

## **A Map of Social Innovation Territories: A Tool for Navigating across Diverse Disciplines and Fields of Practice**

**By:** Laura L. Murphy\*, Maille E. Faughnan\*

\*Tulane University

\*Tulane University

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### **Abstract**

This paper offers a visual map of the landscape of social innovation to help clarify assumptions, overcome biases, and learn new approaches for making social and environmental changes in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The map is a wayfinding tool to aid exploration, communication, and collaboration across sectors and worldviews. The map is oriented around different epistemologies (ways of knowing) and ontologies (ways of being), which carve out two key territories: (1) mainstream liberal social entrepreneurship (aligned with positivist epistemologies (western science)); and (2) complexity-based models characterized by relational ways of being and calling for plural knowledges. We note (3) a rift across this landscape – formed by fault lines of positivist/non-positivist epistemologies and dualist/non-dualist ontologies. We explain how to use the map to locate your position, navigate, and explore new places. We point out bridges across barriers, including complexity thinking, design thinking, and attention to power.

### **Background and Context**

We face intractable threats of climate crisis and inequality and calls for decolonizing academia. ‘Social innovation’ (SI) offers promise in addressing these frontlines of systemic social change, yet it is also a contested and “polysemous” field of action and knowledge (Logue 2019). Many definitions are wielded expediently by varied changemakers to address wicked problems across diverse sectors and contexts. Like scholar Danielle Logue (2019), we see no need to crystallize a universal one-size-fits-all definition. But we do need a guide to help clarify assumptions, overcome biases, and learn new approaches for social and environmental change in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

This map emerged from the authors’ experiences inhabiting, navigating, and getting stuck in confusing landscapes. As university-based researchers in the United States, we can bring impressive but mysterious methods when seeking community partners and research sites. Meanwhile, social entrepreneurs seek ‘research’ partners but find academia a confusing warren of disciplinary standards. As the staff of a university social innovation center, we aimed to serve everyone – faculty, staff, administrators, students, community, and donors – but faced contradictory interests.

We looked for guides to help us understand this landscape – and failed. We, thus, drafted a literature review and sketched the metaphorical “Map” in Figure 1 (Murphy et al. 2021). The map charts territories’ social innovation practice and knowledge, covering 1) mainstream Western, classically liberal approaches on the left side and 2) complexity-based models on the right side. These territories are divided by “Fault Lines of Epistemology” and an intersecting “Great Rift of Ontology” (which cross from upper left to lower right) which present numerous barriers to travelers in any direction.

**How to Use the Map: Basics**

We offer this map to readers to (1) find themselves in a social innovation landscape and (2) encourage them to move around more freely. Download Figure 1; print in full color, ideally Tabloid (11x17”). [Find the Map on the Taylor Center website](#) (Murphy et al. 2021).

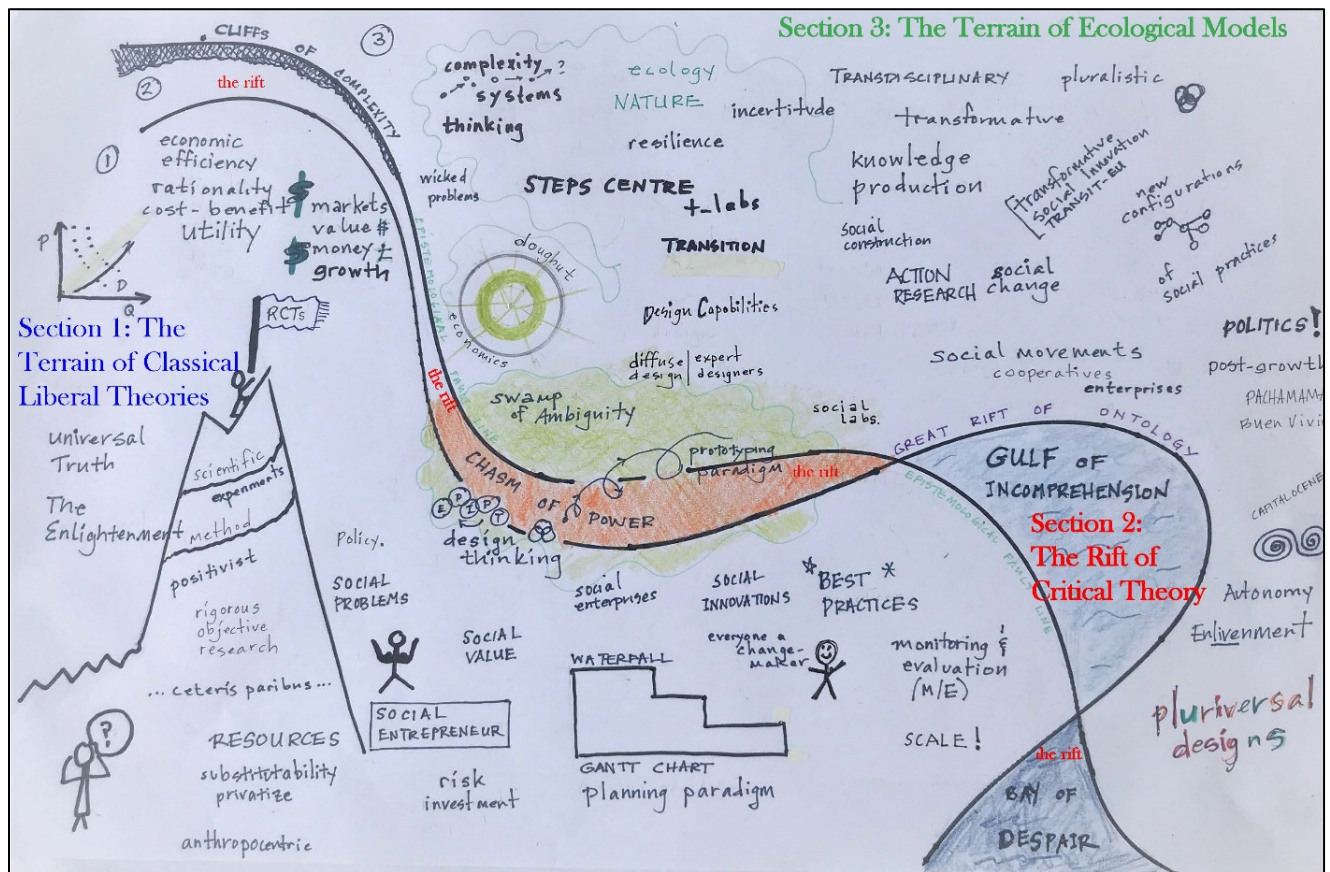


Figure 1: Map of the landscape of social innovation territories

First, we walk readers through our journey. We note *landmarks*. We highlight several bridges. This map is provisional, and we invite you to try it out and share feedback (write to the authors).

## **Use the Map to Locate Your Position**

We (stick figures on the lower left) started 10 years ago at Tulane in “*classical, liberal*” territory, teaching mainstream approaches to *social entrepreneurship* (SE) to undergraduates and encouraging *market-based* thinking to create *social value*. A popular example to share was *micro-finance* as an innovation by the *social entrepreneur* Mohammed Yunus that scaled around the world. Our *anthropocentric*, or humanity-centered ontology was characterized by a dualistic view that separates humans (as “stewards”) from nature (as “*resources*” for people), yielding market-driven approaches to environmental issues, such as carbon trading. The dominant model of knowledge production in this territory is *positivist*, a scientific method grounded in European Enlightenment. A well-known landmark is *randomized control trials (RCTs)*, a gold standard of scientific research for *rigorous, objective* evaluations: it sits atop a **mountain peak** of research. This territory is home to researchers in the *sciences* (health, social, natural), but it can collide with lived experiences, e.g., structural racism and inequality.

More concerns arose around the uncritical, Eurocentric models of heroic *individuals*, and driving change was challenged. Dominant business model thinking (revenues, customers, *growth, scaling*) revealed the neoliberal underpinnings of SE. *Power*-informed critiques led us to rethink what we were promoting. We jumped into a scholarship from *the rift*, with its viewpoint overlooking the left (see Murphy et al. 2021). These post-structural/post-colonial lenses revealed how “social entrepreneurship” reproduces modernist, individualistic, and entrepreneurial ontologies and reinforces structural ills like elite accumulation, money in elections, and white supremacy.

## **Use the Map to Explore New Territory**

Attention to *power* dynamics bridged the rift, bringing us to new territory on the right. We found new ways of being, knowing, and doing. Prior exposure to *complexity thinking* helped us embrace principles of inter-relatedness, feedback, non-linear change, and emergence in this region of “*ecological models*.” We noticed landmarks like *Social Labs* and *Transformative Social Innovation*. Practices here diminish the role of the heroic individual, instead reinforcing relational ontologies. Non-dualistic ontologies see humans as embedded within *nature*/natural systems – so we need *Doughnut Economics*.

This territory values *pluralistic* knowledge – learning from local, historical, indigenous, and scientific sources. Landmarks are *action research* and *STEPS Centre. Pluriversal design* (DRS Pluriversal SIG 2022) is part of the movement to cultivate “*the pluriverse*” – a world in which many worlds fit, to paraphrase the Zapatista movement. Find here Latin American philosophies (Da Sousa Santos 2014), post-development thinking (Kothari et al. 2019), and indigenous knowledge systems (e.g., Escobar 2018).

## How to Notice Barriers and Use (or Build) Bridges

Operating in the ecological territory is the future of social innovation, especially considering our globally interconnected, systemic eco-social challenges. Since many people in western culture inhabit the left territory, we need to facilitate explorations to the right. This means overcoming hazards:

- The “*Cliffs of Complexity*” (at the top) mark the challenges in moving from reductionist science towards interconnectedness, feedback, and nonlinearity. Learning complex system thinking/mapping/habits offer ladders for scholars and practitioners.
- The “*Chasm of Power*” (in the middle) illuminates forms of power at work in society. To bridge the chasm: learn about different forms of power; undertake self-reflection to gain awareness of identity, privilege, and oppression.
- The “*Swamp of Ambiguity*” acknowledges multiple perspectives on a situation, leaving people frustrated and unclear about what to do. Here, an ethical stance is a compass out of the swamp, pointing out marginalized voices. *Design thinking* can encourage participants to “embrace ambiguity” and value different perspectives while muddling through.
- The “*Gulf of Incomprehension*” and “*Bay of Despair*” (at the bottom) are traps faced by scholars, formed by academic silos and rules. The “Bay” has painfully snared doctoral students dissatisfied with disciplinary expectations. To escape, seek good mentors and collaboration across disciplines.

## Scenarios for Using the Map

Our path revealed social scientists navigating from left to right. Yours might differ. We offer scenarios to illustrate how readers can use this map. All start with “How to use a map: basics.”

- *Scholars of social innovation*: Clarify your coordinates. Notice landmarks, i.e., accepted theories and research methods in your department/program. For those just starting: where do you think you find an (academic) home? What departments/disciplines align with that? Understanding disciplinary rules can guide a scholar to a feasible dissertation and escape the “*Bay of Despair*”, and lead to bridges into new territories and compelling questions.
- *Social entrepreneurs*: Use the map for organizational challenges. Orient yourself via landmarks of language: What questions are stakeholders asking? What dialects do donors/investors speak? Looking ahead: which landmarks look interesting to visit? Exploring the broader landscape can infuse the mission with new ideas, relationships, and problem framings.
- *Changemakers*: Explore “alternative” careers. We tested this with (public health) graduate students. We printed out tabloid-size maps and oriented the students via familiar landmarks—the language of their discipline, on the left— *scientific evidence*,

*monitoring, and evaluation.* Students then explored other territories across the rift. They reflected on what would they need to learn (and unlearn) to find meaningful work in that territory.

- *Social Innovation Centers:* A community social entrepreneurship incubator revisiting its strategy can explore which organizations and sectors to support in ways that align with their values. Are they trying to scale entrepreneurial ventures that can provide a financial and social return for investors (left side)? Or to support grassroots organizations that shift power dynamics in favor of disadvantaged communities (right side)?

## **Conclusion and Invitation**

Social innovation in higher education lies at the intersection of the modern university and real-world social-system change. This is ill-charted territory. People tend to get stuck in known territories. This map aims to help people involved in social innovation education, research, and practice to navigate more freely, to learn and practice in new ways. We envision the map catalyzing conversations among learners, educators, scholars, practitioners, community members, philanthropists, and government.

Given the intractable threats of climate crisis and inequality, we sought out more compelling approaches to address these structural, systemic challenges. We also hear calls for decolonizing curricula, campuses, and academia, and these affect social innovation education and research. We needed a guide to clarify assumptions, overcome biases, and learn new approaches to social innovation that are needed for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

We invite you to print out this map and use it with your audiences—students, teammates, colleagues, and partners. Discern where you sit now and where you might go next. Find bridges across barriers. Connect the concepts to your own real-world projects. Use the map to guide new program development and fund-raising, academic research, evaluations, and knowledge production that respond to the multi-faceted nature of the challenges we face.

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