the other way around happened as well. So empirical findings led me to the construction of the endogenous and exogenous institutional capital first. Then those institutional capital was produced after I studied a housing alliance in New Orleans, the Greater New Orleans Housing Alliance, which was an alliance of counter-hegemonic social resilience cells, which was established in 2007. And became much more invigorated in the later years of recovery. And it has become now a very influential urban stakeholder.

And the HousingNOLA, which was another partnership between the Greater New Orleans Housing Alliance, and other various partners, such as city and state authorities, universities, banks, local residents, non-profits, who together set up a housing plan for the city of New Orleans in order to make sure that there would be affordable, high quality housing for all in the next 10 years. So this partnership is a notable example of the building up of institutional capital in exogenous governance arrangements.

Thank you, Angeliki. Also for expanding on this question of how the connection between ideas and empirical study goes. And it goes both ways, as you've made very clear here. Frank, would you like to comment fairly quickly on this question of how to study empirically social innovations. Because that's something you have thought about of course very, very much. So what kind of empirical studies do we need? I mean, I think that's an important question.

It is a very important question, of course. We also have to learn our metier when we started doing social innovation research at a very local level at the end of the 1980s within the framework of the Poverty Tree Programme of the European Commission, as a matter of fact. The tools we had available came from different disciplines, but we were looking really for a much more integrated approach. And I think the first thing with it, if I recollect well, is look at some local development models in different disciplines, and pick some of the most relevant elements to use as a combined perspective to look at local development initiatives.

And some of our very important and interesting case studies at the very beginning were like, the BOM (Buurtontwikkelingsmaatschappij) in Antwerp, the neighbourhood development association in Antwerp. Which, as a matter of fact, we followed for almost 25 years to its dissolution. Very soon, and very early in the process of analysis, we discovered the relevance of looking at the three dimensions of social innovation, which I mentioned before interactively. I mean, satisfaction of human needs, building-rebuilding of social relations, and social-political and power dynamics, social and political transformation. And especially the link between the second and the third dimension is extremely important. If you look at the failures of many of the alternative political systems in the world over the last 100 years, it's because I think the theory and practise about the political system was just controllish. Was about how can we re-control the resources in order to allocate them according to criteria that are more egalitarian for example. But then still doing it according to very, very authoritarian, cruel, exclusive methods in a way.

And if you would have a political system in which social relations, reciprocity, respect, communication, and so on, would be put much more forward than in the actual existent political systems, and the political practises we went through, I think we would come much closer to what a real democracy, deep, deep democracy really means. So I believe there cannot be social political transformation without a transformation in social relations, in the ethics of social relations.

And it's a message we got from the anarchist literature, but also from a lot of social movements literature, and so on. But it's a message that social innovation experiences put into practice. I could give many examples, but I will abstain for now. At least this podcast should also be an advertisement for our literature for our writings of course.

Yes. I mean, so this podcast is particularly focused of course on the role of us. And by us, as I said earlier, us as researchers, but of course, it's us as many, many other things. And if we make perhaps concrete the role of researchers in trying to make this political transformation come about. So I think one part of that has been quite clear already. That through our empirical studies, and through possibly action research, and also through creating concepts that we then use to describe, for example counter-hegemonic social resilience cells, versus other approaches to resilience, we can make interventions that might help inspire others to go for these similarly radical ideas of social change.

So that is one aspect of the role of researchers. There is another aspect that I would like you, Frank, to comment on because I know that you have been involved in policy, or at least in networks dealing with policy for a long time. So the role of researchers in relation to policy, and here we go back to the macro level, so to speak. Social innovation is also subject to policy. And of course, when it's subject to policy, it's not typically framed in very radical terms in kind of going against this market economy.

So I would like you to perhaps comment on this, and the role of social innovation researchers can play in seeing to it perhaps that social innovation in policy would reflect perhaps that more radical perspective that you have. And so I would like to start with Frank, and then go to Angeliki with these questions about policy.

Yeah. It's a very difficult question. One of the books I'm writing these days, with Bob Jessop and Erik Swyngedouw these are exactly with the relationship between, on the one hand, the different roles of social innovation, research, action, profiling, designing, and so on. And on the other hand, social-political transformation. The role of researchers till now has been very diverse.

Many of the researchers in the network play political roles. Very modest roles quite often, but advising neighbourhood associations, social movements, on how to build coalitions, on how to build networks in order to maybe end up conquering city hall, as we used to call it. Getting the mayor as was the case in Barcelona. Barcelona en Comu which is one of our very hopeful examples for Europe of how bottom-up social organisations, socially innovative networks, can work towards a new political majority, which tries to implement an agenda that is very different from the city marketing agenda that, for example Barcelona used to pursue.

And being much more focused on, to the extent that is possible within the limits of urban policy, being much more focused on providing social housing, on improving the quality of public spaces, on providing better schooling, better childcare, and so on. Of course, very soon you bump into the limits of what local government can do. And so the lobbying, and the socially innovative mobilisation to also transform the other scales of governance, and of political life, remains very important. But there we have a long way to go.

But again, I refer to history. If you move on from the local unions, the local cooperatives, the local mutualities, if you look at how these associated themselves in-- I don't know what the exact term what they used at the time-- but networks of cooperatives, and so on. Building regionally organised, nationally organised unions. Working together with the progressive parties, the socialist parties, anarchist movement, the political communist party, and so on. Then, yeah, it takes decades to make this happen. What worries me however in the whole dynamics today is that individual ethics have percolated into people's mind to such an extent that it has become very, very difficult to sell collective project like transforming the political system, like the de-economising the market for votes, and turn it into a social-political participation system, and so on. I will stick to that, but it's a very important issue. Can the individualists that we have become today still become political beings? It's a question that preoccupies me very much.

Yes, thank you, Frank. And so Angeliki on this question of, well, the role of researchers in achieving this political transformation. So there are many layers to that. Again, there could be a policy layer, or there could be-- for example, this question of new welfare state, can researchers contribute to that, and how? So these types of questions, what would be your thoughts on these?

Yeah, in terms of what you mentioned about how research is problematized, this pragmatic Anglo-American policy influential discourse, I would like to give a take on that first before explaining how researchers could help in building up a new welfare state, or gossip a new welfare state. So I think we cannot understand the relationship between this alleged role of social innovation policy, and these radical social innovations, if we don't examine the political economy paradigm at the state form in which social welfare policy, and social innovation policies are embedded in. So in my opinion, social innovation policy within a narrow welfare state can make a very good symbiosis with a radical bottom-up, or bottom-linked governance.

Because the new welfare state supports with long term stable financing, and coherent support of a wide range of social innovations. Whereas when social innovation policy is embedded in a neo-liberal, or pro-market state form, that makes a more problematic symbiosis. Because we see socially innovative initiatives, especially the solidarity inspired, the more radical, are contained, or they are unsustainable, or let us say handicapped in a way in terms of access to resources, vis a vis, other kinds of social innovations, like entrepreneurial ones, or technological ones.

And this also echoed by various post-political foundational authors, like Ranciere, where they claim that social innovation can only have limited potential for transformations because they refer to this caring neoliberal use of social innovation. So they say, and they argue that, within a caring neoliberal paradigm, the welfare state is shrunken in budget, and social responsibility for cost efficiency purposes. And then the main role of this small welfare state becomes the activating and the monitoring of preselected social innovations who in turn are expected to experiment with new ideas for low-cost services. And they don't cultivate politically stronger social innovative actors.

Now, this is very obvious. We see it in the housing sector. It becomes a welfare policy failure when we see that a large portion of Europeans are struggling with housing affordability issues. And especially the most the low-income populations living in countries like Greece, Ireland, Portugal, Spain. Now, the interesting thing to notice here is that on the one hand, social innovation policy celebrates socially innovative actors in the housing sector, such as social housing providers, a community land trust, housing cooperatives, and other kinds of housing collaborative forms.

But on the other hand, those organisations struggle to gain access to public funding. So that impacts their work, and also impacts the final result of-- what-- of housing provision, adequate housing provision. So it then impacts society's most vulnerable, homeless, low-income people, migrants, young people, et cetera. So that is really a policy vacuum here. Now, this showcases the social innovation policy needs to be backed up by a new welfare state.

And not by a silo pocketed small welfare state. But not only that, it also needs to pay more attention, not only on the first dimension of social innovation, which is the satisfaction of human needs. So the state should not only treat those initiatives as policy implementers, but they should also focus, celebrate, and finance all these different social relations that they build together with the alliances, and their advocacy work, et cetera. So we need to see that as well.

Now, what is the role of researchers in those fermentations, in those processes? I believe that researchers certainly should be more active in doing trans-disciplinary research. Meaning to create learning community forums where different partners are part of, not only social initiatives, but also politicians, public authorities, citizens. To start changing a little bit this culture of governance that we have. To link more the top with the bottom, and more the bottom to be linked to the top.

And so on the one hand, we should try to apply more this kind of trans-disciplinary and actual research methods, so we can also contribute in these governance formations. But also to try to communicate science way more by giving interviews to newspapers, writing blog posts, doing podcasts, maybe doing some small documentaries, and try to promote them through YouTube, et cetera. I think this is really crucial.

Thank you, Angeliki. So again, this question of bottom-linked governance is very crucial in everything I think that that has been said. And the role of researchers can be to be part of those networks forming these bottom-linked governance systems, so to speak. So how about in EU policy, Frank? What do you think the role researchers can be? I mean, prominent researchers are involved in policy very often. Is there an opportunity to complete this bottom-linked circle, so to speak, or the whole system, by being involved at the very highest levels of policy, or do you think, given the current structures, it's a fool's errand? What would be your thoughts about this to wrap our discussion up?

Well, the short answer could be yes to the second question. I mean, the European Commission, and its administration functions as a bureaucracy, a market for lobbyists, to change the terminology. And it's amazing to see how, for example our 20 years long research trajectory on social innovation, and local development that has had a tremendous academic impact to my own benefit as well, has been completely overlooked by the European Commission. Till one day, one lobby, one NGO-- I won't mention the name. You can retrieve it in my publications-- went to speak to the commission with this brilliant idea to launch social innovation at the level of the European Commission.

They set up a panel of wizards, most of which came from the economic sector, mainstream policy sector, some NGOs, obviously otherwise you're not representative-- this is the cynical Frank speaking. And then they started writing a policy document on social innovation, which completely reflects this one pole in the literature. I mean the practical pole. In a way, it's even more conservative than what we distinguished, and pointed out as the Anglo-Saxon approach to social innovation, which is very pragmatic. This original vision of social innovation in the European policy documents was, not just pragmatic, it was market geared.

It was very much about creating second rate, second quality jobs in order to provide jobs for the poor, for the unemployed, for the unqualified, and so on. And our scientific officers who supervised our projects, and very often had to defend them at the level of the commission, they protested really against this way of proceeding-- against this way of writing a policy document that would cover the different possible impacts, and contributions of social innovation in European policy. So I had the honour to write eight pages of comments on the original documents, which were then retrieved in one footnote in the final version of the document. So that more or less-- [LAUGHTER]

That summarises it, yes.

That summarises my feelings. I'm a bit more positive now because the soup is never eaten as hot as it is served, they say. So we are Europeans. We are Belgians. So we always find loopholes, and back doors in order to locate our projects and programmes within what looks like the very mainstream, and economically acceptable social innovation programmes. And there has been a wide diversification of social innovation programmes across the different European support programmes.

So if you would make a prospectus now of the different European programmes and projects, in which social innovation pops up, you may find that you can still serve yourself ala carte. And find your thing to do your more radical, conscious raising, empowering type of social innovation. Dr. Cools who worked with Stijn Oosterlynck, he made a very interesting survey of the different initiatives of social innovation at the European level. I don't know if he has updated it, but it's really a document worth looking at. I can give you the precise reference later on.

Many thanks Frank and Angeliki. So it was such an engaging discussion that time ran out very, very quickly. And I hope that our listeners understood what we, especially as researchers, can do to make social innovation truly transformative. One of the lessons I heard from, notably from Angeliki, on the question the role of researchers is this question of being involved in these bottom-linked networks. And another thing I've heard now from Frank is that aiming for the very top is can end up as a footnote. So it might not always be the best investment of the research this time, but there is room for it as well. And it's important as well.

An official document from the commission can be a footnote in the course of history, of course. And that is our hope.

Exactly. Exactly. It is actually quite likely to be so. All right. So many thanks again. I look forward to all the discussions with you in the future. And for now, good bye to our listeners.

[MUSIC PLAYING]