

# SOCIAL INNOVATION IN QUÉBEC AND THE CO-CONSTRUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE

Based on the concept of co-construction of knowledge developed by the Center for Research on Social Innovations (CRISES), this text focuses on the mode of development applied in the Province of Québec (Canada). Part of an epistemological revolution, it asserts that collaborative research is a key for co-constructing social innovation.

*Juan-Luis Klein*

## BACKGROUND: THE UPHEAVAL OF THE 1980S

The place which CRISES gives to the question of the co-construction of knowledge is very much defined by its initial mandate, or vision, of promoting links with and between actors. CRISES was created in 1986. In that year, the province of Quebec, like other industrialized societies, faced a profound economic and social crisis, the crisis of Fordism. This phenomenon consisted of the relocation of manufacturing production to areas that were more profitable. Throughout Quebec, and in particular in Montreal, this crisis resulted in plant closures, job losses, a significant increase in unemployment and poverty.

At the same time, civil society actors in local communities and neighbourhoods began experimenting with solutions to the problems caused by this crisis. Some of these solutions proved to be effective responses to devitalization and have been sustained over time. The experiments took place in organizations, in businesses and in local social milieus. When they were shown to be positive and began to spread, they became major social innovations that have contributed to changing public policy in several areas, among them support for business creation, community services, housing, affordable child care, labor market insertion and territorial development [1]. Organizations associated with social movements were then seen as promoters of collective actions that are oriented towards a more democratic model of development and rooted in civil society.

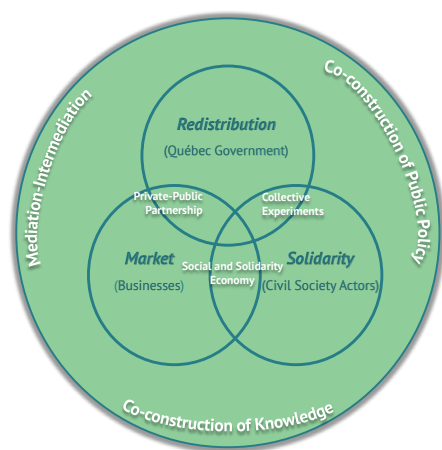
Therefore, research partnerships between innovative organizations and social science researchers were able to evolve in a fairly natural way. In that context, without abandoning the critique of capitalism, or the analysis of what was being destructed, CRISES focused on what was

emerging following the aforementioned social experiments and also was prefiguring a new mode of regulation [2]. This explains the choice of social innovation as an object of research, with regard to social transformation. It also explains why researchers opted to work with those innovative actors and to promote and possibly formalize their experiments.

For the researchers who embraced this line of thinking, this transformation of the role of collective actors meant a change of perspective. Their work preceding the Fordist crisis was focused more on social, economic and spatial inequalities in the context of capitalism. The social innovation approach, however, follows an actionalist perspective that focuses on social action and social movements. This switch responded to the great paradigmatic changes that swept the world at the time. The work carried out by the CRISES researchers together with the social actors formed part of this turning point insofar as they encouraged it, whereby they contributed to the implementation of various types of experiences, in particular regarding community development, financial tools enabling stakeholders to take an active part in the support and creation of jobs, and the structuring of a solid and recognized social economy sector [3].

## THE CO-CONSTRUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

Partnership-based research is therefore a part of the genetic makeup of CRISES. For the Center, it is a key to the co-construction of knowledge and calls on research to be reflexive about problems, the solving of which requires a collaboration between the actors as well as autonomy and criticism. Reflexivity refers here to a process wherein researchers and practitioners in practice fields become aware that they are part



### Social Innovation Oriented Québec Model Regenerated During the 80s

of the reality they are analyzing and for which they are in part responsible. Researchers are therefore not only observers. They are also actors because, through the knowledge they produce, they contribute to the definition of truth and the legitimacy of knowledge. As for autonomy and criticism, it concerns the ability of researchers and actors to envision new paths and new institutional frameworks for social transformation. It constitutes an epistemological opening that includes the will to question established knowledge, in order to promote social transformation.

The co-construction of knowledge corresponds to an epistemological vision. This vision makes it possible to produce knowledge that can be mobilized for action and that takes into account the normative and ideological foundations on which innovations are built. CRISES, given the experimental capacity provided by its links with innovative actors in the Quebec context, has become a component of a social innovation ecosystem in which various forms of participation, organization, financing and even democracy can take shape and which, when disseminated and institutionalized, constitute a milestone in a hybrid and composite model of governance combining social, public and private spheres. Moreover, it is thanks to this perspective that the interrelations between social actors, facilitated through the partnership-based research, enable CRISES to go beyond specific projects and to characterize the innovation system of the Québec model.

In fact, a synthesis of the research conducted at CRISES to date, revealed the main characteristics of the social innovation system that was established in Quebec in the 1980s in response to the crisis of Fordism and which shaped the so-called Québec model. These characteristics

are: 1) participative and shared governance, in terms of mediation and intermediation between political, community and private actors; 2) the co-construction of public policies, particularly in the areas of social services and territorial development; and 3) the implementation of a pluralist economy that is based on the social and solidarity economy and that coordinates the mechanisms and logics of the market, redistribution and solidarity [4].

### THE CHALLENGE POSED BY THE END OF A CYCLE

The cycle of innovations that regenerated the Québec model during the 1980s continued until the beginning of the 2000s. From then on, however, the actors' capacity of experimentation became increasingly constrained given the concomitant institutionalization of this renewal. Moreover, in 2003, and again in 2014, newly elected governments sought to change the governance of the Québec model to align with the New Public Management approach, thereby calling into question the continued existence of several organizations and programs that had emerged during this process. In fact, as demonstrated by Lévesque [5], the new neoliberal government is fundamentally changing the governance of the Québec province, a transformation that is less about privatizing public institutions than about imposing the governance methods of private business on them.

Thus, in the face of this new crisis, experimentation and innovation are yet again put onto the agenda, calling on civil society actors to become involved and exposing new problems and aspirations that prompt new experiences in local communities. It also calls for collaboration between researchers and actors as a means to forge new paths to change the existing order while preserving the main achievements [5]. This crisis should be taken as an opportunity by researchers and actors in practice fields to launch a new cycle of innovations oriented to the fight against poverty and exclusion, recognition of experiential knowledge, achieving gender equality, participation and the ecological transition [5].

We are convinced that alternatives exist, and that they must be explored and revealed. CRISES tries to contribute to the construction of a cognitive framework that makes these alternatives visible and viable.

### REFERENCES

- [1] Klein, Juan-Luis/ Harrison, Denis (2007): *L'innovation sociale*. Presses de l'Université du Québec: Québec.
- [2] Lévesque, Benoît (2001): *Le modèle québécois: un horizon théorique pour la recherche, une porte d'entrée pour un projet de société*. Cahiers du CRISES, no ET0105: Montréal.
- [3] Bouchard, Marie (2013): *Innovation and the Social Economy: The Québec Experience*. University of Toronto Press: Toronto.
- [4] Klein, Juan-Luis/ Fontan, Jean-Marc/ Harrison, Denis/ Lévesque, Benoît (2014): *L'innovation sociale au Québec: un système d'innovation fondé sur la concertation*. In: Klein, Juan-Luis/ Laville, Jean Louis/ Moulaert, Frank (Eds.): *L'innovation sociale*. ÉRÈS: Toulouse, pp. 193-246.
- [5] Lévesque, Benoît (2014): *Un monde qui se défait, un monde à reconstruire*. In: Lévesque, Benoît/ Fontan, Jean-Marc/ Klein, Juan-Luis (Eds.): *L'innovation sociale: les marches d'une construction théorique et pratique*. Presses de l'Université du Québec: Québec, pp. 369-383.