

RESEARCH PAPER

The discourse of social innovation and gender equality

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ABSTRACT

In Swedish government discourse, social entrepreneurship and social innovation have come to be articulated as *the* solutions to a wide array of societal challenges and social problems. Within this discourse of social innovation, gender equality is articulated as a key determinant in conquering all societal challenges defined in the UN's *Agenda 2030*. The aim of this paper is to analyse the Swedish government's discourse on social innovation, and how it intertwines with gender equality in select government texts and media material. The analysis starts from the assertion that the dominant discourse on social innovation and social entrepreneurs is part of generating the possibilities and limits of social change. Earlier research on social innovation discourse has shown a strong bias towards private market solutions, and that social innovation has become an essential trait in the neoliberal reforming of the state. Because of their particular influence, governments' public endorsement of social entrepreneurs and social innovation in their work is one of the factors shaping the understanding of what social change and gender equality are and how they can be achieved. The analysis shows that the government discourse of social innovation produces an understanding of businesses as having a strong desire and capacity for social change and an altruistic agency. From a discursive point of view, this could be read as if the public sector is lacking such qualities and thus the responsibility for social change is placed in the hands of private corporations. Social change and gender equality are hence made intelligible within an economic logic, equating social change with doing business and gender equality with making profit. Gender equality is thus articulated through the discourse of social innovation, as a means to an end.

Introduction

The Swedish government claims to be feminist (Regeringen, 2019) and that Sweden is the most gender-equal nation in the world (Regeringen, 2000), a notion that has been reiterated in both Swedish self-image (Towns, 2002) and its reputation abroad (Svenska Institutet, 2012). During the latter part of the twentieth century, the Swedish welfare model added to the country's reputation as a strong, social democratic, centralized and women-friendly state (Sainsbury, 1996; Hobson, 2006), providing for its citizens (Andersson, 2009; Wennemo, 2014). Such notions are currently being challenged by the discourse of a new Swedish model (Frostberg, 2018) that articulates social entrepreneurship and social innovation as solutions to societal challenges and social problems. State feminism has turned towards neoliberal entrepreneurialism in recent years, which has impacted the feminist project in Sweden (Ahl *et al.*, 2016). The government's turn towards entrepreneurship and innovation is manifested in a variety of arenas. In 2001, a government agency (Vinnova) was founded to promote innovation and several official government inquiries have been undertaken to

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promote innovation. One example is *New Thoughts on Doing Good: On Shifting Perspectives in Public Administration* (Innovationsrådet, 2013; see Sjöstedt-Landén, 2016). Such ideals are also expressed in the Swedish school curriculum, where it is explicitly stated that students should be shaped to embrace entrepreneurial ideals (Lindster Norberg, 2016).

The innovation discourse centres on the market as the preferred provider of basic services and thereby sees the state as relatively inefficient (Scott-Smith, 2016). Furthermore, because of austerity politics, social innovation has become central in reforming social services (Martinelli, 2012). Social innovation argues in favour of, and provides a solution to, such politics (Häikö *et al.*, 2017). In recent government documents, social innovations have been set out as a response to the societal challenges specified in the UN 2030 *Agenda*,¹ ranging from climate change to gender equality (Regeringen, 2018). Furthermore, Vinnova claims that gender equality is a key determinant in this pursuit (Vinnova, 2020a). Such claims articulate a discourse in which social innovation and gender equality are linked and are given a central role in solving a multitude of societal challenges. However, it has been argued that the contemporary focus on women's entrepreneurialism in governmental policy might in fact weaken state feminism as well as the feminist project in general in the Nordic countries (Ahl *et al.*, 2016). This paper looks at how social change is expressed and understood within a nexus of social innovation and gender equality, and how this is made intelligible through government articulations.

The discourse of social innovation is intriguing as it appears to incorporate both an all-encompassing hope for the future and the added value of doing good. *The Government Strategy for Social Enterprises: Sustainability through Social Enterprises and Social Innovation* (Regeringen, 2018, henceforth the *Strategy*), launched in 2018 by the Swedish ministry of enterprise and innovation, states:

An important resource in facing many societal challenges, not least social ones, is the increasing group of businesses and entrepreneurs active in the field called 'social enterprises'. These social entrepreneurs in business and organisations, social start-ups, innovative social enterprises and work-integrated social enterprises and more, both in the private and idea-driven sector, offer new solutions and have a strong driving force to contribute to the improvement of society. (Regeringen, 2018, 4, author's translation)

Social enterprises are portrayed as an important resource for tackling societal challenges. Social entrepreneurs, in both the private sector and the so-called 'idea-driven' sector, are described as offering new solutions and as possessing a strong desire to make society better. In fact, they are presented as *the* solution: 'It is social entrepreneurs . . . who offer new solutions'. Within these solutions, gender equality holds a special place, according to Vinnova, the government innovation agency. What does this shift from government towards social entrepreneurship mean, and what role does gender equality play?

How social innovation, social enterprises and social change are understood within a particular context is shaped by contemporary discourse. Equally, how actors, such as governments, social innovators and social enterprises, act in a certain time and place arguably shapes the discourses of social change. Governments in particular may be argued to do so as they speak from a position of authority, possess influential channels of communication and, of course, can implement policies at their own discretion. The dominant understanding of social innovation and social enterprises thus constructs the possibilities and limits of social change. How are these understandings produced? And how is gender equality intertwined in these constructions? In order to analyse government discourse on social innovation, governmental articulations at different levels have been collected; namely, the government strategy for social enterprises, Vinnova's writings on

¹ Agenda 2030 is the UN's plan of action for people, planet and prosperity. It contains 17 sustainable development goals.

social innovation and descriptions of those projects that received government funding connected to the *Strategy* (see Appendix 1). This constitutes a body of material that can capture articulations of the government discourse of social innovation and gender equality at different levels and in different contexts.

Consequently, the aim of this paper is to analyse the Swedish government's discourse of social innovation, and how gender equality is intertwined with and articulated within this discourse, in order to discuss its potential for political change. How is social change articulated? How is gender equality constructed and produced in the context of social innovation? What roads to social change become (im)possible as a result of this discourse of social innovation? In order to situate the study, the next section will discuss critical research on social enterprises, social innovation and gender equality. The paper will then present the empirical material examined in the study before moving on to the analytical framework and ultimately the analysis.

Social enterprises, social innovations and gender equality

This section presents genealogical research on social innovation in order to understand its history and the hegemonizing of the innovation discourse. The focus then moves on to the European Union's policy discourse on social innovation, especially in relation to studies of gender equality. In scholarly work, there are no single definitions of social enterprise, social innovations or social entrepreneurship (Pol and Ville, 2009). Even though social innovation and social enterprises are popular terms in policy and public discourse, the terminology is not new. Some have argued that activities such as libraries, unions and maternity care in their first historical manifestation should be regarded as social innovations (Augustinsson, 2016). In a genealogical study comprising the uses of the term over the past 150 years, Godin (2012) shows that the meaning of 'social innovation' has developed from an historical context of socialism to a contemporary one of new public management (NPM). In an NPM context, social innovation primarily means incorporating social issues into an economic framework (Scott-Smith, 2016).

Regardless of its outcome, it is commonly presupposed that 'innovation is always good' (Sveiby *et al.*, 2012). Innovation is perceived as the ultimate solution to social problems in the West because it is regarded as a major contributor to economic growth, and thus pivotal for the prosperity and wealth of a nation. By further exploring the understanding of innovation as 'always good', Fougère and Harding (2012) argue that innovation has become a powerful discourse enabling Western nations to distinguish themselves from others through the connotation of innovation as progressive and modern. Because of the dominant understanding of innovation in contemporary policy texts as something new and competitive, Fougère and Harding argue that 'it becomes impossible to speak of failed innovations – an innovation that fails is not an innovation' (Fougère and Harding, 2012, p.34). Consequently, unwanted and unintentional effects of innovation are seldom considered (Sveiby *et al.*, 2012).

Even though social innovation and innovation are not the same, they are presented by means of a similar discourse and are often understood as closely connected concepts (Godin, 2012). Scott-Smith (2016) has studied the innovation discourse in a humanitarian aid context, and contends that it is difficult to oppose the innovation narrative of 'new and better' (similar to Fougère and Harding, 2012; Sveiby *et al.*, 2012). Furthermore, Scott-Smith (2016) shows how the innovation discourse connects the expansion of the private sector with liberation, producing a contrast with an inefficient state, thereby overstating the object (the specific innovation) and simultaneously 'understating the state', which undermines the role and agency of the state by praising market relations and innovations as the preferable path for delivering basic services (Scott-Smith, 2016, pp.2236–7).

In a European context, social innovation is primarily expressed as a positive force in EU policy discourse, which rarely criticizes contemporary political systems of social reform (Moulaert *et al.*, 2013). By analysing European Union social innovation policy discourse, Fougère *et al.* (2017) can argue that the social innovation discourse strengthens the hegemony of the neoliberal political

project, thus naturalizing and deepening its hold. By incorporating the inherent critique contained within neoliberal ideology, such as state roll-back and reduced public spending, into itself, the discourse of social innovation conceals the negative impacts of neoliberalism, thereby making it difficult to criticize. The popularity of social innovation can be explained by the growth in austerity politics (Häikö *et al.*, 2017) because it simultaneously argues in favour of, and provides a solution to, such austerity. Social innovation has become a central aspect of reforming social services (Martinelli, 2012).

Gendered dimensions of social innovations are an understudied field, especially studies that focus on qualitative aspects of gender (Lindberg *et al.*, 2016). Lindberg *et al.* (2015) argue that social innovation contains both potential and pitfalls regarding gender equality. It can be used to identify ‘unsolved societal challenges of gender inequality’ as well as ‘enabl[ing] the identification and analysis of the newness and transformative potential of socially gendered aspects of structural change in organisations and society’ (Lindberg *et al.*, p.480). In a general sense, the EU’s social innovation policy opens up opportunities for more inclusion, argues Lindberg (2016). However, she warns that social innovation can lead to a ‘reinforcement of existing gender patterns’ because of a variety of aspects, such as a focus on excellence. Through an interview study with members of a ‘Swedish network promoting women’s employment, entrepreneurship and innovation’ (Lindberg, 2016, p.411), Lindberg *et al.* (2016, p.421) conclude that the possibilities relate to identifying ‘gendered societal challenges and social needs, development of gender inclusive solutions and promotion of gendered change’. The limitations relate to involving women only as a category and thus disregarding the complex and intertwined relationship of gender with class, ethnicity, sexuality and age. However, the authors call for further empirical studies focusing on gendered aspects of social innovation. Ahl *et al.* (2016) explore how a shift from state feminism towards neoliberal entrepreneurialism has affected the feminist project in the Nordic countries. They conclude that a turn to women’s entrepreneurialism in governmental policy might weaken state feminism as well as holding out possibilities for new forms of feminist action through enterprise. The opportunity, they argue, lies in the fact that this is feminist action decoupled from the state. Ahl and Marlow (2019) contend that Swedish government policies on women’s entrepreneurship are infused with postfeminist discourses of empowerment, individuality and skills, which conceal the risks associated with entrepreneurship as a career choice for women, such as discrimination and substandard welfare benefits.

Innovation and social innovation are commonly associated with new, progressive and alternative ways of tackling social needs. It is important to analyse critically the discourse of social innovation because most attention has been focused on the innovators. The unchallenged imperative of innovation as ‘always good’ seems to pave the way for an understanding of the innovator as progressive and modern, and furthermore veils the context of austerity politics and the weakening of the state in favour of entrepreneurial subjects and new markets – not least in studies of gender and innovation. A focus on the discourse of social innovation and gender equality will, however, shed light on how this discourse shapes our understanding of doing social change *and* doing gender equality.

Empirical material

The empirical material in this study comprises a wide variety of material that together can provide a broad picture of the Swedish government’s discourse of social innovation, and how gender equality is intertwined with and articulated within this discourse. The entry point into the empirical material will be the *Strategy* because it speaks from a position of authority and thus may be argued to be influential in shaping the discourse of social innovation. The *Strategy* captures how the government articulates its strategic goals and approach towards social entrepreneurship and social innovation, and to some extent, towards social change. In addition to the *Strategy* itself, media material about it and different texts published by, or connected with, Vinnova will be analysed.

The *Strategy* is a document that does not include specific policy decisions, such as rules, legislation or the allocation of resources, but rather states the government's overarching goals and intentions within the field of social enterprises and social innovation. It is a 12-page document published in 2018 by the ministry of enterprise and innovation. The main goal of the *Strategy* is formulated as:

to strengthen the development of social enterprises, to stimulate their participation in solving societal challenges and contribute to the public sector's awareness and use of social entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurs as valuable actors in the development of a sustainable society. (Regeringen 2018, p.6, author's translation)

This goal is broken down into five focus areas and a section targeting its implementation. The *Strategy* states that it is in line with the government's ambition to implement the UN's *Agenda 2030* for sustainable development. Nowhere in the document or on the government's webpage is it stated which documents, proposals or preparatory work form the foundations for the *Strategy*.

To cover more of the political discourse of social innovation and gender equality, and in order to tease out connections between government branches and levels, this paper draws upon material from Vinnova, the main government agency responsible for carrying out the *Strategy*. This material consists of text from Vinnova's webpage about social innovation and gender equality: the agency's government assignments regarding social innovation and gender equality, and its own definition and description of these areas and how the government assignment transforms into calls for funding. Additionally, the empirical material for this study includes descriptions of projects funded by Vinnova as a direct result of the governmental strategy. The selection of such projects was rendered from three different calls for funding. The first call was extensive, targeting 'more established innovation promoters aiming at creating better conditions for social innovations' (Vinnova, 2020, call 1, 11 projects in total). The other two calls were open to 'social entrepreneurs or intrapreneurs in new or established business, idea-driven organizations or the public sector' (Vinnova, 2020, calls 2 and 3, 10+10 projects). Calls 2 and 3 focused on 'developing and testing solutions that address social needs in a new way and contribute to positive social progress' (Vinnova, 2020, calls 2 and 3). In total, 31 descriptions of funded projects are included in the study. These descriptions were written by the project owners themselves and are on average 1.5 pages long, consisting of a description of the project's aim and goal, the expected effects and results, and planned set-up and implementation. By combining this variety of material, a broad collection of texts embodying the discourse of social innovation and its intertwining with gender equality has been gathered, from the general strategic level down to particular social innovation projects converting the strategic goals of social innovation and gender equality into practice. This material provides information about articulations of the social innovation discourse from government level down to the businesses of social entrepreneurs.

Analytical framework

From a discursive approach there follows an understanding that power relations are embedded in language. The term 'discourse' encapsulates the understanding of knowledge and meaning as unstable, and closely intertwined with power. It also includes the idea that the difference between what is said and what is done is dissolved; hence, both language and action have discursive consequences. Discourse refers to the system of articulations that makes up the framework for our understanding of a certain phenomenon. This framework lays the foundation for our understanding as well as enabling and limiting how and what we can articulate about the subject at hand. As discourses are contingent, they are in a constant state of (re)articulation, and thus may often appear inconsistent or illogical (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985).

Taking a discursive understanding as a starting-point, empirical material will be analysed using a method inspired by Carol Bacchi's (1999, 2009) post-structural approach to policy analysis: 'What's the "problem" represented to be?' (WPR). A WPR approach includes questioning the idea of the underlying good of policy and entails an understanding of policy as not primarily consisting of measures to solve 'existing' problems, but rather as a form of governing through defining and shaping common ways of understanding things as being problems (i.e., *producing* problems). Bacchi (2009) also argues that, more often than not, there are no explicit descriptions of what the policy purports to solve, but that there are always implicit problem representations that help to shape our understanding of the world.

Drawing on a Foucauldian understanding of power and problematization, a WPR approach to policy means understanding problems as constituted within a discourse of competing articulations (Bacchi, 2009). Using WPR as a way to approach policy analysis means that the aim is not to evaluate the success of policy or the intentions of policymakers, but rather to scrutinize what assumptions it rests upon, what is taken for granted and how this affects public discourse. Engaging with WPR is a way of making an implicit problem explicit, and asking questions about what effects the implicit problem representation produces, as a way of revealing its underlying premises. Another way of putting this is to ask what understanding has to be(come) established in order for it to be possible to articulate a particular policy and for it to seem reasonable, and what understandings that policy helps to produce. This way of approaching the analysis is also helpful in scrutinizing who and what is considered to be responsible for the existence of the problem and who is best positioned to solve it.

The empirical material in this study is thus not articulated outside broader society but is instead created within a certain frame of understanding. This means that the *Strategy* is not simply addressing 'a problem' outside itself in order to fix it; instead, 'the problem' is created within the process of developing the *Strategy*. Certain ideas, politics or understandings are taken for granted during this process. When a certain discourse becomes hegemonic or dominant, other understandings become veiled and more difficult to address. The analysis will not reveal policymakers' intentions or policy outcomes, but a critical analysis of the propositions, suggestions and solutions in the *Strategy* is helpful for understanding the constitution of what the problem is that social enterprises and social innovation are to solve and what understandings it helps to produce.

The methodology of WPR thus focuses on working backwards from specified goals, policies and proposals in order to scrutinize and unveil what the problem is implicitly represented to be. WPR is designed for analysing policy and has been used to inspire the analysis of the empirical material in this study: the *Strategy*, media material about it, Vinnova's publications on social innovation, its calls for funding and descriptions of the funded projects connected to the *Strategy*. This material is included because it may all be said to contribute to the constitution of the discourse of social innovation and gender equality and may provide insights from the perspectives of such contexts.

The discursive effects rendered by this material should not be understood as 'outcomes', as in a traditional policy analysis, which measure the rate of success, since a post-structural perspective rejects such an understanding of evidence. Instead, the focus is on analysing the possible understandings that are produced by discourse (Bacchi, 2009, p.15). Through concurrent articulations, a discourse stabilizes meaning, which renders some articulations or knowledge unthinkable, and hence other ways of understanding and addressing the problem become veiled. Inspired by Bacchi's WPR methodology (2009, p.2), the following questions guide this paper's analysis:

- (1) What's the 'problem' represented to be?
- (2) What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem'?
- (3) What is left unproblematic in this problem representation?
- (4) Where are the silences?

The above questions constitute a careful selection from the original seven questions in a WPR analysis. The scope of this study recommends the selection of these four. Particular focus will be on the first two questions because they are at the heart of understanding the logics behind problem representations. The results will be discussed in relation to the other two questions.

Analysis

Throughout the *Strategy*, there is no explicit or clear description of what problem(s) it is supposed to solve. Thinking with Bacchi (2009) and her analytical question about the representation of a problem, one can focus on the claim that social enterprises and social innovations are responses to ‘the many challenges that stand before society’ (Regeringen 2018, p.4). These challenges are not defined in detail; instead, a wide array of indistinct examples are given to suggest what they might be: ‘for example integration [of immigrants], health, education, the climate, the environment, more efficient ways to improve employment or gender equality’ (Regeringen 2018, p.4). It is stated that social enterprises are a means to achieve socially useful goals to ‘reduce marginalisation, improve the climate and the environment or contribute to a safer living environment’ (Regeringen 2018, p.4). Nowhere in the *Strategy* is there a more detailed description of the problem(s) that it aims to solve. However, these broad descriptions and suggestions imply that we are faced with huge but elusive and complex problems that demand attention and subsequently make a forceful response seem logical. Phrased differently, the production of a discourse on societal challenges legitimizes the installation of policies to handle such challenges.

Proposed solutions

Analysis begins by scrutinizing the suggested propositions in the *Strategy* in terms of implied problems, after which it moves on to the descriptions of the projects that have been chosen for funding by Vinnova. In order to achieve the *Strategy*’s overarching goal – to ‘strengthen the development of social enterprises’ (Regeringen, 2018, p.4) – five focus areas and their interventions are presented. By investigating the suggested propositions in the *Strategy* and how they are framed, one by one, the problem representation can be teased out.

Supply and demand constitutes the first of the five focus areas, a notion that captures an understanding of the inherent ability of the market to regulate the prices of particular goods in a capitalist economy (Gibson-Graham *et al.*, 2013, pp.85–6). When it comes to social enterprises and social innovation, this mechanism does not seem to function properly and thus needs to be nurtured. The *Strategy* argues that, in order for social enterprises to function, the ‘business relations or collaborations between, or the partnership with, the public sector need to be clarified’ (Regeringen, 2018, p.8). What does such a clarification of relations and collaborations entail? For one thing, it is argued that ‘knowledge about social innovation in the public sector needs to be strengthened’ (Regeringen, 2018, p.8). In terms of the relationships that need cultivation, it is argued that, if they are clarified, this will ‘help develop social enterprises and nurture new ideas and collaborations which will foster innovative solutions to societal challenges’ (Regeringen, 2018, p.8). A particular relation that is addressed is that between buyer and seller, and the ‘fostering of innovation procurement’, because this will ‘make it easier to buy the services of social enterprises’ (Regeringen, 2018, p.8).

These excerpts seem to imply that, as of today, despite social entrepreneurs’ ‘strong driving force to make society better’, this force does not function properly in a liberal capitalist system of supply and demand. The *Strategy* seeks to ‘strengthen the knowledge of social innovation on state, regional and municipal level regarding social innovation’ and to ‘strengthen the knowledge about alternative ways of collaboration with the public sector’ (Regeringen, 2018, p.8). One way of handling this problem is to supply the public sector with more knowledge that will enable it to purchase more services from social enterprises. ‘This will develop and expand social enterprises as well as

new ideas and collaboration which will foster new innovative solutions to societal challenges' (Regeringen, 2018, p.8). Educating the public sector in this area is articulated as a win-win solution because this will simultaneously strengthen social enterprises and help the public sector to solve societal challenges. Hence, the problem of supply and demand is represented as a problem of deficient knowledge. The underlying assumption of such focus on producing and disseminating more of a certain kind of knowledge can thus be read as a desire to reshape the discourse of social innovation (as the solution) and of the public sector (as needing solutions). Such an underlying assumption is in line with Scott-Smith's (2016) argument that innovation discourse articulates market solutions as the preferable supplier of basic services, depicting, in contrast, the state as inefficient.

The next area of proposition – strengthening business and advisory/mentoring expertise – concerns different ways to 'level the playing field' between social enterprises and 'businesses with a more traditional business model' (Regeringen 2018, p.8). According to a traditional understanding of liberal capitalist theory, businesses compete within a free market on equal terms. In the *Strategy*, however, it is suggested that such a milieu is not optimal for social enterprises and is therefore in need of intervention. This will be achieved by four measures on four levels:

- (1) 'strengthening the business acumen in social enterprises', suggesting that they should think and act more like proper businesses;
- (2) 'enhancing the incubator support for social enterprises', which presumably entails providing subsidized or free services, such as office space or management training;
- (3) 'strengthening the intermediates of social enterprises', which arguably means stimulating lenders and venture capitalists to provide more capital; and
- (4) developing and spreading 'knowledge about successful business and financing models in social enterprises and idea-driven organisations', which is presumably about promulgating best practice.

The problem is represented as a lack of business acumen in social enterprises. In order to level the playing field of competition (i.e., free-market capitalism), social enterprises need to be taught to think and act more like traditional for-profit businesses. They need a helping hand in their start-up phase, they need privileged access to funding and stories of their success need to be disseminated. The underlying assumption of the problem represented here is that social enterprises harbour such a driving force and potential for social change that the government must be willing to nurture and protect them in the marketplace (Häikö *et al.*, 2017).

The third area of proposition regards funding. In the *Strategy*, it is stated that 'access to funding is a challenge for social enterprises' and therefore the aim is to 'increase the knowledge about, and the ability of the private and public sector to invest in, social enterprises' (Regeringen, 2018, p.8). This articulation reveals two things about what the problem is represented to be. First, the problem is represented to be that social enterprises cannot survive on their own within a free market, they need external funding. And secondly, the problem is represented as that neither the private nor the public sector is investing enough in social innovations and that they need schooling in these areas, which in itself reveals the underlying assumption that suggests a desire for more (social) business in the public sector. This assumption is further strengthened when read in the light of Scott-Smith's (2016) exposition of how the innovation discourse undermines the role and agency of the state.

The fourth area of proposition concerns the clarification and measurement of effects. As stated in the *Strategy*, 'efficiency measurement is a precondition to create long-term and sustainable business models and to attract capital and new business' (Regeringen, 2018, p.6). Being able to put numbers on 'efficiency' and 'results' is stated as a necessary precondition in order to create sustainable business models and to attract capital and new business. Sustainability is thus connected to business models, which indicates that here it has something to do with business survival, or that a *sustainable* business is a business that can generate capital or new business on its own.

A condition for a client or financier to invest in a social enterprise is that it is able to demonstrate/show results. . . . Results in traditional business are measured by economic outcome, but in social enterprises by societal outcome. (Regeringen, 2018, p.10, author's translation)

The problem is here represented to be that of not being able to demonstrate results, and that showing results by societal outcome is not an easy task. Strengthening knowledge about effect measurement of social enterprises and stimulating the rise of a new market of actors who can provide effect and results measuring is proposed as the solution. Once more, it is indicated that social innovations and social enterprises need help to thrive in the free market. This builds on the underlying assumption that 'the social' can be intelligible only within an economic discourse of measurement, and that such a discourse needs to be actively produced. Since social innovations do not produce results merely in a traditional business-like manner (by making a profit), this kind of business is not intelligible within a capitalist system and therefore there is a need to invent a new 'currency' in line with established capitalist knowledge. Inventing new systems of value measurement can arguably be read as a way to incorporate social enterprises and social innovation into a calculus rationality. This is not seen as a problem.

All this is intriguing for two reasons. First, there is a call for a change in the way one should measure social innovations that extends beyond profit. Secondly, this knowledge regime also actively produces an understanding of non-profit organizations as needing to become more like for-profit corporations. Numbers play an important role here, but in different ways. For-profit organizations should be measured outside of the logic of capital, with numbers other than profit, in their 'effects on society' On the other hand, non-profit organizations should become more like for-profit organizations, introduced to a capitalist logic by strengthening their business acumen and more traditional business models. Using a technology of numbers, this knowledge regime attempts to blur the lines between the two while grooming them so that 'financiers will want and be able to finance social enterprises' (Regeringen, 2018, p.10). In other words, make them intelligible and more attractive purchases or investments.

The fifth and final area of proposition in the *Strategy* is the development of knowledge and venues. The *Strategy* states that: 'the development of social enterprises is partly hampered by a lack of effective knowledge dispersion, best practices and venues for learning' (Regeringen, 2018, p.10). The lack of an effective dispersion of knowledge is articulated as hindering the development of social enterprises. This brings about the need for venues where actors and potential actors in social enterprises can meet and collaborate. In order to achieve this, the government intends to 'foster a national structure for knowledge dispersion about social innovation and social enterprises' and to 'foster venues for social enterprises, their clients and financiers' (Regeringen, 2018, p.10). Once again, the lack of knowledge about and support for social innovation is highlighted, but this time the problem is represented to be about the *dispersion* of the new knowledge about social innovation. The clients and financiers of social innovation and social enterprises need more knowledge and venues where they can meet, which further strengthens the analytical point that the underlying assumptions centre around the apparent need to establish the field of social innovation as intelligible within a capitalist discourse of numbers, measurement and value creation.

In sum, the propositions in the *Strategy* represent the problem to be that social enterprises do not function properly in a capitalist marketplace and that social innovations are not intelligible in capitalist terms. The problem is further represented as a lack of knowledge and that the public sector is not buying enough services from business.

Social innovation and gender-equality projects

If societal challenges are treated with consistent vagueness in the *Strategy*, the issue of gender equality has a more central role in the articulations of Vinnova. In its calls for funding for social innovation projects, Vinnova states that 'gender equality and equality, beyond being goals in

themselves, are powerful tools to achieve all of the goals of *Agenda 2030*' (Vinnova, 2020, call 1). Gender equality is hence articulated as a key determinant of all the societal challenges stated in *Agenda 2030*, which indicates huge significance. Exactly how gender equality has such significance is not explained, so precisely what problems are being addressed here, and how social innovation may solve them, remains vague despite being given a significant and powerful meaning.

Turning instead to those instances where gender equality is explicitly mentioned, it becomes evident that this is a requirement for project funding. The ability to contribute to gender equality is therefore evaluated in the application process (Vinnova 2020, call 1). Vinnova articulates this requirement by stating that:

All of the population's skills and needs should be taken care of and our support is conditional upon providing benefits for both women and men. Statistics show that innovation projects where men and women have the same power to exercise influence are more successful. (Vinnova, 2020b, author's translation)

For projects to receive funding, gender equality needs to be integrated into the project as well as reflected in the composition of the project member group. The problem with gender equality is thus represented to be the idea that innovations achieved by women may be missed, or that some innovations are not offered to women. The underlying assumption of such a representation is a logic of seeing women as an untapped market, both as innovators and as consumers. As Ahl and Nelson (2015) have shown, articulating women as an untapped market is also prevalent in the Swedish government discourse on women's entrepreneurship in policy. They conclude that women are articulated as an underused resource with untapped potential in the area of entrepreneurship. Furthermore, their analysis shows how this argument was utilized in promoting 'restructuring of the public sector toward private management' (Ahl and Nelson, 2015, p.283). Similarly, Berglund *et al.* (2018) show how women's entrepreneurship policy (WEP) in Sweden articulates the same kind of narrative. Women 'are to bring new innovations based on their experiences and perspectives to the marketplace and supply goods and services to fulfil as yet unmet needs' (Berglund *et al.*, 2018, p.549). Additionally, the problem is represented to be an issue of success – that unequal gender representation will be less successful. Gender equality is thus not articulated as a question of power, justice or even of rights, but as something that can enhance profits. This is in line with Ahl and Nelson (2015), who show how gender equality is seldom articulated as a goal in itself in the Swedish government discourse, but as something that can enhance economic growth. Gender equality is mentioned only once in the *Strategy*, as one of many challenges facing society. However, Vinnova regards it as key to solving all the challenges defined in *Agenda 2030*.

What becomes evident when scrutinizing the funded projects from the three calls is that gender equality is not the focus, despite Vinnova's dictum (stated both in the calls and on its website) that gender equality is key to solving all the societal challenges defined in *Agenda 2030*. In terms of frequency, one out of three projects mentions gender equality in some way. The problem representation of gender equality in the project descriptions differs and can be divided into three themes. First, the problem is represented to be a lack of knowledge, exemplified in projects that aim to generate more 'knowledge about gender mainstreaming' or more knowledge about 'gender-equal micro funding' (Appendix 2, P1, P2). Underlying assumptions of such a problem representation are that gender inequality is not a question of power (Rönblom, 2009) and more knowledge automatically leading to gender equality (see Tollin, 2000; Eduards 2002).

Secondly, the problem is represented to be about numbers of men and women. Illustrative examples of such articulations are interventions that strive for 'gender-equal selection when recruiting' (P3) or 'to provide gender-equal recruitment and support to social innovators' (P4), and underlying assumptions of such problem representations are that women and men are different and so contribute with different perspectives (see Ahl and Nelson, 2015). This problem representation is also connected to integration and concerns the hiring of women born outside Sweden (P5), or newly arrived women (P6).

The final problem representation concerns the highlighting of ‘norm critique’ as a tool to achieve gender equality. Vinnova states that:

Norm-critical innovation concerns the challenging of norms to create new ideas and solutions that contribute to gender equality and equity. By scrutinizing and analysing from a norm-critical perspective, we see things we would otherwise miss. This might be needs that are not met or target groups who are excluded because of how a solution or product is shaped. . . . – insufficiencies that impede social development and growth. (Vinnova 2020c, author’s translation)

In the project descriptions, norm critique is mentioned as a tool to help increase women’s participation or to reach more women as a target group (P7). In one description, it is stated that the project will ‘norm-critically stimulate social innovation’ and have a ‘norm-critical mode of operation in meetings and counselling’ (P8). Hiring norm-critical consultants when developing an app is considered important (P9). Vinnova argues:

Norm-critical innovation is, plain and simple, a way to find new insights and innovation potential in a systematic way, and to convert them into new solutions that contribute to inclusive social progress and sustainable growth. (Vinnova 2020c, author’s translation)

Vinnova promotes norm critique and norm-critical innovation as a tool for gender equality; however, gender equality itself is rearticulated by both Vinnova and the projects to mean growth (for similar results see Ahl and Nelson, 2015). In sum, the problem with gender inequality is represented as a lack of knowledge, an issue of numbers or a lack of norm critique. The last two mirror Vinnova’s own writings about gender equality. Norm critique is used as a tool to reach a larger market. Since women are often overlooked, both as innovators and as consumers, gender equality becomes a tool to reach an untapped market (Ahl and Nelson, 2015; Berglund *et al.*, 2018). In this way, norm critique is framed as a tool for growth rather than a tool for justice. Furthermore, when gender inequality is articulated as a problem of numbers whereby women are outnumbered, it becomes a numerical issue and not an issue of the distribution of power (Berglund *et al.*, 2018). This understanding of gender inequality is well studied in gender-equality research and has been criticized many times (Magnusson *et al.*, 2008; Rönnblom, 2009; Squires, 2007; Bacchi and Eveline, 2010). Berglund *et al.* (2018, p.531) argue that women’s entrepreneurship policy in Sweden has changed during the last two decades ‘from entrepreneurship as a way to create a more equal society, to the goal of unleashing women’s entrepreneurial potential so they can contribute to economic growth’. Yet another change can be discerned, a change towards articulating gender equality through the discourse of social innovation.

The driving force of business

Social enterprises can be understood and defined in different ways (Pol and Ville, 2009). The Swedish government sees the social enterprise as having three distinguishing features. First, whatever its commercial format, it is a means of tackling specific societal challenges. Secondly, results are measured not in terms of profit, but rather in relation to the goals formulated *vis-à-vis* the societal challenges that the business aims to overcome. And thirdly, the surplus value is mainly reinvested in the business or invested in another project aimed at tackling societal challenges, rather than extracted as profit for the owners (Regeringen, 2018, p.4). The *Strategy* contends that:

An important resource in facing many societal challenges, not least social ones, is the growing group of business owners and entrepreneurs who operate within what is called ‘social entrepreneurship’. Engaged social entrepreneurs in business and NGOs, social start-ups, innovative social entrepreneurs and work-integrated social entrepreneurs, both in the private and idea-driven sectors, offer new solutions and have a strong driving force to contribute towards making society better. (Regeringen, 2018, p.4, author’s translation)

It is presented as common knowledge that the business format *per se*, whether it be social enterprises or regular business, incorporates a desire for social change: ‘a strong driving force to contribute towards making society better’. One underlying assumption of the presented threat of societal challenges and the attribution of enterprises’ and entrepreneurs’ ambitions to remedy them, is that some business owners work for the improvement of society rather than to create profit. From a discursive horizon, representation works relationally: when one articulation gets stronger others fade or are constructed as opposites. From such a cue, a silence in the above articulation is that other kinds of actors become constructed as the opposite of social innovation. Hence they are represented as lacking such ambition and driving force.

We face huge challenges in society, where the big systems can be too slow and not sufficiently novel in their thinking. Social enterprises have a unique ability, for example when it comes to integration or climate change. (Mikael Damberg, minister of enterprise and innovation, Frostberg, 2018, author’s translation)

There is an underlying assumption that the formal democratic system of elected government, public service agencies and municipalities lacks a driving force for social change. Furthermore, the minister argues that so-called ‘big systems’ are too slow and old-fashioned in their thinking, and claims that social enterprises embody the opposite. By ‘big systems’ is meant the public sector:

The big systems still play an important role in terms of stability and continuity, but when the public sector cannot reach all groups, we need social entrepreneurs. . . . the borderland between public and private sectors carries with it the opportunity for new solutions to both old and new societal problems. (Frostberg, 2018, author’s translation)

Thus it is represented that the present model of government and its public services is insufficient for tackling current societal challenges, and that social innovation is the answer. This line of argument is similar to Scott-Smith’s (2016) argument about the innovation discourse and how it connects the private sector to liberation while simultaneously casting the state as insufficient. Such contrast undermines the role of the state by commending the market and innovation as the best performers of social services (see also Martinelli, 2012).

It seems that the social innovation discourse implies that it is a new way of doing things, and that it is ‘always good’ because it is innovative (cf. Fougère and Harding, 2012). This leaves little room for evaluating, or even deliberating upon, its possible (negative) effects, which thus effectively escape critique. In the *Strategy*, there are also references to a *current* model of government as being something to strive for:

The Swedish model is a role model for many nations. To be able to remain a modern, safe, sustainable and inclusive society, it is important to hold on to and make use of all of Sweden’s innovative force, not least through social enterprises and social entrepreneurs. (Regeringen 2018, p.4, author’s translation)

An underlying assumption of ‘to hold on to’ and ‘to remain’ is that modernity, safety, sustainability and inclusion provide a description of the present, something that already exists. These characteristics are connected to the Swedish welfare model, which implies that this model incorporates them and produces such results. The quote states that this current model can be sustained only if we utilize the force of (social) enterprises and (social) entrepreneurs.

However, as this paper argues, the idea of the Swedish welfare model, as a way of caring for its citizens, can be maintained *through* the discourse of social innovation because of its postulation of ‘social’ as intelligible only through a market logic. The underlying assumption of such a representation of the Swedish welfare model is that, if not changed, the Swedish model of government and its

public services will be insufficient to face societal challenges. At the same time, in the quotes above, the Swedish welfare model is articulated as both a goal and a solution.

Altogether, social enterprises and social innovations are called upon as a response to the huge challenges that society is facing. The discourse of social innovation articulates that businesses incorporate a strong desire to enact social change in ways that are rapid and novel – in contrast to the old system, where such qualities are lacking. From the angle of WPR, this framing of the ‘problem’ places the hope and responsibility for the future in the hands of social innovation, to be exerted by social enterprises and entrepreneurs (for similar results see Scott-Smith, 2016; Häikö *et al.*, 2017; Martinelli, 2012).

This analysis shows that the articulation of societal challenges in the discourse of social innovation constitutes a vague threat to society. This threat, however vague, functions as a reminder of the vanishing good old days, the theft of a utopian Sweden as we know it, with its well-functioning welfare model, if we do not engage in social innovation. This is intriguing, because there is overwhelming support for the claim that many of the current challenges facing society can be understood as being the direct or indirect results of previous innovations, such as financial innovation or innovations which increase CO₂ emissions (Sveiby *et al.*, 2012, p.254).

Concluding discussion

The *Strategy* focuses on providing an optimized milieu within which social enterprises and entrepreneurs can provide solutions. The *Strategy* begins with an understanding that social enterprises cannot survive within the confines of the free market, and that this needs to be rectified. The setting up of incubators, the allocation of special funding, the dispersion of knowledge, new systems of measurement and new venues all have to be invented in order to level the playing field between regular business and social enterprises. Not only is there a lack of logic here, but the promotion of enterprises and entrepreneurs to provide solutions by social innovation may hinder critique of such further marketization because innovation is understood as ‘always good’ (Fougère and Harding, 2012). Furthermore, social innovation is underpinned by connotations of the new and the modern. In fact, innovation has been argued to be a distinction of a modern nation. Because being innovative is associated with being advanced, innovation becomes a way for Western countries to distance themselves from, and produce a self-image that contrasts with, supposedly backward or primitive countries (Fougère and Harding, 2012, pp.33–4).

The discourse of social innovation also builds upon an articulation of businesses’ strong desire for social change, producing an idea that commercial enterprises have an altruistic agency and simultaneously producing an understanding of a public sector that lacks such qualities. The responsibility for the many challenges that society faces is put in the hands of social innovation, to be performed by social enterprises and entrepreneurs. However, the discourse of social innovation needs to be nurtured with new knowledge, best practice and ways to measure its value if it is to be intelligible within a capitalist system.

Gender equality is articulated as a key determinant in the discourse of social innovation. The problem of gender inequality is represented as a lack of knowledge, a lack of women and a lack of norm critique. Women are framed as an untapped market, both as innovators and as consumers. Gender equality is articulated as a tool for growth and not as an issue of rights, justice or power. There has been a shift in women’s entrepreneurship policy in Sweden from entrepreneurship as a tool for gender equality towards economic growth (Berglund *et al.*, 2018). Yet another shift becomes visible in this study, a change towards the articulation of gender equality as only a vehicle for social innovation. When the ‘social’ becomes intelligible primarily within an economic discourse, and gender equality becomes an issue of growth, the risk is that social change becomes equated with doing business, and gender equality becomes equated with making profit.

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Appendix 1

Empirical material

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Appendix 2

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P1 Stiftelsen Reach for Change, 'Förverkliga potentialen i social innovation', available at <https://www.vinnova.se/p/forverkliga-potentialen-i-social-innovation/> (accessed March 2020).

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P4 Social entrepreneurship forum (SE-forum), ‘Care of Business Social Innovation (CoB)’, available at <https://www.vinnova.se/p/care-of-business-social-innovation-cob/> (accessed March 2020).

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