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**THE ACTIVE SOCIETY REVISITED:  
A FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY OF SOCIAL  
INNOVATION**

**Alexander Kesselring\***

***Abstract***

*The aim of this paper is to show how the theory of an active society by Amitai Etzioni can provide a theoretical framework for the study of innovation processes – in particular social innovation, which is generally defined here as the implementation of a new social practice aimed at solving social problems and/or meeting social needs. An active society is a society in which collectivities (social groups) have the potential to articulate values and needs, to participate in consensus building processes and decision processes, to develop organisational structures and to realise values through collective social action. This paper discusses the general differentiation and interrelation between culture, structure and agency which is the fundament of the theory of an active society and additionally presents a systematisation which combines these domains with the “elements” (consciousness, commitment, knowledge, power) and “processes” (consensus building, mobilisation, decision making, control/guidance) that Etzioni perceives as the main dimensions of the active orientation. This systematisation can be seen as an adaptation of Etzioni’s theory which tries to make the interrelation between different theoretical dimensions more explicit.*

**Keywords:** *social innovation; innovation; social change; social guidance; Amitai Etzioni; active society*

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## **1. Introduction**

“The active society” by Amitai Etzioni was first published in 1968 and has recently been re-published in German language [Etzioni 2009]. The historic context of the first publication is of course significant: 1968 is the year of massive student protests against the Vietnam War. Etzioni always considered himself to be political and saw his early appointment as a professor of sociology as an opportunity to engage in political activities [Reese-Schäfer 2001]. “The active society” clearly shows the imprint of the social movements which were developing during the late 1960s and Etzioni explicitly dedicated the book to his students being engaged in these movements. However, the “active society” did not develop into a political treatise – its general tone is that of a down-to-earth sociological analysis in the tradition of the so called “grand social theory”. The book is structured in an extremely systematic way and step-by-step presents the foundations and elements of a general social theory. What sets Etzioni’s work apart from other social theories is his emphasis on the need to make society more active – which basically means to investigate cultural, structural and organisational characteristics which support societies and collectivities to realise their values through collective social action. In this sense the theory does not approach society with an essentialist normative critique – it rather introduces a level of “meta-values” which are expressed through such concepts as “pluralism”, “participation” and “activity”. An active society is a pluralistic society in which a multitude of collectivities has the potential to articulate values and needs, to participate in consensus building processes and decision processes, to organise and to realise values through collective social action. The normative approach is therefore not essentialist but “immanent” – it acknowledges the fact that value judgements are a product of social life rather than abstract scientific or philosophical thought.

Etzioni perceives the active society as a future model rather than an “as is” description of societies in the 1960s. The societies at his time (Western and socialist societies being his main focus) he describes as post-modern or post-industrial but not “active” – they lack the organisational structures to enable a balance between control processes and consensus building processes which is for him the main characteristic of active collectivities and societies. Etzioni uses these two dimensions – control and consensus processes – to describe different types of social units, which is crucial for his structural approach, but also to describe societies as a whole as shown in Tab. 1. Western democratic societies are characterised as “drifting” societies which means that their control capacity is more deficient than their consensus building capacity. Etzioni knowingly uses the word “deficient” to indicate that this characterisation does not suggest that consensus building capacity is optimal in these societies – only the balance between the two capacities leans towards a predominance of consensus building processes. Etzioni perceives the need to make democratic societies more capable of regulating social and technological change while maintaining the achieved level of responsiveness. However, consensus building and control capacity are tightly linked and do not necessarily obviate each other. As long as neither control capacity nor consensus building capacity excels a certain threshold these capacities even support each other in Etzioni’s view – exactly this balance characterises the active society.

Table 1: *Different types of societies according to consensus building and control capacities*

		Consensus building capacity	
		+	-
Control capacity	+	Active societies	Overmanaged societies
	-	Drifting societies	Passive societies

In the next chapter we will turn our attention to the main topic of this paper – the relation between the theory of the active society and the concept of social innovation. The active orientation as described by Etzioni entails many implicit references to innovation processes although Etzioni does not develop a theory of innovation per se. His focus is more on regulation than innovation – however, the active society is about self-transformation. Etzioni explicitly states that the active orientation implies the capacity to anticipate and act rather than to react to unintended consequences of social, environmental and technological change. In other words: the active society innovates its own structures in a self-reflexive way utilising its internal differentiation and organisational capacities.

### **1.1 Social innovation**

The aim of this paper is to show how the theory of an active society can provide a theoretical framework for the study of innovation processes – in particular social innovation, which is generally defined here as the implementation of a new social practice aimed at solving social problems and/or meeting social needs. This chapter will therefore shortly explain the concept of social innovation and its theoretical and practical context.

Social innovation is not an established term in the social sciences. Only recently we observe a growing interest in this topic accompanied by first attempts to define social innovation more strictly. This interest is obviously caused by the difficulties modern societies face in solving ecologic, social and economic problems. The model of ever growing economies in combination with the institutions of the welfare-states is under serious pressure in the light of globalisation and the growing complexity of society. This automatically raises questions on how to effectively regulate, coordinate or intervene in social systems [Willke 2001, Mayntz 1995]. Neither market nor state seems to be sufficient as mechanisms of coordination. The theoretical discussion as well as social practice slowly seems

to depart from this dichotomy which structured most socio-political and socio-economic discussions in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Society becomes aware of its internal differentiation into sub-systems and the multiplicity of organisational fields which have evolved – activity and coordination of activity is everywhere and goes beyond market and state. It is generally recognised that effective problem solving depends more and more on the negotiation and coordination of agents located in different social fields (NGOs, research institutes, activist groups, private companies, labour unions, trade unions, governments, supra-national political entities, etc.) which are usually guided by their own interests and values [Fürst 2004]. This complexity can restrict collective social action but it also creates new opportunities for intended social change. In this context social innovation is becoming a popular term to describe a broad range of initiatives directed at social betterment. It is characteristic for the situation that such a term is not introduced by social sciences but rather stems from a diverse range of different societal “agents” outside academia such as NGOs, activists, non-university research institutes or private foundations. Thus the social sciences are not leading the discussion on social innovation – they are rather in the role of “late adopters”. However, it can be seen as their function to provide a more stable framework for the study as well as the implementation of social innovation. The following definition which already combines different literature on social innovation is only a first step in that direction [Moulaert 2005, Gillwald 2004, Zapf 1994, Lindhult 2008, Mulgan et al. 2008]:

- Social innovation consists in the implementation of *a new social practice* aimed at solving social problems and/or meeting social needs (e.g. social inclusion)
- Social innovation by definition creates indented *advantages* for certain social groups which might be accompanied by *dis-*

*advantages* for other groups (resource transfer). Unintended positive and negative side-effects have to be considered.

- *Values, problems and objectives* are formulated and evaluated in the context of discourses and consensus building processes
- Social innovation is *intentional* and implemented by a group of *agents* (individuals, groups, organisations)
- Social innovation is a process which encompasses three main stages: *invention* (a new idea), *intervention* (a social action which diverges from institutionalised routine behaviour) and *institutionalisation* (the new social practice manifests itself through norms, rules, roles and organisational structures)
- Institutionalisation builds on the process of *diffusion* and the *acceptance and evaluation of the impacts* of a the innovation by relevant “stakeholders”
- The *distribution of resources* (economic, cultural and social capital) and the *power relations between different social groups* influence the process of institutionalisation at all stages

Figure 1 illustrates this definition and distinguishes framework conditions, elements and stages of social innovation.

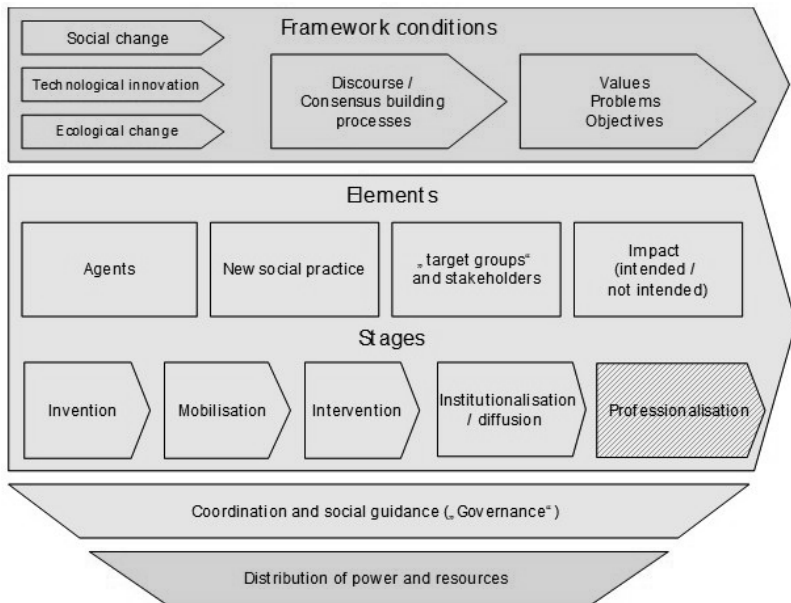
In my perspective the concept of social innovation has important implications for sociology in four aspects:

1. As a theoretical and empirical concept informing the study of social change.
2. As a theoretical and empirical concept informing general social theory with regard to the conceptualisation of the interrelation between the micro, meso and macro level of sociological analysis and the interrelation between culture, social structure and agency.
3. As a model for a new application of sociological knowledge and new forms of scientific practice which implicates a re-evaluation of the role of social sciences in society.



4. As a compliment to technological innovation in innovation discourse and innovation processes.

Figure 1: *Framework conditions, elements and stages of social innovation*



- (1) The first implication is immediately evident suggesting that sociology should integrate the concept of social innovation into theories of social change, clarify its meaning and operationalise the concept for empirical study.
- (2) The second implication emphasises the empirical and theoretical implications the concept has for general social theory. Social innovation intersects the micro, meso and macro level of sociological analysis. Furthermore, it encompasses the concepts of agency and structure. The ideal type of a social innovation would allow the researcher to

follow a social innovation from its very beginnings at the micro-level of individual ideas and interventions, to the meso-level of groups, social networks and organisations, up to the macro-level of large-scale institutional change.

- (3) The concept of social innovation is connected to a claim that sociology enforced in its beginnings in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century which is to provide society with guidance and practical knowledge to anticipate and alleviate negative consequences of social and technological change and to introduce effective practices to solve social problems [Lepenies 2002]. We know of course that this claim could not be completely fulfilled by modern academic sociology but the discussion on social innovation can be seen as an opportunity to re-think the role of sociology in society and to reflect on new forms of involving sociology in practical fields of society. The models which have been presented in this context are not reviving the notion of expert-led social engineering but rather consider collaborative forms of social practice and the co-production of valid and practically useful knowledge by sociologists and practitioners [Franz 2009].
- (4) Furthermore, the concept of social innovation can complement technological innovation in innovation discourse and innovation processes. The interrelation between these two types of innovation – which overlap in multiple ways – has not been thoroughly studied until now [Kesselring 2009; Aderhold, John 2005]. Social innovation has often been ascribed the status of an “accompanying measure” or “subsequent adaptation” rather than a type of innovation in its own right which is in its consequences in many instances as striking as technological innovation. It has been a specific characteristic of industrial society to rely on technological innovation which was equivalent to economic and social progress.

In post-industrial societies it becomes more and more evident that this still dominant discourse neglects the fact that technological innovation has to be seen in the context of social change and the societal capacity for guidance. Theories on “social guidance” or social regulation identify a lack of control capacity with regard to the development and mass market introduction of technological innovations (for instance in the food industry) [Etzioni 1975: 232, Willke 2001: 147]. This thematic field comprises topics such as non-intended and intended externalised social and environmental consequences of technological innovation and its normative implications. Thus the perception of technological innovation as the unquestionable driver of economic and social change to which the social system has to adapt (the cultural lag thesis by William Ogburn has often been interpreted in this way) will probably be weakened when it becomes clear that complex societies depend as much on principles of social guidance as on technological development.

## **1.2 Social innovation in the framework of the active society**

What are the characteristics of the theory of an active society that make it relevant for the study of social innovation? Firstly, the potential of self-transformation and the analysis of elements and processes necessary for increasing this potential is the main focus of the theory which makes it in general very suitable as a framework for social innovation.

Secondly, the combination of sociological and political analysis is an explicit methodological aim of the theory. Sociological analysis often emphasises cultural and structural features which shape individual behaviour, whereas political analysis emphasises the concepts of “agency” and “power”. The study on social innovation needs both perspectives to be able to describe opportunities for collective action as well as constraints. Thirdly, the theory comprises the most relevant elements to describe social innovation: Consciousness, commitment, knowledge, power, mobilisa-

tion, consensus building, decision making, control/guidance. Furthermore, it integrates three main aspects of sociological analysis – culture, structure and agency – in particular at the meso and macro level.

While Etzioni does not use the term social innovation, he introduces the term “project” which is defined very similar as an intended and confined activity bound to certain objectives [Etzioni 1975: 656]. Etzioni distinguishes between individual or collective projects. Their main feature is that they raise awareness, activate and mobilise resources and multiply the invested energy on the output side. Thus a project to be successful has to trigger some sort of individual or collective dynamic. I think that the term project basically captures what is usually understood as social innovation which means that there is already a “place” where social innovation is located in the framework.

Of course this should not suggest that the active society is an “off-the-shelf” solution to analyse social innovation. The active society was written 42 years ago – thus one has to argue why this theory should still be relevant in 2010 and beyond. Forty two years imply that there is a difference between the active society and the state-of-the-art of macro-sociological analysis. In particular system theory was further developed, based on an abstract but concise definition of a social system and the “observation concept” of functional differentiation, a concept which is not present in Etzioni’s theory [Luhmann 1998]. Also the theories on institutions (for instance neo-institutionalism) [Powell, DiMaggio 1991], organisations (organisational change and organisational learning) [Weick 1995] and social movements [McAdam, McCarthy, Zald 1996] showed significant progress. Furthermore, general methodological concepts such as network analysis were introduced which provided researchers with a new perspective for instance on the development of social movements [Diani, McAdam 2003]. This paper will present the outline of Etzioni’s theory and at the same time will relate his propositions to other approaches – the final picture will of course not be complete. The generality of Etzioni’s theory as well as

the strong interrelation of the concepts he presents make a comprehensive understanding necessary. This paper can only present a rough outline of this endeavour.

## **2. Culture, institutions, social structure and agency**

The general dimensions of analysis we have to consider when describing Etzioni's theory are culture, structure and agency. To draw a distinction between these dimensions of social life and sociological analysis and at the same time to consider their interrelation is probably one of the most fundamental theoretical problems of sociology. Furthermore, these dimensions are intersected by another differentiation – the micro, meso and macro level of sociological analysis. The theory of an active society includes all these dimensions and additionally introduces elements and processes which are relevant to increase the activity of a social unit or society.

Table 2 gives an overview on this combination of analytical dimensions, elements and processes.

### **2.1 Culture**

Edward W. Lehman, an American sociologist and commentator of Etzioni's work, writes in his essay "The cultural dimension of the active society" that Etzioni while predominantly focusing on social structure and the capacity of certain social structures to enhance agency (to produce agents capable of collective social action), he also includes cultural aspects in his analysis [Lehman 2006]. Etzioni's main thesis in this regard is that cultural symbols are not able to transform societies and to support agents unless they are manifested in social structure and connected to control/guidance, mobilisation and consensus building processes. The theoretical challenges which Etzioni partly avoids, is to define and relate the con-

cepts of culture and social structure. Lehman states that neither culture nor structure is strictly defined in Etzioni’s work although the terms are used consistently. Etzioni refers to “culture” predominantly as values and knowledge whereas knowledge comprises reality-testing symbols (“facts”) and symbols for evaluative interpretation (“meaning”) while social structure is conceived as a combination of morphological (collectivities) and relational (relations between collectivities) aspects.

Table 2: *Overview on dimensions, elements and processes*

	Culture	Structure	Agency
Micro	<p><b>Elements:</b>            Consciousness            Commitment            Knowledge            Power (resources)</p> <p><b>Processes:</b>            Consensus building            Mobilisation            Decision making            Control/guidance</p>		
Meso			
Macro			

Culture has been defined in different ways in the history of sociology. William Ogburn in his treatise on “culture” cites a classic definition by the anthropologist Edward Tyler who defines culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” [Ogburn 1964: 3]. In a recent sociological encyclopaedia the term “culture” is defined as “the totality of common materialistic and idealistic ar-

tefacts, internalised values and interpretations as well as institutionalised lifestyles of human beings” [Schäfers 2001: 196]. Thus the term culture is still defined in a very general way comprising the symbolic interpretation of reality, social institutions and their manifestation in social practices as well as created objects.

Without aiming at a comprehensive definition of culture I think that it is preferable to see the symbolic interpretation and evaluation of reality as the main sphere of culture. In this sense culture is foremost a system of symbols. In general culture is of course used in a broader sense comprising social institutions and routine social behaviour as well as artefacts. Lehman introduces an interesting distinction between “culture as system” understood as a “bounded network of symbols with a propensity toward internal coherence” and “culture as practice” which refers to the manifestations of culture in social practice [Lehman 2006: 45]. Cultural symbols oscillate between these two spheres whereas “culture as practice” marks the transition from culture to structure. It is not completely clear in Lehman’s approach whether “culture as praxis” comprises structure or if it is the intermediate zone between culture and structure. However, since Lehmann explicitly acknowledges structure as an independent analytical term we will rather assume the latter. We will also see that the term social structure comprises morphological and relational aspects of societies which most sociologists would probably not assign to the domain of culture.

Lehman tries to emphasise the cultural dimension of the active society in showing which qualities of cultural symbols enhance the capacity for agency. He uses the distinction between “culture as system” and “culture as practice” to follow the transformation of symbols into means of action.

The table below summarises Lehman’s theoretical concept which assigns specific qualities of symbols to the elements of an active orientation as defined by Etzioni. These general qualities are modified depending on the cultural sphere. “Culture as system” usually comprises more general symbolic orientations which might often be the implicit fundament of the

assumptions and evaluations of actors, while “culture as practice” comprises specific and more explicit symbols which are knowingly used or referred to by actors in social practice. Lehman supports Etzioni’s thesis that symbols used in social practice are more agency enhancing if they are connected to both spheres and thus provide agents with general orientation as well as guidance in specific situations. Of course the distinction between qualities is not meant as defining distinctive types of symbols or symbolic systems: Symbols or symbolic systems will often inherit several of these qualities.

Lehman mentions four different qualities of symbols: “Energising symbols” are able to raise the awareness (consciousness) of individuals or groups regarding their general orientations and positions in existential and social contexts. “Reality testing symbols” support actors in enriching their knowledge and in according it better to contingent events – they encourage actors to assess the instrumental use of symbolic systems as descriptions of reality. These symbols may be “scientific” but could also be routed in more general procedures of monitoring “empirical validity” (trial and error methods). Symbols which provide “ethical gain” support agents in making their moral judgements explicit and in monitoring them in the light of the relation between moral standards and actual practices. Finally, “malleability” describes the “capacity” of symbols for being strategically employed to overcome resistance and pursue objectives. The malleability of a symbol determines the degree to which its transition from “culture as system” to “culture as practice” is possible [Lehman 2006: 30]

The transfer from symbols or “symbolic bundles” from one sphere to the other is for Lehman a process of re-organisation and re-evaluation. To put it another way: To make symbols or systems of symbols (more) applicable in contexts of social action often causes the dissolving of the original coherent context. He illustrates this process for the knowledge dimension using the metaphor of the assembly line:



Table 3: *Lehman’s model of the interrelation of culture and structure in the context of the active society*

<b>Dimension of the active orientation</b>	<b>quality/function of symbols (according to Lehman)</b>
Consciousness	energising
Knowledge / Commitment	evaluative interpretation / ethical gain
Knowledge	reality-testing
Power	malleable

How acceptable and accessible (energising, ethically gainful, and malleable) actors can make such (symbolic, AK) bundles depends on what happens to them from the time that they are created, collected, and codified (reality testing) to when actors apply them to designated goals (making them malleable and attributing ethical gain). Between creation, collection, and use, knowledge bundles are placed aboard a social-structural assembly line on which they are physically condensed while “value” is added. Knowledge bits and bundles are summarized, reorganised, and deleted by actors through whose hands the data pass, never strictly on logical-empirical grounds, but also on the basis of their moral standards, theoretical preferences and institutional interests. If knowledge is to become a malleable symbolic resource (i.e., to contribute to applied science), such processing is unavoidable. “Facts” even reality testing scientific ones, as Etzioni recognises, never speak for themselves and hence cannot yield effective means or contribute to desired outcomes, only processed empirical knowledge that remains energising and is invested with ethical gain can make this knowledge usable. [Lehman 2006: 40]

Social innovation is strongly connected to the cultural sphere of society since it is rooted in an increased consciousness and normative and cognitive assessment of social reality. At the same time these symbolic systems have to be put into practice and manifested in social structure. It is therefore crucial to conceptualise the interrelation between “culture as system” and “culture as practice” and the process of symbolic transformation that occurs at the transition from one sphere to the other.

It is only when cultural patterns interpenetrate with social structures that symbols can assist in turning actors into agents. As symbolic bundles in social structures are interpreted and strategically deployed, they appear less coherent and more like contingent assemblages of diverse ingredients. However, only in this form do symbolic bundles possess the attributes to become “tool kits” or repertoires which further societal activation. [Lehman 2006: 45]

Lehman’s concept is useful as a more systematic approach to culture as well as an adaptation of the theory of an active society. The question is if this concept fully acknowledges the structural dimension. The dichotomy of “culture as system” and “culture as practice” seems to “skip” the structural dimension shifting immediately from system to practice – but of course culture is strongly interrelated with structure. We could for instance think of Bourdieu’s habitus concept which identifies the stratification of society as the fundament for the cultural orientation and expression of the individual [Bourdieu 1982]. Thus culture is “embedded” in social structure without being completely determined by structural features. A comprehensive theory would therefore have to interrelate culture, structure and agency. The concept of institutionalisations and institutions is probably a good starting point for this discussion.

## **2.2 Institutions and institutionalisation**

Institutions are generally defined as rule systems by which social action is guided, evaluated, rewarded and sanctioned<sup>1</sup>. These rule systems have a symbolic and normative aspect. Additionally one can distinguish rule systems according to the explicitness of rules and sanctions. The thesis would be that the more explicit a rule system becomes the more it shifts from “culture as system” to “culture as practice”. One could distinguish between three general types: implicit, semi-implicit and explicit rules. Implicit rules are rooted in custom and are “unconsciously” reproduced in routine behaviour, semi-implicit rules are regularly articulated and negotiated without being codified, explicit rules become codified, for instance a certain legislation. An important proposition in this regard is that institutions are embedded in other institutions. The type and degree of embeddedness, so we can assume, will have influence on the character of the rule system (its explicitness) and reward/sanction system [Jepperson 1991].

To follow the process of institutionalisation is not only relevant for the conceptualisation of the relation between culture and structure but also for the development of the capacity for collective social action. Social innovation is consequently the establishment of a new social institution

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<sup>1</sup> Jepperson (1991) provides a very comprehensible definition of the terms institution and institutionalisation: „Institution represents a social order or pattern that has attained a certain state or property; institutionalisation denotes the process of such attainment. By order or pattern, I refer, as is conventional, to standardised interaction sequences. An institution is then a social pattern that reveals a particular reproduction process. When departures from the pattern are counteracted in a regulated fashion, by repetitively activated, socially constructed, controls - that is, some set of rewards and sanctions - we refer to a pattern as institutionalised. Put another way: institutions are those social patterns that, when chronically reproduced, owe their survival to relatively self-activating social processes. Their persistence is not dependent, notably, upon recurrent collective mobilisation, mobilisation repetitively reengineered and reactivated in order to secure the reproduction of a pattern. That is, institutions are not reproduced by „action“ in this strict sense of collective intervention in a social convention.“ (Jepperson 1991: 145)

guiding new forms of social practice. Institutions in this regard are tools to establish certain routines independent from persons, time and space. When we investigate collective action and social innovation on a meso- and macro-sociological level it becomes immediately evident that institutionalisation is indispensable. While Etzioni does not use the notion of institutionalisation or institution very intensively he always emphasises the need for organisational structures – but organisations in many aspects can be seen as institutions and they are illustrating the working of explicit rules which define memberships, positions, roles, responsibilities and power relations enabling organisations to act as a “collectivity” on the basis of binding decisions and the mobilisation of resources.

In the context of the new institutionalism Jepperson [2009] tried to define different forms and degrees of institutionalisation. The form of institutionalisation is related to the type of the rule system (implicit/explicit) which we described earlier on. The degree of institutionalisation he conceives in terms of relative vulnerability to social intervention:

A given institution is less likely to be vulnerable to intervention if it is *more embedded in a framework of institutions*. It is more embedded if it has been *long in place* (so that other practices have adapted to it) or *more centrally located* within a framework (so that it is deeply situated). It is more embedded if it is *integrated within a framework by unifying accounts based in common principles and rules*. Further, the greater the *linkage of this institution to constraints conceived to be socially exogenous* – namely, to either socially exogenous (transcendental) moral authority or presumed laws of nature – the less vulnerability to intervention. The degree of institutionalisation is also dependent on the *form of taken-for-grantedness*. If members of a collectivity take for granted an institution because they are unaware of it and thus do not question it, or because any propensity to question has halted due to

elimination of alternative institutions or principles (e.g., by delegitimizing them through reference to natural or spiritual law), the institution will be decidedly less vulnerable to challenge and intervention, and will be more likely to remain institutionalised. [Jepperson 2009: 151, 152]

It is an interesting theoretical move to describe the degree of institutionalisation from this perspective which is very similar to Etzioni's strategy. Etzioni often refers to the "costs" for agents for willingly transforming certain institutions and discourses, in particular in his treatise on societal knowledge. This means that a theory on collective action and social innovation has to conceive a realistic perspective on the multiplicity of restraints and degrees of restraints – be they cultural or structural or caused by counter-action – that collective social action is confronted with. In general it is necessary to reconstruct the process of institutionalisation parallel to the process of diffusion to assess the impact of a social innovation respectively to define a social practice as a social innovation based on a certain degree of achieved institutionalisation and diffusion.

### **2.3 Social structure**

The term structure or social structure is in sociology mainly connected to the following aspects depending on the general theoretical position:

- Social groups (categories and collectivities) and relations between social groups
- The distribution of resources among social groups
- Social institutions and relations between institutions
- Social systems and relations between social systems or between the elements of social systems

We can generally differentiate between a morphological and a relational approach to “structure” which in fact will often be combined in analysis. The definition of the elements of structure (social systems, institutions, collectivities, categories) of course depends on the sociological language: System theory will speak of social systems and functional systems while the new institutionalism will speak of institutions and institutional fields when describing the structure of society. In the German sociological tradition there is also a sub-discipline called “social structure analysis” which focuses on national societies describing in an empirical style significant changes in the main areas of these societies (economy, politics, education, families, etc.).

Etzioni’s approach to structure is morphological as well as relational. Etzioni does not conceptualise society on the basis of functional differentiation and does not use the terms social or functional system. He roots his analysis in a concept of social structure which describes society as a supra-unit composed of units, referred to as collectivities, and sub-units, which – depending on the context – could be groups as well as individuals [Etzioni 1975: 120]. These “units” are characterised by normative, utilitarian or coercive bonds on which their “identity” and potential for collective action is based.

In contrast to units, “categories” define groups of individuals according to certain social or demographic characteristics. Generally, sociology differentiates between vertical (class, social stratum usually comprising status, occupation, education and income) and horizontal groupings (age, gender, ethnicity, lifestyle, etc.). Thus society can be decomposed in different vertical and horizontal categories in this perspective. Categories are passive by definition – only if the members of a category form a collectivity and become conscious of sharing the same interests and/or values their capacity for collective social action is activated. However, a collectivity can also remain largely passive if another important component is not added – the organisational structure which may consist in one or more

organisations respectively a network of organisations (which Etzioni also calls “control network”) which has a collectivity as its “basis” meaning that it derives its legitimisation and resources from that collectivity. Although formal organisations are important to Etzioni the terms control network and control unit comprise different forms of social organisation – a social movement led by a group of activists can at the general level be described similarly to a collectivity represented by an organisation. Both can be considered as “active units” consisting of a collectivity and a control network.

The following table combines the two main dimensions of the active orientation – consensus building capacity and control capacity – and provides a general overview on four different types of social units with regard to their “activeness”. This can also be seen as a systematisation of the connection between categories, collectivities and control networks. For instance a collectivity as a group of individuals or sub-groups sharing the same values and interests without organisational representation or an elite group (Etzioni uses the elite concept as a role concept and not as a status concept) would be characterised as a cohesive unit but not as an active unit. Also a control unit or network (organisation or organisational network) which is not rooted in a collectivity is not considered as an active unit – for instance a prison.

Table 4: *Different types of societies according to consensus building and control capacities [Etzioni 1975: 132]*

		Consensus building capacity	
		+	-
Control capacity	+	Active units	Control networks (normative, utilitaristic, coercive)
	-	Cohesive units	Categories (aggregates)

These typifications show that Etzioni's approach is not based on a social-engineering model of top-down social control but rather a balance model comprising consensus and control processes. It acknowledges the importance of shared normative or utilitarian orientations as well as the need for control in the sense of decision making and implementation of decisions which affords organisational structures or at least the differentiation of roles ("elite"). Etzioni's model may sound mechanistic – an impression which is probably caused by his use of general concepts from cybernetics. Beyond this first – and somewhat misleading – impression the concept reveals an enormous flexibility which we will try to illustrate when discussing the basic elements and processes of the active orientation.

## **2.4 Agency**

The most important aspect regarding the concept of agency in Etzioni's macro-sociology is that he treats collectivities and in particular organisations as agents. They are capable of processing knowledge, communicating, making decisions, redefining their identities and acting. This is possible due to the internal differentiation of roles and the implementation of rules and procedures (for instance regarding decision making). Etzioni emphasises that organisations significantly differ from individuals in their increased capacity of managing these processes. An organisation is for instance capable of integrating new knowledge simply by hiring new staff. Organisations can also mobilise larger amounts of resources in shorter time periods. At the same time we should not over-estimate the strategic capacity of an organisation to transform its own structures, the relations to other organisations or to mobilise collective action [Hasse 2003: 149]. Etzioni himself investigates several conditions which restrict the strategic capacity of organisations – thus, enhancing agency has to be seen as a continuous challenge on individual and collective level.



This discussion on the culture, structure and agency and the intermediate process of institutionalisation was intended to introduce the general foundations of the theory of an active society. All these “domains” are approached with regard to their agency enhancing capacities as well as the restrictions they impose on agency. The next chapter will now explain the main elements and processes of the active orientation.

### **3. Elements and processes of the active orientation**

Etzioni presents four different elements which have to be combined to create the capacity for collective action (“agency“): Consciousness, commitment, knowledge and power. Additionally, the coordination of four main processes is necessary: consensus building, mobilisation, decision making and control/regulation. After a first overview on the combination of these elements and processes with the culture, structure, agency differentiation as shown in table 5, I will describe “knowledge” as an example for one element of the active orientation and additionally I will give a short overview on the processes. While this combination reflects the main “ingredients” of Etzioni’s theory it is already an adaptation which makes the interrelation between dimensions, elements and processes more explicit. To further include the “third dimension” consisting of the micro, meso, macro level differentiation can only be formulated as a future challenge and won’t be undertaken here.

The table illustrates that each element and process of the active orientation has specific implications on the cultural, structural and agency level. The active orientation is consequently based on the interrelation respectively *coordination* of elements and processes at different levels which illustrates the complexity of the theory as well as its broad applicability to a multiplicity of social phenomena. We can read the table in two directions – vertically or horizontally. The vertical direction reveals the succession of consciousness, commitment, knowledge and power – in a simpli-

Table 5: Scheme for the interrelation between the dimensions culture, structure and agency and the elements and processes of the theory of the active society

DIMENSION:	Culture	Structure	Agency
<b>Elements:</b>			
<b>Consciousness</b>	Symbolic representation of the position of an individual or collectivity within social and existential contexts	“collective consciousness” (e.g. class consciousness)	Self definition as an agent in contexts of social action
<b>Commitment</b>	Values	Commitment to the values of a specific collectivity	Commitment to a specific aim and willingness to utilise and transfer resources to attain it
<b>Knowledge</b>	Symbolic representation of reality / “reality testing” / evaluative interpretation	Organisation and distribution of knowledge among collectivities, organisations, individuals, etc.	Utilisation of knowledge for social action
<b>Power (resources)</b>	Symbolic representation and legitimization of power relations	Power relations between collectivities / distribution of resources	Potential to realise aims and to overcome resistance (in form of established institutions, counter action, etc.)
<b>Processes:</b>			
<b>Consensus building</b>	Shared values / Embedded consensus formation	Representation of collectivities / functionally differentiated consensus formation	Consensus legitimises social action
<b>Mobilisation</b>	–	Resource transfer / Re-structuring of collectivities	Organisations (or “control units”) utilise resources from sub-units for social action
<b>Decision making</b>	Visions	Differentiation of units capable of asserting collective decisions	Decision making processes specify visions/aims and prepare specific actions
<b>Control/guidance</b>	–	Differentiation of control units and implementation units	Control units instruct implementation units to implement decisions

fied approach we could say that this succession is the ideal type for social innovation: Intensified consciousness is transformed into commitment, guided by knowledge and finally supported by power and resources. In the horizontal direction the “succession” of culture, structure and agency is much more complicated and it is maybe misleading to speak of a succession. We should rather be aware of the strong interrelation between these domains of social life.

Thus we arrive at a systematisation which relates the elements and processes of an active orientation as defined by Etzioni with the three domains culture, structure and agency. All the elements and processes show different characteristics when related to a specific domain and thereby reveal a possible thematic field for the study of social innovation respectively an aspect which has to be considered in a theoretical approach. These “thematic fields” comprise main fields of sociological research which are often connected not only to different general theories but also to different research methodologies. This includes for instance discourse analysis as well as network analysis. Furthermore, the systematisation is probably helpful to assess the innovation process. We could for instance identify “blind spots” of the process if main elements or processes are either missing or deficient. We could also explain the transformation of the initial idea or practice on the basis of an in-depth investigation of the interrelation between different elements and processes on different levels. Also the degree of institutionalisation and diffusion could be assessed in this way. In general, the different fields in the culture and structure column indicate resources as well as constraints for collective social action which have to be considered in the study of social innovation.

### **3.1 Knowledge**

For Etzioni knowledge is a symbolic system which has two main functions: *reality testing* (“facts”) and *evaluative interpretation* (“meaning”).

Knowledge constitutes a relation between an agent and reality. This “reality” encompasses the non-social and social environment as well as the agent himself. “Testing” means that knowledge implies a monitoring of the relation between symbolic comprehension and reality – knowledge has to be validated by experience. The second aspect refers to knowledge as “meaning” – to provide orientation knowledge has to go beyond facts – it has to interpret and evaluate them. Etzioni connects this second function to “ideology” and “religion” [Etzioni 1975: 161].

Already in 1968 Etzioni was well aware of the increasing importance of knowledge in particular of the organisation, production, distribution and utilisation of knowledge for the self-transformation of societies [Etzioni 1975: 158]. The “quality of knowledge” depends on the social structure in which these processes are embedded (the autonomy of knowledge production, the funding of knowledge production, lines of communication between knowledge production units (e.g. universities) and control units (e.g. governments), etc.) [Etzioni 1975: 160]. Etzioni focuses on “societal knowledge” understood as knowledge acquired and utilised by societal macro-agents (large organisations, governments). He comes to the conclusion that societal macro-agents predominantly rely on evaluative interpretation while showing significant weaknesses regarding reality testing in comparison to individuals or smaller groups. To illustrate Etzioni’s structural approach we will shortly describe the arguments he presents:

- If individuals neglect reality-testing they usually encounter social reactions or even sanctions and the pressure to adjust their perception. In contrast societal macro-agents such as large organisations or governments lack these corrective mechanisms because they are not interacting in this direct sense with other macro-agents.
- Macro-agents can influence their environment to a much larger degree than individuals and therefore can partly shape

their environment according to their views independent of the validity of these views.

- The relation between control units and collectivities is relatively loose for macro-agents. The control unit of the macro-agents (for instance a political elite) can therefore maintain certain views or practices without being immediately confronted with a negative reaction.
- Macro-agents need to organise the distribution of knowledge among their sub-units to become effective which is a complex process (for instant knowledge management in organisations). Etzioni assumes that a more equal distribution of knowledge is connected to the enhancement of agency. However, the organisation of such processes is a constant problem for macro-agents [Etzioni 1975: 163–166].

In this case Etzioni focuses more on the restrictions of macro-agency – but the restrictions are relative and vary with the particular organisational structure of the macro-agents. Therefore the focus on restrictions also presents opportunities how macro-agents can enhance their reality-testing.

## **3.2 Processes: consensus building and control**

### ***3.2.1 Consensus building***

I noted earlier that the active orientation is captured by two “capacities” or processes: consensus building processes and control/regulation processes. Consensus building is in itself differentiated into *consensus formation* (bottom-up formation of consensus) and *consensus mobilisation* (top-down mobilisation of consensus). Furthermore, Etzioni introduces the important distinction between *embedded consensus formation* which is a by-product of social interaction without the explicit function of con-

sensus formation and *functionally differentiated consensus formation or consensus mobilisation* which means that special institutions have the explicit function to support consensus formation or mobilisation. Embedded consensus formation is assigned to the culture dimension in table 5 because it refers to a consensus which builds on shared cultural practices rather than organisational structures. Macro-agents usually rely on both sources – on the embedded consensus created in cohesive communities as well as on functionally differentiated organisational structures.

### **3.2.2 Control/guidance: mobilisation and decision making**

The process *control/guidance* actually comprises the two other processes – mobilisation and decision making – and describes the intervention in a social system. It also has specific implications on the structural level as indicated in table 5.

*Mobilisation* means a *transfer of resources respectively control of resources from collectivities to control units* and thus a gain in resources available for collective action [Etzioni 1975: 406ff.]. Mobilisation can predominantly be based on utilitarian, coercive or normative relations and is initiated by control units to activate resources and therefore a *top-down process*. Etzioni argues that *mobilisation in post-modern societies is rather low* – most resources are not available for collective action. This is even the case in situations where efforts for increasing mobilisation are rather high (social movements, revolutions, etc.). Etzioni assumes that only a small part of the mobilised collectivity is actually active, whereas the larger part of the collectivity remains passive.

*Decision making* is a process which *specifies general contexts* (values, commitment, knowledge), *identifies possible courses of action* and *selects specific actions* [Etzioni 1975: 270ff.]. Etzioni's approach is guided by a critique of rationalistic decision theory which is based on the idea of "complete" instrumental rationality. The notion of complete instrumental

rationality implies for instance that agents have comprehensive information on all possible actions and the consequences of their actions. It is furthermore assumed that the “best” course of action is selected based on a clear prioritisation of objectives. Etzioni argues that these assumptions are not realistic for societal macro-agents in “real-life” situations, characterised by restricted resources and time pressure as well as the ambiguity of objectives and means. Instead he proposes the model of “holistic rationality” which is characterised by a constant monitoring of contextual and specific decisions as well as the way that means influence objectives (There are means which can de-legitimise the objective).

Out of this holistic rationality he conceives the decision strategy of “mixed scanning” which means to systematically move back and forth between contextual and specific decisions and to monitor both the *adjustment of general options* (Are there new options?) and (changing) *framework conditions* as well as the *adjustment of specified implementation strategies*. This includes a *stepwise implementation* of decisions, a stepwise distribution of resources and a re-adjustment on both levels throughout the process.

These short comments on the elements and processes of the active orientation illustrate Etzioni’s approach to social theory which is on the one hand general and abstract but on the other hand also rich of content and empirical observation. The active society in this regard meets the criteria that the philosophical tradition of pragmatism conceived for a scientific theory: Its quality is determined by the connections it draws between fragmented parts of our perception of reality and by the new differences it introduces to our perception as well as our practice [James 1994].

#### **4. Conclusion**

The intention of this paper was to present the theory of an active society as a framework for the study of social innovation. The function of a frame-

work is to theoretically and empirically refine a concept and to relate it to other concepts. This is particularly needed in the case of social innovation because of the weak integration of the concept in general social theory. The theory of an active society in my perspective provides an adequate analytical as well as “normative” framework whereas normative has to be understood in terms of a general value orientation which supports pluralism, participation and activeness.

The active society focuses on processes of societal self-transformation and investigates the cultural and structural foundations of such processes. While structural dimensions dominated the thinking of Etzioni at the time he wrote the active society, he also accepts culture as a partly independent domain. In fact he acknowledges that the flexibility of symbolic representation in establishing relations between agents and their social reality is the foundation of agency. Knowledge is maybe the most important element for Etzioni – three chapters of the book cover different aspects of knowledge. In particular the organisation of the production and distribution of knowledge as well as the functional differentiation between knowledge producing and knowledge utilising social units is important for him. This intuition on the increasing relevance of knowledge can 42 years later be confirmed – but not only the structural aspects of knowledge are more important now, in fact knowledge seems to become a medium of social guidance equal to power or economic capital for the intervention in social systems [Willke 2001: 247ff.].

“Activeness” implies the ability of a society or a social unit to identify and anticipate social problems and to actively encounter these problems. Passiveness, in contrast, only allows us to react in an uncoordinated way to problems which are already “knocking on the backdoor”. The characterisation of modern western societies as “drifting” rather than “active” in the sense of Etzioni’s theory still seems to be true. The recent Copenhagen summit on climate change which failed to establish a binding contract between the world nations – is only the last example of this lack of social



guidance and coordination. One could endlessly investigate the cultural and structural features which in this case restricted the capacity for collective social action.

Etzioni's focus is more on social guidance and control than on innovation although the establishment of new structures as well as the "de-construction" of old structures is the final "output" of an active orientation [Etzioni 1975: 261]. Thus the active orientation is directly related to social innovation – but social innovation has to be conceived within a more general framework – the active society is not about continual self-transformation for its own sake or frenetic innovativeness which is sometimes promoted in recent innovation discourses. Instead it is basically about the establishment of a society which is able to respond to the needs and interests of individuals as well as collectivities. *Responsiveness* is besides activeness probably one of the core concepts of the whole theory. It is exactly the balance between consensus building capacities and control/guidance capacities which creates responsiveness.

Another important point is that neither consensus building nor control/guidance should be understood as completely centralised processes – the active orientation is not about creating an artificial and "inauthentic" consensus among all collectivities of a society which is then answered by the state as the only active agent. Etzioni never supported this simplified perspective. The active society is rather based on a decentralised structure where different collectivities reach a consensus concerning their values, needs and interests among themselves and articulate this consensus. To become effective this consensus has to be represented by control units (for instance organisations or more informally organised structures). If the establishment of these organisational structures is successful the result is an internally differentiated control unit which is able to mobilise resources for collective social action. Thus the consensus building processes can be answered by a variety of organisational forms which have the capability to activate collectivities.

Etzioni is realistic enough to avoid the romantic image of intended change without control – shifts in public awareness or moral disconcertment are not enough to change social structures or to establish new structures. There have to be societal agents who actively draw on the elements of the active orientation – consciousness, commitment, knowledge and power – and who turn passive awareness and disconcertment into collective social action.

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