



**QUASI: ‘Is the [organization] a meaningful unit of analysis to study social innovation?’**  
**Where and how to study – unit of analysis debates**

1

Marc J Ventresca @marcventresca Dec 2020

# How to study ‘social innovation’: Focus on firm [organization] as unit of analysis – a view from research design

- Vexed issue of research design: units and levels of analysis; need to bring these conversations back on the ‘agenda’ – per ‘firm’, ‘social innovation’
- Brief from one current project (Oxford and Skoll Foundation) - *Pathways to systems change*
- Why focus on organization?
  - Site (per J Mair, today)
  - Means, from which to notice variance in complex context
  - Policy- and practice- relevant, tractable

# Pathways to System Change: Conceptions from 30+ (global) funders

(Savaget & Ventresca 2020)

- How do global funders define systems change? According to whom? And (why) do these conceptions matter? One of 3 empirical studies in this project
- First findings on conceptions among funders:
  - Disrupt the status quo
  - Influence chains of cause-and-effect
  - Empower agents
  - Coordinate agents better
  - Scale up
  - Scale deep
  - Impact beyond organisational level

# New/ revised research question(s) and change of emphasis

- Focus on research design, re-thought in terms of practice and policy desiderata (Nicholls&Edmiston 2018; Seelos &Mair 2017)
- Start from comparative and longitudinal design; integrate lessons from rich portfolio of cross-section and single case studies (Tilly 1989; Ostrom et al 2004; Burton&Beckman 2007; Beckman&Burton2008)
- Tools and theory to thread together studies of diverse forms of organizations – an old debate e.g., community ecology (DiMaggio 1986) now with new ‘rendering text’ tools (Hannigan et al 2019)
- Recognize inductive questions: What to learn from reports, experiences of ventures (e.g., ‘theory of change’) and when to bring ‘normative’ models to assess those accounts (Besharov 2014)?
- How to study the ‘adjacent possible’ for organizations and social innovation (Kauffman 1990; Felin et al 2014)?
- We have emphasized institutions, complexity, and logics. Now ready for a generation of work that reconnects to context in new, old ways (Selznick 1949, 1957; Kraatz&Block 2017; Mikes&Kaplan 2015)



**‘The future is already here,  
It is just very unevenly  
distributed.’**

**– W Gibson**





# Governance of the 'commons'

(borrowed from Wikipedia)

'2009 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences. Cited "for her analysis of economic governance," saying her "research brought this topic from the fringe to the forefront of scientific attention ... by showing how common pool resources – forests, fisheries, oil fields or grazing lands– can be managed successfully by the people who use them rather than by governments or private companies". '

'In 1973, Ostrom founded Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis at Indiana University. Examining the use of collective action, dialogue, trust, and cooperation in the management of common pool resources (CPR), her institutional approach to public policy: Institutional analysis and development framework (IAD).'



Elinor (Lin) Ostrom, 1933-2012

# D Meadows, *Leverage points* 1999

- The more I listened, the more I began to simmer inside. "This is a **HUGE NEW SYSTEM** people are inventing!" I said to myself. "They haven't the **SLIGHTEST IDEA** how this complex structure will behave," myself said.... "It's almost certainly an example of cranking the system in the wrong direction

