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SOCIAL INNOVATION BETWEEN EDUCATIONAL JUSTICE AND EQUITY: GUIDELINES FOR A “SOFT THEORY”

INNOVACIÓN SOCIAL ENTRE JUSTICIA Y EQUIDAD EDUCATIVA: LINEAMIENTOS PARA UNA “TEORÍA BLANDA”

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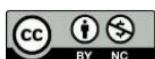
Abstract

Social Innovation is in the centre of political agendas in many countries for the resolution of several social problems and inequalities. “*Social innovation encourages us, ..., to apply a power test to each area of public policy or social action: does it share power? Is it designed in ways that will help people to feel power over their own lives?*” (Mulgan, 2019). In this paper, we ask ourselves: Can social innovation foster equity, justice and decolonise thought for a social change? Which approach is useful for social innovation? What principles should guide innovation in order to generate change and promote empowerment, justice and equity? Our aim is to offer a “soft theory” of social innovation that works towards equity, justice and decolonising thought. The contribution constitutes an extensive analysis on the theory of social innovation, the different approaches and the effects in practice. Through a critical reading of some scientific contributions by different authors (Mulgan, 2019; Phills, Deiglmeier y Miller, 2008; Radjou, Pranhu y Ahuja, 2014; Nicolescu y Bambara, 2014; Freire, 1970), an attempt will be made to reach a critical research approach and a “soft theory” for social innovation with an epistemic structure, capable of constituting a model for an approach that promotes empowerment, equity, educational and social justice, decolonisation of culture and thought, epistemic equality of the actors involved and democratisation. The results led to the construction of a “soft theory” of social innovation and reflection on these points: social innovation, equity, justice and decolonization; «the circular democratic solidarity approach» (Milani, 2022); and the construction of a “soft theory” of social innovation as a social practice with an epistemic structure based on a series of “stellar ideas” (Milani, 2022). The analysis conducted leads to the conclusion that social innovation, including the margins and promoting empowerment, is the way for social change with regard to justice, equity and the decolonisation of thought for a New Humanism.

Keywords: Social Innovation; Social Change; Equal opportunity; Justice; Empowerment.

RESUMEN

La innovación social está en el centro de las agendas políticas de muchos países para la resolución de varios problemas y desigualdades sociales. “*La innovación social nos anima a aplicar una prueba de poder a cada área de política pública o acción social: ¿comparte poder? ¿Está*



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diseñado de manera que ayude a las personas a sentir poder sobre sus propias vidas?” (Mulgán, 2019). En este ensayo nos preguntamos: ¿Puede la innovación social fomentar la equidad, la justicia y descolonizar el pensamiento para un cambio social? ¿Qué enfoque es útil para la innovación social? ¿Qué principios deberían guiar la innovación para generar cambios y promover el empoderamiento, la justicia y la equidad? Nuestro objetivo es ofrecer una “teoría blanda” de la innovación social que trabaje por la equidad, la justicia y el pensamiento descolonizador. La contribución constituye un extenso análisis sobre la teoría de la innovación social, los diferentes enfoques y los efectos en la práctica. A través de una lectura crítica de algunas aportaciones científicas de diferentes autores (Mulgan, 2019; Phills, Deiglmeier y Miller, 2008; Radjou, Pranhu y Ahuja, 2014; Nicolescu y Bambara, 2014; Freire, 1970), se intentará alcanzar un enfoque de investigación crítico y una “teoría blanda” para las relaciones sociales. innovación con estructura epistémica, capaz de constituir un modelo de enfoque que promueva el empoderamiento, la equidad, la justicia educativa y social, la descolonización de la cultura y el pensamiento, la igualdad epistémica de los actores involucrados y la democratización. Los resultados llevaron a la construcción de una “teoría blanda” de la innovación social y a la reflexión sobre estos puntos: innovación social, equidad, justicia y descolonización; «el enfoque circular de solidaridad democrática» (Milani, 2022); y la construcción de una “teoría blanda” de la innovación social como una práctica social con una estructura epistémica basada en una serie de “ideas estelares” (Milani, 2022). El análisis realizado permite concluir que la innovación social, incluyendo los márgenes y promoviendo el empoderamiento, es el camino para el cambio social en materia de justicia, equidad y descolonización del pensamiento para un Nuevo Humanismo.

Palabras clave: Innovación Social; Cambio social; Igualdad de oportunidades; Justicia; Empoderamiento.

INOVAÇÃO SOCIAL ENTRE JUSTIÇA EDUCACIONAL E EQUIDADE: DIRETRIZES PARA UMA “TEORIA SUAVE”

Resumo

A Inovação Social está no centro das agendas políticas de muitos países para a resolução de diversos problemas e desigualdades sociais. *“A inovação social encoraja-nos, ..., a aplicar um teste de poder a cada área da política pública ou da acção social: partilha o poder? Foi concebido de forma a ajudar as pessoas a sentirem poder sobre as suas próprias vidas?”* (Mulgan, 2019). Neste ensaio, questionamo-nos: Pode a inovação social promover a equidade, a justiça e descolonizar o pensamento para uma mudança social? Qual abordagem é útil para a inovação social? Que princípios devem orientar a inovação para gerar mudanças e promover o empoderamento, a justiça e a equidade? O nosso objetivo é oferecer uma “teoria suave” de inovação social que trabalhe em prol da equidade, da justiça e do pensamento descolonizador. A contribuição constitui uma extensa análise sobre a teoria da inovação social, as diferentes abordagens e os efeitos na prática. Através de uma leitura crítica de algumas contribuições científicas de diferentes autores (Mulgan, 2019; Phills, Deiglmeier y Miller, 2008; Radjou, Pranhu y Ahuja, 2014; Nicolescu y Bambara, 2014; Freire, 1970),

tentar-se-á alcançar uma abordagem crítica de investigação e uma “teoria suave” para a investigação social. inovação com estrutura epistémica, capaz de constituir um modelo de abordagem que promova o empoderamento, a equidade, a justiça educativa e social, a descolonização da cultura e do pensamento, a igualdade epistémica dos atores envolvidos e a democratização. Os resultados levaram à construção de uma “teoria suave” de inovação social e à reflexão sobre estes pontos: inovação social, equidade, justiça e descolonização; «a abordagem de solidariedade democrática circular» (Milani, 2022); e a construção de uma “teoria suave” da inovação social como uma prática social com uma estrutura epistémica baseada em uma série de “ideias estelares” (Milani, 2022). A análise realizada leva à conclusão de que a inovação social, incluindo as margens e promovendo o empoderamento, é o caminho para a mudança social no que diz respeito à justiça, à equidade e à descolonização do pensamento para um Novo Humanismo.

Palavras-chave: Inovação Social; Mudança social; Oportunidade igual; Justiça; Fortalecimento.

INNOVATION SOCIALE ENTRE JUSTICE ÉDUCATIVE ET ÉQUITÉ : LIGNES DIRECTRICES POUR UNE THÉORIE DOUCE

Résumé

L'innovation sociale est au centre des agendas politiques dans de nombreux pays pour la résolution de plusieurs problèmes sociaux et inégalités. « *L'innovation sociale nous encourage, ..., à appliquer un test de pouvoir à chaque domaine de politique publique ou d'action sociale : partage-t-il le pouvoir ? Est-il conçu de manière à aider les gens à ressentir du pouvoir sur leur propre vie ?* » (Mulgan, 2019). Dans cet essai, nous nous demandons : l'innovation sociale peut-elle favoriser l'équité, la justice et décoloniser la pensée pour un changement social ? Quelle approche est utile pour l'innovation sociale ? Quels principes devraient guider l'innovation afin de générer du changement et promouvoir l'autonomisation, la justice et l'équité ? Notre objectif est de proposer une « théorie douce » de l'innovation sociale qui œuvre en faveur de l'équité, de la justice et d'une pensée décolonisatrice. La contribution constitue une analyse approfondie de la théorie de l'innovation sociale, des différentes approches et des effets dans la pratique. A travers une lecture critique de quelques contributions scientifiques de différents auteurs (Mulgan, 2019; Phillips, Deiglmeier y Miller, 2008; Radjou, Pranhu y Ahuja, 2014; Nicolescu y Bambara, 2014; Freire, 1970), on tentera d'aboutir à une approche de recherche critique et à une 'théorie douce' du social innovation avec une structure épistémique, capable de constituer un modèle pour une approche qui promeut l'autonomisation, l'équité, la justice éducative et sociale, la décolonisation de la culture et de la pensée, l'égalité épistémique des acteurs impliqués et la démocratisation. Les résultats ont conduit à la construction d'une « théorie douce » de l'innovation sociale et à une réflexion sur ces points : innovation sociale, équité, justice et décolonisation ; « *l'approche de solidarité démocratique circulaire* » (Milani, 2022) ; et la construction d'une « théorie douce » de l'innovation sociale en tant que pratique sociale avec une structure épistémique basée sur une série des « idées stellaires » (Milani, 2022). L'analyse menée conduit à la conclusion que l'innovation sociale, y compris les marges et la promotion de l'autonomisation, est la voie du changement social en matière de justice, d'équité et de décolonisation de la pensée pour un nouvel humanisme.

Mots-clé: Innovation sociale ; Changement social ; L'égalité des chances; Justice; Autonomisation.

INTRODUCTION

Both in Europe and around the world, social innovation is at the very centre of the political agendas of many countries to solve social problems and inequalities, but also social inclusion and development for economic development. In order to bring about a change that affects social development, it is necessary for policies to take into account the needs and requirements of citizens by considering their views on the problems that affect them. However, citizens - especially marginalised ones - develop a sense of disempowerment that generates distrust of political and social institutions and fuels a sense of incompetence. Therefore,

“If the main source of the strident antithesis is a sense of disempowerment, then this is where an alternative must start – not only shifting power to the people, but also ensuring that people feel that power as well. Social innovation encourages us, in other words, to apply a power test to each area of public policy or social action: does it share power? Is it designed in ways that will help people to feel power over their own lives?”
(Mulgan, 2019; p. 64).

Social innovation is a creative and fluid process that demands improvisation, adaptability, continuous revision and imagination (Radjou, Prabhu and Shuja, 2014; Lorini, Ngwenyama and Chigona, 2022). Referring to Womack's contributions, Thevenot (2021) reminds us that resistance - here understood as African-American resistance, but extendable to any condition of oppression and marginality - requires improvisation, adaptability and imagination and this allows “to use innovation as a socially just construct to decolonize oppressive systems and to create forward momentum for their educational advancement” (p. 112). His thoughts turn to school innovation to decolonise thinking, but also approaches to teaching, promotes empowerment and it also adapts to change and transformation in multicultural social contexts.

The best-known literature on social innovation insists on its function of developing social, cultural and inclusion processes that encourage equity and justice (Phills, Deiglmeier, and Miller, 2008; Moulaert, MacCallum, Mehomoood and Hamdouc, 2013; Mulgan, 2019). To varying degrees and with different emphasis, current approaches converge transversally on the effects of social change and development of social innovation, in improving the social system as a whole, in generating social value and in transforming society's capacity for action and social relationships (Lampugnani and Cappelletti, 2016). In particular, as Lampugnani and Cappelletti underline, there are some points in common regarding the idea of innovation, the attention to defining and taking into consideration social needs and the interest in reasoning about the transformations of social relations (pp. 7 -9).

The approaches of social innovation

There are at least five approaches to Social Innovation (Bassi, 2011; Lapugnani and Cappelletti,

2016) that help define the concept and broaden its scope, highlighting above all the specificity of the humanistic character of this innovation perspective. Their peculiarities are hereby briefly illustrated:

- *The systemic approach* (Westley and Antadze, 2010) is above all interested in thinking about a model of innovation that brings about a change that can increase the resilience of the social system in the face of facing the several crises that it may have to face.
- *The pragmatic approach* (Mulgan, 2006; 2019; Mulgan, Wilkie, Tucker, Ali, Davis, and Liptrot, 2006; Murray, Caulier-Grice and Mulgan G., 2010) defines social innovation as an intervention that meets unsatisfied social needs by creating new relationships and cooperation and transforming the social fabric. Mulgan offers:

“a simple definition which describes social innovation as ‘innovations that are social both in their ends and their means. They are social in their ends because they motivated by the goal of meeting a social need. They are social in their means because they leave behind a stronger social capacity to act, and are usually, though not exclusively, spread through organisations whose primary purpose are social’ (2019, p. 10).

- *The managerial approach* (Phills, Deiglmeier and Miller, 2008) considers innovation as “A new solution to a social problem that is more effective, efficient, sustainable or fair than existing solutions and for which the value created goes mainly to society as a whole rather than to private individuals” (p. 36), placing the concept of “social value” at the centre.
- *The Juggad or frugal approach* (Radjou, Prabhu, and Ahuja, 2014; Bhatti, Basu, Barron and Ventresca, 2018; Bhatti, Prabhu, and Harris, 2020; Hindocha, Antonacci, Barlow and Harris, 2021) is an approach that places at the center the idea of doing more with less, of optimizing resources to meet adversity, of implementing innovations that take into account real needs and that involve all people, especially marginal ones; frugal innovation includes thinking agile and flexible and aims for resilience, adaptability, simplicity, inclusiveness, empathy and passion.
- *The critical approach* (Moulaert, MacCallum, Mehomood and Hamdouc, 2013) revolves around questioning the economic and development model of neo-liberalism and highlights its negative effects such as the immeasurable increase in poverty, inequalities and deprivation; consequently, this approach sees social innovation as the tool to meet human needs by transforming social relations through the promotion of processes of empowerment and active citizenship.

In the wake of this last approach, Lampugnai and Cappelli (2016) introduce the concept of

social generativity by connecting it to the Capability Approach (Sen, 1995; 1999) for an enabling perspective of social innovation that is truly capable of having “*a real impact on complex problems such as poverty or social exclusion: that is, acting on the transformation of the social fabric at their base and, above all, attributing greater capacity for action to those who do not have any*” (Lampugnai and Cappelli, 2016, p. 10).

In light of the extensive literature on these approaches on social innovation, we ask ourselves: 1) Can social innovation foster equity, justice and decolonise thought for a social change? 2) Which approach is the most useful for social innovation? 3) What principles should guide innovation to generate change and promote empowerment, justice and equity?

We will answer these questions with the aim of offering a “soft theory” of social innovation that aims at equity, justice and decolonise thought. Through a critical reading of some scientific contributions on the topic of social innovation by various authors cited above and with contributions by Nicolescu and Bambara (2014); Freire (1970), an attempt will be made to arrive to the construction of a critical research approach and a “soft theory” for social innovation that is truly an opportunity for social emancipation and inclusion.

Social innovation, equity, justice and decolonization: some theoretical reflections

What is social innovation? By innovation we can mean both the process and the result. In each case, it must meet these criteria: (1) novelty and therefore originality for those who use it and for society; (2) improvement, so the innovation must be effective and efficient, but also sustainable; (3) it must have diffusion or, we would add, some durability; and (4) finally, the last criterion is “social” value (Phills, Deiglmeier and Miller, 2008, pp. 37-39).

In fact, “*an innovation is only truly social if the balance is oriented toward social value*” (Phills, Deiglmeier and Miller, 2008, p. 39). Social innovation, therefore, is oriented toward building value for society, we could say that it is oriented toward the Common Good (Milani, 2022).

In this direction, then, social innovation wants to challenge social imbalances. Indeed, it aims to generate sources of love, care, cooperation and hope. It wants to re-imagine democracy.

Social innovation is by its nature democratic and participatory, calls for cooperation and partnership actions, is inclusive, and aims to create social value, well-being, and improvement for all. In social innovation, the purpose of empowerment is implicit: the issue of “power” and of its imbalances and that of an active democratic participation are at the heart of the improvement goals (Mulgan, 2019). Mulgan writes: “Social innovation is, at root, a promise of power: power not only to receive but also to shape” (p. 64).

At the same time, the principles of equity and social justice combined with the revitalization of democratic power make innovation a tool for decolonizing thinking and the injustices that come with it (Kalema, 2019; Thevenot, 2021). Social innovation imposes and promotes a process of cultural

change (Milani, 2022, p 41).

In this perspective, social innovation is consistent with Freire's pedagogy (1968-1970) which, in the dialectic of oppressor-oppressed, conscientization and dialogue lays the way for the decolonization of thought and culture. Social innovation, by creating active and democratic participation, building partnerships and promoting empowerment, allows minorities to be a significant and different voice and to promote the decolonization of thought and culture. This requires a change of perspective on the part of the academic world so that it promotes processes of democratization and participation.

The circular democratic solidarity approach: a new look from the point of view of Universities

Universities are a common good for the Common Good (Milani, 2017) and requires today a democratization of knowledge and participation in the construction of processes of knowledge, experimentation and innovation. The social and ethical responsibility of universities is growing: this requires new postures on the part of the academics (Milani, 2022).

Mulgan (2019) points out that there are three "missing habits" in academia:

“The first missing habit is listening and in particular listening to the people whose money is being spent – about their lives, their hopes and fears and where new knowledge could achieve the most for them” (p. 268).

“The second missing habit is, surprisingly, experiment. In many walks of life improvement comes from vigorous and continuous experimentation” (p. 268)

“The third missing habit is opening harvesting – the habit of always trying to tap the widest range minds, organisation and data” (p. 268)

According to Mulgan, these missing habits stem from the status of the academics. The first stems from their presumption that they know what people need; the second from the presumption that their first draft is the best; and the third from the presumption that they and their colleagues have a monopoly on wisdom (2019, p. 269).

These three shortcomings constitute a central issue in the question of research ethics and the political commitment of the University: in fact, academics' assumption of a top-down posture and a misrecognition of the meaning and power of research and social innovation thwart the sense of promoting the Common Good and the assumptions of democratization and participation (Milani, 2022, p. 42).

We need to recover for a democratic ethics *an equal posture* in building processes of experimentation and innovation. We take, therefore, *a critical ethical stance*: we think it is now obsolete, in the perspective of social innovation, to remain anchored to the perspective of *top-down*

and *bottom-up* approaches as this means, again, creating *epistemic and power disparity*, even when we want to strengthen the importance of the so-called "*bottom-up*" perspective (Milani, 2022, p. 43).

We propose the hypothesis of a *democratic-solidarity approach to research*, an approach that we might also call circular in that in the geometric figure of the circle there is no beginning and no end and there is no point that is more important or exposed than any other. With the adjective *democratic* we want to emphasize that the decision-making power belongs to everyone and is shared because it is the result of co-creation, cooperation, co-construction and co-design; with the attribute *solidarity* we intend to remark that a solidarity is generated among the different actors and partners of the innovation process in which each is, primarily on the *epistemic level*, indispensable to the other for an innovation that generates empowerment and nurtures the Common Good (Milani, 2022, pp. 43-44).

Innovation as a social practice can and must also contribute to eliminating epistemic inequalities in the research and in partnership building processes.

"For a "soft theory" of social innovation as a social practice: twenty "stellar ideas"

Regarding the theory and models of innovation there is still much debate. What is certain is that there are different approaches and models and that this plurality is implicit in innovation as social practice. Our proposal for a "soft theory" of social innovation, while taking into account all the contributions examined, follows the pragmatic approach in terms of the need to use a light and contextualized model of social innovation and, at the same time, recognizes the critical approach and the *Juggad or frugal approach* for their attention to issues of empowerment, social justice, participatory and emancipatory processes.

Aware of this, we propose some "stellar ideas" to indicate some guiding concepts for a "soft theory" of social innovation as social practice. These "stellar ideas" constitute the epistemic structure of this "soft theory" of social innovation and allow a critical analysis *in* and *of* the innovation process to evaluate its social, emancipatory, inclusive, democratic, participatory and scientific scope.

- 1) *Transdisciplinarity*: which invites us to cross the strictly disciplinary boundaries, to reconstruct contextualized and local epistemologies, methodologies and validation processes. Transdisciplinarity is a real political project (Milani, 2015) because "Transdisciplinary researchers increasingly appear to be rehabilitators of hope" (Nicolescu and Bambara, 2014, p. 17). The critical approach recognizes transdisciplinarity as an indispensable criterion in the methodology for social innovation (Moulaert, MacCallum, Mehomood and Hamdouc, 2013).
- 2) *Transinstitutionality*: social innovation requires overcoming institutional fences (for example between universities, political-administrative institutions, NGOs, bodies, social or educational services, schools, cultural, educational and sporting associations...) to build spaces for an equitable distribution of power to choose, direct and guide the whole process.

- 3) *Complexity*: it means, following Mulgan (2019), taking into account the following “*the idea of organizations operating on ‘the edge of chaos; the idea of emergence, of complex structures and institutions emerging from very simple principles; and the ideas of non-linearity, that many social processes do not follow linear relationships’*” (p. 119).
- 4) *Ethicality*: because;

“social innovation as a field seems inseparable from its underlying ethic, which is one of collaboration – acting with, rather only to or for, a belief in rough equality, a cultural commitment to the idea of equality of communication (...) and perhaps an implicit idea that through collaboration we can discover our full humanity” (Mulgan, 2019, p. 135).
- 5) *Social actors*: it is necessary to consider that partners as social actors are essential and require questioning the theories of social action, to cultivate a rooted, extensive and collective “co-intentionality” (Freire, 1970) to promote change.
- 6) *Collective Mind*: social innovation calls for knowing how to cultivate a Collective Mind (Milani, 2013; 2023) to generate positive synergies to act with care with heedful and mindful actions (Weick and Roberts, 1998).
- 7) *Learning by doing and learning by dialogue*: these concepts known in the social and educational fields require us to accept the challenge of failure and the unexpected and to remain open to 'other' thinking.
- 8) *Advocacy, self-advocacy and co-advocacy and rights*: so that the innovative process is an opportunity for empowerment, liberation and social justice. We focus on the concept of co-advocacy which we define as “a shared, co-participatory, ‘reticular’ advocacy approach [...]”. The complex process of implementing co-advocacy is defined as equal, democratic and pluralist between the various parties and actors involved” (Milani and Crotti, 2022, p. 10).
- 9) *Equity and justice*: for innovation that avoids discrimination, inequality, marginalization and exclusion. In the UN 2030 Agenda, the theme of equity is central and transversal. Every educational social innovation must be oriented towards Objective 4: “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (UN, 2015).
- 10) *Democracy and participation*: for equality among partners and mutual enhancement in participation
- 11) *Including the margin*: this is a principle derived from *Jugaad Innovation* (Radjou, Prabhu and Ahuja, 2014, pp. 187-219), that is innovation as the art of making do. Jugaad innovators are close to marginalised groups and work to meet their needs and ensure access to goods, services and education, and their approach sees co-creating value together with

marginalised groups by recognising that “marginal segments are not marginal minds” (p. 213).

- 12) *Frugality*: that is, “*doing more with less*”: in contexts of scarcity of resources and possibilities, “being frugal is not a luxury, but a necessity” (p. 99).
- 13) 13) *Conscientization*: innovation aims at emancipation, cultivating the right to hope, the dignity of citizenship, “*critical intentionality*” (Freire, 1970) and self-educational planning. Following Freire's thought, acquiring conscientization means “by making it possible for people to enter the historical process as responsible Subjects, conscientization enrols them in the search for self-affirmation and thus avoids fanaticism” (p. 10)
- 14) *Intuition*: it is the ‘stellar idea’ to the basis of innovation and guides the processes of elaboration and design.
- 15) *Improvisation and resilience*: why the innovation process is not linear and rigid and requires adaptability. Frugal innovators know that they must learn to improvise and get out of the ‘comfort zone’ to open themselves up more to the creative process (Radjou, Prabhu and Shuja, 2014).
- 16) *Creativity and divergent thinking*: are indispensable to plan and implement innovation and to find new and original solutions; but above all, social innovation itself, as a process, through co-planning, dialogue and the search for alternative solutions develops and cultivates creativity and divergent thinking (Caulier-Grice, Kahn, Mulgan, Pulford and Vasconcelos, 2010).
- 17) *Experimental flow*: innovation requires keeping the experimental flow continuous, constantly reviewing and re-reading the process, welcoming new visions and new solutions.
- 18) *Wellbeing, happiness and sustainability*: many social innovators emphasize that well-being and happiness are at the heart of the purpose of innovation; about this, Mulgan writes: “there are signs that the growing interest in wellbeing could provide both theoretical and practical glue to hold social innovation practice together and provide a common measure of success” (2019, p, 135).

The OECD emphasizes that social innovation places the well-being of people and communities at its center (OECD, 2000). Thus, a positive and essential circularity is created between social innovation, well-being, happiness and sustainability too: in fact, it is “necessary to (re-)direct social innovation towards the promotion of the wellbeing of future people” (Vasconcellos Oliveira, 2021), which, inevitably, finds its roots in social and personal well-being in the present, generating happiness intended as a sense of satisfaction and fulfilment of one's existence.

This perspective of social innovation also intercepts the concept of *Buen Vivir* which “is not only a way of knowing Others’ worldviews, but it becomes an action for social justice, when we recognize the value of giving voice to other visions that are often silenced or marginalized in the current international debate” (Pescarmona and Gozzelino, 2020, p. 256).

19) *Decolonizing thought and practice*: the previous reflection by Pescarmona and Gozzelino (2020) leads us to consider the importance of decolonizing thought and practice, as well; social innovation is participatory, democratic, transdisciplinary and transinstitutional. It therefore requires us to adopt the posture of decolonization, rejecting practices of cultural, political domination (Freire 1970; Ngũgĩ, Gugi and Thiong’o, 1986) even ‘philosophical’, favouring change in relationships, in cultural transactions and in the models of interaction between different institutions and partners in innovation processes. The denial of ‘colonial’ thinking and the removal of ‘other’ cultures are strongly rooted in dominant cultures and are also due to the suppression of historically contextualized thinking and the problematization of plurality of empirical reality.

20) *Epistemic justice*: the recognition of the different social actors as protagonists of the social innovation process requires us to assume fully the principle of epistemic equality and epistemic justice (Milani, 2022) among the different ‘voices’, the different approaches, the models of action and the thoughts: it is a matter of giving epistemic dignity to all the partners involved and recognizing their ability to read, even capacity for scientific and complex readings, starting from points of view and ways of building thoughts, theories and tools, starting from practice. Epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2017) takes away power, the possibility of expression, communication and action, relegating the other to a simple object of the social innovation process because the person who speaks is judged and perceived as epistemically inferior, thus causing discrimination. We consider this ‘stellar idea’ as the maximum expression of the empowerment process implicit in the dynamics of social innovation.

CONCLUSIONS

“The most important task of social innovation is to rekindle a sense of power, a sense that we are able to shape and create a future in which we would want to live. That in turn depends on the ability to see and imagine alternative possible futures that can guide us to the action” (Mulagan, 2019, p. 223).

We therefore think that social innovation, as it includes the margins and promotes empowerment, is the way of the future for social change regarding justice, equity and the decolonisation of thought for a New Humanism. In particular, we believe that the “circular democratic solidarity approach” (Milani, 2022, pp. 44-47) and the twenty “stellar ideas” for a soft theory of social innovation as a social practice can constitute a robust and strongly epistemic perspective oriented towards an emancipatory and decolonizing innovation of thought, cultures and practices.

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