

Avoiding solid ground Innovations to work on the social

Teresa Matus

Doctor in Social Work, UFRJ Rio de Janeiro. Doctor in Sociology, IUPERJ Rio de Janeiro. Full Professor, University of Chile. Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Chile. Coordinator of Nucleus on Effective Innovations in Public Policy ✉

<https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/cuts.96708>

We are facing humanitarian crises: the business of war, climate change and disasters caused by a flurry of initiatives from countries reacting out of step and out of time, waves of migratory movement, social regression, daylight robbery by major corporations, and democracies at risk from diverse forms of authoritarianism. Living through these crises, I think about where social work emerged from: the dawn of the first Great War of the twenty-first century, fighting for women's rights, for a form of work more respectful of the citizenship of all, for suffrage, for peace. Building paths and avoiding the solid ground of the commonplace. As Jane Addams would put it, we were born not to obey the law but to challenge it. This has been a consistent thread across the generations. It makes us a community made up of those who have gone, those alive now, and those who are yet to come: it is what makes us social workers. And so this background of experiencing crises gives us great strength, a way of seeing, a negative potential to act: NOT like this, we will NOT let this happen. But to be faithful to that spirit of co-creation, of public-spirited innovation, we also have to reimagine some of our deep-rooted ways of practising, training, researching, influencing. Once again, we have to avoid solid ground and venture further – perhaps not merely into the sea, but into the air.

I will take my own experience as a starting point. I entered the University of Concepción to study medicine in March 1973 (as young as any 16-year-old could be). I was fascinated by the range of ills and pains on an individual but also a public health scale, and by the Chilean tradition that culminated in Allende, where if one desired to change something, one studied medicine. I passed the Mural of Latin America painted by Siqueiros in the *Casa del Arte*, I walked through the university hall with its motto enshrined in stone: “*por el Desarrollo libre del Espíritu*” (for the free development of the spirit) ... and a few months later, on 11 September, Chile woke up to the military coup. When we were back, a professor (one of the remaining ones) told us: “my dear students, now that the revolution is over and we have vanquished the Marxist cancer, your job will be science and reform” (we were a generation condemned to trudge). And after three years of resistance and uncertainty among that academic community, I walked through the university hall again, passed the mural by Siqueiros, took my entrance exam once more and changed to social work. It was magnificent, absolutely on the front line, parallel, clandestine. There was no need to go to the classes, only to some of them; what was important was elsewhere, in other classrooms. There was a direct question to be answered: which side you were on. Whether you were for or against the system, serving domination or emancipation, criticism or oppression. That was brilliantly clear and certainly false. Since then, I have had a growing curiosity to observe the features of a criticism that **can also be structured as a reassuring simplification**, in the sense that it is transformed into an antagonistic – moralising – dual corpus. A criticism that demands “purity” and relegates dissonance to fragmentation. It is made up of perfect stories, of repeat offenders, of violent naturalisations. And so I would like to describe that criticism as a kind of inhabitable fidelity, unsustainable if one is seeking equality, fraternity, liberty; a place where there are no precarious lives and what can become reality is expanded. That is why I believe it is a fundamental task in these times of crisis to tackle critical simplifications in social work and demand innovation with memory, in a revitalising spirit.

To keep pushing for an infinite modernity made up of dreams and catastrophes ...

Because faced with far-right radicalism that deviously appropriates liberty, it must be defended as a set of fundamental rights won in the modern era. Modernity, that post-nineteenth century project (the time Hobsbawm referred to as the Age of Revolution) is philosophically expressed as an indivisible triad: liberty, equality and fraternity; as an idea offering infinite paths for a democratic society. However, this also frames **the path of temptation to separate**. Certain societies have delayed liberty in the name of equality. This dualization, as Hannah Arendt would argue, turns those States into totalitarian regimes, which make up the various dictatorships in our world. To put it plainly and clearly: without liberty, there is no democratic rights-based society.

But it is also true that in Latin America, the modern aspiration for over two hundred years has been to fight for more liberty. It is unquestionably a key element of a progressive equation. Interrupted by the horror of the dictatorship and its grievous violations of human rights. Today we find ourselves before a paradoxical possibility of succumbing to an inverse temptation: **believing that liberty can be achieved at the expense**

of equality and by renouncing fraternity, as shown by Bolsonaro in Brazil and now Milei in Argentina, closing public universities and violating the social rights of women and workers. This is deeply entrenched in Chile, a country that has developed quickly in economic terms and extraordinarily slowly in terms of social and cultural rights, and where the law on heterosexual divorce was put off for 104 years, recently concluding in 2004. The arguments were repeated: will the country be ready for the change? Along the same lines is a telling article from Ximena Hinzpeter and Carla Lehmann in the Chilean Centre of Public Studies (CEP): “*Los pobres no pueden esperar, la desigualdad sí*” (The poor can’t wait, inequality can” (CEP2000). And so the development/inequality relationship changes for that of development/vulnerability, shifting difficult burdens onto subjects and creating a series of vulnerable people, communities, neighbourhoods. **Allow me to make a point here: subjects are always creators of value.** For those who profess a religious faith, we are all children of God. For the secular, we are all citizens – not first, second or third class. So what is vulnerability and where does it come from? It comes directly **from systems, from the quality of their supply, from their opaque effectiveness, whether State or private organisation.** This is a critical substantive issue when considering a new Constitution. Because **good quality supply quickly changes the lives of a few and condemns the rest of the population to a long crawl. And this is something we must address.**

Edwards described this as the *weight of the night*, outlining a slow Chile: if a child has spent more than five years in a social protection system, the OECD states that it will take them over 100 years to overcome poverty. Despite all the progress made in this area (CREAD; SENAME; LOS NIÑOS PRIMERO; MEJOR NIÑEZ); 48% of those adolescents are in prison today. As far as women as concerned, the UN says that it will take 136 years to achieve a level playing field. In other areas, time has simply run out, as shown in numerous studies on climate change and its perverse effects at various levels, proposing new terms such as “sacrifice zones”. This shows how critical public education is for Chile: to open up other worlds, where artists, poets, scientists and researchers can reimagine the future together. This is why the freedom to choose a school for one’s children is at least incomplete, if we bear in mind that 92% of the top intake at universities and technical institutes come from private schools.

As a result, human rights are situated universal rights. It is not appropriate, then, to fragment them or to set them against each other as minority identities, or as gender ideologies or as excessive expectations of indigenous peoples. **Because they make up a whole**, they entail the requirement that they must be accepted as a universal whole. One that guarantees dignity, respect and quality standards for all citizens.

The foregoing entails avoiding a conception of human rights as arising from nature: rights are a societal construct. According to Habermas, one of the main features of modernity is that normativity can no longer be drawn from old rules of natural law, but rather that there is a need to construct normativity on its own basis (Habermas, 1990). This has been a constant controversy in the debates on a new Constitution for Chile, the people using the same force as the NO with which they rejected Pinochet to say again, twice: NO, NOT like this. An example: in 1776, Abigail Adams wrote in a letter to her husband: “in the new code of laws...remember the ladies”. History shows us that John Adams forgot them. The constitutional referendum held on 17 December 2023, driven by the right, does not forget the ladies. It does more than that: perhaps (and this opens up the debate) it seeks to remind us of our ancestral place, anchoring us back in nature. In a structure that posits **THE** family (and the use of the singular is no accident here) as the fundamental unit, in which women’s rights to decide on abortion, parity, care, redistribution and recognition are subject to the whims of the law. Not so for matters concerning ownership, where the proposal considered exemptions from the payment of housing contributions (including for high-value properties) without the need for legal regulation, even though tax-specific regulation in Chile has not traditionally been included in constitutional texts. This reminds us of the Human Development Report 1998, the last one organised by that great thinker Norbert Lechner, which referred to the **paradoxes of modernisation**, whereby Chile has constructed (as Weber would put it) a gilded cage for products, individual freedoms, consumer goods, while paying a high price: **ratifying that we are in favour of a modernised country but one lacking in modernity.**

And so I conclude this first part where I began: fundamental rights are a synergic expression. The greatest risk is to de-institutionalise instead of reinforcing them. The great constituent challenge is to attach them to a range of innovations that show other paths to development, doing so together, plurally and collaboratively, considering the unmet expectations of the past and thus thinking about the urgent future.

Perhaps in the air

Does anyone not know, and perhaps admire, the concept of Marx: “all that is solid melts into air”. Well, perhaps today the air is the most solid thing we have. I would hence like to propose an aerial idea; a platform, an open co-laboratory that can be gifted. Because an enormous value of those working in the social sphere is undoubtedly their spirit. This strength, from the pioneers to today’s thousands of professionals, in terms of seeking another possible life for all of that *rest of the world* as Benjamin calls it, the uprooted, those who have, for Ciorán, fallen into time. This long trail of inequalities, abuses and arbitrariness, where their hope becomes as uncertain and precarious as their lives. The question is: how do we communicate and impact, how do we show this set of investigations, studies, analyses, implementations and projects that we have developed on the world of social work?

The Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Chile, from this global south, has a proposal and an invitation. The proposal is for a social sciences research co-laboratory. It is an innovative disruption that changes the direction and content of current organisational processes. The central point is the view that the means and procedures by way of which this would be achieved have become insufficient and anachronistic, or lack the force they could have (Christensen, 2006 and Mazzucato, 2021). But this is feasible today: universities can develop a roadmap of changes to open up this cultural opportunity, relying

on the principle and practice of open science. For this purpose, it is advisable to identify the benefits and incentives of this approach as an innovation that strengthens the whole education system (League of European Research Universities, 2018, p.13).

One of the main benefits of the ability to share information is the strengthening of lines of research and training. Information can enjoy a more widespread and widely debate life cycle, with a better framing of critical issues and strategies at various levels of knowledge problems. Both the Beijing Declaration (2019) and the FAIR Data Ecosystem recommend standards such as implementing forms and templates for data verification, analysis and description, in addition to reviewing conditions of access and reuse based on the following principle: “as open as possible, as closed as necessary” (FAIR, 2016). This change today finds support from the European Open Science Cloud (EOSC) and has been adopted by the NIH Data Commons, Australian Research Data Commons and African Open Science Platform. The Global Open Access Portal (GOAP), financed by the governments of Colombia, Denmark and Norway and the US Department of State, presents an instant update on the state of open access to scientific information in 158 countries worldwide¹. In the European Union, a requirement has developed in terms of research data and findings being published in an open system after a certain time, so that investments become catalysts for research and innovation worldwide. This has taken the specific form of Horizon Europe, the EU’s research and innovation funding programme for research and innovation from 2021 to 2027. In Latin America, UNESCO has performed important work in terms of processes, components and proposals to develop open science, written in a report-based format for decision-makers (Ramirez and Samoilivich, 2019, 2021).

Chile’s National Research and Development Agency (Anid) incentivises the *Colección SciELO Chile* as an open science initiative to reinforce the democratisation of scientific knowledge and make the findings obtained using public funds more transparent and traceable. As a result, based on this set of domestic and international initiatives to develop comprehensive university approaches and new communication, production and investment models, this is an interesting and feasible path.

In this sense, the Social Sciences Faculty at the University of Chile is creating a digital social sciences innovation ecosystem (González et al., 2016), designed as a network of open science platforms. The origins of this proposal lie in the award of a FIDA project in 2022, under the academic direction of Professor María Antonieta Urquieta. Her diagnosis identifies a paradox affecting social sciences in Chile: the new science, technology, knowhow and innovation development strategy launched on 16 June 2022 recognises the importance of securing development in the arts, humanities and social sciences on the same terms as for natural and pure sciences, to create a fluid and interconnected system that encourages multidisciplinary integration. Yet despite this, resources have not been allocated to social sciences in a consistent manner. This is clear from the latest version of the tender process for the fund for the promotion of scientific and technological development (FONDEF), which did not approve social science projects. In this regard, the Ministry of Science needs to prioritise collaboration over competition between researchers and disciplines and to encourage the implementation of social science research as envisaged in the aforementioned strategy. This remains a pending matter (Fischer, 2022).

The foregoing raises a greater challenge of innovation. Social science faculties and other bodies have developed a culture of adaptation in response to the organisational tensions of academic capitalism (Brunner and Labraña, 2021), which finds expression in a consistent trend towards increased individual or group productivity, with specific interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary studies by researchers from various universities, but without an explicit agenda for collaboration between social science faculties in Chile. This task has been pending for decades. It requires a conception of integrated development models and systems involving synergic innovation in terms of teaching, research and public impact (Matus, Mascareño and Kaulino, 2008).

In matters of public interest in the social sciences, there has been a gap between knowledge production at universities and public policies and social programmes (Capano, 2020), in addition to civil society and its organisations (Cai, 2020). This is a quadruple imperfect helix: (a) there is a lack of a knowledge repository, where what has previously been done can be found, since each change of government or foundation management revisits diagnoses and solutions; (b) there are different timelines in each sector and it is difficult for knowledge to be suitably integrated into these timelines; (c) there is no collaborative motor that incorporates strict quality standards to develop basic and applied research findings; (d) there is no eco-digital data system where one can find and manipulate multiple sources of knowledge. A form of implementation that is up to the task and effectively reduces the complexity of social phenomena subject to research is hence unlikely.

Bringing together all of the above (Matus, 2023), the FASCO eco-digital innovation system proposes an approach based on the following logic: knowledge production + training + communication, with innovation at the base:

$$\frac{P + F + C}{I}$$

Innovation occupies a dual position here. First, within the changes in the subsystems of knowledge production, training and communication, where it is the knowledge production subsystem that offers key inputs

¹ www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/portals-and-platforms/goap/

for training. Second, innovation creates conceptual changes affecting the vision of a new, comprehensive-level education model. The preliminary layout of this vision is as follows:



The first sphere of the university education model under this approach is underpinned by the production of knowledge through basic and applied research, innovations and transfers. This feeds a second sphere that is understood as a training network, from pre-degree to the various forms of continuous and postgraduate education. And this makes it possible to develop the third sphere, which contains an unprecedented communication process, making the best of this knowledge available in the domestic and international public contexts. The model is also traversed by three concepts that are expressed across the various spheres of the systems: an intersectional gender approach, a transdisciplinary standpoint and a strong focus on public impact. From here, we can consider new offers, intermediate certificates, hubs that adopt other pedagogical systems, and postgraduate courses located at the intersection of disciplines addressing complex problems, proceeding in directions that are appropriate and with opportune timing that foreshadows better decisions.

In the area of knowledge production, this gives rise to the **“Social Sciences Co-Laboratory”**, where the aim is to assess and disseminate current work but also to do the same for different generations. With a Spotify-type rationale, each researcher will have an introductory profile with an interview where they can tell us how they conceived their line of research and what it would be connected to today. Their projects will be there, including application forms, data and their various findings. This will be an innovative means of discovering their backgrounds, making it possible to connect with the preferences of those using the platform. The co-laboratory is also thinking of networking with other social sciences faculties and thought networks, to be able to make an effective contribution to their impact at national and international level. This is key: innovation here is not closed but rather a permeable system, susceptible to system/environment connection. Adjusting processes (Christensen, 2006) and innovating in terms of how we see the social dimension are crucial, particularly when reconsidering those persistent mechanisms that accompany extreme social phenomena.

Creating available innovation, and doing so in the sectors most heavily hit by the process of modernisation, becomes the DNA to change the face of poverty, of environmental crisis, of the shaping of territories and of our observation of the failings of that innovation (Matus et al., 2018).

To open up worlds that avoid solid ground, this type of platform ecosystem comprises a new language, one that uses progressively self-generating and reworkable materials. This provides us with a map, a gradually expanding mobile cartography: a topology that forges a new rationale. But at FACSOC we want to push further, and on 13 June 2024 we will launch this open science platform. Those who wish to can follow it at <https://www.youtube.com/user/webfacso>. But best of all, from then onwards we wish to gift this platform to all social work faculties, departments or schools that have research they want to share with others, that are prepared to venture along this path of transparency, the formulation of their projects, some of their information, their different findings: creating a network or networks in this solid air. To do so, we can connect at <https://colaboratoriocienciasociales.uchile.cl/>

I conclude with a broader invitation: in 2025, Latin American social work has its 100th birthday. We are going to celebrate in Chile, in mid-October. You are all specially and eagerly invited to take part. Perhaps it is time. To shake up the foundations, avoid solid ground, and open up in unimagined ways the grand, solid and universal avenues of liberty, equality and fraternity.

Let's all go together, into the air.

Referencias

- Benjamin, W. (2010). *Libro de los Pasajes. Iluminaciones II*. Editorial Taurus.
- Brunner, J.J. y Labraña, J. (2021). *La investigación en ciencias sociales y humanidades: sus debates e impactos*. Puntos de Referencia del Centro de Estudios Públicos. https://www.cepchile.cl/cep/site/docs/20210120/20210120154005/pder560_jjbrunner.pdf
- Buck Morss, S. (2004). *Mundo soñado y catástrofe*. Balsa de la Medusa.
- Butler, J. (2009). *Vida Precaria. El poder del duelo y la violencia*. Editorial Paidós.
- Capano, G., y Pritoni, A. (2020). What really happens in higher education governance? Trajectories of adopted policy instruments in higher education over time in 16 European countries. *Higher Education*, 80 (5), 989- 1010.
- Christensenn, M. (2006). Innovación disruptiva para el cambio social. *Harvard Business Review America Latina*, 1, 3-8.
- Cioran, E. (1988). *La caída en el tiempo*. LAIA/ Monte Ávila.
- Comisión Europea (2013). *Social innovation research in the European Union*. Disponible en: http://ec.europa.eu/research/socialsciences/pdf/social_innovation.pdf
- CTCI (2022). *Estrategia Nacional de Ciencia, Tecnología, Conocimiento e Innovación para el Desarrollo de Chile*. Disponible en: <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/portals-and-platforms/goap/>
- González, T.M., Vergara, L.K Luque, F.J. Rodríguez, N. Bonilla N.A. (2016). Revisión del concepto de ecosistema como unidad de la naturaleza 80 años después de su formulación. *Revista Ecosistemas* 25 (1), 83-89. <https://doi.org/10.7818/ECOS.2016.25-1.12>
- Honneth, A. (2011). *La Sociedad del desprecio*. Editorial Trotta.
- Jay, Martin (1984). *Marxism and totality: the adventures of a concept from Lukács to Habermas*. University of California Press.
- LERU (2018), *Open Science and its role in universities: a roadmap for cultural change*. League of European Research Universities Advice 2018 <https://www.leru.org/files/LERU-AP24-Open-Science-full-paper.pdf>
- Matus, T. Kaulino, A. Urquiza, M.A., Cortez-Monroy, F. y Mariñez. C. (2018). Lógicas de auto observación de la falla para una innovación efectiva. *Revista MAD*, 38, 1-21. DOI: 10.5354/0718-0527.2018.51026
- Matus Sepúlveda, T. (2023). Abrir mundos: potenciales de inflexión en la investigación universitaria. *Anales De La Universidad De Chile*, 20, 367-383. <https://doi.org/10.5354/0717-8883.2022.70410>
- Mazzucato, M. (2021) *Misión Economía. Una carrera espacial para cambiar el capitalismo*. Ediciones Taurus.
- OECD (2017). *Systems Approaches to Public Sector Challenges: Working with Change*, OECD Publishing, Paris. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264279865-en>
- Ramirez, P. y Samoilovich, D. (2021). *Ciencia Abierta en América Latina*. UNESCO
- Scheffer, M. (2009). *Critical Transitions in Nature and Society*. Princeton Press.
- Villalobos Majarrez, A. (2015). *Los tiempos de Walter Benjamin*. Errancia Litorales.
- Webb, S. (2019). *The Routledge Hanbook of Critical Social Work*. Routledge Internacional.