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Social incubation: three perspectives on the incubators' work in promoting social innovations

Alexandra Gaidos

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THÈSE POUR OBTENIR LE GRADE DE DOCTEUR DE L'UNIVERSITÉ DE MONTPELLIER

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L'incubation sociale

Trois perspectives sur le travail des incubateurs dans
la promotion et l'accompagnement des innovations
sociales

Présentée par Alexandra GAIDOS

Le 4 juin 2019

Sous la direction de Florence PALPACUER

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UNIVERSITÉ
DE MONTPELLIER

L'Université de Montpellier n'entend donner aucune approbation ni improbation aux opinions émises dans cette thèse. Ces opinions doivent être considérées comme propres à leur auteur.

Pentru mami și tati,

Cu toată dragostea.

Remerciements

Dăruind vei dobândi*. Nicolae Steinhardt

(*Donne et tu recevras)

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Préférez ce qui est positif et multiple, la différence à l'uniforme, le flux aux unités, les agencements mobiles aux systèmes. Considérez que ce qui est productif n'est pas sédentaire, mais nomade.

Michel Foucault, Préface à L'Anti-Œdipe (1977)

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Introduction générale

1. Introduction

L'innovation sociale a connu un essor impressionnant durant les vingt dernières années, aux niveaux tant académique, pratique que politique. Le nombre d'articles de recherche a augmenté exponentiellement depuis une dizaine d'années (Montgomery, 2016 ; Ayob et al., 2016). De plus, les acteurs qui allaient mettre l'innovation sociale en pratique – les entrepreneurs sociaux – et les organisations qui allaient la diffuser – les entreprises sociales, n'ont pas cessé d'augmenter leur nombre. L'innovation sociale fait appel à l'ingéniosité et la créativité des individus et des collectifs, motivés pour trouver des solutions inédites et soutenables aux problématiques sociétales actuelles. Elle est ainsi apparue comme une panacée pour réinventer nos sociétés (Godin, 2012).

Son expansion a été soutenue par une volonté politique de reconnaître l'utilité sociétale de l'approche entrepreneuriale et de mobiliser les ressources nécessaires pour la soutenir (BEPA 2010). Cette volonté a été transcrite au niveau européen dans la proposition d'une définition du concept, inspirée de l'expérience anglo-saxonne, qui caractérise l'innovation sociale comme : « des nouvelles idées qui répondent aux besoins sociaux, créent des relations sociales et des nouvelles collaborations. Elles peuvent être des produits, des services ou modèles qui adressent des besoins non satisfaits plus efficacement »¹. En France, l'innovation sociale a été définie en 2014 dans le cadre de la loi sur l'Economie Sociale et Solidaire² et présente des points communs avec la définition européenne. Ces deux définitions mettent l'accent sur la résolution de besoins non ou mal satisfaits, par des formes d'organisations entrepreneuriales.

En outre, ont été développées des initiatives censées favoriser l'émergence et la promotion de ces innovations : des compétitions entrepreneuriales (European Social Innovation Competition), des plateformes de dissémination de bonnes pratiques (Social Innovation Europe, devenue Social Innovation Community, l'Avise en France), des groupements d'experts (Groupe d'experts de la Commission sur l'entrepreneuriat social – GECES), ainsi que des fonds d'investissement dédiés (Social Investment Taskforce, La France s'engage, le FISO en France, Le French Impact). Parmi ces initiatives, les incubateurs sociaux font partie des mesures clés envisagées pour créer les conditions favorables au développement et à la dissémination des innovations sociales (BEPA 2010 ; Mulgan, 2006 ; Mulgan et al., 2007 ; Murray et al.,

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/growth/industry/innovation/policy/social_en

Notre traduction de : “Social innovations are new ideas that meet social needs, create social relationships and form new collaborations. These innovations can be products, services or models addressing unmet needs more effectively.”

² <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000029313296&categorieLien=id#JORFTEXT000029313309>

2010). Sous la Stratégie Europe 2020, deux projets européens – BENISI et Transition – ont été financés pour dynamiser l'activité d'incubation et aider à la dissémination des innovations sociales en Europe.

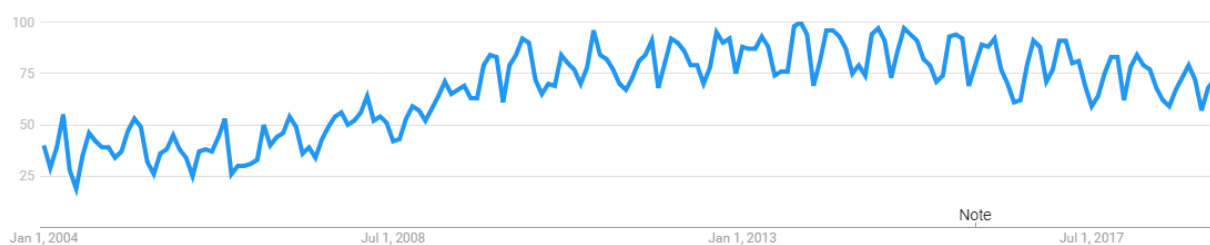
A l'instar du monde entrepreneurial traditionnel, les incubateurs sociaux proposent aux entrepreneurs sociaux de faire incuber leurs idées de changement pour les transformer en entreprises sociales. Si en France en 2007 il n'y avait que deux incubateurs (un académique et un issu de l'économie sociale et solidaire) faisant référence à l'innovation sociale, l'Avise recense actuellement plus de 30 incubateurs et plus largement, 160 structures d'accompagnement destinées aux entrepreneurs ou entreprises sociales³.

Néanmoins, les incubateurs sont jusqu'à présent restés dans l'ombre des entrepreneurs sociaux et de leurs projets innovants. Cette thèse se propose d'approfondir notre connaissance sur ces acteurs et d'explorer les liens encore peu étudiés entre l'incubation et l'innovation sociale, ainsi que leurs effets.

1.1. L'objet de recherche

Bien qu'elle ne soit pas un phénomène nouveau (Defourny, 2005 ; Godin, 2012 ; Lévesque, Fontan, & Klein, 2014), l'innovation sociale a commencé à gagner en visibilité et à être intensément promue aux alentours des bouleversements produits par la crise économique et financière de 2008 (voir Figure 1). Elle incarnait alors une promesse de trouver de nouveaux moyens, entrepreneuriaux et soutenables, pour répondre aux défis sociétaux tels que le changement climatique, le vieillissement de la population, ou la protection de l'environnement.

Figure 1 - Popularité des recherches cumulées sur l'innovation sociale et l'entrepreneuriat social d'après Google Trends (source : Google Trends, recherche menée le 01/04/2019)



Paradoxalement, en dépit d'une littérature florissante, l'innovation sociale reste encore un concept difficile à appréhender et il n'y a pas de consensus académique sur son sens (Pol & Ville, 2009 ; Richez-Battesti et

³ Annuaire des acteurs et dispositifs de l'Avise (2019): <https://www.avise.org/annuaire-des-acteurs>

al. 2012 ; Montgomery, 2016 ; Ayob, Teasdale, & Fagan, 2016). Cette notion présente de multiples facettes qui sont fortement sensibles tant aux contextes nationaux qu'aux organisations qui l'utilisent (Defourny & Nyssens, 2008, 2010 ; Besançon, Chochoy, & Guyon, 2013 ; Kerlin, 2010, 2012). Dans cette thèse, nous retenons la définition de Phills, Deiglmeier et Miller (2008) qui est actuellement la plus utilisée : *l'innovation sociale est « une nouvelle solution apportée à un problème social, qui est plus efficace, efficiente, soutenable, ou juste que les solutions existantes et qui crée de la valeur premièrement pour la société dans son ensemble, plutôt que pour des individus privés »*⁴ (p. 36).

Les implications positives de l'innovation sociale ont, en quelque sorte, fondé l'attrait généralisé pour ce concept aux nombreuses vertus (Evers et al., 2014). En effet, Mulgan et al. (2007) décrivent l'innovation sociale comme un vecteur de croissance économique et même « un impératif quand les systèmes ne fonctionnent pas ou quand les institutions sont tournées vers le passé, plutôt que vers les problèmes actuels » (p. 8). Dans cette lignée, l'innovation sociale aurait une « position VIP » (Unger, 2015, p. 235) dans sa capacité à répondre aux besoins qui ne sont pas satisfaits par le marché, l'Etat, ou le secteur non-gouvernemental (Mulgan et al. 2007 ; Murray, Caulier-Grice & Mulgan, 2010 ; Unger, 2015). Enfin, Harrisson (2012) considère l'innovation sociale comme importante pour la vitalité de la démocratie, car elle émerge de l'action citoyenne et introduit de la solidarité au sein de la société. L'innovation sociale serait ainsi mobilisée de manière privilégiée dans l'un ou l'autre de quatre contextes : l'introduction de changement institutionnel, la poursuite des objectifs sociaux, la poursuite du bien commun, et/ou la satisfaction des besoins qui sont négligés par le marché (Pol & Ville, 2009). Ces différentes approches reflètent la multitude de racines dans lesquelles la recherche académique a puisé pour analyser le concept : la sociologie, l'innovation technologique, le changement social, les études politiques, ou encore le management (Ayob, et al. 2016).

Contrairement à la première vague d'optimisme qui a propulsé l'innovation sociale sur devant de la scène, des voix émergent qui contestent le concept à plusieurs niveaux. Dans ces débats, la promesse de l'innovation sociale d'allier soutenabilité et efficacité économique pour répondre aux besoins sociaux, occupe une position centrale. Au niveau macro, ces perspectives plus critiques signalent les effets d'une généralisation des approches entrepreneuriales et marchandes dans le domaine du social. De ce point de vue, l'innovation sociale représenterait une tendance à individualiser et fragmenter les réponses aux besoins sociaux, et à instrumentaliser les acteurs traditionnellement en charge du social (par ex. les organisations non gouvernementales, les organisations de l'économie sociale), afin de les entrepreneurialiser et les rendre

⁴ Notre traduction de : “a novel solution to a social problem that is more effective, efficient, sustainable, or just than existing solutions and for which the value created accrues primarily to society as a whole rather than private individuals”(p. 36)

Précision : dans cette introduction, toutes les citations provenant de l'anglais sont traduites par l'auteur.

moins dépendants des financements publics (Eikenberry, 2009). Cette tendance s'inscrirait dans le paradigme du nouveau management public et masquerait en réalité un retrait de l'action publique devant la montée du néolibéralisme (Laville, Young, & Eynaud, 2015). Au niveau micro, ces recherches remettent en cause la vision positive de l'alignement entre objectifs sociaux et économiques que l'innovation sociale rendrait possible. Au contraire, ce double objectif générerait des tensions tant subjectives, au niveau des entrepreneurs sociaux ou praticiens des domaines sociaux, qu'organisationnelles, au niveau des entreprises sociales.

Cette multiplicité de sens attribués à l'innovation sociale a représenté l'un des puzzles tant théoriques que pratiques qui ont motivé la poursuite de cette thèse. Notamment, la vision de l'innovation sociale en tant que cohabitation des objectifs sociaux et économiques dans de nouvelles organisations entrepreneuriales a suscité notre intérêt.

Les incubateurs sociaux sont apparus comme un objet d'analyse empirique particulièrement riche afin d'explorer la mise en œuvre du concept, le façonnement des organisations socialement innovantes, et la manière dont s'y articulent des objectifs économiques et sociaux. L'incubation a été promue comme un moyen de prédilection pour répondre à l'intérêt croissant de trouver des solutions pour 'implémenter', accompagner et stimuler l'innovation sociale (Mulgan et al., 2007). Parallèlement aux innovations technologiques, l'incubateur est une organisation qui joue un « rôle crucial » pour offrir les conditions nécessaires au fleurissement des innovations sociales (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015, p.5). Il offre un cadre d'expérimentation (Mulgan et al., 2007), et de ce fait représente lui-même l'un des espaces « où l'innovation sociale a lieu » (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015, p. 2).

Cependant, bien qu'étant l'un des fers de lance de la promotion de l'entrepreneuriat social (Dey, Schneider, & Maier, 2016) et de la traduction du concept en initiatives et organisations concrètes (Mulgan et al., 2007 ; Nicolopoulou et al., 2015), les incubateurs sociaux restent des organisations peu connues. Malgré l'attention portée aux fonctions de support entrepreneurial qu'ils assurent, peu d'études s'intéressent à leur émergence, aux objectifs sociaux qu'ils portent, ainsi qu'à leurs propres démarches de légitimation. En dépit de l'intérêt grandissant pour comprendre les processus d'incubation (Karatas-Ozkan et al., 2015 ; Hackett & Dilts, 2004, 2008), il y a actuellement un manque d'analyses examinant de manière empirique les processus qui y sont à l'œuvre et la manière dont l'incubation influence les innovations sociales soutenues. A l'instar de l'incubation conventionnelle, l'incubation sociale a été plutôt traitée comme une « boîte noire » (Hackett & Dilts, 2008 ; Bergek & Norrman, 2008 ; Schwartz, 2013).

Cette thèse propose d'étudier le lien entre l'innovation sociale et les incubateurs sociaux, qui n'a été que très peu exploré jusqu'à présent (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015). L'objectif est de proposer une meilleure

compréhension de ces organisations et de leurs activités d'accompagnement. Le prisme de l'analyse est ainsi focalisé sur les pratiques mises en place par les incubateurs, afin de comprendre comment ils promeuvent l'innovation sociale et l'incarnent dans les organisations incubées.

1.2. Problématique, questions de recherche et objectifs

Notre problématique émerge au croisement de deux phénomènes. D'une part, l'essor de l'innovation sociale qui, en dépit de sa large diffusion, reste un concept à multiples facettes et potentiellement en tension. D'autre part, l'intérêt grandissant pour l'accompagnement entrepreneurial à l'innovation sociale, notamment l'incubation sociale, qui a fait l'objet de peu d'investigations empiriques malgré son développement dans les milieux pratiques.

Compte tenu de ces éléments, **la problématique générale de la thèse s'attache à comprendre les manières dont les incubateurs sociaux promeuvent et accompagnent l'émergence des innovations sociales.**

Nous souhaitons aborder ce sujet en prenant en compte la multiplicité des rôles joués par ces acteurs dans le développement de l'innovation sociale, et plus largement dans le champ de l'entrepreneuriat social. Nous examinons ce que les incubateurs disent, mais surtout ce qu'ils font, en vue de soutenir l'innovation sociale, et les effets de ces pratiques. En effet, si les incubateurs sont impliqués dans la « fabrique » des innovations sociales, ils le sont aussi dans la promotion de ces nouvelles initiatives.

Nos questions de recherche s'articulent dès lors autour du travail et des pratiques des incubateurs sociaux, et sont déclinées de la manière suivante :

- (1) Quels sont le rôle et le travail des incubateurs dans la diffusion de l'entrepreneuriat social ?*
- (2) Comment les pratiques d'incubation influencent-elles la construction des innovations sociales ?*
- (3) Comment des nouvelles subjectivités et formes organisationnelles sont-elles construites au travers de l'incubation sociale ?*

Les trois objectifs de cette recherche sont les suivants. Le premier objectif vise à mieux comprendre comment les incubateurs sociaux agissent afin de promouvoir l'innovation sociale comme nouvelle approche entrepreneuriale dans la résolution des problématiques sociales. Si ce premier objectif se focalise sur l'activité des incubateurs par rapport à leurs contextes institutionnels, les deux objectifs suivants se concentrent sur leurs actions à l'intérieur du processus d'incubation. Le deuxième objectif met l'accent sur les pratiques d'incubation afin d'éclairer leur influence sur le façonnement des initiatives incubées et sur

les compromis élaborés entre leurs objectifs sociaux et économiques. Le troisième objectif consiste à étudier l'interaction *incubateur – porteur de projet* et s'attache à observer les tensions à l'œuvre dans la construction des innovations sociales. Ces trois objectifs sont complémentaires et apportent une vision multidimensionnelle du rôle et des pratiques des incubateurs sociaux.

1.3. Démarche de la thèse

Cette thèse est constituée de trois articles, qui traite chacun d'une des questions de recherche annoncées. Afin de répondre à notre problématique, nous avons mené plusieurs études qualitatives auprès de quatre incubateurs européens, pionniers dans le champ de l'innovation sociale. Ce choix se justifie par l'état émergent des connaissances empiriques et théoriques sur les incubateurs sociaux et sur l'incubation sociale, plus généralement. Dans l'analyse des résultats, nous avons mobilisé plusieurs cadres théoriques, pour rendre compte des différentes dimensions du travail des incubateurs qui sont explorées. Les trois articles inclus dans cette thèse seront présentés dans l'ordre suivant :

Le **premier chapitre (article 1)** adresse notre première question de recherche, concernant le lien *incubateur(s) – contexte(s)*. Il se base sur la théorie néo-institutionnelle pour analyser comment les incubateurs sociaux ont diffusé et légitimé l'entrepreneuriat social dans leurs contextes d'action. L'originalité de ce chapitre réside dans une approche comparative des quatre incubateurs pionniers agissant dans des contextes nationaux différents (en France, en Allemagne, au Royaume-Uni et en Roumanie). Nous avons mené une étude de cas multiple et interrogé les équipes dirigeantes et opérationnelles dans chaque organisation, ainsi que des entreprises incubées considérées comme représentatives. Nous mobilisons la notion d'organisation frontière (O'Mahony & Bechky, 2008 ; Brown, 1991 ; Lawrence & Hardy, 1999) pour illustrer la position stratégique des incubateurs au croisement de différents champs institutionnels. Nous mettons en évidence l'existence d'un processus d'institutionnalisation de l'entrepreneuriat social qui opère de manière similaire au travers des quatre cas étudiés, et illustrons les caractéristiques du travail institutionnel effectué par les incubateurs.

Le **deuxième chapitre (article 2)** répond à notre deuxième question de recherche, en appréhendant la relation *incubateur – pratiques – projet(s)* d'innovation sociale. En prenant appui sur une approche socio-matérielle de la performativité, l'étude met en lumière une dimension peu étudiée dans la littérature empirique antérieure : l'influence des pratiques d'incubation sur les porteurs de projet et les initiatives incubées. Par le biais d'une étude de cas unique du processus d'incubation au sein de l'incubateur français, l'article s'attache à analyser ces pratiques au moment de leur réalisation *in situ*. Il rend compte de la matérialité des pratiques qui participent activement à la définition des innovations sociales, au cœur des articulations entre les équipes accompagnatrices et les porteurs de projet. Ainsi, nous identifions trois

catégories de pratiques performatives qui sous-tendent le dispositif d'incubation. Elles agissent dans le sens d'une *marchandisation* des problématiques sociales, d'une *entrepreneurialisation* des individus et d'une *managérialisation* des organisations en projet. Ces résultats nous conduisent à interroger la dimension politique de l'incubation sociale, du point de vue des arbitrages faits dans le soutien apporté aux dimensions sociales et économiques des projets incubés.

Le **troisième chapitre (article 3)** se propose de répondre à notre troisième question de recherche et interroge la relation *incubateur – porteur(s) de projet*. A partir d'une étude de cas enchâssés, nous analysons de manière longitudinale le processus d'incubation de trois projets, au sein de l'incubateur français. L'article s'inscrit dans une approche foucauldienne et porte sur les notions de dispositif et techniques de soi. Il apporte une nouvelle perspective dans la littérature critique sur l'entrepreneuriat social, en montrant, pour chaque projet, l'évolution de l'interaction entre le pouvoir exercé par l'incubateur et les formes de résistance développées par les porteurs de projet. Ainsi, cet article ouvre la « boîte noire » de l'incubation sociale et met en exergue les relations de pouvoir qui sous-tendent ce processus. Cette analyse nous permet de montrer comment la construction du projet d'innovation sociale se réalise au cœur d'un processus où se définissent, dans la confrontation, de nouvelles subjectivités entrepreneuriales et des compromis autour des missions sociales et économiques portées par les projets. Nous proposons des pistes de réflexion quant aux situations où l'alignement de ces tensions est possible et peut aboutir à des incubations réussies.

Un résumé des questions de recherche abordées dans chaque chapitre est présenté dans le Tableau 2 (Annexe du chapitre).

1.4. Intérêts de la recherche

Cette thèse présente plusieurs intérêts. Sur le plan théorique, elle a pour objectif d'approfondir les connaissances dans le champ encore émergent de l'entrepreneuriat social. L'analyse adopte la perspective de l'incubation sociale et éclaire l'action des incubateurs, grâce à une approche comparative. Le sujet de l'incubation entrepreneuriale n'est pas nouveau et a fait l'objet de recherches approfondies en ce qui concerne l'entrepreneuriat et l'innovation « conventionnels » (Hackett & Dilts, 2004, 2008 ; Bakkali, Messeghem, & Sammut, 2014). Néanmoins, dans le champ de l'entrepreneuriat et de l'innovation sociale, les incubateurs restent des objets peu connus. Leur travail d'accompagnement, ainsi que ses effets sur les projets d'innovation sociale sont encore très peu analysés. Ainsi, cette recherche s'attache à mettre en évidence différents niveaux de tensions et compromis à l'œuvre dans la promotion et la construction des innovations sociales, et élargit les connaissances sur ces processus.

Sur le plan méthodologique, notre thèse présente l'intérêt d'analyser l'objet de recherche depuis plusieurs angles d'analyse, tant au niveau macro et contextuel, qu'au niveau micro des pratiques et interactions subjectives. En outre, elle combine des approches comparatives avec des études de cas uniques, qui apportent des connaissances précises sur le sujet étudié.

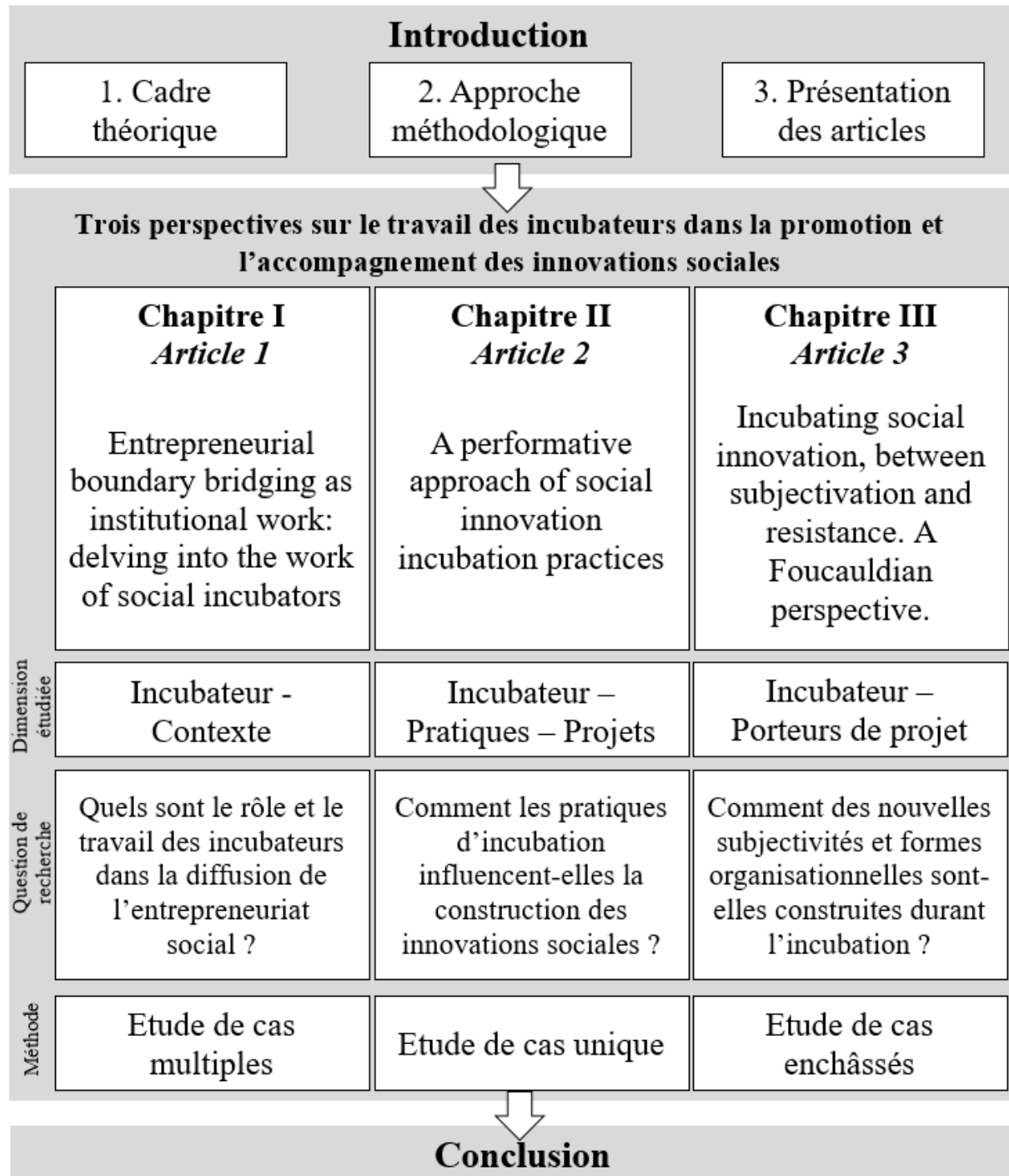
Sur le plan pratique, cette thèse présente un intérêt tant pour les structures d'accompagnement à l'innovation sociale que pour les personnes qui sont à la recherche de soutien dans leurs démarches entrepreneuriales. Elle permet une meilleure compréhension des défis de l'incubation sociale et présente une utilité sociale dans le sens où elle met en lumière les difficultés qui peuvent apparaître dans ce processus, ainsi que leurs sources d'apparition. Nous espérons ainsi qu'elle viendra alimenter de futurs échanges, en vue d'améliorer la prise en compte des besoins d'accompagnement des initiatives incubées sur les volets tant sociaux qu'économiques. Cette recherche peut également servir aux décideurs publics et collectivités locales qui souhaitent soutenir des structures d'accompagnement à l'entrepreneuriat social.

1.5. Structure de la thèse

Afin de répondre à notre problématique et aux objectifs de recherche, le plan de la thèse est le suivant.

Les deux sections suivantes présentent les fondements théoriques et la méthodologie utilisée dans ce travail de recherche. Ensuite, les chapitres I, II et III correspondent aux trois articles susmentionnés. Enfin, une conclusion générale synthétise les principaux résultats, contributions et limites de cette thèse et présente les perspectives de la recherche. La figure 2 illustre le plan général de la thèse.

Figure 2 - Le plan général de la thèse.



2. Cadre théorique

2.1. Description de l'objet de recherche

Les concepts d'innovation sociale, d'entrepreneur social ou d'entreprise sociale sont entrelacés et souvent utilisés de manière interchangeable (Montgomery, 2016). Dans le but de faciliter la compréhension de ces termes tels qu'ils sont utilisés dans cette introduction, nous introduisons quelques repères. Les définitions de ces concepts sont néanmoins contestées (Choi & Majumdar, 2014 ; Ayob et al., 2016 ; Chell, 2007) et présentent des variations en fonction des contextes et des acteurs qui les mobilisent.

L'**entrepreneur social** est l'individu à l'origine de l'innovation sociale et de la création du projet entrepreneurial. Il se différencie par la poursuite d'une mission sociale (Austin et al., 2006 ; Weerwardena & Mort, 2006 ; Dacin et al., 2010). Il peut présenter des traits spécifiques (Dacin et al. 2010) dont par exemple la passion pour une cause en particulier (Bornstein, 2004) ou un fort sens de l'éthique (Drayton, 2005 ; Bacq & Janssen, 2011). Notamment, il exploite des opportunités pour répondre aux problématiques sociales et il est motivé par la création de valeur sociale (Mair & Marti, 2006 ; Bacq & Janssen, 2011).

L'**entreprise sociale** est l'organisation porteuse de l'innovation sociale. Elle offre des services ou produits censés répondre aux problématiques sociales identifiées. Les entreprises sociales peuvent être positionnées sur un continuum de modèles allant du purement philanthropique au purement commerciaux (Dees, 1998 ; Chell, 2007). Néanmoins, la caractéristique de base est l'objectif de créer de la valeur sociale (Dacin et al., 2010 ; Dees, 1998 ; Dees & Anderson, 2002 ; Peredo & McLean, 2006 ; Zahra et al., 2009) qui transparait dans son modèle économique soutenable et dans ses stratégies.

L'**incubateur social** est une structure d'accompagnement qui aide les individus (entrepreneurs sociaux) à monter leurs projets entrepreneuriaux à but social.

Nous développons maintenant plus les concepts d'*innovation sociale* et d'*incubateur social*.

L'innovation sociale

Comme annoncé dans l'introduction, le concept d'innovation sociale ne présente pas de consensus concernant son sens (Pol & Ville, 2009 ; Besançon et al., 2013 ; Cloutier, 2003 ; Diochon & Anderson, 2011 ; Richez-Battesti et al., 2012 ; Montgomery, 2016 ; Rüede & Lurtz, 2012). Ayob, Teasdale & Fagan (2016) le caractérisent comme un « concept contesté », « conceptuellement imprécis et utilisé de différentes manières qui peuvent être vues comme contradictoires » (p. 636), tandis que Montgomery (2016) parle de

l'imminence d'une « definitional bankruptcy » (p. 1981). Afin d'éclairer les différentes dimensions du concept, nous procédons à une courte caractérisation.

L'innovation sociale peut prendre plusieurs formes : un produit, un processus de production, une technologie (comme l'innovation en général), mais peut également représenter un principe, une idée, une loi, un mouvement social, une intervention, ou une combinaison de tout cela » (Phills et al., 2008). Elle n'est pas limitée aux frontières d'un champ organisationnel ou institutionnel en particulier et de ce fait, elle peut trouver ses origines tant dans l'initiative des individus, par exemple les entrepreneurs sociaux, que dans des mouvements sociaux (par exemple, le féminisme) (Mulgan, 2006 ; Mulgan et al., 2007 ; Harrison, 2012), des ONG ou des acteurs politiques (Mulgan et al., 2007 ; Nicholls & Murdock, 2012).

Plusieurs niveaux ou dimensions de l'innovation sociale ont été décrits (Nicholls & Murdock, 2012 ; Moulaert et al., 2005 ; BEPA2010), notamment :

- l'innovation sociale incrémentale – fait référence aux biens et services qui répondent de manière plus efficace aux besoins sociaux, et peut de ce fait représenter une opportunité d'affaires ;
- l'innovation sociale institutionnelle (ou processuelle) – réorganise des structures sociales et économiques, mais aussi leurs modèles de gouvernance, pour créer de la valeur sociale ;
- l'innovation sociale disruptive (ou émancipatrice) – tente de changer les systèmes et correspond plutôt à l'action des mouvements sociaux ou acteurs politiques.

Nous retenons ici deux caractéristiques de l'innovation sociale que nous allons mettre en lumière au travers de notre analyse de l'incubation. D'une part, son objectif principal est la création de « valeur sociale » qui profite à la société, plutôt que la « valeur privée » qui revient aux entrepreneurs, investisseurs, etc. (Phills et al., 2008 ; Chell, 2007), ce qui la différencie d'autres formes d'innovation. D'autre part, les solutions innovantes qu'elle propose doivent être soutenables afin de pouvoir garantir un impact social sur le long terme (Phills et al., 2008). Cette double contrainte se retrouve également dans l'activité des entrepreneurs sociaux et des entreprises sociales au travers de leur double mission sociale et économique.

L'incubateur social

Nicolopoulou et al. (2015) proposent le terme d'incubateur social pour un incubateur qui est « particulièrement motivé par l'accomplissement d'une combinaison de résultats sociaux et économiques » (p. 2). *Dans cette recherche nous comprenons par incubateur social une organisation qui propose un accompagnement entrepreneurial à l'émergence des projets socialement innovants.*

Le rapprochement entre l'innovation sociale et les processus d'incubation n'est pas neutre et trouve ses origines dans les études qui analysent le concept sous le paradigme de l'innovation.

Par exemple, Phills et al. (2008) distinguent quatre éléments : le processus qui amène à générer la solution innovante, le produit ou l'invention en elle-même, la diffusion ou l'adoption de l'innovation et enfin, la valeur créée par l'innovation sociale. Mulgan et al. (2007) et Murray et al. (2010) décrivent trois étapes dans la progression des innovations sociales qui commencent avec la génération des idées, le prototypage et le pilotage, et enfin le changement d'échelle et l'apprentissage. Dans ce schéma, l'intervention des incubateurs sociaux se situe au niveau de la phase émergente qui amène à la conception de la solution socialement innovante.

Le lien innovation sociale – incubation est ainsi renforcé par la croyance que « l'innovation peut être managée, soutenue et encouragée » (Murray et al., 2010, p. 7) et que dans cette démarche il existe un besoin d'expérimentation, de créativité ainsi que d'une combinaison d'idées provenant de différents champs (Mulgan, 2006). Dans cette perspective, l'innovation sociale « a souvent besoin d'incubation » (Mulgan et al., 2007 p. 38) parce que cette dernière offre « un environnement protecteur pour l'expérimentation » (p. 38). Ainsi, l'incubation offrirait un gain de temps et une augmentation de l'efficacité en permettant d'accéder aux ressources, de « tester rapidement en pratique de nouvelles idées, avec des évaluations rapides » (p. 38). Selon ce point de vue, l'incubateur occupe une fonction de support à l'innovation sociale au travers de différents services et ressources qu'il propose.

2.2. L'innovation sociale en tensions

La diversité des approches et des conceptions de l'innovation sociale que nous avons exposées reflète les difficultés à concevoir l'articulation entre les deux mondes que le concept associe : le « social » et « l'innovation » ou la réalisation d'objectifs de changement social par des mécanismes économiques. Cette association renvoie, en effet, à un débat normatif qui traverse tant les recherches sur l'innovation sociale que sur l'entrepreneuriat social.

Pour Montgomery (2016) les enjeux de définition de l'innovation sociale révèlent « un champ de bataille » (p. 1995) entre deux paradigmes, qui a des effets importants en termes de visibilité et de poids accordés à certaines initiatives plutôt que d'autres. En parlant d'« une guerre paradigmatique », il soutient l'existence de deux courants opposés. D'abord, un courant technocrate de l'innovation sociale, synonyme d'« une destruction créatrice des relations sociales » (p. 1992). Cette vision est alignée aux objectifs néolibéraux. Elle promeut un élargissement du domaine marchand par la diffusion de la compétition, la marchandisation du social, l'accent sur l'efficacité, et le gain d'économies pour l'acteur public (BEPA 2010 ; Murray et al., 2010 ; Mulgan, 2006). Elle offre ainsi une voie pour réimaginer l'action publique et l'Etat Providence (Moulaert et al., 2013), dans le sens d'un désengagement en faveur du marché. L'image de l'entrepreneur social « héroïque » ou « change maker » (Bacq & Janssen, 2011 ; Mulgan, 2006 ; Mulgan et al., 2007) et

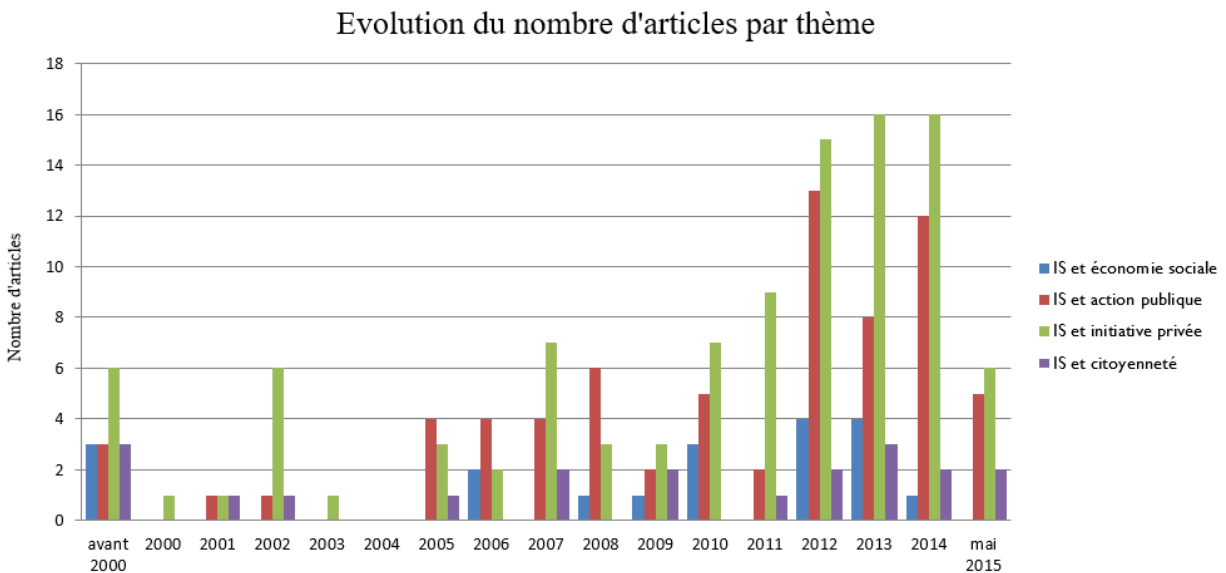
de l'entreprise sociale économiquement efficace, de plus inscrite dans une démarche de changement d'échelle, est alignée à ce paradigme. Ayob, Teasdale et Fagan (2016) indiquent que cette vision est issue du management et la caractérisent d'utilitariste, du fait de sa concentration sur la valeur sociale créée par les innovations sociales (Pol & Ville, 2009).

A l'opposé, bien que moins puissant, se trouve un courant démocratique de l'innovation sociale, qui promeut la « transformation créatrice des relations sociales » (Montgomery, 2006, p. 1992). Ce paradigme met l'accent sur le besoin de créer un système économique plus juste et plus participatif envers les populations marginalisées (Moulaert et al., 2005 ; Moulaert & Ailenei, 2005). Il promeut également une approche de la gouvernance par la coopération et la solidarité, à la place des logiques marchandes de la compétition. Afin de résoudre les problèmes sociaux, l'innovation sociale doit aspirer à transformer les relations sociales qui sont à l'origine de ces problèmes (Bouchard, 2012 ; Lévesque, 2002). Ceci peut être accompli par une démarche participative et inclusive des multiples parties prenantes dans le processus d'innovation sociale (Tello-Rozas, 2015). Cette vision de l'innovation sociale correspond à la tradition radicale ou transformatrice identifiée par Ayob, Teasdale et Fagan (2016), qui prend ses origines dans la sociologie. Elle se veut normative et prend en compte les effets du changement sociétal sur les relations de pouvoir en place (Bouchard, 2012 ; Harrisson, 2012).

Si ces différentes perspectives se sont initialement affrontées, Ayob et al. (2016) constatent une tendance apparente de dé-contestation de l'innovation sociale, dans laquelle la vision utilitariste prend plus d'ampleur. Nous avons également constaté cette tendance au début de ce travail de recherche, lorsque nous avons essayé de cartographier l'évolution des productions académiques dans lesquelles le concept d'innovation sociale est utilisé au cours du temps (Figure 3 ci-après).

Figure 3 - Evolution du nombre d'articles académiques traitant de l'innovation sociale.

(Source : élaboré par l'auteur, à partir de la base de données ABI Inform, (mai 2015). Les thématiques ont été créées sur la base d'un codage émergent des résumés de 200 articles sélectionnés selon une recherche par mot clé, qui faisaient référence au concept d'innovation sociale, dans leur titre ou leur résumé.)



Ainsi, la lutte entre les deux paradigmes de l'innovation sociale est fortement enracinée dans des distributions existantes de pouvoir (Montgomery, 2016), qui ont favorisé la diffusion d'une conception entrepreneuriale de l'innovation sociale. Par conséquent, « l'innovation sociale n'est jamais neutre mais toujours politique et socialement construite » (Nicholls & Murdock, 2012, p. 4) et elle devrait être analysée en tant que processus qui incarne ces dimensions politiques inhérentes (Ayob et al., 2016, p. 649). L'innovation sociale résulte alors d'un conflit, et elle peut même avoir un « dark side » (Nicholls & Murdock, 2012, p. 4). De par ses objectifs, elle est située au cœur d'une redéfinition des frontières entre le social et le marchand et incarne « la lutte entre la marchandisation et la 'dé-marchandisation' » (Harrison, 2012). De ce point de vue, les deux paradigmes opposent une vision dépolitisée de l'association *social-marchand* (où la mécanique économique peut conduire au changement social sans créer des tensions) *versus* une vision politisée qui questionne cette relation et s'attache à mettre en évidence les conflits de pouvoir à l'œuvre.

Au vu de ces tensions, le rôle et l'activité des incubateurs sociaux méritent d'être investigués de manière plus approfondie. La prise en compte des effets politiques et normatifs dans la promotion des innovations sociales et de l'entrepreneuriat social, plus généralement, questionne également le travail des incubateurs. Ceux-ci sont amenés, d'un part, à naviguer et agir dans un champ émergent, sujet à de nombreuses

contestations (Choi & Majumdar, 2014) et d'autre part, à soutenir des organisations complexes du fait des objectifs sociaux et économiques poursuivis.

A l'image de l'incubation conventionnelle, l'incubation sociale est une « fabrique » d'entrepreneurs sociaux, outillée par des pratiques et processus d'accompagnement spécifiques. Sous l'angle de la fonction de support assurée, l'incubation répond ainsi au manque de maîtrise des outils business qui a été mise en évidence au sein des entreprises sociales (Chell, 2007). Néanmoins, si l'approche de l'innovation sociale par le paradigme de l'innovation technologique fait des incubateurs des acteurs légitimes et équipés pour soutenir ce nouveau type d'innovation, la capacité des incubateurs à répondre aux objectifs de transformation sociale inhérents au concept n'a pas encore été analysée (Kieboom, 2014).

Des recherches récentes ont commencé à questionner ces acteurs à plusieurs niveaux. Kieboom (2014) illustre la tendance des incubateurs à s'attacher à la recherche de solutions de manière « hermétique », sans prendre en considération les effets de ces solutions sur les configurations de pouvoir en place. L'incubateur peut agir en tant que « moteur performatif » (Leca, Gond, & Cruz, 2014) et transformer un idéal organisationnel en réalité sociale. Les travaux de Dey et Lehner (2016) et Dey, Schneider et Maier (2016) mettent en évidence la nature idéologique des discours promus par les incubateurs et d'autres organisations de support à l'entrepreneuriat social. Ils montrent que ces discours attirent et façonnent les individus pour qu'ils correspondent à une représentation idéale de l'entrepreneur social. Les pratiques d'accompagnement, telles que les présentations entrepreneuriales et le brainstorming, peuvent également déclencher des actes d'identification et de subjectivation corporelle de la part de porteurs de projet, incités à devenir des entrepreneurs sociaux (Ruebottom & Auster, 2017 ; Mauksch, 2018).

Ces études mettent en lumière le caractère politique des incubateurs sociaux, ainsi que la dimension non-neutre de l'exercice des pratiques d'accompagnement (Germain & Jacquemin, 2017) à l'entrepreneuriat social. Néanmoins, elles ne s'attaquent pas au cœur de la mécanique d'incubation – le processus d'incubation en lui-même, et les interactions qu'il génère avec les projets incubés. La recherche sur le sujet n'a pas encore montré l'influence de ce processus sur la construction des innovations sociales, ni les tensions qu'il peut générer dans la recherche d'un équilibre social-économique au sein des projets incubés.

Par conséquent, nous sommes incités, dans cette recherche, à aller au-delà de la fonction support des incubateurs pour analyser la nature politique du travail des incubateurs, au travers des processus, pratiques et outils mobilisés. Nous explorons cette problématique sous trois prismes théoriques, exposés ci-après.

2.3. Cadres théoriques mobilisés dans la recherche

Portant sur **les manières dont les incubateurs sociaux promeuvent et accompagnent l'émergence des innovations sociales**, la construction multi-niveau de notre questionnement de recherche justifie la mobilisation et l'articulation de plusieurs cadres de référence théorique. L'approche néo-institutionnelle offre, tout d'abord, des outils d'analyse de niveau meso pour appréhender le travail des incubateurs dans la diffusion de l'entrepreneuriat social, appréhendé comme une activité de construction et de transformation de champs. La perspective socio-matérielle de la performativité permet, ensuite, d'analyser comment les pratiques d'accompagnement peuvent influencer la construction des innovations sociales au niveau de l'incubateur. Enfin, à un niveau plus fin, l'approche foucaldienne des dispositifs et de leurs effets sur les subjectivités offre une grille de lecture des processus de subjectivation à l'œuvre dans les interactions entre l'incubateur et les porteurs de projet.

L'incubation sociale en tant que construction et transformation de champs institutionnelles

La théorie néo-institutionnelle offre plusieurs clés de compréhension de l'émergence des nouveaux champs organisationnels et du rôle joué par les acteurs dans ce processus, motivant notre choix pour ce cadre analytique. En effet, plusieurs raccords sont faits entre la théorie néo-institutionnelle et les recherches en entrepreneuriat social.

Tout d'abord, ces recherches partagent un intérêt commun pour la compréhension du changement, institutionnel ou social/sociétal – deux notions qui se complètent. L'explication du changement institutionnel et des mécanismes qui y conduisent a déclenché de nombreux débats au sein de la théorie néo-institutionnelle (Dacin, Goodstein, & Scott, 2002 ; Seo & Creed, 2002 ; Leca, Battilana, & Boxenbaum, 2008). En effet, la théorie s'est attachée à comprendre comment de nouveaux acteurs, organisations et pratiques étaient à même d'impulser un changement dans les institutions ou champs les concernant, tout en étant contraints par ces mêmes institutions. Les démarches d'innovation sociale, quant à elles, posent d'emblée l'intention de produire ce changement comme étant leur but central. Les références au changement social ou sociétal poursuivi par l'innovation sociale sont pratiquement omniprésentes dans la littérature (Mulgan et al., 2007 ; Harrisson, 2012). Ainsi, l'innovation sociale questionne les normes institutionnalisées et les relations de pouvoir en place (Bouchard, 2012). Elle « tente de bouleverser et reconfigurer les systèmes eux-mêmes en modifiant leurs logiques, normes et traditions institutionnelles internes » (Nicholls & Murdock, 2012, p. 4). Néanmoins, si les innovations sociales peuvent apparaître dans des situations de vide institutionnel (Dacin et al., 2010 ; Mair & Marti, 2009), elles ont besoin de

reconnaissance politique afin de gagner en légitimité (Mulgan et al. 2007). Dans ce sens, le soutien institutionnel peut stimuler la motivation des acteurs et faciliter leur accès aux ressources (Stephan et al., 2014).

Ensuite, dans les deux approches, les acteurs et leur travail quotidien et intentionnel occupent une place importante pour produire le changement (Lawrence et al., 2010 ; Phillips & Lawrence, 2012 ; Battilana et al., 2009 ; Mair & Marti, 2006). De manière similaire aux entrepreneurs institutionnels, qui mobilisent des ressources pour « créer de nouvelles institutions ou pour transformer les institutions existantes » (Maguire, Hardy, & Lawrence, 2004, p. 657), les entrepreneurs sociaux aspirent à changer les systèmes sociaux, ou les institutions inefficaces (Mumford, 2002). Pour parvenir à leurs buts de changement, les entrepreneurs institutionnels mobilisent plusieurs types de travail (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) qui s'articulent différemment en fonction de l'étape du processus de changement dans laquelle ils se situent (Battilana et al., 2009 ; Perkmann & Spicer, 2007 ; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). Néanmoins, dans le cas de l'entrepreneuriat social, il y a une moindre connaissance des processus et caractéristiques du travail des acteurs qui ouvrent à la création et la légitimation d'un champ (Tracey et al., 2011 ; Annette, Valéau, & Eynaud, 2018), tels que les mettent en œuvre les incubateurs sociaux. De plus, le rôle spécifique de leur comportement entrepreneurial dans le travail de changement institutionnel (Chell, 2007) mené n'a pas été étudié.

Enfin, dans la compréhension des changements institutionnels produits, les contextes dans lesquels les acteurs sont enracinés et agissent ont un rôle considérable. Le contexte peut tant poser des contraintes que faciliter l'accès aux ressources pour les entrepreneurs institutionnels (Leca et al., 2008). Les acteurs qui travaillent à la création de nouveaux champs doivent, quant à eux, formaliser leur projet institutionnel d'une manière qui attire des alliés potentiels (Boxenbaum & Battilana, 2005 ; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005) et qui rende ce projet légitime aux yeux des acteurs détenant les ressources (Déjean et al., 2004 ; DiMaggio, 1991 ; Maguire et al., 2004), tout en œuvrant à la création d'une identité propre au nouveau champ (Rao et al., 2000). Cet aspect est particulièrement important dans le cas de l'innovation sociale, dont le caractère hybride tend à créer de nouvelles combinaisons d'éléments existants, et ainsi à dépasser les frontières organisationnelles ou sectorielles (Mulgan et al., 2007 ; Nicholls & Murdock, 2012). Par conséquent, l'entrepreneur ou l'entreprise social(e) est destiné(e) à naviguer continuellement entre des contextes institutionnels distincts, souvent régis par des logiques en concurrence (Venkataraman, Vermeulen, Raaijmakers, & Mair, 2016 ; Pache & Santos, 2010, 2013). Ceci est également le cas des incubateurs sociaux qui de par la nature de leur travail, sont positionnés à l'interface des acteurs possédant des ressources et des acteurs en besoin. Néanmoins, ce positionnement ainsi que leur travail de relier ou faciliter les échanges entre ces mondes sociaux reste très peu étudié. Nous mobilisons ainsi la notion d'organisation

frontière (Lawrence & Hardy, 1999 ; O'Mahony & Bechky, 2008), issue des travaux néo-institutionnels, afin d'explorer le rôle stratégique de ce positionnement à l'interface de contextes institutionnels différents.

L'incubation sociale au prisme d'une conception socio-matérielle de la performativité

La notion de performativité présente plusieurs dimensions et a été mobilisée de diverses manières dans la recherche en gestion. L'article de Gond, Cabantous, Harding et Learmonth (2015) met en évidence une variété de perspectives sur la performativité. Ces perspectives mettent l'accent sur différents niveaux d'analyse qui peuvent « performer ». Il s'agit tant du discours qui « fait ce qu'il dit » (Gond et al., 2015, p. 5 ; Austin, 1962), donc produit la réalité qu'il annonce, que de la nature construite des « corps » humains et du genre qui « finit par produire précisément le phénomène qu'il a anticipé » (Butler, 1999, p. xiv). La performativité peut également représenter une manière d'expliquer comment certaines formes organisationnelles prennent vie. Ainsi, les concepts et théories préexistantes peuvent performer et « faire naître » la réalité (Esper, Cabantous, Barin-Cruz, & Gond, 2017, p. 691) qu'ils décrivent, en s'incarnant dans des pratiques (Cabantous et al., 2010 ; Muniesa, 2014). Dans ce processus, les chercheurs peuvent également être impliqués et « co-produire une nouvelle réalité organisationnelle » (Esper et al., 2017, p. 691 ; Steyaert & Dey, 2010).

La perspective socio-matérielle de la performativité (Orlikowski, 20017) s'attache à mettre en évidence la nature socio-matérielle des pratiques organisationnelles (Barad, 2003). Nous retenons dans notre analyse cette dernière vision, du fait qu'elle permette de rendre compte des effets des pratiques d'accompagnement dans leur matérialité. En effet, la pléthore d'outils, d'objets, d'artefacts et de pratiques qui sont entrelacées dans un réseau de relations avec les acteurs humains, est souvent ignorée des analyses organisationnelles (Michaud, 2014). En particulier, dans la vision post-humaniste de la performativité développée par Barad, « matter matters » (la matérialité compte) au même niveau que les discours (Barad, 2003). La réalité est ainsi produite par des forces matérielles *et* discursives. Les acteurs et l'action co-émergent et se définissent réciproquement (Keevers et al. 2012). Des dispositifs se constituent sur la base d'assemblages de pratiques matérielles et discursives. Ils sont « producteurs de (et font partie de) phénomènes » (Barad, 1998, p. 98) et façonnent « ce qui devient déterminé et ce qui est exclu » (Orlikowski & Scott, 2014b, p. 873). Ces actes de (re)définition des frontières socio-matérielles sont par conséquent, producteurs d'exclusion. Nous nous appuyons sur cette perspective afin de mettre en lumière les enjeux politiques et les relations de pouvoir qui sous-tendent les pratiques performatives (Gond et al., 2015 ; Orlikowski & Scott, 2014b ; Nyberg & Wright, 2015) à l'œuvre pendant l'accompagnement des innovations sociales.

L'incubation sociale comme processus foucauldien de subjectivation

Pour explorer l'incubation sociale en tant que processus de construction de nouvelles subjectivités et de nouvelles formes organisationnelles, nous nous inscrivons dans les perspectives critiques en entrepreneuriat social (par exemple, Dey, 2013 ; Hjorth & Bjerke, 2006 ; Dey & Steyaert, 2012, 2014) qui mobilisent le prisme d'analyse foucauldien du dispositif et des techniques de soi. Nous nous appuyons ici sur les travaux ultérieurs de Foucault, qui ont marqué un changement dans sa pensée lorsqu'elle s'est moins focalisée sur les effets de contrôle et d'asservissement produits par le pouvoir (Weiskopf & Loacker, 2006), pour accorder une place accrue à l'action individuelle, aux formes de résistance et à la pratique de l'éthique (Dey & Steyaert 2014 ; Raffnsøe, 2014). Ainsi, « toute relation de pouvoir implique [...] une stratégie de lutte » (Foucault 1982, p. 346). Foucault capture cette coexistence entre pouvoir et résistance au travers du concept de dispositif.

Le dispositif implique un processus de subjectivation, ou de création des sujets qui porteront le projet stratégique qu'il incarne (Agamben, 2009 ; Foucault, 1998). Dey (2010) suggère que la fonction stratégique de l'entrepreneuriat social est précisément de problématiser le secteur social, tout en offrant comme solution l'entrepreneur social et le modèle organisationnel de l'entreprise sociale. Nous mobilisons cette approche pour proposer une lecture des relations de pouvoir au sein du processus d'incubation. Actuellement, les études de Dey et Lehner (2016) et Dey, Schneider et Maier (2016) ont mis en lumière la nature idéologique des discours produits par ces organisations. Ainsi, les incubateurs produisent une représentation de l'entrepreneur idéal qui influence les subjectivités et les comportements des individus (Dey & Lehner, 2016 ; Dey, 2013). Ils érigent de manière hégémonique une vision de l'entrepreneur héroïque, qui trouve des solutions pragmatiques aux problèmes les plus pressants de nos sociétés, tout en prenant du plaisir dans ce processus (Dey et al., 2016). Dans cette démarche idéologique, les difficultés et tensions inhérentes aux processus de changement social sont effacées afin de rendre l'entrepreneuriat social plus attractif (Dey et al., 2016). Néanmoins, ces études s'arrêtent aux pratiques discursives des structures d'accompagnement et n'offrent pas d'éclairage sur les réactions des individus face à l'usage de ces techniques de contrôle. Pour répondre à ce manque, nous utilisons deux prismes – le dispositif et les techniques de soi – afin de proposer une analyse simultanée, du pouvoir exercé par l'accompagnement d'une part, des formes de résistance produites par les porteurs de projet, d'autre part. Notre analyse se situe à l'interface de deux processus que les études récentes ont abordé séparément, en se concentrant soit sur le pouvoir, soit sur la résistance (Dey, 2013).

La combinaison de ces trois perspectives théoriques nous permet de donner à voir l'incubation sociale selon différentes facettes du travail accompli par les incubateurs dans la promotion et l'accompagnement des innovations sociales.

3. Positionnement épistémologique et approche méthodologique

Après quelques éléments portant sur notre cadre épistémologique, nous présentons ici le processus de recherche et les méthodes de collecte de données mobilisées pour répondre aux questions de recherche. Ensuite, nous présentons les approches analytiques utilisées.

3.1. Démarche générale

Avant de développer notre méthodologie de recherche, nous apportons quelques précisions sur notre cadre épistémologique (Miles & Huberman, 2003 ; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018 ; Thiétart et al., 1999 ; Hlady Rispal, 2002 ; Roussel & Wacheux, 2005).

Notre recherche s'inscrit dans un paradigme constructiviste pragmatique, qui a été de plus en plus mobilisé au sein des recherches en management (Avenier, 2011). Ce paradigme pose l'hypothèse de non-séparabilité « dans le processus de connaissance, entre l'observateur et le phénomène observé » (Albert & Avenier, 2011, p. 25-26). Ainsi, la production de connaissances est vue « comme un acte de construction de représentations forgées par des humains pour donner sens aux situations dans lesquelles ils interviennent » (Albert & Avenier, 2011, p. 26). Il s'agit d'un processus intentionnel qui conduit à élaborer des représentations des phénomènes observés. La connaissance produite représente plutôt des « hypothèses plausibles adaptées à l'expérience des sujets qui la génèrent » (Albert & Avenier, 2011, p. 27). Ces hypothèses offrent des « voies plausibles » et des « repères viables pour cheminer dans le monde en direction de ses buts » (Albert & Avenier, 2011, p. 27) tout en stimulant la réflexion et la créativité.

Le paradigme constructiviste souligne la nécessité d'une démarche réflexive du chercheur quant à sa manière de comprendre et d'agir par rapport à son objet de recherche (Patton, 2002). Les savoirs produits font l'objet d'une légitimation réalisée par le travail épistémique du chercheur (Piaget, 1967, Martinet, 2000). En effet, tout processus de recherche implique un travail épistémique, ou réflexif, opéré par le chercheur lors des différentes phases de ce cheminement, notamment au moment de la conception du

protocole de recherche et de la construction des savoirs (Avenier, 2007 ; Albert & Avenier, 2011 ; Martinet, 2000, 2007). Nous éclairons ces différents choix dans les paragraphes suivants.

Notre démarche de recherche est essentiellement qualitative. Ce choix découle en partie de la nature de notre problématique, portant sur des phénomènes encore peu étudiés, et de la nature émergente du champ de l'entrepreneuriat social. En effet, la recherche sur l'innovation sociale et les initiatives qui y sont associées reste très ancrée dans les études qualitatives. Initialement, ces démarches empiriques avaient pour objectif de mettre en avant les caractéristiques qui différiaient ce champ des approches conventionnelles en innovation ou en entrepreneuriat (Mair & Marti, 2006 ; Dacin, et al., 2010). Pour la plupart descriptives, ces recherches faisaient ressortir le caractère exceptionnel des entrepreneurs sociaux et des initiatives qu'ils mettent en place (Doherty, 2018 ; Dacin et al., 2010). L'intérêt vite grandissant pour le sujet a suscité la réalisation d'études comparatives soit entre pays européens, soit outre Atlantique, impulsées aussi en partie par des financements européens (par exemple les programmes FP7 ou Horizon 2020). L'objectif était de mieux cerner le phénomène dans différents domaines (par exemple les services sociaux, l'action publique), d'évaluer son étendue, mais aussi de cartographier le secteur, les acteurs et d'identifier les meilleures pratiques, à potentiel de diffusion dans les autres pays européens. Notre premier article s'inscrit dans cette approche, en explorant de manière comparative des incubateurs sociaux engagés dans la promotion de l'entrepreneuriat social et de l'innovation sociale en Europe. Cette démarche est originale du fait du manque de connaissances sur ces acteurs, et sur les points de convergence ou divergence entre leurs actions dans différents pays européens.

Le deuxième et troisième articles de cette thèse, quant à eux, se situent dans un tournant plus critique des recherches en entrepreneuriat social. Celui-ci a remis en cause la vision optimiste (Chell et al., 2014), voire idyllique de la manière dont l'entrepreneuriat social était promu à l'échelle européenne. Ces recherches ont mis en évidence la nature idéologique des discours sur l'entrepreneuriat social, et les contradictions et tensions engendrées au niveau de l'action et de l'identité des praticiens. Elles encourageaient les chercheurs à s'engager au plus près des acteurs de l'innovation sociale, dans une optique de plus longue durée (Dey & Teasdale, 2015 ; Dey & Lehner, 2016). L'intérêt ici était de déconstruire la vision apolitique de ces concepts, et de mieux démêler leurs effets. Méthodologiquement parlant, ceci impliquait de mettre l'accent sur les pratiques et les actions quotidiennes, afin de comprendre comment les praticiens font sens de l'innovation sociale et construisent leurs identités et organisations en tant qu'accumulation de choix et de compromis par rapport au double objectif – social et économique – qu'ils poursuivent. De ce fait, notre approche semble particulièrement pertinente du fait du manque actuel de connaissances sur la manière dont l'incubation sociale est construite, et sur ce qu'elle implique au niveau des participants au processus. Ceci nous a motivé à mener une analyse au niveau micro, impliquant un engagement plus fort et de longue durée

dans les terrains d'étude. De ce fait, nous avons choisi pour ces deux articles de nous concentrer sur un seul des quatre incubateurs étudiés.

Bien que différentes, les approches analytiques qualitatives développées dans ces trois articles sont toutes ancrées dans l'action des incubateurs, destinée soit à promouvoir l'entrepreneuriat social dans leurs contextes institutionnels, soit à produire des innovations sociales. Elles offrent une compréhension multidimensionnelle des incubateurs sociaux et sont, de ce fait, complémentaires.

3.2. Processus de recherche et méthodes de collecte de données

Le processus de recherche a suivi plusieurs phases successives et itératives, menées en lien direct avec la collecte et l'analyse des données (Eisenhardt, 1989). En termes de processus, la figure 4 présente de manière chronologique les étapes et les méthodes de collecte de données. Les techniques et outils de collecte utilisés y sont illustrés. Afin de répondre à notre problématique de recherche et de comprendre comment l'innovation sociale est produite au travers du travail des incubateurs sociaux, notre stratégie d'investigation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018) a consisté à s'engager au plus près de l'activité des incubateurs. Nous avons initialement démarré par une étude documentaire, suivie d'une étude exploratoire et une étude qualitative approfondie qui comporte deux niveaux de collecte de données. Le premier niveau – *organisationnel* – correspond à la collecte de données comparables entre les quatre incubateurs sociaux sélectionnés, concernant notamment l'organisation, les activités et les relations aux contextes institutionnels respectifs. Le deuxième niveau – *processus d'incubation* – correspond à la collecte de données au sein d'un seul incubateur (le cas français) concernant l'activité d'incubation en elle-même. Nous nous efforçons d'éclairer la démarche réflexive qui a conduit à ces choix méthodologiques dans les paragraphes suivants.

Choix des cas empiriques

Le point d'ancrage empirique de cette recherche a été l'écosystème de l'innovation sociale de l'ex-région Languedoc-Roussillon, maintenant intégrée dans la région Occitanie. Dotée du premier incubateur français destiné à l'innovation sociale (lancé en 2007) et d'une pépinière d'entreprises (lancée en 2014), centrée sur les jeunes entreprises de l'économie sociale et solidaire (ESS), cette région présentait un intérêt empirique particulier.

Du fait du contexte européen dans lequel l'innovation sociale se diffuse, et de mes propres parcours et expérience dans le milieu des institutions européennes, l'intérêt d'une approche comparative est apparu dès le début de notre recherche. Dans ce but, nous avons mené une première **étude documentaire**, sur la base

de données secondaires, afin d'identifier d'autres initiatives similaires en Europe, qui soient les plus visibles et les plus avancées pour développer le champ de l'entrepreneuriat social.

Compte tenu de la diversité des approches d'accompagnement, ainsi que des conceptions différentes de ce qu'un incubateur représente, surtout dans des contextes nationaux distincts, nous avons établi des critères de sélection. Ces critères incluaient :

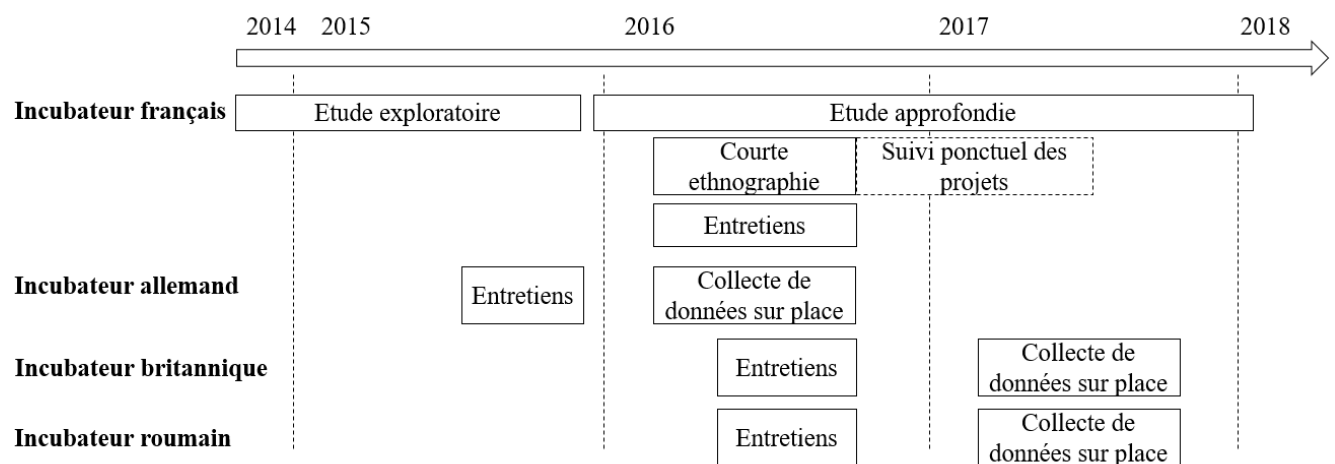
- le positionnement explicite de l'organisation dans le champ de l'entrepreneuriat social, par des références concrètes (sur son site web et dans les matériaux de communication) aux termes d'entrepreneur social, d'innovation sociale et/ou d'entreprise sociale.
- le caractère pionnier de l'organisation dans son contexte national.
- la proposition d'une offre d'accompagnement avant-crédation, en termes de monitoring et d'assistance des initiatives incubées (Hackett & Dilts, 2004).

Cette approche nous a permis d'identifier trois autres incubateurs, situés en Allemagne, au Royaume-Uni et en Roumanie. Du fait du développement de ces organisations sous forme de réseau, nous avons réduit l'analyse à un incubateur par réseau, situé respectivement à Berlin, Londres et Timisoara. Ces choix sont explicités plus en détail dans la partie méthodologique de notre premier article.

Collecte de données

Notre collecte de données a suivi plusieurs étapes, dont une étude exploratoire et une étude qualitative approfondie (figure 4).

Figure 4 - Processus de collecte de données



Démarrée en novembre 2014, l'**étude exploratoire** s'est déroulée en trois temps. Nous avons interrogé des acteurs clés de l'innovation sociale, aux niveaux : de l'écosystème entrepreneurial du Languedoc-Roussillon, des décideurs européens, ainsi que d'entreprises-phares de l'innovation sociale incubées en région. Cette étape nous a permis de développer une meilleure compréhension de la manière dont l'innovation sociale était appréhendée et de ce qu'elle représentait en termes d'initiatives entrepreneuriales. Nous avons également identifié le processus d'incubation comme étant particulièrement important, en tant que « lieu » où l'innovation sociale est produite et où les compromis en termes de création entrepreneuriale sont opérés.

Nous avons ensuite établi les premiers contacts avec les incubateurs étrangers afin de valider notre choix initial et la conformité de ces organisations par rapport à notre problématique de recherche. Malgré leur intérêt pour participer dans notre étude, leur niveau d'implication ne pouvait rester que limité. D'abord, chacun de ces incubateurs était composé de petites équipes très sollicitées, autant par le développement de l'organisation que par l'accompagnement des initiatives incubées. Ensuite, la longueur des processus d'incubation et leur étalement différents dans le temps, ainsi qu'une problématique de compréhension linguistique (l'accompagnement dans l'incubateur berlinois était fait majoritairement en allemand, langue que nous ne maîtrisons pas à un niveau satisfaisant) rendait difficile notre analyse concomitante de ces quatre processus d'incubation. A ce moment, nous avons décidé de diviser notre collecte de données entre les deux niveaux annoncés précédemment. Un premier niveau, organisationnel, avait pour objectif d'analyser les incubateurs et leurs activités dans une approche comparative. Un deuxième niveau, centré sur le processus d'incubation, visait à analyser *in situ* l'émergence des innovations sociales dans le seul cas de l'incubateur français.

Niveau organisationnel. L'étude qualitative approfondie des quatre incubateurs s'est basée sur des entretiens semi-directifs avec des membres des équipes dirigeantes et accompagnatrices de chaque incubateur. Dans le cas des dirigeants, le guide d'entretien a été composé de plusieurs parties : (1) l'historique de l'organisation, son engagement et sa perspective dans le champ de l'entrepreneuriat social, (2) la relation aux partenaires institutionnels, (3) les activités destinées aux entrepreneurs sociaux, ainsi que le déroulement du processus d'incubation, et (4) l'évolution de l'organisation. Le guide d'entretien destiné aux équipes accompagnatrices visait à comprendre (1) la nature et les difficultés de l'accompagnement, (2) la contribution de l'incubation dans la recherche de l'équilibre entre les missions sociales et économiques des projets, et (3) des exemples de cas réussis ou échoués d'incubation et leurs motifs. Nous avons également interrogé les fondateurs de quelques anciennes entreprises incubées, recommandés par les incubateurs comme étant des exemples emblématiques. Ces entretiens se sont focalisés sur (1) les missions portées et l'activité proposée, (2) les difficultés à aligner mission économique et sociale et (3) les apports

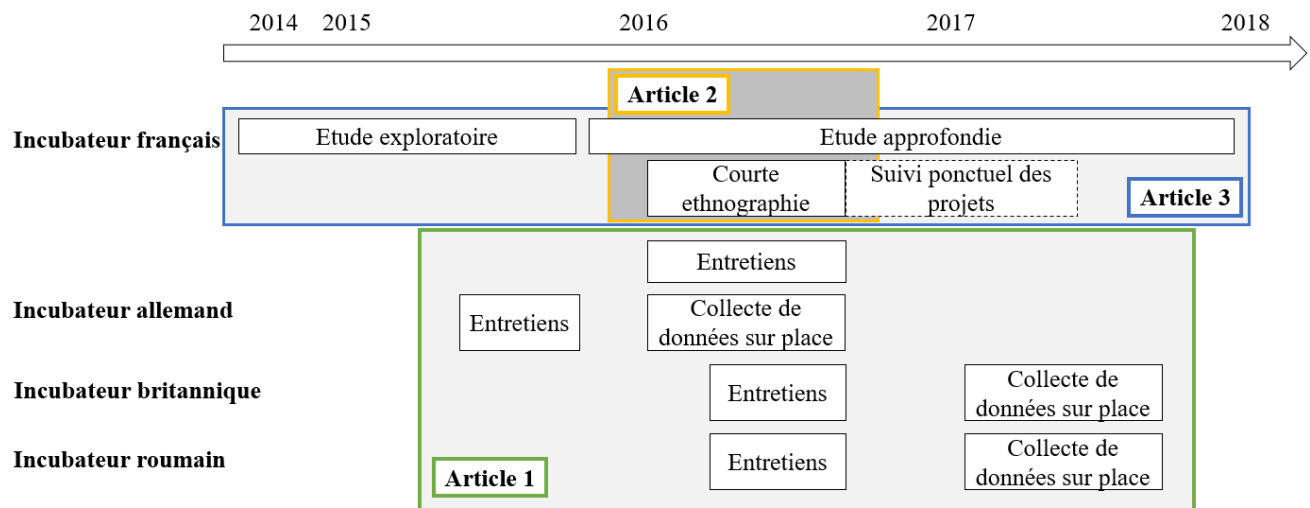
de l'incubation et les difficultés rencontrées lors de la création de l'entreprise. La majorité de ces entretiens a été effectuée sur le site des incubateurs, ou des entreprises elles-mêmes, lors des visites que nous avons effectuées sur les quatre terrains. Ces visites nous ont permis de mieux comprendre les moyens mis à disposition des projets incubés, et de participer dans certains événements organisés par les incubateurs. Nous avons complété ces données par une recherche documentaire et un suivi des matériaux médiatiques produits par les incubateurs (newsletters et comptes Facebook). Ces données ont été mobilisées dans l'analyse présentée dans notre premier article.

Niveau du processus d'incubation. Ce niveau de collecte visait à approfondir notre compréhension du processus d'incubation et des phénomènes qui y sont à l'œuvre. Dans ce but, nous avons décidé de suivre l'évolution de trois projets tout au long du processus. Lors de cette approche longitudinale (Langley, 1999 ; Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas, & Van de Ven, 2013 ; Van de Ven & Poole, 2005), nous avons mené des entretiens semi-directifs avec les personnes impliquées dans le processus d'incubation (les accompagnateurs, les membres des jurys et les porteurs de projet) et nous avons réalisé une phase de trois mois d'observation participante. Cette étape a été très riche en termes d'interaction avec les participants et les pratiques d'incubation, et peut être assimilée à une ethnographie de courte durée (Pink & Morgan, 2013). Nous avons porté une attention particulière aux interactions entre les accompagnateurs et les porteurs de projet, en notant les réactions des porteurs face aux concepts et pratiques d'entrepreneuriat qui leur étaient proposés, mais également face aux différents défis de l'incubation. Dans ces observations, l'attention accordée aux pratiques d'incubation a été également forte, du fait de notre intérêt pour comprendre comment les innovations sociales étaient « fabriquées », comment ces pratiques interagissaient et avec quels effets sur les porteurs et leurs projets. Nous avons aussi été sensibles aux points de tensions ou de désaccords qui ont émergé dans certains cas entre les projets et les accompagnateurs, et nous avons suivi leur évolution dans le temps. Tout au long de ce processus, des notes de terrain ont été consignées dans un journal de bord, tenu pendant et après les moments d'observation. Au terme de cette période d'observation, nous avons continué à avoir des contacts réguliers tant avec l'équipe accompagnatrice qu'avec les porteurs de projet, pour suivre leur évolution.

3.3. Analyse de données

Compte tenu de l'évolution de notre processus de recherche, présentée dans la section précédente, nous avons mobilisé les données collectées de manière différente dans chacun des trois articles, comme illustré dans la figure 5 ci-après.

Figure 5 - Utilisation des données dans chacun des trois articles



Pour mener nos analyses, nous avons procédé au codage des données en utilisant différents outils (le logiciel de codage de données qualitatives MAXQDA, ainsi que des logiciels de cartographie visuelle comme XMIND). Les données ont été codées dans leur langue d'origine (anglais, français et roumain). Seuls les extraits mobilisés dans les articles ont été traduits en anglais. Le codage a été émergent et a fait l'objet de multiples allers-retours entre les données collectées et les différents cadres conceptuels mobilisés, voire même des retours sur le terrain pour collecter des informations complémentaires. Ce processus d'analyse et nos efforts de conceptualisation n'ont pas été « straightforward » comme présenté succinctement ci-après.

Le **premier article** se base sur une étude de cas multiple (Yin, 2009) qui compare les quatre incubateurs du point de vue du travail engagé dans la promotion de l'entrepreneuriat social. Lors d'une première phase d'analyse de données, deux lignes directrices sont apparues. D'un côté, on notait l'existence d'un socle commun parmi les quatre incubateurs, leur activité s'inscrivant dans l'approche entrepreneuriale de l'innovation sociale promue au niveau européen. De l'autre, leurs manières de promouvoir cette approche étaient fortement ancrées dans les caractéristiques nationales de leur périmètre d'action. Dans les phases initiales d'analyse, nous avons essayé de « démêler » les liens entre ces contextes institutionnels et les stratégies d'intervention des incubateurs, voire même le modèle organisationnel de chaque incubateur, dans le but de construire une typologie. Nous avons mobilisé dans ce sens, la théorie des origines sociales (Salamon et al., 2000), et la théorie sur la variété des capitalismes (Hall & Soskice, 2001 ; Schmidt, 2007 ; Whitley, 1998 ; Gereffi, 1996). Malgré quelques pistes intéressantes, la nature de nos données ne nous a toutefois pas permis d'établir des relations causales solides. Nous avons alors changé d'approche pour

aborder notre analyse selon le prisme des similarités identifiables entre ces incubateurs. En rapprochant les activités initiées par ces incubateurs, du point de vue des objectifs de changement portés par leurs approches de l'entrepreneuriat social, et des mécanismes mis en place pour les atteindre, nous avons trouvé propice de mobiliser un cadre d'analyse néo-institutionnel. Selon la perspective du processus de changement institutionnel (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009 ; Maguire et al., 2004 ; Perkmann & Spicer, 2007), nous avons identifié ensuite les similarités du travail institutionnel mené dans les quatre cas.

Le **deuxième article** présente une étude de cas unique de l'incubateur français. Alors qu'il apparaît en deuxième place dans notre thèse, dans le processus d'écriture, il s'agit du dernier article produit. La ligne directrice de cet article a été, dès sa première formalisation, de donner la place aux pratiques peu connues d'incubation sociale et à leurs effets. Nous nous sommes initialement appuyé sur les données récoltées auprès des quatre incubateurs sur les processus et pratiques d'incubation. En mobilisant l'approche de la théorie du changement (Colby et al., 2004 ; Brest, 2010 ; Frumkin, 2006) nous avons dressé un canevas commun qui décrivait les effets de changement poursuivis par les incubateurs sociaux à partir des ressources mobilisées et des pratiques mises en œuvre. Nous pouvons dire que la forme actuelle de cet article est, en réalité, issue d'une frustration. D'abord, certaines dimensions des pratiques restaient non interrogées, car le cadre analytique ayant guidé la collecte des données ne prenait pas suffisamment en compte la nature politique des transformations qu'elles opéraient. C'est à ce moment que nous avons commencé à étudier les recherches sur les approches performatives. Nous avons codé à nouveau les données, en nous concentrant sur les effets produits et leurs niveaux d'action, et nous avons identifié trois grandes catégories de pratiques performatives, analysées dans la forme actuelle de l'article. Néanmoins, afin de donner à voir les pratiques et de rendre compte de leurs effets dans l'interaction entre les porteurs de projet et les accompagnateurs, nous avons fait le choix de centrer l'écriture sur le cas de l'incubateur français. C'était celui qui nous permettait de montrer, dans l'action, la façon dont les pratiques étaient amenées à agir sur les porteurs de projet et leurs initiatives.

Enfin, le **troisième article** est fondé sur une étude de cas enchâssés de l'incubateur français et de trois entreprises incubées. Lors de notre approche processuelle de l'interaction entre l'incubateur et les porteurs de projets, nous avons constaté l'émergence de différents points de tension et de trajectoires de (non)résolution différentes. Nous avons observé à la fois une forte pression exercée lors du processus d'incubation pour que les porteurs de projet se conforment aux règles, pratiques et représentations attendues, et des réactions parfois contestataires de la part des entrepreneurs. Ceci nous a amené à nous intéresser aux analyses du pouvoir développées par Michel Foucault (1977, 1980), notamment les concepts de *dispositif* et de techniques de soi. Avec ce prisme, nous avons modélisé notre analyse de données en

termes d'action – réaction. Ceci a été réalisé pour chaque projet incubé de manière longitudinale et détaillée dans l'article.

Cette approche méthodologique et ces différents choix analytiques nous ont permis de mettre en exergue trois facettes différentes du travail des incubateurs en termes de leurs activités de légitimation du champ d'entrepreneuriat social, de leurs pratiques et de leurs interactions avec les porteurs de projet lors du processus d'incubation. La figure 6 ci-après synthétise les méthodes et données utilisées pour chaque article.

Figure 6 - Synthèse des méthodes de recherche

Article 1	Article 2	Article 3
Etude de cas multiples (4 incubateurs européens)	Etude de cas unique (incubateur français)	Etude de cas enchâssés (incubateur français et 3 entreprises incubées)
<i>Données primaires:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 36 entretiens semi-directifs• 13 jours d'observation participante	<i>Données primaires:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 23 entretiens semi-directifs• Courte ethnographie (approx. 27 jours d'observation participante)	<i>Données primaires:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 29 entretiens semi-directifs• Courte ethnographie (approx. 27 jours d'observation participante)• Observation en dehors de l'incubation (11 jours)
<i>Données secondaires</i> (rapports annuels, publications, présence média)	<i>Données secondaires</i> (documents et méthodologie d'incubation)	<i>Données secondaires</i> (rapports annuels, publications, présence média; documents et méthodologie d'incubation)

4. Présentation des articles et des principaux résultats

La base commune des trois articles que nous allons présenter dans cette thèse se situe dans leur ancrage dans la pratique des incubateurs sociaux, destinée à promouvoir l'émergence des innovations sociales. Tout d'abord, nous abordons cette question sous l'angle du travail institutionnel des incubateurs, qui vise à légitimer l'approche par l'entrepreneuriat social. Ensuite, nous nous intéressons aux pratiques d'incubation

sociale en elles-mêmes, et à leur pouvoir transformateur. Enfin, nous étudions les tensions à l'œuvre dans le processus d'incubation, ainsi que leurs effets sur les subjectivités et les organisations incubées.

Ayant comme point pivot les incubateurs sociaux, ces trois perspectives mettent en lumière leur pratiques de soutien à l'innovation sociale autant sous l'angle de l'interaction *incubateur – contexte*, par l'institutionnalisation d'un nouveau champ (Article 1), que sous l'angle de *l'interaction incubateur – incubé*, par la création d'organisations socialement innovantes (Articles 2 et 3). Ainsi, si le focus de la recherche est plutôt méso – intra-organisationnel lors du premier chapitre, il zoome ensuite sur le niveau micro des pratiques d'incubation, puis sur les rapports subjectifs qui se créent pendant l'incubation (Article 3).

Au travers de ces trois études, la dialectique entre les missions sociale et économique, qui caractérise les démarches d'entrepreneuriat social, est mise en lumière en trois manières : (1) en montrant comment cette nouvelle approche est rendue légitime dans des contextes institutionnels différents (Article 1), (2) en illustrant comment les pratiques d'incubation peuvent servir de médiateur et influencer les compromis dessinés entre ces deux objectifs (Article 2), et (3) en illustrant comment la recherche de l'équilibre social-économique peut être une source de tensions et conflits dans la relation d'incubation (Article 3).

Nous présentons ici brièvement les problématiques et les principaux résultats contenus dans chaque article.

4.1. Article 1. Entrepreneurial boundary bridging as institutional work: delving into the work of social incubators

Objectifs

Ce premier chapitre s'intéresse aux incubateurs sociaux et à leurs contextes d'émergence, sous la perspective de la promotion de l'entrepreneuriat social. Il adresse la problématique suivante : « *Quel est le rôle et le travail des incubateurs dans la diffusion de l'entrepreneuriat social ?* ».

Cette recherche répond au manque actuel de compréhension des mécanismes et des processus qui ont permis aux incubateurs sociaux de promouvoir l'entrepreneuriat social et ce faisant, d'attirer les ressources nécessaires pour construire leur propre légitimité dans ce champ émergent (Nicholls, 2010).

L'approche se différencie des études existantes qui ont mis en avant l'impact des incubateurs sur les entrepreneurs sociaux et leurs organisations, soit en leur fournissant les ressources essentielles à la création entrepreneuriale (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015 ; Steiner & Teasdale, 2016 ; Kieboom, 2015 ; Miller & Stacey, 2014), soit en influençant leurs subjectivités par l'utilisation du discours (Dey & Lehner, 2016 ; Dey et al.,

2016). Ainsi, au lieu de se focaliser sur la dyade incubateur – incubé, cette étude fait un zoom en arrière, en recadrant l’activité des incubateurs dans leurs contextes institutionnels respectifs.

En prenant appui sur le cadre de la théorie néo-institutionnelle, notamment sur les recherches en termes d’entrepreneuriat et de travail institutionnel (Leca, Battilana, & Boxenbaum, 2008 ; Maguire, Hardy, & Lawrence, 2004 ; Phillips & Lawrence, 2012 ; Lawrence et al., 2010 ; Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009) nous explorons la nature du travail institutionnel effectué par les incubateurs européens dans la légitimation de l’entrepreneuriat social. Dans ce but, nous mobilisons la notion d’organisation frontière (O’Mahony & Bechky, 2008 ; Brown, 1991 ; Lawrence & Hardy, 1999) afin de rendre compte du rôle joué par le positionnement des incubateurs aux frontières de différents champs, et notamment entre les acteurs établis, détenant les ressources, et les entrepreneurs sociaux émergents. Deux questionnements guident cette recherche : *(1) Quels sont les processus de changement institutionnel qui caractérisent le travail des incubateurs sociaux dans des configurations institutionnelles différentes ? et (2) Quelles sont les caractéristiques du travail institutionnel des incubateurs ?*

Afin de répondre à ces questions, nous avons mené une étude qualitative auprès de quatre incubateurs sociaux pionniers en Europe. Nous avons interrogé les équipes dirigeantes et opérationnelles de ces incubateurs, ainsi que certains de leurs meilleurs cas d’entreprises incubées. Ce travail a été complété par des séances d’observation auprès des sièges de chaque incubateur (ex. les facilités d’incubation, des événements ou des formations à destination des entrepreneurs sociaux), ainsi que par une recherche documentaire.

Principaux résultats et contributions

Sur la base de notre recherche empirique, nous montrons l’importance du rôle institutionnel des incubateurs qui ont agi de manière entrepreneuriale à la frontière de différents champs (privé, public, non-lucratif) pour attirer des ressources vers l’incubation des entreprises sociales et légitimer ce champ émergent. Malgré les configurations institutionnelles différentes qui ont entraîné la mobilisation de partenaires et de ressources variées, les incubateurs ont construit des discours similaires. Le discours commun promeut l’entreprise sociale comme une solution souhaitable, innovante et entrepreneuriale dans la résolution des problèmes sociaux divers tels que le développement régional, la lutte contre le chômage des populations marginalisées, l’isolement entrepreneurial, la pauvreté ou les conditions de travail indignes.

Nous apportons deux contributions. Tout d’abord, nous illustrons comment les incubateurs ont créé un espace légitime pour l’entrepreneuriat social à la suite d’un processus d’institutionnalisation multi-niveaux, similaire dans les quatre contextes institutionnels analysés. Ce processus se déroule en trois phases : (1)

l'articulation de visions alternatives du changement, basées sur une approche entrepreneuriale, (2) la matérialisation de ces visions dans la création de projets sociaux entrepreneuriaux, grâce à la mobilisation de ressources et la création d'espaces transversaux de collaboration, et enfin, (3) l'ancrage du domaine émergent de l'entrepreneuriat social dans des contextes socio-économiques plus larges.

Deuxièmement, nous contribuons à la compréhension des organisations-frontière en identifiant deux dimensions essentielles du travail institutionnel des incubateurs. En promouvant l'entrepreneuriat social, les incubateurs articulent un travail institutionnel qui transforme les frontières entre les champs – en contestant des pratiques institutionnalisées ou en créant des collaborations transversales – avec une démarche entrepreneuriale qui consiste à saisir les opportunités, à prendre des risques, à imaginer des nouvelles modalités d'accompagnement et de services, ou même à réinventer leur propre rôle dans le champ de l'entrepreneuriat social. Ces deux dimensions jouent des rôles différents dans chaque phase du processus d'institutionnalisation.

Enfin, nous montrons que l'institutionnalisation de l'entrepreneuriat social est un processus continu et non linéaire, qui a nécessité des efforts pour surmonter le scepticisme initial quant aux réponses entrepreneuriales à des besoins sociaux, et qui est continuellement alimenté et renforcé par l'incubation de nouveaux entrepreneurs et entreprises sociales.

4.2. Article 2. A performative approach to social innovation incubation practices

Objectifs

Ce chapitre analyse la mise en pratiques de l'incubation sociale, en répondant à la problématique suivante :
« Comment les pratiques d'incubation influencent-elles la construction des innovations sociales ? »

En pleine effervescence, le champ de l'entrepreneuriat social vit au rythme des compétitions entrepreneuriales, des offres d'incubation ou d'accélération qui incitent les futurs entrepreneurs sociaux à se lancer en suivant des programmes outillés pour les aider à définir leurs offres et mission sociales, à monter leur business plan social en 3, 6, 12 mois... La similarité de ces approches avec celles de l'accompagnement entrepreneurial conventionnel ne semble pas susciter d'interrogations quant aux effets possibles de cette « traduction » au monde de l'entrepreneuriat social. Néanmoins, des études ont mis en évidence la façon dont les incubateurs et d'autres organisations de support à l'entrepreneuriat social ont tendance à façonner les individus participant à l'incubation et les organisations que ces derniers projettent

de créer (Dey & Lehner, 2016 ; Dey, Scheider, & Maier, 2016 ; Leca, Gond, & Cruz, 2014 ; Ruebottom & Auster, 2017 ; Mauksch, 2018).

Ce chapitre questionne ces pratiques et leur assemblage dans des processus d'incubation sociale, notamment du point de vue de leurs effets sur la recherche d'un équilibre entre les finalités sociales et économiques propres aux entreprises sociales. Il répond ainsi au manque actuel d'études empiriques qui analysent les mécanismes à l'œuvre à l'intérieur de l'incubation (Germain & Jacquemin, 2017), à un moment où l'approche par l'incubation se diffuse et s'instaure graduellement en tant que méthode privilégiée pour favoriser l'émergence et le développement d'innovations sociales. Nous mobilisons l'approche matérielle-discursive de la performativité développée par Barad (2003) afin de répondre aux deux questions suivantes : **(1) *Quels sont les effets performatifs des pratiques d'incubation sociale ? et (2) *Comment la dialectique social-marchand se manifeste-t-elle au travers des pratiques d'incubation ?****

En s'appuyant sur une étude qualitative approfondie du cas d'Alter'Incub, le premier incubateur français d'innovation sociale, cette recherche analyse la socio-matérialité des pratiques d'incubation *in situ*, au moment où les compromis émergent et où l'espace du projet entrepreneurial se négocie (Germain & Jacquemin, 2017, p. 10).

Principaux résultats et contributions

Ce chapitre donne à voir la texture de l'incubation depuis l'intérieur de ce processus, dans les articulations mouvantes entre les porteurs de projet, les accompagnateurs et les pratiques. Il met en lumière certaines pratiques clés du dispositif d'incubation au moment de leur réalisation, dans leur matérialité au cœur des actions, réactions et appropriations par les acteurs impliqués. Ainsi, cette recherche met en évidence la performativité des outils et des pratiques d'incubation, qui ne sont pas simplement des instruments neutres et passifs servant de médiateurs à la création d'entreprises sociales. Au contraire, ils participent activement à la définition des initiatives et des individus prenant part au processus.

Nous identifions trois effets des pratiques qui sous-tendent le dispositif d'incubation et qui performant : 1) les réponses aux problématiques sociales (*les pratiques de marchandisation*), 2) les individus (*les pratiques d'entrepreneurialisation*) et 3) les organisations porteuses (*les pratiques de managérialisation*). La marchandisation traduit la façon dont les enjeux sociaux et sociétaux portés par les projets sont redimensionnés, recadrés et calculés, afin de leur donner du sens en termes économiques, de les rendre compatibles avec une activité entrepreneuriale et gouvernables au sein de cette activité. La managérialisation est quant à elle opérée en intra-action avec les pratiques et les outils qui fabriquent une entreprise dimensionnée pour produire les services et produits identifiés. Enfin, l'articulation des deux est

rendue possible par le phénomène d'entrepreneuralisation, qui consiste à produire des individus capables de gérer la création et le fonctionnement d'une entreprise sociale.

Sous ce prisme, l'innovation sociale et les formes organisationnelles qui la portent apparaissent comme des construits (sociaux) qui prennent un sens négocié localement au coeur de « forces matérielles-discursives » (Barad, 2003) qui les façonnent. L'incubation elle-même devient un processus émergent et non-déterminé. Enfin, cette recherche montre comment cet assemblage de pratiques matérielles-discursives orchestre les moments et les contenus des interactions durant l'incubation, et performe des actes d'exclusion ou d'inclusion quant aux problématiques sociales, profils entrepreneuriaux et formes organisationnelles soutenus par l'incubation.

4.3. Article 3. Incubating social innovation, between subjectivation and resistance. A Foucauldian perspective.

Objectifs

L'objectif de ce chapitre est d'analyser l'interaction entre l'incubateur et les porteurs de projet, afin de répondre à la problématique suivante : « *Comment de nouvelles subjectivités et formes organisationnelles sont-elles construites au travers de l'incubation sociale ?* »

Les approches critiques en entrepreneuriat social ont mis en exergue les relations de pouvoir à l'œuvre dans la construction des identités entrepreneuriales sociales. La subjectivité de l'entrepreneur social émerge ainsi de luttes entre des pratiques de pouvoir qui tentent de transformer l'entrepreneur social en un sujet calculable, gouvernable et autonome, et des pratiques d'émancipation des entrepreneurs par lesquelles ils essaient de redéfinir ou créer des espaces d'action alternatifs (Dey & Steyaert, 2014). Les incubateurs sociaux s'inscrivent eux aussi dans ces rapports de pouvoir. À travers un travail idéologique, les incubateurs font de l'entrepreneuriat social un « objet de désir » (Dey et al. 2016) et « modifient le comportement des individus en suggérant des orientations normatives particulières de ce que signifie le fait de mener une 'bonne vie' » (Dey & Lehner, 2016 ; Dey, 2013). Cependant, les recherches traitant de l'interface entre les forces normalisatrices qui tentent de redéfinir les subjectivités individuelles d'une part, et les individus eux-mêmes d'autre part, ont été asynchrones (Dey, 2013). Ainsi, ces recherches ont été axées soit sur l'exercice du pouvoir par la mise en place d'un discours entrepreneurial hégémonique par des acteurs influents (Nicholls, 2010 ; Hervieux, 2010), soit sur les actes de résistance émanant des acteurs entrepreneuriaux eux-mêmes (Parkinson & Howorth, 2008 ; Seanor & Meaton, 2008 ; Dey & Steyaert, 2014).

Ce chapitre contribue à ces analyses en examinant la dialectique pouvoir - résistance lors du processus d'incubation des innovations sociales. Afin d'ouvrir la « boîte noire » de l'incubation et d'analyser les tensions à l'œuvre au fur et à mesure du déroulement du processus, nous mobilisons le concept de dispositif introduit par Foucault. Nous nous appuyons sur l'analyse de trois projets incubés par Alter'Incub.

Principaux résultats et contributions

Au travers du prisme du dispositif, nous analysons les relations de pouvoir entre l'incubateur, les individus (futurs entrepreneurs) et les autres parties prenantes intégrées au sein du dispositif. Nous montrons l'interaction entre les technologies de contrôle destinées à produire des subjectivités entrepreneuriales (calculatives) en tant que forme de discipline qui rend les sujets et le social « gouvernables », et les techniques de soi qui intègrent la liberté de l'individu de se construire lui-même comme une forme de pratique éthique. Par conséquent, nous montrons que la logique stratégique de l'incubateur, consistant à produire des subjectivités entrepreneuriales et des solutions marchandes aux problèmes sociaux, coexiste avec la possibilité des porteurs de projet de résister et de se construire leur propre identité entrepreneuriale en lien (et en réaction) aux pressions normatives qu'ils subissent pendant l'incubation. Ainsi, l'émergence d'innovations sociales révèle d'une lutte permanente au sein du dispositif d'incubation.

Nos contributions sont de deux ordres principaux. D'une part, la dialectique pouvoir – résistance illustre la possibilité des individus de négocier et problématiser en permanence la subjectivité de l'entrepreneuriat social qui leur est imposée lors de l'incubation. Au regard des cas étudiés, la relation d'incubation est « tenable » lorsque l'écart entre la représentation idéale promue par l'incubateur et la subjectivité de l'individu n'est pas très important, indiquant la possibilité de compromis.

D'autre part, l'interaction incubateur – porteur de projet dessine la recherche d'un compromis autour des objectifs sociaux et économiques que portent les projets incubés. Nous montrons que le dispositif d'incubation peut agir dans les deux sens de cette opposition : il peut autant promouvoir une approche plus marchande dans le cas de projets à forte mission sociale, qu'essayer de renforcer la dimension sociale dans les projets dominés par une approche plus marchande.

Chaque article a fait l'objet de plusieurs présentations à l'occasion de différentes conférences nationales et internationales, au fur et à mesure de son développement. Ils sont situés à différentes étapes du processus de publication. Le tableau 1 ci-dessous présente la progression des articles.

Tableau 1 - Journal de suivi des articles

Titre	Auteurs	Statut
(Article 1) Entrepreneurial boundary bridging as institutional work: delving into the work of social incubators	Alexandra Gaidos Florence Palpacuer	Principales conférences : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International Conference of the International Society for Third Sector Research (ISTR), Stockholm, (28 juin – 1 juillet 2016) • XVIe Rencontres du Réseau Inter-Universitaire de l'économie sociale et solidaire (RIUESS), Montpellier, (25-27 Mai 2016)
(Article 2) A performative approach to social innovation incubation practices	Alexandra Gaidos	Article en révision pour l'ouvrage "Entrepreneuriat et Société" sous la direction de Olivier Germain (ESG UQAM) <p>Principales conférences :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 13th International Conference of the International Society for Third Sector Research (ISTR), Amsterdam (10-13 July 2018). • Accepté pour présentation au 11ème congrès de l'Académie de l'Entrepreneuriat et de l'innovation, Montpellier (3-5 juin 2019) et au 35th EGOS Colloquium (European Group for Organization Studies), Edinbourg, (4-6 Juillet 2019)
(Article 3) Incubating social innovation, between subjectivation and resistance. A Foucauldian perspective.	Alexandra Gaidos Florence Palpacuer	Principales conférences : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9th International Social Innovation Research Conference (ISIRC), Melbourne, (12-14 décembre 2017) • 32nd EGOS Colloquium (European Group for Organization Studies), Naples, (7-9 juillet 2016)

5. Annexes de l'introduction générale

Tableau 2 - Synthèse des questions de recherche, des cadres théoriques et méthodologies par chapitre

Contexte	Problématique	Questions de recherche	Objectifs	Cadre théorique	Méthodologie et cadre empirique
Chapitre 1. Entrepreneurial boundary bridging as institutional work: delving into the work of social incubators					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - un manque de connaissances sur le travail des incubateurs sociaux en lien avec leurs contextes d'émergence - un manque d'approches comparatives des incubateurs sociaux - peu d'études en entrepreneuriat social sur les processus de changement menés par des acteurs individuels dans l'institutionnalisation du champ 	<p>Quel est le rôle et le travail des incubateurs dans la diffusion de l'entrepreneuriat social ?</p>	<p>Quels sont les processus de changement institutionnel qui caractérisent le travail des incubateurs sociaux dans des configurations institutionnelles différentes ?</p> <p>Quelles sont les caractéristiques du travail institutionnel des incubateurs ?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - meilleure compréhension de l'émergence et du rôle institutionnel des incubateurs dans la promotion de l'entrepreneuriat social - illustrer le processus de légitimation des incubateurs sociaux - identifier les similarités entre le travail des incubateurs dans des contextes institutionnels différents 	<p><i>Théorie néo-institutionnelle</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - entrepreneuriat institutionnel (Leca, Battilana, & Boxenbaum, 2008 ; Maguire, Hardy, & Lawrence, 2004) - travail institutionnel (Phillips & Lawrence, 2012 ; Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009) - organization frontière (O'Mahony & Bechky, 2008; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010) 	<p>Méthode qualitative</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - étude de cas multiples (Eisenhardt, 1989) Comparaison de 4 incubateurs sociaux européens (36 entretiens semi-directifs et 13 jours d'observation participante)
Chapitre 2. A performative approach to social innovation incubation practices					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - un manque d'analyse des pratiques et des processus d'incubation sociale qui prend en compte leur dimension socio-matérielle 	<p>Comment les pratiques d'incubation influencent-elles la construction des innovations sociales ?</p>	<p>Quels sont les effets performatifs des pratiques d'incubation sociale ?</p> <p>Comment la dialectique social-</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - illustrer l'utilisation des pratiques d'incubation <i>in situ</i> - mettre en lumière la dimension socio-matérielle de l'incubation 	<p><i>Approche socio-matérielle de la performativité</i> (Barad, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2007 ; Orlikowski & Scott, 2014b ; Gond, Cabantous, Harding, &</p>	<p>Méthode qualitative</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - étude de cas unique Analyse du processus d'incubation chez

<p>- une acceptation sans contestation des pratiques d'incubation de l'entrepreneuriat classique - un manque de visibilité sur la mise en action des pratiques et sur leurs effets - une montée de l'intérêt des recherches en gestion pour les approches performatives</p>		<p>marchand se manifeste-t-elle au travers des pratiques d'incubation ?</p>	<p>- analyser l'incubation dans son déroulement au milieu des interactions incubateur – incubé – pratiques - identifier et conceptualiser les niveaux auxquels les pratiques performant les innovations sociales incubées</p>	<p>Learmonth, 2015 ; Garud et al., 2018) <i>Etudes critiques en entrepreneuriat</i> (Steyaert & Katz, 2004 ; Rindova, Barry, & Ketchen, 2009 ; Dey & Steyaert, 2010, 2012, 2014 ; Steyaert & Hjorth, 2006)</p>	<p>Alter'Incub (23 entretiens semi-directifs et observation des 3 mois de pré-incubation)</p>
<p>Chapitre 3. Incubating social innovation, between subjectivation and resistance. A Foucauldian perspective.</p>					
<p>- un manque d'études empiriques sur les processus d'incubation sociale - une majorité d'études critiques en entrepreneuriat social axées prioritairement sur les pratiques discursives des acteurs - une analyse prédominante des incubateurs en tant qu'organisation support, qui n'intègre pas leur rôle dans la définition des innovations sociales</p>	<p>Comment des nouvelles subjectivités et formes organisationnelles sont-elles construites au travers de l'incubation sociale ?</p>	<p>Comment l'interaction incubateur-individu influence-t-elle l'évolution des initiatives incubées ? Comment cette interaction peut être source de tensions ?</p>	<p>- explorer l'interaction incubateur – incubé dans le contexte de l'innovation sociale - intégrer une perspective du pouvoir dans l'analyse de la production des innovations sociales - identifier les tensions à l'œuvre dans le processus d'incubation sociale</p>	<p><i>Approche Foucauldienne du pouvoir : le dispositif et les techniques de soi</i> (Foucault, 1976, 1977, 1982, 1997 ; Raffnsøe, 2014 ; Loacker & Muhr, 2009) <i>Etudes critiques en entrepreneuriat social</i> (Dey, 2013 ; Dey & Steyaert, 2012, 2014; Dey & Lehner, 2016; Dey, Schneider, & Maier, 2016)</p>	<p>Méthode qualitative – étude longitudinale de cas enchâssés Analyse du processus d'incubation chez Alter'Incub (29 entretiens semi-directifs, observation des 3 mois de pré-incubation)</p>

Tableau 3 - Ensemble des données utilisées dans cette thèse

Incubateur	Entretiens semi-directifs			Observation directe	
	Equipe dirigeante	Equipe opérationnelle & entreprises incubées	Total	Exemple	Durée
<i>Social Impact Lab Berlin</i>	- Directeur (2)	- Manager projets et coopération internationale (2) - Manager coordination du mentorat (1) - Manager formations et innovation - coach (1) - Coach d'incubation (1) - Manager incubation (1) - Entreprises incubées (3)	11	- (07/2016) Visite sur place des locaux - Observation d'une journée de formation en design thinking - Visite sur place de 2 entreprises incubées	2 jours 1 jours 3h
<i>Impact Hub King's Cross</i>	- Directeur (1) - Manager stratégie (3) - Manager développement global (1)	- Directeur scaling et programmes - coach (1) - Manager communauté (1) - Coordinateur de projet - coach (1) - Entreprises incubées (2)	10	- (09/2017) Visite sur place des locaux - Participation à l'événement entrepreneurial FuckUp Nights	2 jours 2h
<i>NESsT Timisoara</i>	- Directeur portefeuille global (1) - Directeur national (1)	- Manager senior - coach (1) - Manager de projet - coach (1) - Entreprises incubées (2)	6	- (07/2017) Visite sur place des locaux - Visite sur place de 2 entreprises incubées	1 jour 1 jour
<i>Alter'Incub Montpellier</i>	- Directeur (1) - Fondateur (1)	- Coach d'incubation (6) 2018 (1) 2017 (2) 2016 (3) - Entreprises incubées (5) - Partenaires institutionnels (6) - Membres du jury de sélection (10)	29	Processus d'incubation - Jurys de pré-incubation et d'incubation et comité de pré-sélection (10 jours) - Journées de formation collective (10,5 jours) - Rendez-vous de suivi projet (6 jours) Evénements et réunions internes Alter'Incub + événement régionaux	Approx. 27 jours 11,5 jours

Chapitre I

Entrepreneurial boundary bridging as
institutional work: delving into the work of
social incubators

L'organisation-frontière entrepreneuriale : comprendre le travail institutionnel des incubateurs sociaux

Résumé

Nous nous appuyons sur l'analyse comparative de quatre incubateurs sociaux pionniers en Europe pour comprendre leur rôle et la nature du travail institutionnel qu'ils accomplissent afin de favoriser l'émergence de l'entrepreneuriat social. Au contraire des études existantes qui se sont concentrées sur la relation incubateur-entrepreneur, nous proposons une perspective différente qui fait un zoom arrière sur cette analyse dyadique pour repositionner ces organisations et leur travail dans le contexte institutionnel plus large dans lequel elles émergent et agissent.

Nous proposons une nouvelle conception des incubateurs sociaux en tant qu'entrepreneurs institutionnels agissant à la frontière de plusieurs champs. En nous appuyant sur la littérature sur l'entrepreneuriat institutionnel, nous montrons qu'ils mettent en place un processus d'institutionnalisation à plusieurs niveaux qui se déroule en trois phases: (1) articuler des visions alternatives du changement basées sur une approche entrepreneuriale, (2) matérialiser ces visions dans la création de projets sociaux entrepreneuriaux grâce à l'attraction de ressources, et enfin, (3) ancrer le domaine émergent de l'entrepreneuriat social dans des contextes socio-économiques plus larges.

Au cours de ces différentes phases, les incubateurs sociaux créent des liens entre des acteurs, des modèles de pensée et d'action appartenant aux secteurs public, privé ou non-lucratif, en articulant de manière dynamique un travail entrepreneurial aux frontières de ces champs. Nous montrons comment ces organisations relient de manière entrepreneuriale ces différentes formes de frontières afin de susciter l'intérêt et d'instaurer des collaborations transversales qui légitiment l'entrepreneuriat social au sein de différentes configurations institutionnelles.

Mots clés : incubateurs sociaux, entrepreneuriat social, changement institutionnel, entrepreneuriat institutionnel, organisation frontière

Entrepreneurial boundary bridging as institutional work: delving into the work of social incubators

Abstract

We draw on a comparative analysis of four pioneer social incubators in Europe to understand their role and the nature of the institutional work they perform in order to foster the emergence of the social entrepreneurship field. While existing studies have focused on the incubator – entrepreneur relationship, we propose a different lens that zooms out from this dyadic analysis to reposition these organizations and their work in the wider institutional context in which they are embedded.

We propose a novel conception of social incubators as institutional entrepreneurs acting at the boundaries of fields. Building on the institutional entrepreneurship literature we show that they enact a multi-level institutionalization process that follows three phases: (1) articulating alternative entrepreneurial visions of change, (2) materializing these visions through bridging diverse interests and creating new organizations in the form of social enterprises, and finally, (3) anchoring the emerging social entrepreneurship field to broader local socio-economic contexts.

Throughout these phases, the social incubators create bridges between actors, models of thinking and acting belonging to the public, corporate and non-profit fields by engaging in a dynamic interplay of entrepreneurial action and boundary work. We show how these organizations entrepreneurially bridge different forms of boundaries in order to raise interest and instigate cross-field collaborations that legitimize social entrepreneurship in different institutional configurations.

Keywords: social incubators, social entrepreneurship, institutional change, institutional entrepreneurship, boundary organizations

1. Introduction

Social entrepreneurship has seen an unprecedented growth during the last three decades at the impulse of major actors - national states, foundations, academics and private actors, to name a few - that have mainstreamed the concept in an attempt to govern and shape its evolution through discourse, regulation or control of resources (Nicholls 2010a; Hervieux 2010). The diffusion of the concept has been mostly analyzed from a macro perspective, with little emphasis on the salient involvement of individual actors (Chandra, 2016) that undertook institutional entrepreneurship roles (DiMaggio, 1980). In particular, the work of intermediary organizations, such as promotion agencies, incubators, accelerators and entrepreneurial networks⁵ (Nicholls, 2010b), in developing the field of social entrepreneurship has received little attention.

However, these support organizations have played an important first-mover role in fostering social entrepreneurship and have acted as a catalyzer in increasing the number and the visibility of social enterprises in Europe (Nicholls, 2006, 2010a; Dey, Schneider & Maier, 2016). Moreover, social incubators and accelerators have been continuously growing and have been subject to intense interest from a practitioners' perspective, as demonstrated by the plethora of dedicated guides and best practices reports such as NESTA's "Good Incubation" (2014)⁶, the Rockefeller Foundation's report "Accelerating Impact" (2015)⁷ or Aspen Network's GALI Report (2016)⁸, to name just a few.

The social incubators' salient role stems from their particular field position at the emergence phase of social innovations (Miller & Stacey, 2014). These novel solutions to social problems are seen as "more effective, efficient, sustainable, or just than existing solutions and for which the value created accrues primarily to society as a whole rather than private individuals" (Phills, Deiglemeier & Miller, 2008, p. 36) and have received growing academic and political interest. Incubators are perceived as "social laboratories" (Nicolopoulou, Karatas-Özkan, Vas & Nouman, 2015, p. 13) that provide an experimentation framework for the transformation of these initiatives from early stage ideas to operational organizations, mostly social enterprises. Nicolopoulou et al., (2015) build on the typology of incubators developed by Aernoudt (2004) and distinguish social incubators from conventional business, research or technology incubators, based on

⁵ Notable international examples are Ashoka, the Schwab Foundation, the Unreasonable institute (rebranded Uncharted) or Village Capital

⁶ NESTA (2014) Good Incubation. The craft of supporting early-stage social ventures, by Paul Miller & Jessica Stacey

⁷ The Rockefeller Foundation (2015) Accelerating impact. Exploring best practices, challenges, and innovations in impact enterprise acceleration. Authored by Monitor Deloitte.

⁸ Roberts et al., (2016). What's working in startup acceleration. Insights from fifteen Village Capital programs, Aspen network, GALI report.

their main purpose of answering a “social gap” (Nicolopoulou et al., p. 12) and achieving “a combination of social and economic outcomes” (Nicolopoulou et al., p. 2), done by leveraging their knowledge of the social economy (Bakkali, Messeghem, & Sammut, 2010).

Current research has mostly focused on the nature and dynamics of the incubator – entrepreneur interaction (Aerts et al., 2007; Bøllingtoft, 2012). As such, social incubators provide essential learning, networking (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015) and financing opportunities (Steiner & Teasdale, 2016) to emerging social entrepreneurs. More broadly, they can help entrepreneurs build their legitimacy and overcome the initial feelings of isolation (Messeghem & Sammut, 2010; Chabaud et al., 2010). By giving access to these development resources, incubators consolidated their image as an indispensable ally for social entrepreneurs wishing to grow their ventures (Dey et al., 2016).

A different aspect of the incubators’ work in promoting the field is the enactment of ideologies that shape the societal imaginary around social entrepreneurship. Dey and Lehner (2017) portray the social incubators as epistemic authorities that foster the appeal of social entrepreneurship to broader audiences by transforming the idea into “an object of desire” in order to “make the ideal subject of the social entrepreneur palatable to as many people as possible” (Dey & Lehner, 2016, p. 13; Dey & Lehner, 2017). This discursive process influences values and behaviors by engaging affectively with potential entrepreneurs and triggering their desire to identify themselves with the image and identity of the social entrepreneur as promoted (Dey, 2013; Dey & Lehner, 2016).

Although advancing our understanding of the social incubators’ role in attracting, transforming and supporting the entrepreneurs, these perspectives do not tackle the mechanisms through which these recent organizations built their own legitimacy in order to arrive in resource-rich positions (Nicholls, 2010a) and become central players in the growth of the social entrepreneurship field. Overall, scant attention has been given to the organizational strategies enacted by the incubators (Messeghem, Bakkali, Sammut &, Swalhi, 2017; Theodoraki & Messeghem, 2017; Schwartz & Hornych, 2008, 2010; Vanderstraeten & Matthyssens, 2012). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to shed light on the processes by which social incubators emerged and legitimized social entrepreneurship within specific institutional contexts. Our research enlarges the current incubator – entrepreneur interactional focus, and zooms out to the larger contexts in which social incubators operate (Roundy et al., 2017; Theodoraki & Messeghem, 2017) in order to identify regularities in the institutionalization processes they enact across different institutional configurations. We propose an analysis of social incubators as institutional entrepreneurs working at the boundaries between fields with the aim of promoting a new entrepreneurial solution to social needs – social entrepreneurship.

We focus on four European pioneer social incubators that had major roles in the process of introducing social entrepreneurship in their countries of origin. Alter'Incub is the first French incubator dedicated to social innovation (Richez-Battesti & Vallade, 2009), that played a pioneering role in building political compromises and entrenching this novel concept in local public development policies and incubation ecosystems (Richez-Battesti & Vallade, 2018) in the Languedoc-Roussillon region. Also a first-mover and innovator, Social Impact Lab is a reference and best practice example in terms of incubating social start-ups in Germany (Jähneke, Christmann, & Balgar, 2011; Christmann, 2014; Schwarz, 2014). In Eastern Europe, NESsT is the first organization to provide tailored social entrepreneurial support to civil society organizations facing the structural challenges of international donors' retreat. Finally, Impact Hub is an international network of social entrepreneurs, recognized for creating local entrepreneurial communities acting for the social good and mainstreaming social entrepreneurship (Dey & Lehner, 2016; Dey et al., 2016; Wittmayer, Avelino, & Afonso, 2015).

Based on a qualitative analysis of these four cases, we make two contributions. First, we illustrate how, across different contexts, the incubators created a legitimate space for social entrepreneurship via a similar institutional process of (1) articulating alternative visions of change, (2) materializing these visions and (3) anchoring the emerging field to the broader institutional configurations. Second, we contribute to the theory of boundary organizations by showing how social incubators strategically leveraged their position at the boundary of fields.

The paper proceeds as follows. We start out by discussing some background literature on processes of institutional change, and linking them with the boundary characteristics of social incubation work. Next, we outline the research context of our comparative analysis and describe the methods we used to investigate our research question. Then, we present our results and discuss the implications of our research. We propose a three-phases institutionalization process that sheds light on two intertwined dimensions - entrepreneurial and boundary bridging - in the work accomplished by social incubators to promote social entrepreneurship.

2. Literature review

2.1. Institutional entrepreneurs and processes of change

Institutional change has triggered prolific debates within the new institutional theory (Dacin, Goodstein, & Scott, 2002) in trying to explain how change is possible despite the determinism of pre-existing structures – a question captured by the paradox of embedded agency (Seo & Creed, 2002; Leca & Naccache, 2006; Leca, Battilana, & Boxenbaum, 2008; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). Possible explanations pointed to the

role of institutional entrepreneurs (Leca, et al., 2008; Dorado, 2005), defined as actors who “have an interest in particular institutional arrangements and who leverage resources to create new institutions or to transform existing ones” (Maguire, Hardy, & Lawrence, 2004, p. 657).

The “turn to work” (Phillips & Lawrence, 2012), however, shifted the focus from the skills of these outstanding actors (Fligstein, 1997) to the actors’ day to day actions and micro-practices (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009; Smets et al., 2011), and their struggles (Lawrence et al., 2010) as they reflexively engage in a “‘purposeful effort’ to manipulate some social-symbolic facets of the context in which they operate” (Phillips & Lawrence, 2012, p. 224). Following this view, change is explained by a “permanent recursive and dialectical interaction between agency and institutions” (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2010, p. 55) which accommodates both the potential oppressiveness of structures and the possibility of emancipation (Lawrence et al., 2010).

The role of institutions in social entrepreneurship has received increasing attention (Dacin, Dacin, & Matear, 2010; Nicholls, 2010b; Sud, VanSandt, & Baugous, 2009; Teasdale, 2012; Stephan, Uhlaner, & Stride, 2014; Pinch & Sunley, 2015). It has been argued that social entrepreneurs operate in contexts of “institutional ambiguity” (Mair & Marti, 2006) or in/around institutional voids (Dacin et al., 2010; Mair & Marti, 2009) created by the absence or failure of institutions, be they market, public, or voluntary-based (Mulgan et al. 2007; Murray, Caulier-Grice & Mulgan, 2010; Unger, 2015). Most often, researches have analyzed the role of individuals or organizations engaged in changing institutions or introducing new social mission-driven organizational forms (Tracey et al., 2011; Chandra, 2016; Dorado, 2013; Olsen, 2016). However, fewer studies in social entrepreneurship have dealt with the processes enabled by institutional entrepreneurs to bring diverse forms of change, especially at field level. Exceptions are several researches dealing with the institutionalization of social investment in the UK (Nicholls, 2010b), the legitimization of the microfinance field in Guatemala (Khavul, Chavez, & Bruton, 2013) or the emergence of change agents in the Latin American microfinance sector (Olsen, 2016). In particular, Khavul, Chavez and Bruton (2013) develop a process-centric view of institutional entrepreneurship marked by the actors’ attempts to redefine organizational boundaries and navigate institutional logics.

Although social incubators, and intermediary organizations in general, have played a pioneering role in promoting social entrepreneurship and enterprises, these organizations are often portrayed as already settled and legitimate examples. Accordingly, we lack an understanding of the processes through which they actively built their own legitimacy together with the normative underpinnings of the emerging field. We follow Dacin, Dacin and Matear’s (2010) argument to make use of institutional change advances in order “to develop a stronger understanding of the process of social change” (p. 51) ignited by social entrepreneurship. We argue for the interest of adopting a process perspective to take into account the role

of incubators as institutional entrepreneurs. Thus, this research firstly aims at analyzing what are the change processes and mechanisms mobilized by social incubators to institutionalize social entrepreneurship. As institutional entrepreneurs always act in context (Leca et al., 2008; Battilana et al., 2009), our approach analyzes the work of social incubators in different institutional configurations (Stephan et al., 2014), answering recent calls for comparative approaches to social incubators (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015).

For this purpose, we mobilize existing research which has outlined the major steps taken by actors to instill change (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009). As a first step, institutional entrepreneurs may attempt to occupy legitimate field positions (Maguire et al., 2004) and frame existing problems and deficiencies into opportunities (Battilana et al., 2009; Tracey et al., 2011) in order to create a vision for divergent change (Battilana et al., 2009). Further on, they engage in “interactional projects” (Perkmann & Spicer, 2007) in an effort to gain support by mobilizing allies and resources. Finally, in sustaining the vision of change and making it palatable to wider audiences, institutional entrepreneurs engage in “cultural projects” (Perkmann & Spicer, 2007) by connecting with the existing routines and values of actors (Maguire et al., 2004), framing discourses (Tracey et al., 2011; Perkmann & Spicer, 2007) or aligning their position with other legitimate actors (Tracey et al., 2011).

Consequently, we home in the similarities of the mechanisms of change between institutional and social entrepreneurship (Dacin et al., 2010), especially in terms of “the creative leveraging of resources in order to change the discourse, perceptions, and approach to solving identified social problems” (p. 46), and propose a processual analysis of incubators’ work in institutionalizing social entrepreneurship.

2.2. Social incubators at the boundaries

Social incubators support the emergence of complex hybrid organizations. Social enterprises pursue a dual mission of both social performance and economic productivity (Battilana, Sengul, Pache, & Model, 2014) that makes them incorporate and bridge different, sometimes competing logics within their modus operandi (Tracey et al., 2011; Besharov & Smith, 2013). Moreover, they are embedded in pluralistic institutional environments (Venkataraman, Vermeulen, Raaijmakers, & Mair, 2016; Pache & Santos, 2010, 2013) which exerts additional pressures on their organizational structures. In their aim to support social enterprises, incubators have a mediating role at the interface of multiple (financial, social capital, etc.) resources and the demands emerging from the social entrepreneurs (Casasnovas & Bruno, 2013). Therefore, they are in a salient position to bridge the political and financial supporters of social entrepreneurship, on one side, and the emergent social enterprises, on the other side.

To study this strategic field position (Greenwood, et al., 2011), we analyze social incubators from the perspective of boundary organizations, defined as “independent organizations that provide a mechanism for other organizations and individuals to work together” (Lawrence & Hardy, 1999). Boundary organizations design new possibilities and mechanisms of interaction among organizations belonging to different fields, by aligning their divergent interests (O’Mahony & Bechky, 2008). Their field position entails that they navigate among complex institutional environments (Greenwood et al., 2011) and invest effort in facilitating the material, conceptual and symbolic exchanges between different social worlds (McKague, Zietsma, & Oliver, 2015; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010) by providing a “durable structure to reinforce mutual adaptation” (O’Mahony & Bechky, 2008, p. 453)

Particularly in emergent fields such as social entrepreneurship, characterized by high ambiguity and low or lacking “institutionalized patterns of relations and actions” (Santos & Eisenhardt, 2009, p. 644), these organizations occupy a strategic position in establishing a shared context, influencing meanings (Tracey et al., 2011), delineating “boundaries between convergent and divergent interests” (O’Mahony & Bechky, 2008, p. 453).

On the one hand, boundary organizations can strategically instigate and pursue institutional change (Brown, 1991). As they are exposed to the confrontations and contradictions within fields (Greenwood, Oliver, Suddaby, & Sahlin, 2008) due to power struggles between actors promoting different institutional logics (Seo & Creed, 2002), boundary organizations can use their position in order to promote alternatives that blurr or (re)shape organizational boundaries (Santos & Eisenhardt, 2005; Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006), or that breach, connect or establish new field boundaries (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010).

On the other hand, however, performing across borders exposes intermediaries to conflicting logics (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010) and exerts pressure on their organizational structure and mission, as these organizations pursue a double objective of cross-border connecting and of advancing their own strategic interests (Brown, 1991; Lawrence & Hardy, 1999). Therefore, their capacity to promote change in inter-organizational or inter-field interactions depends on their work in gathering the necessary support and resources, and even in facing the resistance coming from the power and interests embodied in the institutional arrangements in place (O’Mahony & Bechky, 2008).

While the bridging work done by these multi-embedded organizations (Leca et al., 2008) has been already exposed, we have a scant understanding of the entrepreneurial role they can play. As they are exposed to the expectations of actors belonging to different social worlds that they actively attempt to connect, we argue that social incubators represent an interesting empirical case to study how the boundary bridging and entrepreneurial work articulate to each other throughout the institutionalization process.

3. Methodology

3.1. Study context

The four pioneer incubators selected for this study support early stage initiatives wishing to transform ideas of tackling social problems into social enterprises. The following paragraphs provide a quick overview of the four cases.

Alter'Incub Montpellier (France)

Alter'Incub was created in 2007 in Montpellier from a partnership led by the Languedoc Roussillon Regional Association of Cooperative Enterprises (URSCOP) that gathered actors from the public sector (the Regional Council, Caisse des dépôts – French public development bank) and from the social economy⁹. It was the first French social innovation incubator designed to contribute to regional development (Richez-Battesti & Vallade, 2009) and was established as a nonprofit organization, hosted and staffed by the URSCOP.

Social Impact Lab Berlin (SIL) (Germany)

Social Impact was created in 2011 in Potsdam (Berlin) as a nonprofit company and currently incorporates a network of 9 incubators around different locations in Germany, called Social Impact Labs (SIL). It was founded by a prominent German entrepreneur who was awarded the Ashoka fellowship in 2007, and the Schwab Foundation's Social Entrepreneur of the Year prize in 2010 for his activity in the field of social entrepreneurship. The first incubation program for social startups proposed by Social Impact was named Social Impact Start and was powered through a collaboration with the Federal Ministry of Brandenburg, the German Federal Ministry for Families, Seniors, Women and Youth, as well as a corporate partner specialized in software solutions for businesses (SAP).

NESsT Timisoara (Romania)

NESsT (Nonprofit Enterprise and Self-sustainability Team) is an international nonprofit organization created in 1997 by two American social entrepreneurs. Its activity focused on emergent countries from Central and Eastern Europe, as well as Latin America. With the financial support of the United States

⁹ CRES LR, AVISE, MACIF, MAIF, Caisse d'épargne

Agency for International Development (USAID), channeled through the Romania Civil Society Strengthening Program and the partnership of World Learning for International Development, NESsT entered Romania in 2007, establishing an office in 2009 in Timisoara. A pioneer in the Romanian social economy sector and its first social incubator, NESsT Romania (so forth NESsT) relied mainly on private contributions redirected to the incubation of civil society organizations aiming to become sustainable through social enterprise activities.

Impact Hub King's Cross London (IH) (United Kingdom)

Initially named the Hub, the incubator was founded in 2005 in London (Islington), at the initiative of a young group of entrepreneurs. The Hub was created around the idea of a collaborative physical space that gathered a community of like-minded people. The rapid and unexpected international success of the model (currently reaching over 100 Hubs) triggered a strategic reorientation to accommodate the organizational growth and so the network became Impact Hub (IH) in 2013. This grassroots initiative represented “a cross between a business incubator, a learning lab, and a professional membership community” (Bachmann, 2014). Impact Hub King's Cross was among the first to be established in 2008 in London and was certified as a B-corp in 2016. Among the four Impact Hubs in London, it is the one that focuses the most on supporting social entrepreneurs through specific incubation programs, notably the Impact Hub Fellowship, an entrepreneurial idea award followed by a one-year incubation program.

3.2. Methodological approach

We used an inductive, multiple-case research design (Eisenhardt, 1989) based on research in four European social incubators that allowed us to compare and contrast patterns and observations from each of the individual cases in a “replication logic” (Yin, 2009). We aimed at complementing and extending previous theoretical work on the diffusion of social entrepreneurship by illuminating how incubators worked to legitimate the field, while taking account of their institutional embeddedness, following the logic that “no organization can properly be understood apart from its wider social and cultural context” (Scott, 1995, p. 151).

Data collection

Theoretical sampling was used “to choose cases which are likely to replicate or extend the emergent theory” (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 545). In order to guarantee the comparability of the cases (Yin, 2009), we aimed at identifying social incubators with similar organizational characteristics. We searched in particular pioneering independent organizations that made explicit reference to supporting the emergence of social

entrepreneurship, social enterprises or social innovations. A discriminating criterion to differentiate incubators from broader promotional or consulting agencies was the design and implementation of “strategic, value-adding intervention system (i.e. business incubation) of monitoring and business assistance” (Hackett & Dilts, 2004, p.57) for early stage entrepreneurs. These programs aimed at helping nascent entrepreneurs to take the leap from an idea to an operational market-based organization with a social mission.

To select the incubators, during 2014, we collected publicly available online data on the incubation field in Europe with the objective of identifying the most popular organizations that stood out in terms of visibility and efforts in promoting the field. Our sampling strategy led to identifying four organizations – Social Impact Lab, Impact Hub, Alter’Incub and NESsT – that answered our criteria. We were already in contact with the French social incubator, Alter’Incub, due to the previous participation of the second author in its launching phase. Initial debates regarded the inclusion of Impact Hub in the comparison, as the organization didn’t define itself as a pure incubator, but as a community of social entrepreneurs sharing a co-working space. Nevertheless, the visibility and the rise of incubation programs throughout the network, particularly in London, the birth place of the organization, led us to select Impact Hub King’s Cross¹⁰ for our analysis, as being the most engaged in incubation programs. Moreover, in the interest of contextual diversity and due to the personal background of one of the authors, NESsT Romania was preferred among the different locations where NESsT operated in Eastern Europe.

The use of qualitative data “enables researchers to unpack multifaceted, temporally unfolding situations and causal mechanisms” (Graebner, 2012, p. 279). Our data was gathered over the 2015 – 2017 period. We collected data from three main sources: interviews, field notes from direct observations and documents. We conducted in total 36 semi-structured in-depth interviews covering key informants involved in the management of the incubators as well as members of the operational teams dealing with program management and incubation coaching (see Table 5, annexes). The interviews lasted in between 45 minutes and one hour and 30 minutes, during which we searched to obtain in-depth knowledge of the way in which the organizations operated and the programs they implemented to support social entrepreneurs. Informants were approached either by e-mail or at themed events on the incubation of social enterprises. The first author participated at the European event “Social Innovation LIVE” 2014 (Lisbon), themed “Bringing together social innovation, incubation and action”, and at the European-funded project BENISI’s final conference in 2016 (Brussels), entitled “Experiences and first success stories of a European network of incubators for social innovation”. These two important events allowed us to develop a better understanding

¹⁰ To be noted that we didn’t choose the first Impact Hub – Impact Hub Islington, in London – because this organization is most focused on capacitating its own members and doesn’t provide incubation programs.

of the evolution of the incubation field at the European level and to approach members of the selected incubators. Following these events, initial interviews were conducted via Skype with a key person from the management team in order to verify the fit of the incubator to the purpose of our analysis and to check their interest in enrolling in the study. Further on, site visits were made at each incubator's offices in London, Berlin, Timisoara and Montpellier for at least 2 days (see Table 5, annexes). During these stays, we conducted on-site interviews, we observed some of the facilities made available to the entrepreneurs and we also engaged with and visited the offices of some of the enterprises recommended by the incubators as successful examples of incubated enterprises. The site visits were revealing in better understanding the ethos and entrepreneurial culture promoted by each incubator, as well as their preferred strategies for incubation and pursuing impact. They allowed us to appreciate the incubators' resources and to identify the type of support and facilities that were the most put forward in supporting social entrepreneurs.

We also participated where possible in events or sessions organized by the incubators such as a design thinking workshop (Social Impact), a workshop designed to fight the fear of entrepreneurial failure (Impact Hub) and multiple training sessions and public promotional events (Alter'Incub). In addition, we collected data from the organizations' newsletters, annual or impact reports and media interventions (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube channels, keynotes in conferences).

Data analysis

We adopted an inductive approach shifting back and forth between case data, the patterns emerging from our data and the extant literature (Locke, 2001). The analysis took an iterative path and the coding process was emergent. Once we transcribed the data, we started our initial open coding with a broad focus trying to compare the organizational and program specificities of each incubator and to identify patterns or regularities through their work. At this stage, examples of code were: "adapting support to entrepreneurs' needs", "partnering with public authorities", "attracting funding" or "challenging prejudices in the business sector".

When grouping these descriptive codes together and refining them into second order codes by "recognizing patterns of relationships among constructs within and across cases and their underlying logical arguments" (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007, p.1), a recurrent theme emerged at the crossroads of the social change objectives pursued by the incubators and the mechanisms they used to leverage support from local actors and networks to sustain their objectives. The efforts made by the incubators to legitimize social entrepreneurship and make it an accepted organizational form within their various contexts led us to introduce in our analysis existing elements from the institutional theory regarding processes of institutional change, the role played by agency and the institutional embeddedness of actors. This lens enabled us to

identify a broadly similar process of change at work in the four organizations, and following three phases of evolution. However, if, on the surface, the proposal of incubation services relied on similar mechanisms and offerings throughout the four cases, underneath, the incubators mobilized various, highly contextually imprinted sources of support. We further compared codes and data with each other and synthesized our codes following a focused coding process, to “condense data and provide a handle on them” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 59) (Table 4). We undertook mapping exercises to shed light on the different configurations of actors that the incubators attracted and the type of interactions in which they engaged (see Figure 8). This process guided us to focus on the different boundary positions that the incubators leveraged in order to promote social entrepreneurship in their specific settings. Finally, the entrepreneurial nature of the way incubators attracted resources and collaborations across boundaries led us to revisit the three phases of the institutionalization process, to identify the interplay between the entrepreneurial and boundary bridging dimensions of their institutional work, at each of these steps. To overcome one of the challenges of presenting empirical evidence in multiple-case research, regarding the “better stories vs. better theories” (Eiseinhardt & Graebner, 2007, p.5) tradeoff, we follow existing recommendations and support each part of the theory by evidence from at least some of the cases, while summarizing case evidence in separate tables (Eiseinhardt & Graebner, 2007). Therefore, Table 4 below provides a sample of the data structure and additional representative data are illustrated in Table 6 (annexes).

Table 4 - Overview of data structure

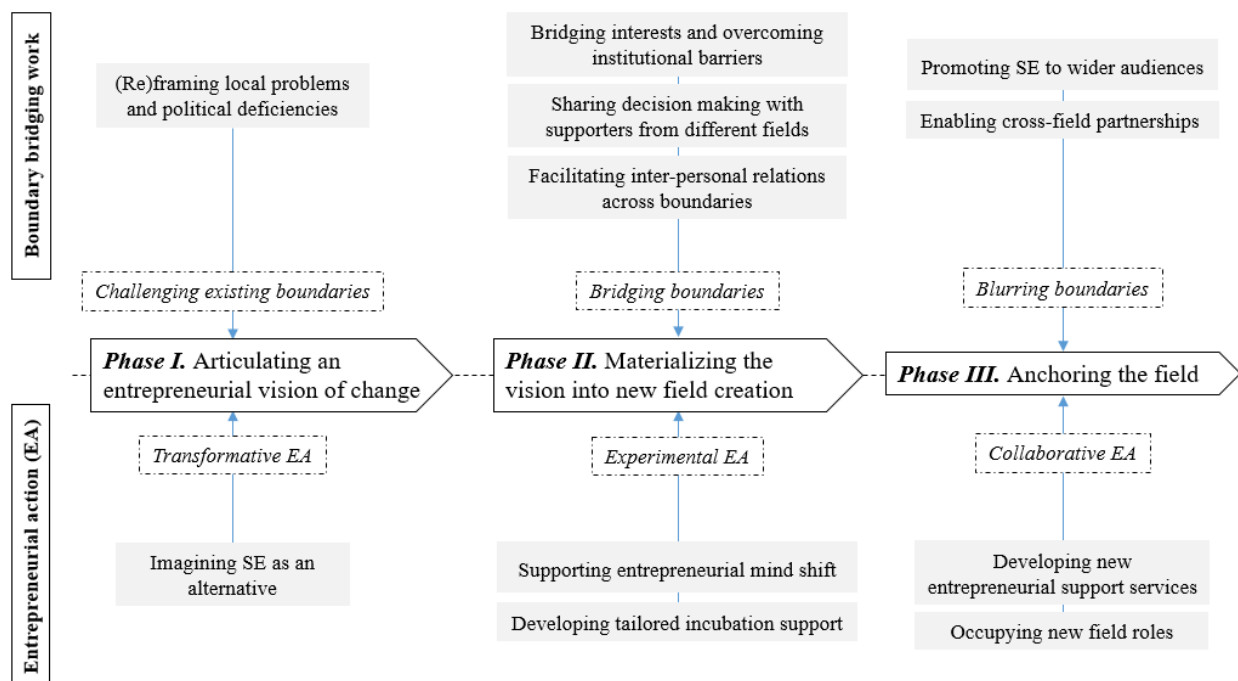
First-order codes	Focused codes	Change process
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Framing local problems and political deficiencies • Endorsing a positive discourse on social entrepreneurship • Overcoming institutional barriers and prejudices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing alternatives 	=> Phase I. Articulating a vision of change
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seizing opportunities • Bridging interests and creating new avenues for social action • Supporting entrepreneurial mind shift • Providing tailored incubation support • Sharing decision making • Facilitating inter-personal relations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobilizing supporters and resources • Endorsing entrepreneurial transformation • Intermediating cross-field interactions 	=> Phase II. Materializing the vision into field creation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing new support services outside the incubation • Investment brokering • Promoting SE to wider audiences • Enabling cross-field partnerships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undertaking new field roles • Enlarging the reach of SE across boundaries 	=> Phase III. Anchoring the emergent field to existing institutional configurations

4. Results

By tracing the practices and mechanisms enacted by the four social incubators, we identified two salient dimensions of their institutional work. A first, boundary bridging dimension encompassed their engagement with existing conceptualizations, normative frames and field configurations in an attempt to connect and integrate them in the new emerging paradigm of social entrepreneurship. A second, entrepreneurial dimension consisted in imagining, experimenting and creating new forms of entrepreneurial support, as well as methods of intervention and collaboration across fields. These two dimensions were articulated in a multilevel process, composed of three phases: the development of an entrepreneuring vision of change, the materialization of the vision through resources' and actors' mobilization and finally, the anchoring of the emergent field to broader institutional configurations (see figure 7 below).

Figure 7 - Process view of the institutionalization of social entrepreneurship from the incubators' work perspective

Source: developed by the authors



4.1. Phase 1. Articulating a social entrepreneurial vision of change: (re)framing contextual deficiencies and imagining alternatives

The incubators identified aspects of institutionalized models of action at the crossroads of different fields - activist, nonprofit, cooperative, public and private - as dysfunctional. They entrepreneurially interpreted them as legitimate opportunities to introduce “a novel institutional combination” (Dorado, 2005) and to imagine new trajectories of action (Seo & Creed, 2002; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). All four incubators envisioned change in an entrepreneurial way that meant transforming individuals, NGOs or other socially-driven initiatives into entrepreneurs and sustainable market-based organizations, in moments when social entrepreneurship and social innovation were still rather unknown concepts.

The launch of the incubators reflected a phase of high entrepreneurial energy during which the founders’ vision and stamina were a cornerstone in creating the incubators’ identity, as well as in positioning and contextually embedding the new organizations. The founders were knocking on doors, meeting people, promoting the idea of social entrepreneurship and the need for incubation support, and trying to identify a match of values with potential supporters.

Alter’Incub emerged in a rather economically poor region - Languedoc Roussillon - where the social economy was weakly structured in contrast to other French regions and lacked recognition from the public institutions. The initiating organization - URSCOP LR - took part in a European-funded project Equal Est, “Social economy and territories”, which was meant to reflect on and experiment with new ways of supporting the development of collective interest companies - a newly created legal form. Although not initially envisioned, the URSCOP LR seized the opportunity of this prospective research to problematize the regional entrepreneurial support, then driven by a technological innovation paradigm. As stressed by the founder, “the chance factor has to be triggered [...] You always have to be in the right spot at the right moment, to feel things. You shouldn’t hesitate to go to a place...even if you don’t know if you can get something out of it or not, you have to be there!”. At that moment, entrepreneurial activities that did not fit the established administrative frameworks were not entitled to receive technical and financial support from the local public authorities, via the existing network of business incubators.

The newly created *Alter’Incub*, therefore, argued for the need to enlarge the spectrum of recognized innovations and struggled for the political recognition of a new form, entitled “social innovation”¹¹. This

¹¹ *Alter’Incub* actively contributed to a national collaborative group, including notably *Avisé* (the National agency for the development of the social and solidarity economy) and *Mouves* (the Social Entrepreneurs’ Movement), in the

new type of innovation aimed at tackling social needs in a collaborative manner - as inspired by the cooperative movement - while economically contributing to regional development priorities. Through such endeavor, Alter'Incub also committed to revamping and “entrepreneurializing” the social and solidarity economy in the region, so as “to take it out of the repairing image of the economy of the poor” (Manager).

The emergence of *Social Impact* can be traced to the initial work of IQ-consult, a consultancy organization established in 1994 as a reaction to the unemployment crisis of the 90s in Germany. It problematized traditional, public-funded, regional development policies (infrastructure development, incentives and attraction of new investments in disadvantaged regions) that failed to acknowledge the marginalization of certain groups, such as women, people with disabilities, unemployed youths, people with low qualifications, etc. who were excluded from the labor market, especially in rural areas.

IQ-consult promoted a new, alternative form of labor market integration strategy that focused on the “endogenous capacities” of regions for the creation of new jobs. Labeled as inclusive entrepreneurship, this new paradigm promoted an alternative bottom up approach by providing the skills and qualifications necessary to emancipate oneself from unemployment through self-employment, considering that “everyone – even those living under disadvantaged circumstances – should have the opportunity to consider starting their own business”¹². Building on the legitimacy acquired by the organization in the implementation of self-employment programs directed at people with disabilities and other forms of labor market exclusion, IQ-consult’s founder engaged in 2010 in national reflections on strategies to scale social innovations in Germany. He identified a gap in answering the specific needs of social entrepreneurs: while there were “many programs for usual startups, there was actually no program for social startups, except those focused on special topics” (Mentoring Manager, SIL). The solution “to support more social entrepreneurs, or people who have an idea to solve a social or ecological problem in an entrepreneurial way” (Manager, SIL) was to offer them high quality support and “increase the business starter’s ability to act and solve problems on their own” (Manager, SIL).

NESsT took a stand regarding the “doing a lot with little”¹³ mentality (Etchart & Davis, NESsT, 2002) that dominated the nonprofit sector. It considered the philanthropic system inefficient as it kept the civil society organizations under-resourced, and weakened their organizational capacity to act by financing rather fragmented and short-term oriented projects in detriment of larger and wider impact projects. In the Romanian context, the adhesion to the European Union triggered a quick retreat of major international

establishment of a national definition of social innovation and a grid of criteria, which were partly integrated in the Social and Solidarity Economy law adopted in 2014.

¹²Iq consult profile on Social Innovation Europe directory (2016)

(<https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/socialinnovationeurope/en/directory/organisation/iq-consult>)

¹³ Etchart & Davis (2002) Prophets for non-profits? (nesst.org)

donors. Thus, “the short-term and project-based grant funding”¹⁴ (Etchart, NESsT, 2017) paradigm left local NGOs unprepared and unskilled to switch to new organizational models. They were caught in between a financially weak welfare State and an underdeveloped local philanthropic sector.

NESsT aimed to fill this void and engaged in legitimizing a model of venture philanthropy¹⁵ as a novel solution that allowed “combining the tools and strategies of business leadership with the mission and values of nonprofit entrepreneurship” (NESsT country report 2011). The incubator challenged the entrenched donor-dependent thinking of the nonprofit sector by inciting NGOs to become financially independent. It proposed to offer them the financial resources and entrepreneurial tools needed to develop commercial activities in the form of social enterprises, “as a fundamental part of the solution in order to move away from a model of simply attending vulnerable groups to bringing them into the virtuous cycle of economic growth”¹⁶ (Comolli, NESsT co-CEO, 2013).

Impact Hub reacted to the “purpose crisis” of the 2008 economic downturn¹⁷, interpreted as lacking opportunities and support for people who wished to pursue social change initiatives or meaningful career paths. In between conventional jobs that “dominated the market place”¹⁸ (Baderman & Law, 2006) and perpetuated the wrong economic model and jobs in the voluntary sector that didn’t allow for “much creativity or imagination or radicalism” (Baderman & Law, 2006), people were often stuck in an isolation circle “trying to realize good ideas from their bedrooms—lonely, cut off from the world”¹⁹ (Bachmann, Impact Hub, 2014).

Impact Hub positioned itself as a “buzzing and alive” (Robinson, IH co-founder, 2010²⁰) community enabler and an alternative space where individual creativity would be liberated and “unlikely allies would meet by serendipity” (Bachmann, Impact Hub, 2014) in order to turn ideas to change the world in reality. Created around the pivotal role of a shared space co-designed by its members, Impact Hub proposed a new collaborative way of action through a network of like-minded people who “wanted to make the world a little bit better, [they] believed that enterprise could have social and environmental outcomes, that business didn’t have to make the world worse, it could make it better” (Baderman & Law, 2006).

¹⁴ Etchart (2017) Reflecting on 20 years of impact (nesst.org)

¹⁵ NESsT developed an impressive amount of reports and policy papers where it defined the venture philanthropy approach, the purpose and functioning of social enterprises, and argued for their efficiency.

¹⁶ Comolli (2013) Social innovation taking off in Latin America (nesst.org)

¹⁷ Wittmayer, J.M., Avelino, F., Afonso, R. (eds.) (2015) WP4 CASE STUDY Report: Impact Hub. TRANSIT.

¹⁸ Baderman & Law (2006) Everyday Legends: The Ordinary People Changing Our World, the Stories of 20 Great UK Social Entrepreneurs

¹⁹ Bachmann (2014) How the Hub found its center, SSIR

²⁰ Robinson, IH co-founder (2010) at IH Tampere, video source

Throughout the four alternative solutions, there was a sense of urgency in enabling individual action and responsibility, or “the power of ordinary people” (Robinson, IH co-founder, 2010), in addressing social needs, as underlined in the narratives of NESsT: “We cannot afford to wait until others start doing something to create long-lasting values in our communities” (Portfolio Director, NESsT, RAF annual report 2010) and Impact Hub : “We shouldn’t wait for policy makers to change the agenda, we should get on building it ourselves” (Robinson, IH co-founder, 2010). In all cases, mission-driven individual entrepreneurial action appeared as the missing link that bridged “economic efficiency and shared wellbeing” (Portfolio Director, NESsT, RAF annual report 2010). There was, however, a lack of tailored entrepreneurial support for these individuals and the four incubators aimed at filling this void.

4.2. Phase 2. Materializing the vision into field creation

The incubators’ proactive strategies to legitimate the new approach of social entrepreneurship involved a two-sided work, due to their boundary position. They bridged the resources they mobilized from existing institutions with the development needs of the emerging social entrepreneurs.

Bridging resources and overcoming institutional barriers

To overcome institutional barriers, the incubators formulated appealing discourses (Leca et al., 2008; DiMaggio, 1991) that presented social entrepreneurship as an opportunity and bridged it with the interests of different actors from the public, private and nonprofit sectors. We have identified three frames used by the social incubators to attract support, by promoting social entrepreneurship as: a new way to deliver local development, a new strategy to spur (organizational) innovation and a new lever in pursuing and demonstrating social engagement.

At a moment when “we had no name for this combination of social and business activities” (IG-consult website), the incubators were in a position of “trailblazers” (Director, Alter’Incub), pursuing initial pedagogical work to explain the distinctness of social enterprises compared to institutionalized cooperation models in the social sector.

First, the promise of **economic sustainability and contribution to local development** represented one such distinctive qualities. *Alter’Incub* put forward the social and economic embeddedness of social enterprises: being in close proximity with the needs of the territory and creating local jobs that would not be outsourced, signaled a strategic type of organization eligible to public funding through early stage incubation. Alter’Incub positioned itself as a partner “who came with ideas and with funding [...] ready to carry and lift the obstacles one after the other” (Director, Alter’Incub). It enabled a “collective logic where

everyone finds a place and plays a role so that everyone contributes to a shared objective” (Founder, Alter’Incub), and argued of its “cooperative DNA” in order to build trust with the public partners. This perspective matched the Regional Council’s objective to restructure and reinforce the local social and solidarity economy, and facilitated the access to financial resources for the launch of the incubator: “during a couple of years – roughly 3, 4, for us Languedoc Roussillon was a bit like the far west, meaning we arrived with the ideas and then we found the money and we went for it! There was really a sort of enthusiasm that was building up” (Founder, Alter’Incub).

NESsT framed social enterprises as a tool “to transform certain communities, to send a message and to create jobs, because eventually this is the objective” (Country Director, NESsT), to “stimulate local economic activity [...] and reduce the burden of providing services for local and state governments.” (Etchart & Davis, NESsT, 2002). The incubator purposely tried to orient discussions away from stakeholders’ enthusiasm for the social nature of social enterprises, and to offset the mission-oriented mindset that governed the nonprofit world. Instead, NESsT aimed to “inflow a lot of business knowledge” (Country Director, NESsT), arguing that: “there is a mass delusion in regards to what it means a business and that really is the case in this [nonprofit] sector. Because by default, those businesses, even if they are social businesses they are very difficult compared to classic [NGO] projects where you receive the money, you spend it, [the project] is over and you report” (Country Director, NESsT). NESsT aimed to attract a new type of philanthropists to the non-profit sector, who were interested in having a social contribution but to whom the conventional donation model was not appealing. Although this approach led to NESsT’s collaboration with one of its first core local supporters, the Romanian American Foundation, the incubator faced challenges in explaining the higher risks associated to social enterprises compared to conventional nonprofit projects, and in taming the expectations of the for-profit supporters: “The difficult part is that it is very expensive if you want to do long term education, flexible money, and all this, on the length we are doing, and not many financiers want to pay for it. They want you very quickly to incubate, to expand, to scale! [...] We have told them that it takes time, that people aren’t [changing] like that in a blink of an eye!” (Country Director, NESsT).

The discourse on economic sustainability was matched in the UK with the philanthropic sector’ intention “for a long time to try to build sustainable systems that can continue beyond the donation itself” (Strategy Director, Impact Hub) and social enterprises appeared as a “a glimmer of hope in this otherwise disappointing landscape” (Strategy Director, Impact Hub). *Impact Hub* cultivated a strong entrepreneurial ethos of financial independence as part of its approach to incubation: “if you want to support entrepreneurs you’d better be an entrepreneur yourself! You’d better build these business models that are not fully granted. I think we’re not advising well if we live of grants and sponsorships only” (Development Lead, IH). Impact

Hub embodied this vision by developing its own organizational model independent of subsidies and based on membership fees gathered from its community, co-working services and income-generating activities such as space renting. However, relying on the market to set up the novel organization raised challenges in finding like-minded investors because the founding team was “asking people to invest in a business, a business that they didn’t quite understand and that had never been done before” (Robinson, IH co-founder, 2010).

Second, the institutional entrepreneurs framed social entrepreneurship as driving **innovative solutions with a startup ethos**. *Alter’Incub* deliberately established its image as an innovation incubator and framed social enterprises as innovative organizations. This helped the incubator to benefit from the glow surrounding technological incubators and further on to integrate the local ecosystem of incubators and gain access to technical knowledge in designing the structure of the support programs in a process of “adapting this [technological] incubation method” (Founder, Alter’Incub) to social innovation.

Social Impact and *Impact Hub* seized the need of large companies to overcome internal bureaucracy and have access to new commercial ideas: “[corporates] would like to be a startup again! They have big structures, they are a tank! They are big ships! They are not agile and quick, as they would like to be sometimes, and that’s why the startup mentality is very interesting” (Mentoring Manager, SIL). Equally, they presented social entrepreneurship as a means for welfare organizations and large non-profits to stimulate internal innovation in order to face increasing social and societal pressures: “there is some interest in innovation, in entrepreneurship, in the ideas that are in here because [large non-profit organizations] don’t get them inside their systems. Their systems are not really designed to incentivize new ideas, innovation, products and systems” (Strategy Director, IH). These collaborations weren’t immediate as the incubators had to change the negative normative assumptions of the major welfare organizations towards the entrepreneurial logic by “convincing them that the social start-ups are not the capitalist enemy in the social sector, but that they bring a lot of innovation” (Manager, Social Impact Lab). Social Impact’s initial attempts to promote its inclusive entrepreneurship solution led to ideological clashes or unsuccessful partnerships, as explained by its founder: “it was a long road, especially when I think how 10 years ago I was more or less thrown out of peoples’ offices sometimes. To them it seemed like too much trouble or even irresponsible to give young or disadvantaged people a way to start their own businesses. The decision makers were skeptical, they thought it was far too risky” (Founder, SIL). The fascination with innovation had a lower appeal in NESsT’s case, where the incubated enterprises were seen as innovative means to provide better jobs and living conditions to people in need, irrespective of the innovative character of the offer produced. The lower purchasing power of the Romanian market made it difficult for Western social business models based on niche products and services to thrive, outside certain urban settings. The

incubator's focus on local impact and dignified jobs confronted the macro-level discourse on social entrepreneurship: "there's a big hype on social entrepreneurship, changemakers, IT online, which I don't think really corresponds to Romania when you look at the development level. I don't think we're there yet to live only from high value-added entrepreneurship, even if I would like, as all of us, to stop helping farmers and making pots of jam all day long. But this is the situation and this type of business still sustains a large part of the economy" (Country Director, NESsT).

Lastly, supporting social entrepreneurship through incubation was framed as an opportunity for companies and foundations to deliver their **CSR commitments** and to reach impact objectives in a novel, entrepreneurial way: "corporates started to look for programs which fit more into their DNA and their core business and not just like supporting some kindergartens" (Manager, SIL). For example, *Social Impact Lab*'s first flagship program, Social Impact Start, was co-founded through a partnership with the multinational SAP²¹ whose Mentoring Manager (SIL) said: "let's try something new! SAP considers itself a quite innovative company so a credible CSR engagement would be also to fulfil innovative solutions in the social context". The company provided funding and advanced expertise in design thinking and human centered design, that were a cornerstone in the incubator's approach to developing new products and services targeting social needs.

Endorsing entrepreneurial transformation

While attracting partners and resources for incubation support, the incubators worked at creating the individuals and organizations that would demonstrate the viability of their entrepreneurial approach and form the emerging field.

The incubation support was fueled by intense technical work, experimentation and learning. A back and forth process alternated between theorizing and conceptualizing social innovation and social enterprises, and drawing on the field experience with grassroots initiatives to prototype and test incubation tools and alternative business models, because "classic economic models aren't always going to be suitable" (Incubation coach, Alter'Incub). The four organizations distinguished their support from existing incubation and acceleration programs and through this work established the boundaries of the emergent field as a sector that "has a different market logic, a different financing logic and a different marketing logic. And that's exactly what we offer"²² (Founder, SIL). Alter'Incub positioned its role as making the operational "link between the satisfaction of social needs and a viable economic model" (Alter'Incub

²¹ SAP is the international market leader in enterprise application software

²² Norbert Kunz online interview. Economy stories: driving social innovation

leaflet). However, if initially the incubators “supported what they could and what existed”, gradually they worked to “grow the sector and develop a pipeline” of enterprises (Manager, NESsT).

The process of creating these new entrepreneurs was not straightforward. The incubators dealt with cases of social entrepreneurs who were “allergic to money” (Programs Director, IH), or came from an NGO background where they didn’t need to “*sense the business purpose*” (Country Director, NESsT) or be client oriented. This mindset represented a downfall when trying to run a business “if essentially you’re pushing the money away” (Programs Director, IH). As underlined by Impact Hub’s co-founder, the identity of the social entrepreneur is distinct and constructed at the boundaries between the activist and the entrepreneurial worlds, where “systemic initiatives need the attention of interdisciplinary and global talent that embody the courage and critique of an activist with the resolve and ingenuity of an entrepreneur”²³ (Glad, Impact Hub, 2008).

To enable an entrepreneurial mind shift, the incubators personalized their support to the needs of the individuals in order to make them assimilate basic business knowledge and verify their own capacity in launching an enterprise in a practical hands-on manner. They designed the different steps of the incubation process as a transition phase for these individuals to become more entrepreneurial, or “an excuse to teach the person: go talk with your clients, see what a cash flow means, develop certain skills, soft and hard, overcome your fears!” (Country Director, NESsT). Impact Hub’s scaling manager explained the personal transformations underwent by these individuals when developing their organizations as a “big mind shift”, because “some of the entrepreneurs are great with the ideas, but aren’t that good at running the business, they need to move aside and recruit a great CEO, or an operations’ person. For some people, it’s about them changing the scale of what they think they are capable of, so there is a practical and an emotional shift, a role shift on the organizational side” (Programs Director, IH).

Moreover, the incubators had to make social entrepreneurship palatable to these individuals, because when they entered the incubation process, they “feel their social innovation, they perceive it, but they don’t manage to put the words on it” (Incubation coach, Alter’Incub). To make them identify as social entrepreneurs, Alter’Incub developed a “Social innovation training day” to give the entrepreneurs the discursive tools to better frame their social objectives. Social Impact used design thinking techniques to help the candidates reframe their ideas and visions of change, to define strategies to track their impact and to better articulate their social contributions with the expectations of the field: “I’m trying to help the projects to define their idea also, like to think about how you can reframe it, maybe push it in another direction so it has even a bigger social impact, or with different methods try to find out how to make the

²³ Glad (2008) The Hub. Creating an Ecology of Social Innovation. Kosmos Journal for Global Transformation

best out of it, to make even a bigger social impact somehow” (Incubation coach, SIL). Impact Hub put forward the value of developing and maintaining a common identity and a shared set of values among the entrepreneurs that became members of the network: “We build a community also by ensuring that our values are enshrined at the moment people approach us. [...] Here we are collaborative, community focused, or social impact focused and you are expected to belong” (Strategy Director, IH).

Intermediating cross-boundary interactions

As boundary organizations, the incubators designed hybrid spaces of interaction that brought together the emerging social entrepreneurs with the different supporters – venture capitalists, consultants, public authorities, welfare organizations, nonprofits – around the goal of developing the social entrepreneurship field. Within these interactional spaces, the incubators played a particular “relational role” (Strategy Director, IH) in ensuring that the language between the different social worlds was understandable and acceptable to all sides.

Sharing decision making and building a common understanding of SE.

The use of multi-stakeholder juries in the selection process was one of the shared practices among the incubators to facilitate and promote a common understanding of social entrepreneurship and social enterprises among different constituencies. These juries assembled the incubators’ main public or private funders and specific field experts. For example, in the case of Social Impact: “we invite 10 teams to the pitch, and there is the expert jury which consists of different types of stakeholders from the private sector, also from SAP, sometimes consulting firms such as PwC or KPMG, like business people, also from the social sector. And sometimes we have alumni startups in the jury [...] we try to have a mix from different sectors” (Manager, SIL). Moreover, Social Impact organized “onboarding workshops” to explain to newcomers the definitions and specificities of social entrepreneurship.

By holding the incubation competence, the incubators exerted their legitimacy as gatekeepers of the concept to skillfully drive the political arena in charge of defining the boundary of what is social entrepreneurship and social innovative and what is not. NESsT’s bridging work between the jury members and the entrepreneurs meant challenging and navigating among different representations or prejudices: “there are those [investors] who put on their charity heads and forget about their mission of investor and critical appraisal and just because they see the social impact: ‘Oh, how wonderful!’ And there are others who remain just as intransigent and critical! [...] They are as strict on the number side [as for a for-profit venture], but even more strict on the motivation side, or more suspicious” (Portfolio Director, NESsT). The boundary position of the incubator, between the reality of the investors and that of the entrepreneurs, enabled it to anchor new representations and find compromises: “so they add up their conditions, while we

are trying to connect them to the reality of each business, to explain the context, and somehow we try to find this balance” (Portfolio Director, NESsT).

Facilitating inter-personal relations and challenging entrenched representations.

The incubators surrounded themselves with networks of business experts and institutional partners engaged at professional level - through service contracting or pro bono consulting - or at human level - through mentoring relations. Impact Hub King’s Cross’ Strategy Manager stressed the importance of “the networks you are plugging [the entrepreneurs] into” and the incubator’s intermediation role in creating and enhancing rich environments “to ensure that [the entrepreneurs] meet the right kind of people, potential customers, potential partners, potential investors, and also networks that are relevant to them” (Strategy Director, IH). To enhance these connections and interactions, a mentoring program was established as an integrative part of the Social Impact’s incubation process and was designed in collaboration with SAP through the Social Impact Start program. It involved more than 180 SAP employees in mentoring or delivering training within their normal working hours. To stir up enthusiasm and enable mutual understanding, a Social Impact staff member integrated SAP offices and organized “Social Impact Connect” events, where incubated enterprises would pitch their projects during lunch sessions in a friendly context, so that the SAP employees could see that the entrepreneurs “are very, very energetic people and people with a lot of ideas and energy to change something and this is motivating and this is...contagious! And this is the key!” (Mentoring Manager, SIL). The incubators’ staff played a key role by personally knowing the skills, experiences and personal backgrounds of the volunteer employees and entrepreneurs, thus being able to manage the expectations between the two sides and to find a mutual working framework formalized in a mentoring agreement: “If I see that for example a colleague at SAP has a very traditional way of seeing it... I have to clarify how our program works, how this relationship can be interesting for both, so that both of them learn from it” (Mentoring Manager, SIL). By facilitating these personal exchanges and interactions among actors from different social worlds, the incubators challenged the prejudices about social entrepreneurs in the for-profit world and “the assumption that you are very hippy-ish and not business like” (Programs Director, IH). Social Impact Lab’s former manager evoked “some bank guy said: ‘I thought they are all like really eco freaks with their dreadlocks sitting around, but they are actually really smart people!’” (Manager, SIL).

4.3. Phase 3. Anchoring the emerging field to existing institutional configurations

With the aim to promote social entrepreneurship, increase its impact and mainstream the approach, the incubators actively searched for new partnership opportunities and designed new frameworks for

collaboration. This macro-level work attempted to integrate or consolidate social entrepreneurship within existing institutional configurations.

Promoting social entrepreneurship to wider audiences

Increasing visibility and creating momentum around social entrepreneurship was a common practice across the four organizations. *NESsT* organized annual promotional events such as the “Social enterprise Day” or “Social enterprise marketplace” to bring to the forefront successful social enterprises, their products and services. It also “committed to sharing best practices, publishing numerous case studies (more than a hundred), guides, research studies, books and tools, disseminating them to colleagues and entrepreneurs throughout the world” (Etchart, NESsT, 2017) in order to promote the social enterprise and venture philanthropy solutions. *Alter’Incub* designed the biannual “International Meetings of Social Innovation” and the competition for ideas “YESS Academy” in order to engage its local partners (involving them as panelists, speakers, jury members or advisors of the entrepreneurs), and to establish itself as a skillful thought leader. *Social Impact* held frequent public events mixing the incubator’s community with external audiences in order to showcase the innovation carried out by the social entrepreneurs and “establish dialogues between different sectors [such as] food and innovation, or waste and innovation, or education and innovation, and different kinds of topics so we can also get the interest of normal companies, who don’t have so much contact with social innovators” (Manager, Social Impact Lab). Networking and topic-based events such as the “Fuck up Nights”, one of *Impact Hub*’s most popular events, were also a strategy that challenged the culture of failure by helping entrepreneurs “get real”, “talk about what’s really inside” (Programs Director, IH) and share their failures during a public event.

Enabling cross-field partnerships

The startup support competence legitimized the incubators’ boundary position and made them appealing for institutions that wished to support social entrepreneurship, either through public procurement contract or through different forms of alliances. One example is *NESsT*, who became the operational partner for a Swiss foundation searching for innovative ways to integrate marginalized Roma communities. This cross-sector collaboration allowed to pool resources and knowhow to attain a common goal, as explained by the Project Manager: “[NESsT] brought the *knowledge* on the social economy side, and they brought the *knowledge* on the communities, because we don’t have access to the Roma communities. You cannot just go there alone and start a project” (Incubation coach, NESsT). *Impact Hub* strategically leveraged this type of partnerships to develop new channels for the diffusion of social innovations into mainstream practices, by increasing their acceptability at larger scales and enabling their capacity to change established systems.

Thus, Impact Hub partnered with WWF (World Wide Fund for Nature) in what they called a “strategic partnership between pandas and makers” (Strategy Director, IH) to change environmentally damaging industries. This allowed WWF to feed innovation and creativity in their existing infrastructures and organizational processes by making calls for projects and ideas among the entrepreneurs of the Impact Hub network, while providing scaling opportunities for these ideas within the NGO’s network.

Developing new support services and undertaking new field roles

Our four case studies indicate that over time, the organizational models as well as the objectives pursued by the institutional entrepreneurs might evolve to incorporate new field roles depending on contextual opportunities and constraints.

After ten years of demonstrating that entrepreneurial models for social problems could be economically self-sustainable, *Alter’Incub* took on a new additional role in proving that these organizations could achieve growth and increase impact by changing the scale of their operations. In close collaboration with the local network of business incubators, *Alter’Incub* launched *Alter’Venture* in 2017, a “pragmatic”, “without dogmatism” acceleration program for social enterprises wishing to grow and change the scale of their operations “at the right speed, with respect for the values and the soul [of the enterprise]” (Incubation coach, *Alter’Incub*).

NESsT equally initiated a move down the pipeline of social enterprises. If the general growth of interest for the social entrepreneurship field triggered a concentration of actors providing services and resources for the start-up phase, or for well-established social enterprises, there was little support for the enterprises in their first 3 to 5 years of existence. *NESsT* coined this risky transitional phase as the “missing middle” and undertook an investment broker role to answer these emerging needs of the field. However, to finance this shift “it is a constant fundraising” indicated *NESsT*’s Country Director, that put considerable pressure on the organization: “for us neither it is not easy [...] There aren’t many investors that agree with this re-granting process. We had probably 3-4 partners during the last 10 years. [...] And for us it takes around 2 years to sign such a contract with a double function: grants and capacity building for the enterprises, and support for us. So there aren’t many [intermediary] organizations that do this because it is hard to attract this type of capital, but at the same time it is extremely necessary” (Manager, *NESsT*).

Social Impact spread to six new locations in Germany and diversified its services and partnerships to include for example, crowdfunding facilities for social entrepreneurs, or consulting services for the launch of social incubators internationally. It outgrew its initial regional focus to develop decentralized programs targeting national social challenges, such as the “Ankommer. Perspektive Deutschland” incubation program

funded by KFW Stiftung (German foundation for development) under the patronage of the Minister for Economic Affairs to tackle the refugee crisis.

Impact'Hub's impact strategy evolved from individual change to ecosystem change as a means to increase further the reach of the social entrepreneurship field, as explained by Impact Hub King's Cross Strategy Director: "the role that we try to play increasingly is to connect these 3 [sectors]: How do we ensure that successful ideas and solutions are scaled within existing frameworks, public sector, private sector? How do we ensure that the richness of ideas is maintained and nurtured but also given a chance to grow not as an independent system but as part of a coming together of systems?" (Strategy Director, IH). This change in vision entailed a growth of interest for cross-sector partnerships, and an increased boundary work through the design of entrepreneurial programs that "are going towards being a bridge, a connector, an enabler, rather than being 'We just do this!'" (Strategy Director, IH).

These different "cultural projects" (Perkmann & Spicer, 2007) embedded social entrepreneurship in wider networks and systems to explore new collaboration models. While bridging actors from different fields to "see how can they really work together" (Strategy Director, IH), these practices also exposed the incubators to multiple institutional logics, as stressed in the case of multinationals: "this tension that we constantly have to keep up with and it's also the compromises that we need to make when we work together with companies that are certainly not like-minded" (Development Lead, IH). To manage these possible conflicts of visions, Impact Hub's strategy manager underlined the need to "be mindful of the intentionality when we approach these actors" (Strategy Director, IH). Thus, in the process of institutionalizing the social entrepreneurship field, the incubators' boundary position represents a constant balance in between mainstreaming the concept and exposing the organization to a plurality of logics, on one side, and safeguarding the distinctness of the approach and the organization's identity, on the other side.

5. Discussion

Despite our focus on social incubators as institutional entrepreneurs promoting change at the boundaries of fields, we clearly acknowledge that the evolution of the social entrepreneurship field and its breakthrough in mainstream discourses, public and private strategies, was made possible through the collective action and "the coordinated and uncoordinated efforts of a potentially large number of actors" (Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca, 2010; Dorado, 2013) such as promotion agencies, competition and contest organizers, both public and private, that put to use different distributed skills (Perkmann & Spicer, 2008; Dorado, 2005) to advance the field over time. It is the purpose of this study, however, to contribute new insights precisely into the

way social incubators and their work are understood, from an institutional perspective. We bring two contributions to the literature.

5.1. Implications for the institutionalization of social entrepreneurship

Our first contribution is to the literature on institutional entrepreneurship at the boundaries. We have built on existing studies tackling processes of field institutionalization (Perkmann & Spier, 2007; Battilana et al., 2009; Khavul et al., 2013) to show how social incubators engaged in three nonlinear and ongoing phases of institutional work. Throughout these phases, they articulate new entrepreneurial visions of change, materialize these visions into the creation of social enterprises and, finally, anchor the emergent field of social entrepreneurship to existing institutional configurations, indicating that their role may be subject to change over the process (Khavul et al., 2013). Moreover, we identified two intertwined, complementary, dimensions in the incubators' work that reflected (1) the entrepreneurial and (2) the boundary bridging characteristics of their work.

The first two phases of the institutionalization process we described (articulating and materializing new visions of change) are the most substantial ones in terms of time and resources allocated by the incubators. At these stages, the incubators performed boundary bridging work to engage with potential allies (Fligstein, 1997) and attract resources into the experimentation of incubation processes for social enterprises. They made use of discursive and framing strategies (Hervieux & Voltan, 2016; Battilana, et al., 2009; Tracey et al., 2011) that (1) challenged institutionalized models of action in relation to the public, private and nonprofit sectors and (2) contributed to the creation of a new entrepreneurial identity meant to attract new individuals to the emerging field. It also contributed to the gradual establishment of incubators as legitimate organizations through the signing of decisive funding collaborations that recognized the project/mission carried by the incubators. The visionary founders of the incubators engaged in innovative entrepreneurial actions and were prone to seize opportunities and take risks in an attempt to introduce and legitimize a new entrepreneurial paradigm while overcoming institutional barriers and contestation. These initial phases brought innovations in developing incubation tools and designing support models for the emergence of the first successfully incubated social enterprises.

Moreover, the framing processes and strategic collaborations developed by the incubators, as they were starting to navigate specific social contexts (Leca et al., 2008; Rao, Monin & Durand 2003) at the crossroads of the private, public and nonprofit worlds, were subject to the imprinting of each institutional context (Stephan et al., 2014). Depending on each institutional configuration, the incubators promoted social

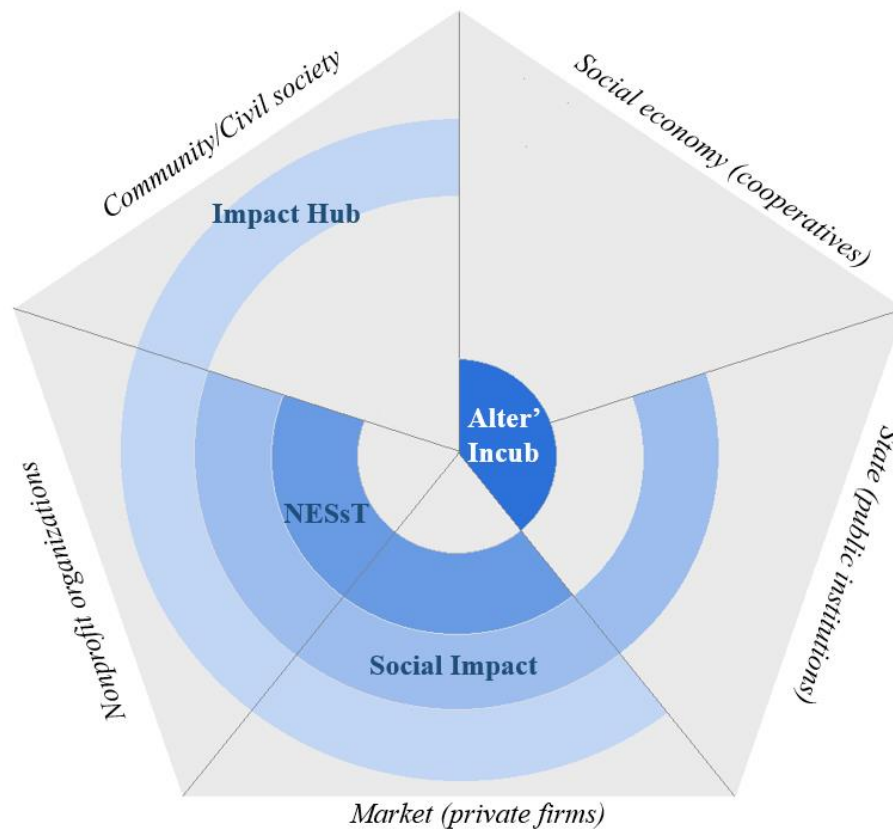
entrepreneurship as a desirable, innovative solution that matched the local actors' interests in supporting regional development (Alter'Incub, Social Impact Lab), in fighting against unemployment (Social Impact Lab), or in overcoming entrepreneurial isolation (Impact Hub), the marginalization of communities (Social Impact Lab and NESsT), or poverty and bad working conditions (NESsT). Though showing a similar evolution, the four institutionalization processes reflected a spectrum of partnership configurations by which the incubators sought for institutional recognition from public authorities (Alter'Incub), partnered with the social sector (Social Impact), or on the contrary, bypassed these institutions to search for resources on the market, from investors and philanthropists (NESsT) or from entrepreneurs (Impact Hub), as shown in Figure 8.

During the third (and ongoing) phase of stabilization, the boundary bridging work characterized activities aimed at enlarging the diffusion of social entrepreneurship and incubation practices by creating new interconnections between the emergent field and the existing ones. Their entrepreneurial endeavor was then oriented towards commercial development through developing new types of services or sources of revenues, finding new partnership opportunities and innovative models of collaboration.

Finally, we contribute to calls pointing to the need to deepen our understanding of the links between institutional entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship theory (Phillips & Tracey, 2007; Bruton, Ahlstrom & Li, 2010; Tracey et al., 2011; Tolbert, David & Sine, 2011). We build on existing studies on the importance of an entrepreneur's position within a field (Battilana, 2006; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010; Bucher, Chreim, Langley & Reay, 2016) to cast light on how social incubators may entrepreneurially use their position at the boundaries between actors and fields to recognize opportunities and develop their capabilities (Bakkali et al., 2010) in order to advance their visions of change. Examples of such strategies were the design of hybrid spaces or forums of interaction between different social worlds, as well as the development of mechanisms that involve supporters in the construction of the new field.

Figure 8 - The boundary positioning of the four social incubators

Source: developed by the authors



5.2. Implications for the incubation of social enterprises

Our second contribution is to the organizational literature on social incubators. We illustrate the complex nature of incubators, both in terms of their objectives and in terms of the influence they exert upon, or undergo from, the actors and systems they engage with. Our comparative approach illuminates the diversity and richness of the practices they design and implement in order to drive interest and resources to the social entrepreneurship field.

We contribute to the understanding of these new organizations from a different perspective in comparison to recent studies. So far, the focus has been directed inwards on the dyadic relation between the incubator and the incubated enterprises (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015; Dey & Lehner, 2016; Steiner & Teasdale, 2016). Our study departs from this perspective by analyzing the incubators' work in relation to the actors and fields they engage with. Highly embedded in the contexts where they operate, the incubators' exposure to diverse

and sometimes conflicting logics and interests at the boundaries between the public, private and nonprofit sectors, triggered organizational pressures, but also enabled them (Tracey et al., 2011; Weber, 2006) to take risks and undertake new roles in developing the field. We point out that as the incubators try to foster social entrepreneurship into the practices of other fields, be they public service provision, corporate or nonprofit innovation, they diversify the types of legitimating work they use, going beyond entrepreneur-targeted incubation programs. Furthermore, their knowledge and control in managing the creation of social enterprises, by supporting the transformation process from an idea to a sustainable organization, increased their legitimacy and attractiveness in front of institutional actors coming from outside the boundaries of the social entrepreneurship field. Leveraging this skill transformed them into indispensable partners for private, public or nonprofit organizations who wished to use social enterprise as a tool to attain their own strategic objectives, but lacked the skills and knowledge to manage these processes on their own. The incubators' intervention strategy, therefore, changed the environmental conditions necessary for the emergence of social enterprises through resources and organizational capacity specifically tailored to the needs of social enterprises at the startup phase.

6. Annexe to Chapter I

Table 5 - Summary of data sources

Data source/ Incubator	Semi-directive interviews			Direct observation		Documents (Examples)
	Management team	Operational team & Incubated enterprises	Total	Examples	Length	
Alter³Incub Montpellier	- incubator managers (founder and current) (2)	- incubation coaches (3) - incubated enterprises (4)	9	- site visit of the incubator - strategic development meetings (2) - attending major events organized by the incubator (<i>International meetings of social innovation</i> (2), <i>YESS academy</i> (1), <i>10th anniversary, launch of the co-working and acceleration facilities</i>)	1.5 days approx. 4 days	- annual activity reports - incubation methodology guide - incubation training materials
Social Impact Lab Berlin	- incubator manager (2) - international projects and cooperation manager (2) - managing coordinator of mentoring program (1)	- workshops and innovation manager (1) - incubation coach (1) - incubation manager (1) - incubated enterprises (3)	11	- site visit of the incubator - attending one day of design thinking training - on-site visit of 2 incubated enterprises	2 days 1 day 3h	- position paper on supporting the endogenous capacities of regions - mentoring materials
Impact Hub King's Cross	- incubator director (1) - strategy director (3) - global development lead (1)	- scaling and programs director (1) - community manager (1) - project coordinator (1) - incubated enterprises (2)	10	- site visit of the incubator (+ tour of Impact Hub Islington) - attending the FuckUp Nights event	2 days 2h	- annual impact reports
NESsT Timisoara	- global portfolio director (1) - country director (1)	- senior manager (1) - project manager (1) - incubated enterprises (2)	6	- site visit of the incubator - on-site visit of two incubated enterprises	1 day 1 day	- annual impact reports - policy papers - learning materials

Table 6 - Representative data

Focused code	First-order codes	Representative data
Developing alternatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Framing local problems and political deficiencies 	<p>“At the beginning there was a need for sustainability in the nonprofit sector because the dependence on the donor prevented you from having a long term vision” (Portfolio Director, NESsT)</p> <p>“Here there was no real structure for support of social entrepreneurs. [...] Because it’s not like normal startup support. The social entrepreneurs have different kind of needs” (Manager, Social Impact Lab)</p> <p>“People were saying there was something weird with us, we don’t have a soul! Coming from other nonprofits, because we were part of the same species, we were somehow those with a genetic modification” (Country Director, NESsT)</p> <p>“Alter’Incub was the first regional incubator for social innovation at a time when innovation was primarily seen only from a technological perspective.” (Director, Alter’Incub)</p> <p>“It was hard work to get into these [Welfare] organizations and convince them that the social start-ups are not the capitalist enemy in the social sector, but that they bring a lot of innovation” (Manager, Social Impact Lab)</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Endorsing a positive discourse on social entrepreneurship 	<p>“The philosophy to SE is about changing the world and in a sustainable way” (Programs Director, Impact Hub)</p> <p>“For people with disabilities, people with migration background, different kinds of social groups that were in some kind disadvantaged: to help them see self-employment or to create their own business as another opportunity.” (Manager, Social Impact Lab)</p> <p>“Our stake was to prove the relevance of the cooperative economy in a context where the societal challenges were a real concern for the public authorities and the regional population” (Booklet Alter’Incub 2014)</p>
Mobilizing supporters and resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bridging interests and creating new expectations 	<p>“What convinces them [the investors] is the impact and I think they are people who understand the need to invest at the beginning of the developing chain to have a stronger pipeline of social enterprises capable of absorbing financial instruments that are more commercial” (Portfolio Director, NESsT)</p> <p>“At that time we joined forces with the technological incubator, which acted as a “godfather”. [...] we didn’t have to set up everything from scratch, allowing us to concentrate on our added value without wasting time” (Director, Alter’Incub)</p> <p>“Every supporter wants to have our name for the program but it’s basically the same content!” (Manager, Social Impact Lab).</p>
Endorsing entrepreneurial transformation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supporting entrepreneurial mind shift 	<p>“It is not about talent, it is a lot of work. [...] [The entrepreneur] changed over time, and the resources we made available, the access to mentors, the operational support step by step have contributed a lot” (Manager, NESsT)</p> <p>“A process of transforming someone into an entrepreneur cannot work on fast forward and you cannot burn the steps. [...] Through this patient learning we are getting very close to that point where they are ready to become entrepreneurs” (Country Director, NESsT).</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Providing tailored support 	<p>“We try to understand what is it that they need? and how can we serve their needs? So everything stands from the community” (Strategy Director, Impact Hub)</p>

		<p>“We have to make them understand that classic business models don’t always work. [...] The idea is to be a bit clever and imagine different scenarios and test them.” (Incubation coach, Alter’Incub)</p> <p>“With design thinking methods, we show them how they prototype, how they test and how they improve their product and how they develop it just up to the needs to the end user.” (Manager, Social Impact Lab)</p>
Intermediating cross-field interactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing decision making 	<p>“We always want to have this multi-stakeholder approach and to involve them, because they bring in also good perspectives” (Manager, Social Impact Lab)</p> <p>“You create this understanding of social innovation collectively and generally at the end of the jury we all have a same idea about the project and where it is heading, but of course there are always doubts” (Incubation coach, Alter’Incub)</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitating inter-personal relations 	<p>“[during the mentoring program] our currency is not money, our currency is passion” (Mentoring Manager, Social Impact Lab)</p> <p>“We have this network of mentors that we have developed [...] We work with a lot of individuals, a lot of people from the business sector that offer to become mentors” (Portfolio Director, NESsT).</p>
Enlarging the reach of SE across boundaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoting SE to wider audiences 	<p>“We have pitches three times a year, and it’s an open event so anybody can come. And this also how we create our community, anyone who is interested in that topic can just come, see the pitches, talk to people” (Incubator Coach, Social Impact Lab)</p> <p>“So we found that [food] was a topic that really a lot of members are passionate about so with some members we started a program of events, this program has attracted new people who became members, journalists, you know, investors, public sector people, like a lot of people started aggregating around that pillar. So a vertical can be a good way to really generate interest”. (Strategy Director, Impact Hub)</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enabling cross-field partnerships 	<p>“Business development is to consult social business incubators in their early stage, or organizations that want to start a social business incubator. So we have one in Egypt and one in Morocco in Rabat.” (Manager, Social Impact Lab)</p> <p>“This is where we might come into play, when they are looking for ideas, when they do a call they might come to us and say, help us bring out the word and really get some ideas from the ground into this.” (Strategy Director, Impact Hub)</p> <p>“We take essentially the driving wheel of the car [ARC Supporting social enterprises scale program] but we don’t actually have the car called Hub, but it’s still us” (Strategy Director, Impact Hub)</p> <p>“So you contract services of training, incubation and grant management because you as a company cannot do it, but you can take care of the communication. [...] practically, we are an agency of ‘social impact’” (Country Director, NESsT)</p>
Undertaking new field roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing new support services 	<p>“We would like this to be a strategy for the future, to move from the startup phase to the middle phase where there are existent social enterprises with a potential of achieving higher impact [...] If the [organizational] planning can be</p>

	<p>outside the incubation</p>	<p>addressed by others as well, I don't know anyone who is doing advanced financial analysis with the entrepreneurs, or who could sustain such a program.” (Manager, NESsT)</p> <p>“Usually these partners come in the system in different ways, we meet them at events, they come here, they hear about us, we approach them and sometimes the partnership we developed flourishes beyond the locality where it has been managed, Axa is a good example; WWF the same. We worked with them initially in Switzerland, then across Europe, and now we have even a shared page with them wwf.impacthub.net we work with them on supporting their efforts especially in the innovation space towards addressing some of their key strategic global goals” (Strategy Director, Impact Hub)</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Occupying new field positions 	<p>“Our support includes what we can offer them directly, but also what we can leverage from our network. We go with them at meetings, negotiations, we do presentations” (Portfolio Director, NESsT)</p> <p>“We have a regional partnership with TISE [Polish Social and Economic Investment Company] and we presented them deals from Romania, for which we did due diligence. NESsT guaranteed 20% of the respective loan and in that way, they invested” (Portfolio Director, NESsT).</p> <p>“We have our own crowdfunding site with Startnext, and before the projects go online they have to fulfill some kind of criteria to ensure the quality, because there were some crowdfunding campaigns that were not so successful so we said, ok, we want to have a quality check before you go on the platform, so they are not maybe disappointed in the end. And there is another component of the social impact finance program, together with Deutsche bank: they match financial experts with social startups” (Manager, Social Impact)</p>

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Chapitre II

A performative approach to social
innovation incubation practices

Une approche performative des pratiques d'incubation sociale

Résumé

Cette recherche analyse l'incubation d'innovations sociales, un processus visant à créer des organisations qui utilisent des mécanismes marchands pour atteindre des objectifs de changement social. Dans un contexte où cette approche est de plus en plus utilisée afin de favoriser l'entrepreneuriat social, il est de plus en plus nécessaire de mieux comprendre le travail des incubateurs sociaux et les pratiques qu'ils utilisent pour aider à la création de ces organisations particulières qui alignent objectifs sociaux et économiques. Ainsi, d'importantes questions se posent quant à la manière dont les pratiques d'incubation sont mises en œuvre et orchestrées dans des processus, qui ont la capacité d'influencer les innovations sociales émergentes, ainsi que les formes organisationnelles produites.

J'aborde cette question par le biais d'une recherche qualitative approfondie auprès d'un incubateur français pionnier de l'innovation sociale. J'utilise une perspective socio-matérielle pour montrer comment l'assemblage de ces pratiques d'incubation est activement impliqué dans la définition des initiatives et des individus prenant part au processus. En examinant certains des outils, pratiques et processus les plus importants de l'incubation sociale, nous développons un cadre permettant de comprendre la matérialité des pratiques d'incubation et leurs effets performatifs. À travers ce prisme, l'incubation apparaît comme un terrain politisé où des actes d'exclusion ou d'inclusion sont effectués. Ces effets sont produits par trois types de pratiques performatives entremêlées qui représentent : la marchandisation des problématiques sociales, l'entrepreneurialisation des individus et la managérialisation des organisations. Dans leur interaction avec les individus participant à l'incubation, ces pratiques déterminent et reconfigurent les limites des objectifs sociaux et économiques à atteindre par les innovations sociales incubées.

Mots clés : incubateur social, entrepreneuriat social, pratiques d'incubation, performativité, dispositif

A performative approach to social innovation incubation practices

Abstract

This paper focuses on the incubation of social innovations, a process aiming to create organizations that use market-based mechanisms to promote social change. As this approach becomes widespread in fostering social entrepreneurship, there is a growing need to better understand the work of social incubators and the practices they use to bring forward these particular organizations that align social and economic objectives. An important question emerges in terms of how the incubation practices are enacted and orchestrated in processes which in turn have the capacity to influence the emerging social innovations, as well as the organizational forms they produce.

I address this question through an in-depth qualitative inquiry of a pioneer French social innovation incubator. The paper adopts a socio-material perspective to demonstrate how a bundle of incubation practices is actively involved in shaping the initiatives and the individuals taking part in the process. By examining some of the social incubation's most salient tools, practices, and processes at work, I develop a framework for understanding the materiality of incubation practices and their effects in terms of performativity. Through this lens, the incubation emerges as a stage where acts of exclusion and inclusion are being performed. These acts are mediated by three types of intertwined performative practices, embodying the commodification of social problems, the entrepreneurialization of individuals, and the market-embedding of organizations. Through their intra-action with the individuals taking part in the incubation, these practices determine and reconfigure the boundaries of the social and economic objectives to be attained by the incubated social innovations.

Keywords: social incubator, social entrepreneurship, incubation practices, performativity, apparatus

1. Introduction

Rather than confining entrepreneurship to a purely economic perspective, critical entrepreneurship studies propose to consider it as a social phenomenon (Steyaert & Katz, 2004) capable of producing social change (Dey & Mason, 2017; Calás, Smircich, & Bourne, 2009; Rindova, Barry, & Ketchen, 2009; Steyaert & Hjorth, 2006). The social entrepreneurship's playground is precisely the society, that it aims to transform by promoting social change in multiple social, economic, cultural or political spheres. More specifically, social entrepreneurship fosters an entrepreneurial model driven by objectives of social change (Battilana & Lee, 2014; Ridley-Duff & Bull, 2011), while integrating commercial principles and proposing an economic activity (Mair, Battilana, & Cardenas, 2012). Thus, social entrepreneurship becomes a “blueprint for solving societal problems” (Dey & Steyaert, 2012, p. 91; Dey & Steyaert, 2010; Dey, 2013) that normalizes the cohabitation of social and commercial objectives in a model where they are both systematically achievable (Mair & Marti, 2006; Zahra, Gedajlovic, Neubaum, & Shulman, 2008).

In promoting this phenomenon, incubation has become a coveted approach to foster the creation of social enterprises and has benefited from a positive general discourse that encouraged individuals to join incubation programs in order to bring their ideas to life. Taking stock of such mounting interest, this article focuses on social incubators, i.e. organizations which are designed to support the rise of innovative solutions to social gaps (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015). In practice, these organizations have been very open to the expertise coming from already established conventional business incubators and have replicated or adapted existing practices and tools (such as entrepreneurial competitions, boot camps, pitches, mentoring programs, the lean start-up model or the social business canvas, etc.) (Miller & Stacey, 2014; Roberts et al., 2016) with little critical reflection and in a rather procedural way. This translation of business tools to the social sector can be observed more generally through the emergence of toolkits designed to equip and help social entrepreneurs in analyzing the resource needs of their organizations, developing strategies for reducing risk, building their business plan or financial reports, etc. (Dees et al., 2001; Dees et al., 2002). This article questions the effects of the utilization of business tools in the incubation process and examines how incubation practices shape the construction of social innovations.

Based on an in-depth qualitative study of a French incubator for social innovation, this research illustrates the performativity of incubation practices, which are not simply neutral and passive instruments serving as mediating tools in the creation of social enterprises. On the contrary, the incubating practices actively participate in defining the initiatives and the individuals involved in the process. Practices “connect ‘knowing’ with ‘doing’” (Gherardi, 2000, p. 218) and discourse with materiality (Putnam, 2015). They

create new domains of truth and effects of legitimation (Hayes, Introna, & Kelly, 2017; Nyberg & Wright, 2015) but can also meet normative resistance (Beunza & Ferraro, 2018). This paper focuses the material-discursive practices at work within the incubation apparatus, as well as on the intra-actions (Barad, 2001) between humans and non-humans (practices, tools, documents, powerpoint presentations, post-its, meeting rooms, etc.) involved in this process, to shed light on the performativity of incubation practices. It shows how this material-discursive bundle orchestrates the interactions happening during the incubation, and who it performs acts of exclusion or inclusion through three intertwined performative practices: the commodification of social issues, the entrepreneurialization of individuals, and the market-embedding of organizations.

The next section reviews the theoretical background on material-discursive performativity in the context of social entrepreneurship and incubation. A third section presents the data and the methodology used to analyze the research question. Empirical results unfold in a fourth section, before a last section devoted to the results' discussion, the elaboration of a performative model and its implications for the incubation of social innovations. A short paragraph is offered in conclusion.

2. Literature review

Social entrepreneurship aligns a normative vision of entrepreneurship as being “good for society” (Dacin, Dacin, & Matear, 2010; Moss et al. 2011; Shaw & De Bruin, 2013; Zahra et al. 2008), with a promise of economic viability (Dey & Steyaert, 2010, 2012), underlined by a discourse that articulates rationality, utility, progress and individualism (Dey & Steyaert 2010; Dey, 2013). Research has shown that dominant discourses perform subjectivities by encouraging individuals – including practitioners from the social sector – to become more entrepreneurial and to voluntarily integrate an economic logic into their behavior (Dey, 2013). In this manner, social entrepreneurship provides “the ethical principles and practical know-how (skills, abilities, motivations, etc.)” (Dey, 2013, p.9) to which individuals are invited to adapt themselves. Moreover, by focusing on the search for (new, innovative, entrepreneurial) solutions, this approach bypasses the concerns related to the very existence of these social problems (Cho, 2006), and decouples the entrepreneurial solutions from their political and cultural embedding (Parkinson & Howorth, 2008; Eikenberry, 2009).

These considerations question the peaceful cohabitation between the social and the commercial worlds proposed by social entrepreneurship. Rather, they indicate a “subservience of the social to economic rationalities” (Dey, 2013, p. 11) by which social change becomes a consequence of economic activity (Calás et al., 2009). To deconstruct and illuminate the normative foundations of the “social” in social

entrepreneurship, Dey and Steyaert (2012) incite to look beyond dominant discourses, and to question the power effects of these discourses in terms of the norms which are disseminated, and the transformations inflicted upon the individuals. This paper builds on this approach, while proposing to overcome its current (over)emphasis on discursive practices. It aims to analyze how the social-commercial divide is being played out in the practitioners' work, by employing a socio-material perspective that focuses on practices. Thus, in their quality of "factories" dedicated to the making of social entrepreneurs and socially-driven organizations, social incubators are an interesting empirical setting to study the material-discursive practices at work.

2.1. The work of social incubators

Critical studies on the work of social incubators discuss their role in the spread of social entrepreneurship, highlighting in particular the ideological character of the discourse they promote (Dey & Lehner, 2016; Dey, Schneider, & Maier, 2016). Incubators establish social entrepreneurship as an object of desire (Dey et al., 2016) that individuals can easily identify with. They build realities and subjects and propose "particular normative orientations of what it means to lead a 'good life'" (Dey & Lehner, 2016, p. 4), by aligning the search of personal (professional) satisfaction with the enjoyment of making a meaningful social contribution. Along with other intermediary organizations that support social entrepreneurs, incubators use vague concepts that have the property of being easily appropriable and making the goal of large-scale social change accessible to anyone. This is made possible by proposing "pragmatic solutions" and by repressing controversial issues that can create anxiety to the entrepreneur, such as the struggles involved in achieving social change (Dey et al., 2016).

By focusing on incubators' discursive practices, these studies indicate the performative effects of social entrepreneurship ideologies, especially in terms of creating new entrepreneurial subjectivities. Mauksch (2018) adds a corporeal dimension, by illustrating how these discourses have the power to affect bodies, as they trigger acts of corporeal identification and subjectivation that lead participants to be or become social entrepreneurs (see also Ruebottom & Auster, 2017). She shows how the ideal of social entrepreneurship is performed during promotional events (such as competitions, pitch, workshops, etc.) where the participants are engaged both intellectually and via their "very physical presence and their emotional amenability" (p.139). In contrast, the study of Leca, Gond and Cruz (2014) illustrates the performativity of an incubator's ideological embedding in terms of the types of organizations it produces. Their case study is based on a Brazilian university incubator that promoted the cooperative model as an alternative to the dominant forms of contemporary capitalism, in pursuit of fighting unemployment of disadvantaged communities. Thus, as a "performative engine", the incubator can be an instrument in enacting the cooperative ideal and principles

(stemming from academic research) into social reality, by infusing these ideological approaches into the worker cooperatives that are incubated. However, if this performative process is essentially mediated by the trainings delivered to the incubatees in order to make them assimilate basic management principles, the incubation practices remain rather invisible, and are not being shown at work. Although we have gained a better understanding of the performative effects of (social) incubation, the socio-materiality (Barad, 2003, 2007; Orlikowski & Scott, 2014b) of incubation practices and processes has been neglected. Thus, the plethora of tools, objects, artefacts and practices that are intertwined during the incubation in a network of relationships with the human actors, is often ignored (Michaud, 2014).

2.2. Social incubation practices from a socio-material approach

Given the ideological underpinnings of social entrepreneurship (Dey, 2013; Montgomery, 2016; Ayob, Teasdale, & Fagan, 2016), and by extension of social incubation, it becomes difficult to ignore the non-neutral nature of entrepreneurial support practices (Germain & Jacquemin, 2017b), as well as their arrangement in (precisely organized) incubation processes meant to foster social innovation. The work of Kieboom (2015) is an exception in that it emphasizes “the solutionism trap” in which social incubators could fall for not taking into account the wider political implications of the social initiatives they support. Her study, however, uses a static perspective, offering a snapshot of some incubation practices which does not capture their enactment in real time, and decouples them from the actors and their context.

Considering the importance of processual analysis in entrepreneurship studies (Hjorth et al., 2015; Germain & Jacquemin, 2017a), and insofar as “it is through intra-actions that the identities of the actors involved and the functionalities of the materials in use emerge” (Garud, Gehman, & Giuliani, 2018, p.62), this research calls for an analysis of the socio-materiality of incubation practices *in situ*, at the moment when compromises emerge and when the extent of the entrepreneurial project is being negotiated (Germain & Jacquemin, 2017b, p.10). Thus, it appears essential to analyze these “factories” of social innovations where things happen: in the very process of incubation, in the midst of the moving articulations between individuals, incubation coaches and practices. In order to highlight the performative effects of the entrepreneurial support (Germain & Jacquemin, 2017b), while acknowledging the lived character of the incubation, I mobilize the material-discursive approach of performativity developed by Barad (2003). In her post-humanistic vision of performativity, “matter matters” on the same level as language, which Barad reframes as discursive practices. Barad rejects the distinction between “words” and “things”, pleading in exchange for the existence of causal relations between apparatuses and material phenomena, relations which are produced through “intra-action” (Barad, 2003, p. 814). Within these intra-active entanglements,

materiality actively participates in the (re)configuration of the world and in the creation of new worlds (Barad, 2007; Orlikowski & Scott, 2014a). Reality is thus produced by enmeshed material *and* discursive forces that should not be artificially separated in analyzing the social incubation phenomenon.

Apparatuses are formed by bundles of material and discursive practices. They are “productive of (and part of) phenomena” (Barad, 1998, p.98). They produce “agential cuts” (Barad, 2003) that (re)define and (re)negotiate in a dynamic way the socio-material boundaries (Gond et al., 2015) between distinctive categories, such as “humans” and “nonhumans” (Barad, 2003, p. 808). The specificity of apparatuses lies in establishing local distinctions and in shaping “what becomes determinate and what is excluded” (Orlikowski & Scott, 2014b, p. 873). These acts of (re)defining socio-material boundaries, therefore, produce exclusions. This perspective sheds light on the power relations and the political considerations that underpin performative acts (Gond et al., 2015; Orlikowski & Scott, 2014b; Nyberg & Wright, 2015), and I suggest that they deserve special attention in the analysis of the entrepreneurial support for social innovations.

A performative approach to the incubation of social innovations encourages us to analyze the ways in which social innovation is performed by the “sayings and doings of multiple socially embedded and materially embodied actors who attempt to make meaning of unfolding processes” (Garud et al., 2018, p. 61). From this perspective, the intra-actions involving humans and non-humans in the incubation “brings about transformational shifts in the identities of the actors and the functionality of the materials that become entangled” (Garud et al., 2018, p. 61). Furthermore, the relational nature of practices, in which actors and action co-emerge and define each other (Keevers, Treleaven, Sykes, & Darcy, 2012) highlights the effects of the apparatus on the entrepreneurial journeys (Garud et al., 2017) of the individuals entangled in the material-discursive network of the incubation. Following this perspective, social innovation and the organizations that embody it appear as (social) constructs that take on a locally negotiated meaning, in the midst of the “material-discursive forces” (Barad, 2003) that shape them. Incubation itself becomes an emerging and undetermined process, subject to the “intra-actions” of the material configurations and the phenomena that are produced (Barad, 2003).

I argue that the analytical prism formed by material-discursive practices bundled into apparatuses as described by Barad (2003), is particularly useful (and necessary) in understanding the performativity of social incubation. Thus, the objective of this article is to analyze the performativity of incubation practices in bringing to reality specific forms of social innovations. Based on the case of Alter’Incub, the first French social innovation incubator, I first illustrate the texture of the incubation from the perspective of a project holder involved in this process. I highlight some of the key practices of the incubation apparatus at the moment of their implementation, in their unfolding through the material-discursive actions, reactions, and

appropriations of the actors involved. Then, I show how these practices perform social innovations into specific entrepreneurial identities and organizations.

3. Methodology

This research focuses on the case of Alter'Incub, one of the pioneers in the field of social innovation in France and the first French social incubator, created in 2007 in Montpellier by the Regional Union of Scop²⁴ Occitanie (Richez-Battesti & Vallade, 2009). The originality of Alter'Incub lies in its approach to reconcile the region's social challenges with "innovative economic answers" in the form of social enterprises, through the provision of adapted incubation support (Richez-Battesti & Vallade, 2009). Alter'Incub addresses social innovation as an entrepreneurial project responding to "unsatisfied or unmet social needs", either through innovative products or services, or through an "innovative form of enterprise, an innovative process of product or service production, or a novel process of work organization" (Social and Solidarity Economy Law (2014) chapter IV, Article 15a).

In order to benefit from the incubation services, the projects must undergo a first selection process involving first a formal application and then a pitch in front of a selection board composed of the main stakeholders of the incubator. In case of acceptance, the projects participate in a first phase of pre-incubation, designed as an intensive three months' evaluation process that includes collective workshops (in social innovation, lean start-up, strategy & marketing, innovative business models, entrepreneurial identity, etc.) as well as an individualized support from the incubator and its external consultants (diagnostic and evaluation meetings). A second selection is organized at the end of these three months and opens access to twelve months of individual support for the implementation of the projects and the launch of the enterprises.

To understand in practice how Alter'Incub supports the creation of organizations that combine social mission and economic performance, I conducted a qualitative study that involved the operational support team and some of the incubated projects. To open the "black box" of social incubation, I conducted semi-directive interviews (in total 21 interviews). Additionally, I integrated the incubation apparatus as an observer over the period of 3 months' pre-incubation which I had identified as being the most intense and decisive phase of the incubation process. *In situ* observation allowed for first-hand experience of incubation practices, the context of their enactment, and the incubatees' immediate reactions. I have experienced the incubation both from the standpoint of the incubator and from the incubatees'. More specifically, I took part (with a right to vote) in ten selection boards that auditioned about forty projects. Also, I observed the

²⁴ Société Coopérative et Participative

incubation of a cohort of five projects over the period between February and May 2016. As a result, I followed the entire pre-incubation phase: I participated with the cohort of projects to the group workshops, the practical exercises and the challenges that were assigned to them. I also attended most of the individual meetings involving three (of the five) incubated projects, their incubation coach and the external consultants.

The important role played by the incubation practices emerged from the beginning of the data analysis, as an essential dimension of (1) the interaction between the incubator and the incubatees, and (2) the evolution of the projects over the course of the incubation. However, engaging with a performative approach was not a straightforward process. In initially trying to characterize the incubation of social innovations, I mobilized the theory of change framework. This tool is extensively used in the nonprofit field to map an organization's vision of change in five processual steps: the organization's inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes and, finally, impacts. This pragmatic approach aims at explaining how an organization intends to achieve a specific impact, by bringing to light some causalities between the allocated resources and the desired social results (Colby et al., 2004; Brest, 2010; Frumkin, 2006). This framework allowed me to make a first mapping of the incubation activities and to identify three levels of change outcomes sought by the incubator, that I situated at individual, organizational, and community levels. Thus, it proved useful in better grasping the levers used by the incubator in creating and advancing social innovation. However, this framework turned a blind eye on the fact that the causalities meant to enable the progress of the projects from one step of the incubation to the next, were enmeshed in power relations. Following this first analytical attempt, I refocused on the micro-practices at work during the incubation. I regrouped and coded these practices depending on the finality they served in the creation of the social enterprises. Examples of the first-order codes that emerged at this stage were: "identifying impact-driven individuals", "supporting individual development trajectories", "challenging ideas", "ensuring sustainable economic models", "transferring business knowledge", "matching solutions to social needs". It is at this moment of the data analysis that the performative framework appeared as a judicious choice in conceptualizing the effects of incubation practices around the three already identified levels: social needs, individuals, and organizations levels.

To account for the texture and energy of the incubation, and to illustrate the practices in action, in the way they are mobilized and intertwined, I drew inspiration from the creative nonfiction approach (Abdallah, 2017). I have chosen to condense the three months of observation around three main "scenes" of this process: (i) the two selection boards, (ii) the group workshops and (iii) the individual coaching. Each of these scenes is based on a unity of time and place (Abdallah, 2017) and their scene-by-scene unfolding reconstructs the key stages of the incubation process. They serve as a framework "to offer an 'image' of what is going on" (Abdallah, 2017, p. 11) and illustrate the performative effects of the incubation practices.

For each of these phases, I highlight the socio-material dimension of some of the most significant practices. The events are not always presented in a chronological order, but in the reconstruction below nothing was changed or added to the facts. The names of the incubation participants have been anonymized.

4. Results: The incubation of social innovation in action

The incubation apparatus is sequenced in three main practices: the selection boards, the individual coaching, and group workshops, that structure where, when, how and why participants interact in the entrepreneurial creation process. In the following sections, I illustrate for each of these emblematic moments, the effects of the micro-practices and tools of incubation *in situ*, in their socio-material interweaving. This being said, let's immerse ourselves in the incubation!

4.1. Scene 1 – Entering the pre-incubation phase: the first selection board

Early in the morning, in a good-natured atmosphere, a dozen members of the selection board arrive one after the other in a white and purple-painted meeting room - the colors of the “scop movement” (regrouping the employee-run cooperative enterprises). Longtime partners of Alter'Incub, they take a seat and help themselves with – cooperative! - coffee or tea. We are on the ground floor of the “Hôtel de la Coopération” (Cooperation Hall), the head office of the Regional Union of Scop Occitanie, and thus, of the incubator that the team had launched.

On today's agenda, a dozen projects to audition. The program is dense, we have to keep up the pace and not cause delays, given the busy schedules of the board members. Julie, the incubation coach, informs us of the latest changes in the functioning of the selection process: “We've tightened our criteria a bit, so that [the business] creations can be done in reasonable time. [...] We cannot afford to select projects that are at a too early stage. ‘Too early stage’ means a long incubation support, often too long! Too long for the project leaders, too long for Alter'Incub.” Given this rise of the bar, we must assess if the enterprises can be created within 15 months, “so it's a little bit tight!” (Julie).

Each of us receives several sheets of paper with a fairly dense selection grid that includes two pages of eligibility criteria. Julie reassures us: “you will not always feel very comfortable to fill in all these elements just because in the presentation you might not have all the answers!”. We have five minutes to evaluate the

social innovation of the projects, indicate the strong points, the weak points, and offer recommendations... Julie reminds us: “Do not hesitate to ask all of your questions! So that we don’t ask ourselves afterwards in the debriefing: ‘Oh, we should have talked about that!’”. The atmosphere becomes more serious, I put on my board hat and we wait for the arrival of the first project.

While we are all sitting at desks aligned in a “U” shape, the project teams must walk along the side of the room until they reach the front and stand next to the board, onto which their power-point presentations are projected. “You have 12 minutes!”, announces the president of the board to the first team. Two young people present their web platform in a very professional (and convincing) way. The platform is meant to connect people suffering from mobility difficulties with transport buddies, which they tell us “is a social innovation because today we have a need that is poorly satisfied for these fragile populations in lack of autonomy for daily or occasional trips”. The presentation ends exactly on time and the board members take the floor: “Concerning the economic model, you presented several economic models: is it because you do not know exactly which will be the most adapted, or because you will combine the three?”. The team looks at ease and explains their different options. Then the questions follow one after another: how about the international development? The deployment of the service to other means of transport? The ownership of the software code? The evaluation of the matching done between the buddy and the person who is accompanied? The complementarity with the technological incubator who is already supporting the project? Other members of the board focus on the team: is there a real team? How do you work together? When do you think you could start living from this project? You had announced to create a cooperative, was it a communication strategy or...? Finally, a member questions the service itself. In terms of ethics: how do you make sure that the vulnerable person is not being abused and how do you ensure trust between her family and the buddy?

The team defends itself well, is open to questions, and provides the necessary explanations. We are all impressed by the quality of their presentation, when I discover that the project is on its second attempt to enter the incubation: the first time, it was adjourned because the selection board considered the idea to be too early stage! Conversely, the current state of development of the web platform, as well as the ongoing contract negotiation with the French National railway company, reassure the board about the entrepreneurs’ ability to carry out the project. As soon as the team leaves the room, the board members quickly agree: “the need, no one doubts it!”, but they have “to quickly look at the marketing, the business model! There are several possible market targets. They have to think very quickly [...] if not, they could very, very quickly lose the opportunity!”. A representative of the local public administration, however, wishes to add a condition, which he insists on writing in the evaluation grid: “I would like that during the incubation support we approach the Transportation Directorate as well as the Youth and Disability Directorate from the

Regional Council, in order to find out who can be mobilized, not just the National Railway company”. Once written down, the team must take it into account until the following selection step.

The projects follow one after the other, while respecting the precise time allotted to each of them. We see the presentations of a web application meant to raise citizen awareness and help the public administrations consult the citizens’ opinions, an online platform for civic debates, a flower pot acting as a compost bin for recycling food waste at home, a citizen-run renewable energy cooperative, a local food network...

Some candidates are less convincing and the board members react: “They are far from having a commercial speech!” or “They have identified the problems, but not the solutions!”. In some cases, communication with the teams is difficult, prompting a board member to outburst during the deliberations: “There is one thing that I cannot stand, even if I am very nice: the negative reactions to the questions!”. The others confirm, and the incubator’s deputy director intervenes to explain that among the projects that do not succeed, in 80% of the cases “it is due to a ‘person’ problem”.

The transition from the idea to the business is at the heart of the evaluations and a new project sparks off the same reaction: what is the service? “What will you live from?”, asks a member of the board. The team in question wishes to propose a system that guarantees transparency in the management of international donations towards development nonprofits, in order to restore the “social trust”. While the “activism is clear”, the selection board doubts the field role that the project could occupy and decides to refuse it, until the idea is more developed to have the potential to be transformed into an enterprise.

Finally, Chris, a last candidate (young, self-confident, dynamic) tries to convince us of the need to create a “matching website for projects” – Teams4Good, a social network that connects people with ideas with those who have the skills. He announces that he wants to create the world’s largest platform in order to “take a stand against the mainstream trend, think differently” and help to create teams that will produce “societal added value”. However, as he begins to present the structure of his organization, the board’s chairman interrupts him: time is up! The discussions that follow focus on the nature of the matching performed by the platform’s algorithm, as well as on the economic model foreseen, but again, “You have to go faster!”, Julie reminds us.

Just a few months before the launch of the beta version, the project seems intriguing, but the economic models of the digital economy are a gray area for the board members. Moreover, the start-up ethos of the project comes back into the discussion and stirs a debate: “If it does not work, we waste our time and if it works, we lose, it’s a start-up!”. The board member estimates that the company will be bought in a few years by the giants of the internet and that the public money used by the incubator will be wasted. Furthermore, another member reacts: “I am not convinced by the social innovation!”. She finds a weak link

with the regional development. On the contrary, for others, “the essence is good” and the project embodies the “new economy” where it is the notion of team that creates this link with the territory. With four votes in favor and four votes against, the board decides to give him a chance to enter the pre-incubation, but with a strong condition to reinforce the projects’ social innovation.

At the end of the selection process, just under half of the auditioned projects are accepted. Each of them will find out the outcome of the deliberations in the coming days, and only five of them will integrate the first stage of pre-incubation.

4.2. Scene 2 – The individual coaching

We change the setting and the configuration. One-to-one with Matthew, the second incubation coach, each project goes through the 360° meeting. This very soliciting step, which resembles a kind of interrogation-radiography, can last about three to four hours. It aims at retracing the background of the teams, the advancement of the idea, as well as the key points to be unlocked during the pre-incubation. It is the turn of the project WoodCo - a shared space promoting woodcraft - to go through this step and I am sitting beside the two, rather shy leaders in a small meeting room. Matthew carefully follows a document where he has synthesized the topics that he addresses with any project when they start the pre-incubation. This document organizes and guides the exchanges and so we start with the feedback from the board members. They appreciated “the true social innovation” and the “real need”, “the response in the spirit of the times”, while signaling some red flags: the high amount of initial investments, the economic model with a high break-even point... concerns that the team will have to address before the next selection step.

Then Matthew questions the two project leaders about their social innovation, and he insists: “The social innovation it’s you! What do you want to do with your project? What do *you* want?”. He continues: “What is the problem you are answering? [...] what interests me the most is how you validated these issues or how you will do it? [...] how do you characterize your social innovation in a few words? How do you see it?”. The social innovation starts to take shape as the discussions evolve. The team hesitates: “the collaboration”, “the fact of doing together”, “pooling resources”, “the sustainable, local approach”, “the appropriation of the means of production”, “individual capacitation”. Finally, the coach clarifies the situation: “I see [your social innovation] in terms of the capacity to mobilize the partners”. At the same time, he defines the priorities that the team should pursue: “What interests me: there are four points to develop your social innovation. The business model must become viable for your project, this is a key point, we agree on it! The risk! Measured, risks must be mitigated. And your impact! How will you measure it?”. The project leaders seem to agree. We then move on to the longest part of the interview: the pragmatic aspects of project implementation.

The objectives to be achieved during the three months of pre-incubation, on which “we get to agree” pile up in a rather impressive way and become concrete as Matthew writes them down in the 360° document: the assessment of the necessary project skills, the customer segmentation, the market research, the description of the commercial offer and the pricing, the long-term action plan, the financial forecast, the design of the collaborative space, the development of partnerships... Faced with the prospect of accomplishing these tasks, the project leaders take the game and the discussion ends up on an optimistic tone. Noah exclaims: “It’s nice to have deadlines!”, while Emma adds enthusiastically “We want to be part of the 18% [projects] that reach the end [through the business creation]”.

Following the meeting, Matthew explains to me why he must put “a little pressure” and why this list of objectives is so strategic in the evaluation process: “The idea is to validate all the parts of the project, be it the team, the feasibility, and especially to challenge the team. The idea is to give them a lot of suggestions, a lot of suggestions, and to see what holds and what doesn’t? I never talk [of the list of objectives] during the pre-incubation, but I do it on purpose! It is at the last meeting before the end of the pre-incubation that we review the objectives and then, we see: were they capable to achieve these objectives without me pushing them?”. The goal is that they become autonomous, highlights Matthew: “We will not write an application file for them. We can give them feedback, change things, but they are the ones who must do it. They are the ones who will defend the project in front of the funders. They are the ones who will do the fieldwork. They are the future sellers. They are everything!”. As a coach, he tries to find the right speech to advise them, to “get their nose out of the grindstone”, but also, more frankly “to thump the table when necessary!” to prevent them from missing out opportunities.

If the individual meetings punctuate the pre-incubation process, it is the collective workshops, illustrated below, that require the largest investment from the projects.

4.3. Scene 3 – The collective workshops

The setting changes again: in a large, bright room on the ground floor of the Réalis building - the modern temple of social entrepreneurship in the Occitanie Region - the teams of the five selected projects choose their places in groups of two, three, or alone. I sit among them, next to Chris, who is alone to represent his team. The projects are expecting “between nothing and everything” and the atmosphere is mixed: there is at the same time a sense of curiosity, of excitement, and of uncertainty because nobody really knows what will happen.

We start with the social innovation...

We start with a training that “makes us discover what social innovation is”. Julie explains that she will show us “everything that exists, and then you pick”. We are offered a wide range of information: a video on the social and solidarity economy, multiple guides on social innovation, numerous examples of successful, award-winning social enterprises that were supported by the incubator, and much more. They make the abstract term of social innovation more visual, palpable, attractive and easier to identify with.

But the most important aspect is that we must “learn the vocabulary” and get to grips with social innovation, both in order to “gain legitimacy and to be pedagogical with the [regional] actors, because often they do not know about social innovation”. Julie insists on the notion of “need”, we must be able to explain: “my project answers to that social need”, “this is my social innovation!”. Matthew adds “You have to target the [social] problem very well! [...] The goal is to validate the need, to be sure of the time you spend on it after, so as not to waste time”. With this aim, he proposes an exercise that simulates a problem validation interview. In pairs, we have four minutes to ask questions to our partner - who acts as a virtual “client” - in order to highlight his/her needs. We must be intriguing, so that the potential client becomes interested in hearing our solution. The exercise puts the teams in a difficult position, as they try to comply and participate in the game, while also being frustrated not to interview a real client in a real case situation. The “fake” customers are not in a more comfortable position. In a circle around the pairs of discussants, we all attend the exchanges in order to better understand how to bring out these needs.

Once the exercise is finished, brainstorming exercises follow in different configurations. For a first modeling exercise, Julie distributes a stakeholders’ map and asks us to establish the ecosystem of the actors that revolve around the projects. This leads the project leaders to question themselves: who are our competitors? What is our future job? Some become confused about the distinction they must make between their future clients and beneficiaries. To enlighten us, Matthew presents the “lean start-up” approach which should, among other things, help us to tone down our perception of entrepreneurial failure. He encourages us to use an iterative approach, to test very quickly the various features of the project and co-construct the service/product with the customers. For the moment, the projects are only a set of hypotheses that must be confronted with the reality of the market, but also measured via questionnaires, market studies, in order to “sort through the features and change, if necessary”. For Charlotte - leader of Hope, a health promotion and prevention project - this “iterative approach” does not fit well to the medical sector. She is not at all considering to present herself in front of the clinics, doctors and medical insurances with an unfinished project! William - leader of EduCare, a project offering socio-educational support for children with disabilities - agrees with her: “We only have one shot!”. If they fail the first meeting with their key public

institution they wish to partner with, the project will not succeed. Certainly, but we can find solutions, Matthew reassures us. We continue with a new tool, the “social lean canvas”, meant to break down the idea in key parts (concerning the value proposition, the market, the cost structure, the financial sustainability and the impact) in order to create a solid business model. This tool is encountered with resistance by some of the project leaders. Driven by an ideological pursuit, Noah (leader of WoodCo) is confused about the ways of articulating a societal issue with a business framework. William also reacts: “For us, the concept of ‘customer’ raises problems: [the customers] are the families [of the disabled children]!”, that he sees more as partners that he wishes to integrate directly in the functioning of the project.

The ambiance changes when the project leaders of a currently incubated enterprise are invited into the room by Julie to present their own entrepreneurial journey. Their project aims to promote a positive image of old age, by enhancing the experience of the elderly and promoting intergenerational exchanges through the digital collection of personal stories (via individual portraits of elderly people, collective animations, workshops). One of the project leaders announces: “While everything is becoming dematerialized, we will try to materialize the memories!”. This is an intense moment, the project inspires, and I see admiration in the eyes of projects that are currently in the evaluation phase. The project’s objective is difficult to attain, their mission moves us as we feel their militant engagement, and this mix makes their social innovation more tangible. They have started having punctual contracts that do not allow them yet to be profitable, but the leaders are trying to reassure us: “We did not know anything about the ‘economic model’, the business plan” before entering the incubation, so we should not be intimidated by the task.

After this inspiring moment, it’s time to work on the entrepreneurial stance. This time, our external consultant asks us what are the qualities of a leader – again in a brainstorming setting, that we are now well accustomed with. On colorful post-its, the qualities are written down one after another: “vision and charisma”, “being assertive”, “being empathic”, “show humility, honesty”. The consultant reacts: “[these qualities] play an even more important role in your projects”. However, our coach, Matthew, insists (rather sharply) that “you have to be crazy, different!”, but above all, you have “to be pragmatic”. Through each exercise, we are constantly encouraged to experiment by ourselves, and the consultant assures us that “to feel like entrepreneur, like a business leader [...] gets down to how we think and what we convey to others. [...] Do not believe anything I say, try it by yourselves!”.

The projects take in the suggestions, but nevertheless, brainstorming on one’s entrepreneurial stance remains abstract, it is not sufficiently personalized, as Emily reacts after the training. Chris and Dan do not hesitate to join the discussion: they would “need more situations of role playing” and “more examples based on the projects [themselves]”.

... to establish a business strategy and a marketing approach...

It is now time to take on the topics of marketing and business strategy. This time, David, our consultant, announces that the strategies are “the major structuring decisions of the project”, but “it never happens as you planned”, there is a lot of uncertainty to manage. In addition, to prevent marketing discussions from changing quickly into merely talk shop, “the main thing, is the method”, we must integrate “the tools in order not to get lost”. He underlines “If you are making your strategy without having a purpose, it does not work! Ask yourselves what do you really want and then figure out a way to get paid for it, that’s the idea!”.

By drawing a chart on the whiteboard, David explains to us that the strategic choices are made at the crossroads of ourselves, the purpose embodied by our projects, and the reality of the surrounding world. We must not forget the world, he adds jokingly, because “my own will, me... my belly button, it’s a small trip! [...] it does not work!”. He insists: “[the project] is you, it’s your own DNA!”. We are each of us encouraged to find a space at the crossroads of ourselves and the world where we “feel good” because “the happiest life is that of doing the things where your own engine is working”. Fortunately for us, David announces that “there are tools that make it possible not to get lost, that’s what’s interesting! It’s not difficult, I insist on that!”.

Among the project leaders, some are paying close attention - they try to absorb as much information as possible, whereas others seem concerned - they are confronting themselves for the first time with these concepts. Others, like Chris to my left, are less convinced and keep themselves busy as they can, hidden behind the protection offered by their laptops.

David does not waste time and begins to draw the first tool onto the board: multiple squares that fit into each other, starting with the smallest that represents the everyday routine, continuing outward with the action plan, the development plan, the strategic project, and finishing with the terms of reference. In front of our puzzled eyes, David alternates the explanation of the concepts with jokes and examples applied to the incubated projects. He then spends time talking about our purpose, our mission - an issue he stresses as being essential. He then rhetorically asks: “What are we going to do? [...] what do we want to be?”. “It’s really a matter of DNA! We do not control it, we have this thing!”, he insists. He reassures us, “it’s not a question of being a genius”, but knowing our mission will allow us to better explain our project to others because “we will always be selling our project!”. In addition, “it avoids a lot of overflows! It avoids being drifted away! It helps a lot in order not to waste your time, not to go astray. What we want to be, we call this in our jargon ‘the terms of reference’”. Eureka! The project leaders react: “That’s what we don’t have!”.

It's time to get back to work. David asks for volunteers and separates us into two groups. Each of us must take about ten minutes to scribble the purpose of one's project, its ultimate mission, and then to present it in front of the colleagues because, as David explains: "we are never as good as when we deal with other people's problems. The things you have a lot of trouble doing for yourself, often, you'll be very good at helping others to do!". Someone asks to review the figure with the terms of reference, which David projects on the whiteboard while starting to monitor the group work. I join the group formed of Emily (EduCare), Dan (BioBulk) and Emma (WoodCo).

Kick-starting the discussion and talking about one's project is not an obvious task, even if the time spent together gradually brings the teams closer. Standing next to a whiteboard, Dan, salesman of organic food in the retail industry, starts talking about his project with a calm, almost hesitant voice. Emily reacts strongly to his project: "You people scare me sometimes! I have a hard time getting into a supermarket where I have no bag, where everything is loose! How am I going to deal with it at home? [...] it will change my life, you will disturb me". She insists that consumer education should be a part of the project's mission: "You can offer workshops - with my child, for example!". Dan seems troubled at not being able to convey his message, the image he has of his project. Disappointed, he changes the subject and begins to tell us how the arrival of his newborn son made him completely change his consumption logic and triggered his desire to start this project. Emily seems this time more convinced: "It's not just a grocery shop that sells bulk organic food! There is everything around it that is also innovative, that has added value!". David steps in the conversation to save the situation. He projects himself in the future of Dan's project: "Tomorrow you can imagine being a franchisor, 'Dan holding' with the central purchasing department and the training system. You can have the BioBulk Béziers proof of concept, and plenty of BioBulk elsewhere in the world!". Seeing Dan decompose, David reassures him: "I'm being provocative, Dan!". He finishes by asking: "Your goal is to hold a store or to deploy a concept?". Without waiting, Dan picks up on the idea (almost annoyed): "[the aim is] to deploy a concept, but not on the economic model on which we are running today! Not with central purchasing departments! To develop an economic model where there are local [products] in every store. To foster the development of a system, of a shop that is also a meeting place for local associations in each location, a meeting place where we can exchange. And why not eventually to master the entire distribution cycle, including the production [of food]!". David gasps: "We do not see this story at all!". Then, Dan's disarray surges: "When I speak with Julie [his incubation coach] she tells me that in fact we are spreading too much! When I talk to the other [local councilor] he tells me to focus first on the '0 waste' [objective]. But when I talk about my project, I do not want to talk about '0 waste'!". In an attempt to bring clarity, David reformulates the different possible configurations of the project and concludes with the fact that the project's mission isn't the same in between "a distribution system, a

production system or [a new system of] societal relations”. Then he presents Dan’s case as an example in front of the other project teams.

David continues the strategic business analysis with the introduction of other concepts: the different models of strategic analysis, the strategic portfolio with different scenarios, to finally insist on the concept of strategic business areas or SBA. If we imagine that our project addresses a single problem, David assures us that in reality there are several problems hidden in one, “there are several SME²⁵s somewhere”. He takes the example of WoodCo: “If tomorrow we take out the collaborative part, the sharing economy with regards to the machines, and I virtually divide the services for the professional carpenters to make a workshop which has its own schedule management, its own reservation system, its membership model [...] I can imagine an enterprise. Virtually speaking, it can survive.” Back to practice, David proposes us to work ten minutes on imagining the activities that the projects would propose for each of the SBAs. “You’re not expected to get to the bottom of things, you’re unable to do that in such a short time! It’s just a matter of seeing if - when we scratch the surface of things - a logic appears that can help you find your way”, he adds. As we are separated again into two groups, I this time join Chris (Teams4Good), Emma (WoodCo) and Emily (EduCare). David insists that we do the exercise standing up, in order to be more responsive. He encourages us to really take the role of the consultant, to take the marker pen from our colleague’s hand and make the [offer] segmentation in their place! He underlines: “The method has no importance [...] if in three minutes you obtain no result, if the sheet is white, if you say: ‘I have no ideas!’ then change your method! Switching from one method to another will unlock your neurons, while if you stay stuck [on a method] you will get nowhere!”.

Emily starts first and tells us about one of her SBAs which is the specialized educational support for children with disabilities. Quickly troubled, Emily confesses that: “For me, the SBAs... I’m willing [to try], but it’s not easy for me to do them!”. She plans to offer support for the children, their families, the public institutions, as well as the specialized caseworkers who work as freelancers, but she does not know what to say or do more. Emma tries to ask her questions, but for Emily, the needs that the project aims to answer are interconnected and she does not know how to disentangle them into different activities. Chris does not interact, he is not enthusiastic about the exercise and he “feels like being in school”. We are quickly stuck, when David arrives. He asks Emily about the nature of the support, about her clients, about the different ways to deliver the service. He tries several divisions, while attempting to represent them graphically on the whiteboard. Following several trials and error, multiple methods to “find a solution key” and a few moments of silence, he draws five circles that would represent the different support activities: the direct services at the families’ homes, the service ‘SOS parents’, the intermediary with the public institutions, the

²⁵ Small and medium-sized enterprises

super agency of freelancer caseworkers, as well as the union of specialized caseworkers. David returns to the other group that is working in parallel, while Emily carefully gathers her sheets with David's drawings, gasping: "He is impressive! Even this morning when I saw him explain, it did not seem clear. You understand him when he speaks, but you, as a project you do not know... and then bam! He arrives at the whiteboard and you understand everything!". Emma agrees instantly: "It's hard [for us] to take a step back. It's easier when you're a consultant!".

... and to finish with the numbers

While each of them is armed with the freshly discovered SBAs, we continue the workshop with a thorny subject: the economic model. John, our consultant, explains how the balance sheet works, how the turnover and the gross margin are calculated: indeed, filling in the numbers is the first step in building the economic model! John adds that if in the case of conventional business models, we are used to start from the market, whereas in the case of social innovation there is "no certainty about the market, or the turnover that can be made". He advises us to identify, for each project, "the parameters that we can play with, while taking into account the reality of the market even if it is not very well known". It is the turn of the EduCare project to put the numbers in and experiment with the different parameters. In front of the concentrated eyes of the project leaders, John is projecting various Excel sheets that he worked on with the team, including a table with the operating expenses and the income statement. In the case of EduCare, the numbers have spoken: "The viability of the economic model depends on the public authorization", John announces with a neutral tone.

Without the public administration's "care services authorization" (which offers families a tax exemption that significantly reduces the price of the service), even if the team volunteers during the first two years of operation, the project would encounter financial losses if they maintain the objective of a low price, accessible to the poorest of families. The verdict falls: for John, the team has to choose. They have the choice between an economic model based on a high price – which is economically viable but only accessible to the richest families - or a "social utility" model which proposes an affordable price but is economically dependent on the public subsidies, provided of course that they get the grant! The team's original plan that estimated a price of 36 euros - and that the selection board had found "clumsy" – is now deconstructed by the economic calculation: they would have to charge at least 60 euros per hour to start the project. The atmosphere is getting heavier and the leaders seem disappointed.

The EduCare team is not the only one to be confused in front of the modelling attempts made through the different tools. Emma and Noah (WoodCo) feel lost in the middle of the tools. They have well worked on their SBAs that they have formalized as "the access to the machines, the coaching, training and thematic

workshops and the prototyping [services], which are anyway interdependent” (Noah). Indeed, as Noah adds: “The community makes them all alive”, which accentuates even more their interdependence. The consultant reacts strongly: “That’s the limit of your economic model! Here you are in the realm of market services, but the community does not fit in”. The leaders’ lack of understanding grows and Noah expresses his dismay: “I do not know how to make [the community] appear in the economic model [...] how to get it into the market model? How to model it? How to integrate [the community] in John’s [Excel] table?”. The incubation coach reframes: “You do not integrate it! You remove some elements”. The SBAs spoke again: for the economic model to be viable, the incubation coach suggests that they focus on the market services for the professional carpenters and that they leave the community on a second priority.

4.4. Scene 4 – Entering the incubation phase: the second selection board

After three months of pre-incubation, the projects are again in front of the selection board, in the same meeting room and in the same configuration, to present their progress and to try to get a further twelve months of incubation. I change roles and join the board members.

For this new stage of the incubation, the format of the selection changes. Matthew explains the process: “I start by taking the floor and presenting the cross-evaluation of the project. It takes around ten minutes. Then, the project teams have 12 minutes sharp! I can take on this role to stop them after 12 minutes. Then we discuss with them for twenty minutes, then we deliberate, and we try to respect this schedule”. He presents the three elements contained in the cross-evaluation: a mixture of his own evaluation, the independent evaluation of a consultant, and the evaluation of the several consultants who intervened in the collective trainings. For transparency purposes, Matthew informs the project teams of the result of the evaluation during the last individual meeting that happens before the selection board. Moreover, he involves the teams in the preparation of his report and takes this opportunity to put emphasis (and a little pressure) on the topics they should insist on during their presentations.

“Everybody is ready? We will bring in the first project!”. Matthew begins by introducing the project Hope, which is “a health promotion and prevention system designed by experts and funded by businesses and local administrations that want to promote health for all”. The ten minutes that follow are packed with dense information, but also seem very long for the three project leaders that wait in front of us. Matthew comes back to the feedback from the first jury, he indicates the strong points, the weak points, the advancements made during the pre-incubation, the red flags... He recognizes the big work done on structuring the project, in particular the fact of integrating in the project “a new commercial vision on health prevention. They have

really moved from the idea stage to the project!”. Nevertheless, “the market has not been validated [...] the design of the offer is not finalized”, there is “a lack of realism and a weak contact with the field”, and the proof test of the service with a private hospital “has been delayed and the idea is that it should not take in more delays”. Matthew announces a favorable opinion and finishes with a list of recommendations of actions to carry out if the project is accepted in the incubation program.

Now it’s the project’s turn to convince us. One team member, also a doctor, explains the problem they found during their field activity and to which they wish to answer “at all levels, there are plenty of initiatives taken to raise awareness - they are diverse, poorly coordinated, and not always well targeted or sustainable. We find ourselves in front of a territorial coverage that is very little optimized and a ‘sprinkling’ of health prevention initiatives”. The project wants to develop preventive care in order to make individuals responsible for their health, to reduce inequalities in the access to care and to fight against chronic diseases, in an economic context where the cost of curative care is increasing. They bring in the figures to support their view: “We have studies that prove that 1 euro invested in prevention, represents 13 euros of net profit”, but also “a diabetes that is taken care of means 500 euros per year, paid by the National insurance. But not taken care of, it becomes 50K!”. The project proposes to aggregate the health prevention initiatives that are already existing and are proposed by nonprofit associations, in “thematic prevention pathways” (eg. for maternity, diabetes, etc.) that they could sell to local public administrations, private hospitals, private health insurances, or companies. I hear repeatedly from the presentation that it is an “original tool”, an “innovative solution!”. Then, I recognize, projected on the screen, the SBAs that the team had identified during the strategy workshop: “Prevention initiatives and thematic prevention pathways, training, counseling, a prevention agency, all under the supervision of a scientific advisory board and of an ethics code that we want to create”. The team then demonstrates with the help of different tables that the project is economically viable. So let’s move on to the numbers: “For the first year: if we sell 45 units we will not be profitable. On the other hand, starting from the second year, we will try to become profitable. We have planned for 2018 to sell a hundred units, and in 2019, 120 units. [In these cases] the turnover allows us to cover the fixed costs and the operational expenses.”

Despite the project’s efforts, some board members are skeptical about the offer: “I have a hard time seeing what you are selling and to whom? [...] Who are the sponsors that you have approached?”. The incubator’s deputy director adds: “This offer... we start to touch on very quickly, but I think that we are not yet at the project phase”. Charlotte (one of the project leaders) defends the project, showing a new table that she had modeled with a different consultant: “If we propose the maternity pathway to a private hospital for 30 beneficiaries, it will bring us 42-43K euros. [With this sum] we would have already paid the associations that work with us. We have [calculated the costs of] all preventive actions by service, by prevention

pathway, but also all that is advertising campaigns”. Indeed, the project would position itself in the middle of the public, private and associative actors and would seek to find “private funding to finance actions of general public interest”, while also enhancing the work of existing associations. This leads to a new question from the selection board: “who will pay you to coordinate all this? [...] the coordination is a matter of public policy, is there room for a private actor in there?”. The team’s commitment comes up again to the surface: “Our project is ambitious, we are activists, we want to act on all aspects of health prevention [...] from the moment when the public [sector] does not do its role anymore... [...] We cannot conduct public health policies, which are based on politics! We want to emancipate ourselves and be autonomous on this subject!”. At the end of the exchange, the board members still have some doubts about certain areas of the project. However, they decide to accept it in the following stage. One board member points out that “they have the will to do something very business, but how will they get there... it’s true that we have trouble understanding...” because “they still have a public [sector] vision!”, completes another member. The incubation will present an opportunity for them to shed light on these points, to test the added value of their service and to clarify their commercial feasibility. Once the decision is made and the evaluation forms are completed, the board resumes its work in front of the next project that enters the room.

5. Discussion: The making of social innovations - a performative model

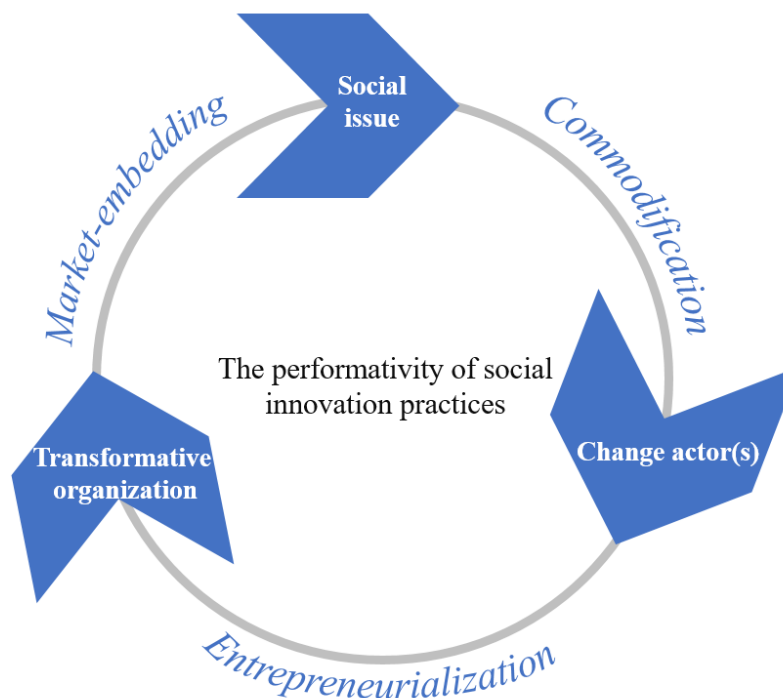
This article brings an alternative understanding of incubation practices that highlights how social innovations are performed and fabricated through ongoing work. By using a socio-material approach (Barad, 2003; Orlikowski, 2007), this research conveys the ways in which the performativity of incubation practices manifests through the intra-actions involving humans (project leaders, incubation coaches, consultants, etc.) and non-humans (tools, documents, texts, post-its, meeting rooms, etc.). These practices articulate in mutually constitutive socio-material interactions (Orlikowski, 2007; Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011), which reveal the specific and local ways in which the entrepreneurs and the incubation support team interact with each other, with (or through) the incubation tools. Thus, social innovation emerges in its socio-materiality and it is the intra-actions formed by the project leaders, the incubation coaches and the practices that reconfigure the projects and the scope of their action: certain activities (or objectives) that were imagined become possible, while others are abandoned. Thus, the incubation apparatus embodies a phenomenon of translating (Latour, 1987) ideas of answers to social problems into social enterprises.

Through this performative lens, the analysis captures the inherent political nature of this translation (Beunza & Ferraro, 2018) which has been neglected in previous studies of social incubation.

This research highlights three interwoven performative acts (Figure 9) that underpin the incubation apparatus and perform: 1) the responses to social issues (*the commodification*), 2) the individuals (*the entrepreneurialization*) and 3) the organizations that embody the social innovations (*the market embedding*). These three acts are articulated as to feed and condition each other throughout the incubation. Therefore, the commodification reflects the way in which the social and societal issues brought forward by the projects are resized, reframed, and calculated, in order to give them a meaning in economic terms and to make them compatible with and governable within a market-based activity. The market embedding happens in intra-action via the practices and tools meant to create a social enterprise capable of supporting the commercialization of the commodified innovative services and products. Finally, the articulation of the two is made possible through entrepreneurialization practices, which aim at producing the entrepreneurial individuals in capacity of implementing and managing the social enterprise.

Figure 9 - The performativity of social incubation practices

Source: developed by the author



5.1. The commodification of social issues

Social and societal issues are tackled through the lens of social needs. By identifying, problematizing, categorizing, validating or quantifying these social needs, the incubation apparatus produces “agential cuts” (Barad, 2003). These “local enactments that make particular distinctions, boundaries, and properties *determinate-in-practice*” (Orlikowski & Scott, 2014b, p. 873) differentiate between needs that are easy or difficult to commodify. Commodifying practices make social innovations governable, by calculating and valuing them in monetary terms: the social issues become products and services with visible prices and commercial characteristics. When analyzing the performativity of social impact measurement tools, Hayes, Introna and Kelly (2017) highlighted how “*these calculative practices transform quality into quantity. As quantity it renders comparable what is incomparable, and connects or relates what might not be connected or related, through quantification and tabulation (in a spreadsheet)*” (p. 17). In a similar way, this study illustrates how, through calculation, these commodification practices mediate and operationalize the depoliticization of the social and the dis-embedding of social problems from power relations, which have been indicated by certain critical studies in social entrepreneurship (Dey & Steyaert, 2012; Dey, 2013; Dey & Lehner, 2016; Parkinson & Howorth, 2008; Cho, 2006).

The functioning of the selection board that I exposed above is a striking example of this commodification pressure which is at play through the incubation. This practice has a pragmatic orientation as it is driven by feasibility and efficiency concerns. In the same time, it offers an important place to economic selection criteria such as: a viable economic model, the creation of local jobs, the innovative nature of the initiative. As a consequence, it excludes from the incubation the projects for which the access to the market is more difficult or takes a longer time (e.g. the aforementioned international development project). In addition, the decisions taken by the selection board perform in terms of creating cognitive and institutional boundaries that signal the “real” social innovations. The study of Dey et al., (2016), in particular, highlighted how the rise of a hegemonic discourse, promoted by support organizations for social entrepreneurs, encloses the meaning of social entrepreneurship and marginalizes alternative meanings (Dey et al., 2016; Hayes et al., 2017). Building on this view, the current research shows how the meaning of social innovation is built through the incubation and subjected to selection constraints that put particular highlight on its entrepreneurial realization. The results equally show the socio-material manifestation of this selection practice, which is loaded with a symbolic dimension (Van den Ende & Vann Marrewijk, 2017), similar to a rite of passage that individuals must pass in order to transform their ideas into projects.

5.2. The entrepreneurialization of individuals

Although subtler than the commodification practices, entrepreneurialization practices lead to an internal change in the very subjectivity of the individuals who participate in the incubation. They act as calculative practices (Hayes et al., 2017; Beunza & Ferraro, 2018) that make these individuals think and act as social entrepreneurs, and consequently, normalize their behaviors. These practices embody the subjectivation phenomenon at work in the field of social entrepreneurship (Dey & Steyaert, 2014). Through the different challenges organized during the pre-incubation – e.g. the pitches, the setting of milestones - the project leaders are challenged in order to quickly frame their offer and meet the potential customers or partners necessary in the implementation of the projects. These novice entrepreneurs are supposed to experience an entrepreneurial “revelation”, to overcome their personal limitations and to adopt a commercial approach. Through the confrontation with the critical eye of the incubation team and their incubation cohort, as well as through the use of the tools during the collective workshops, the project leaders are led to redefine the boundaries of (what they envisioned as) their social projects, and to (re)consider what can be achievable or not, by using an economic lens. These transformations can in certain cases be seen at the second selection phase, when the leaders’ discourse shows the inclusion of a new economic terminology: the leaders present their projects with new words such as “unmet needs”, “innovative responses”, “stakeholders”, “business model”, “customer segmentation”, etc.

If the pre-incubation phase is supposed to be an emancipatory process, during which the project leaders are encouraged to progress and improve themselves, in practice, it is also the stage for an asymmetrical power relationship between the incubator and the project leaders. The evaluation objective and the competitive spirit (maintained by the selection process, the pitches, the challenges, the milestones, etc.) that underpin this phase influence the behavior of the project leaders who attempt to access the additional 12 months of incubation support. These entrepreneurialization practices absorb individuals into the incubation process and instrumentalize them to adapt to the representation of the social entrepreneur as promoted by the incubator. Thus, this result offers an empirical illustration of the mechanisms that make individuals governable and that tend to individualize the responses brought to social problems (Dey, 2013; Dey & Steyaert, 2014).

5.3. The market-embedding of social mission-driven organizations

The market embedding phenomenon embodies the process of imagining and conceptualizing the social enterprise that will bring the service or product to the market and thus render the social innovation

sustainable to the eyes of the incubator. This process begins during the pre-incubation phase and is then tested and implemented during the 12 months' incubation phase. More specifically, the collective workshops which aimed at identifying the "strategic activity areas" of the initiatives, as well as at quantifying the functioning of the future enterprise (identifying the running costs, the necessary turnover, etc.), distinguish and prioritize the different activities envisaged by the projects according to their potential for creating market value. Mikhalkina and Cabantous (2015) showed that "business models do more than 'describe' new ways of creating and capturing value: they also bring into being the very things that they describe firms with new ways of creating and capturing value" (p.81). In our case, the incubation practice legitimizes the "enterprise" framework as the main organizational form capable of ensuring the durability and success of social innovations. Thus, other hybrid forms situated at the crossroads of nonprofit, public, and private worlds, are marginalized despite their potential to produce social change in a sustainable way (Alvord et al., 2004). Moreover, in an incubation setting, the design of social business models reveals that, in practice, the incubation resources prioritize above all the search of sustainable economic models for social innovations. In turn, this leads to a marginalization of the attention given to the social contribution and engagement of the projects, which tend to be taken for granted.

Social and political implications

This research demonstrates the performative nature of social innovation incubation practices as well as their political implications in terms of shaping individual identities and social, mission-driven organizations. By highlighting the exclusion and inclusion effects produced by the market framing of social innovations, this perspective echoes previous studies in critical entrepreneurship, which drew attention to the political character and the inherent frictions in (re)defining the boundaries of what is meant by "social" (Steyaert & Hjorth, 2006). Similarly to the criticisms of a hegemonic vision of social entrepreneurship, if the social does not disappear from the incubation, it is generally taken for granted (Scott, 1995) and presented in an idealized and neutral way (Boddice, 2009; Kimmitt & Munoz, 2018). Its boundaries are negotiated during incubation and they are subject to reformulations and framings. This marginalizes the social and transforms it into a governable object that tends to lose its radical or subversive character (Dey & Lehner, 2016).

Indeed, if social entrepreneurship's main goal is to bring social change, the "vehicle" supposed to lead to it is essentially entrepreneurial and market-based. A performative analysis of the incubation of social innovations illustrates the existence of an imbalance in this dynamic. The incubators are well equipped to design and support the market-based "vehicle"; thus, they enable the creation of products, services, and organizations that otherwise might not have existed. However, they seem less equipped to assess or support the social (transformative) aims of the projects. The incubation practices perform a representation of social

innovation according to which the search for a viable economic model is established as the problematic aspect of the incubation. This is done by decoupling the economic model from the social model carried by the projects, which in turn is not questioned during the incubation. Thus, in the enactment of incubation practices, the social mission carried by the social entrepreneurship initiatives, their relevance, or their impact on those affected (Parkinson & Howorth, 2008) occupy only a marginal place. From this lens, these social aspects are “felt”; they are implicit and immanent to the projects and rarely questioned. This is due, in particular, to the fact that in practice these purposes are interpreted as belonging to the individual’s responsibility, as a matter of self-governance (Dey & Steyaert, 2014) and it is up to the individuals’ ethics and commitment to ensure the pursuit of the social goals.

This article argues for a need to reconsider the incubation of social innovations and take it outside of the framework of conventional support for entrepreneurial creation, in an attempt to provide a wider space for experimentation, and open it to influences, practices and more unusual collaborations that could unleash the emancipatory potential of entrepreneurship (Rindova et al., 2009; Calás et al., 2009; Goss et al., 2011; Dey & Mason, 2017). Re-politicizing the entrepreneurial support activity would involve creating spaces *within* the incubation that would favor exchanges on the projects’ social mission and societal models that they are trying to contribute to, while also creating bridges with the social, economic and political ecosystems *outside* of the incubation, and thus rendering the entrepreneurial creation permeable to external influences. Moreover, it also appears essential to imagine a new equilibrium between the incubators’ need to organize, structure, and manage the entrepreneurial creation process, and the projects’ need for experimentation, which could foster the emergence of more radical forms of social innovation (Nicholls & Murdock, 2012). Furthermore, this new articulation needs to take into account the embeddedness of these support organizations in their specific socio-political contexts, which subjects them to institutional pressures in terms of producing results (eg. number of enterprises, or number of jobs created, etc.) and building their own organizational legitimacy.

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Chapitre III

Incubating social innovation, between
subjectivation and resistance.
A Foucauldian perspective.

Incuber l'innovation sociale, entre subjectivation et résistance. Une approche Foucauldienne

Résumé

Cette recherche examine la manière dont les innovations sociales sont produites au sein du processus d'incubation, en tant que résultat de l'interaction incubateur-individu. Sur la base de l'analyse qualitative longitudinale d'un incubateur social pionnier en France, cette étude met en lumière la manière dont le déroulement de l'incubation sociale, dans la pratique, influence les individus prenant part au processus et façonne les entreprises sociales émergentes.

En mobilisant la notion de dispositif de Foucault (1976, 1977), nous montrons que le processus d'incubation est tissé de relations de pouvoir. À travers ce prisme, nous examinons comment le pouvoir exercé par le dispositif et la résistance des individus s'articulent tout au long de l'incubation, en tant qu'éléments d'un processus de subjectivation qui incite les individus à assimiler une posture entrepreneuriale.

Nous montrons que l'incubation est un processus incertain, au cours duquel l'émergence d'entreprises sociales dépend de l'alignement de deux niveaux de tensions : un niveau qui oppose des technologies de contrôle et de résistance subjective, et un deuxième niveau qui oppose les logiques commerciale et sociale que les entrepreneurs sociaux en devenir doivent intégrer à la construction de leurs organisations. En examinant les tensions qui se manifestent à l'interface de ces deux niveaux de confrontations, celui des individus et celui des projets, nous fournissons des leviers analytiques pour comprendre quand un compromis est possible et quand l'incubation sociale peut fonctionner.

Mots clés : incubateurs sociaux, entrepreneuriat social, dispositif, innovation sociale

Incubating social innovation, between subjectivation and resistance. A Foucauldian perspective.

Abstract

Our research examines how social innovations are produced through the process of incubation, as a result of the incubator – individual interaction. We draw on field interviews and in depth longitudinal observations of a French pioneer social incubator, to shed light on how social incubation is being played out in practice to influence the individuals taking part in the process and to shape the emergent social ventures.

Using Foucault's notion of *dispositif* (Foucault, 1976, 1977), we reveal that the incubation process is enmeshed in power relations. Through this lens, we examine how dispositional power and individual resistance articulate themselves throughout the incubation process, as part of a subjectivation mechanism that calls upon individuals to assimilate an entrepreneurial mindset.

We show that the incubation is an uncertain process, during which the emergence of social ventures is dependent on the alignment of two levels of tension: one that opposes technologies of control and subjective resistance, and one that opposes the commercial and social logics that the nascent social entrepreneurs have to tackle in building their organizations. By examining the tensions that emerge at the interface of these two levels of confrontations we provide analytic levers for understanding when a compromise is possible and when social incubation works.

Keywords: social incubators, social entrepreneurship, *dispositif*, social innovation

1. Introduction

Given the mounting interest in social innovation and social entrepreneurship (Phillips et al., 2017; Cajaiba-Santana, 2014; Dees, 2012; Mulgan, 2006; Nicholls & Murdock 2012), social incubation has become a coveted approach to support the emergence of social entrepreneurs and to bring forward novel, innovative and more efficient solutions to “social gaps” (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015). Intermediary organizations such as accelerators, incubators, labs and other entrepreneurial networks have seen an unprecedented diversification and growth, both in numbers and geographical range (Casasnovas & Bruno, 2013; Levinsohn, 2015; Roberts et al., 2016). Social incubators in particular are seen as uncontested allies of the social entrepreneurs (Dey, Schneider, & Maier, 2016) as well as “social laboratories” (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015, p. 13), designed to provide “support for experimentation” (COM2010, Europe 2020 Flagship Initiative, p. 21) in the early startup phase of social venture creation. Despite the growing interest in the work of these organizations, we still lack empirical insights into the ways social incubation is being played out in practice as a result of the incubator-entrepreneur interaction.

Numerous studies have underlined the salient role of social incubators as service providers for entrepreneurs wishing to switch from an idea stage to building an operating pilot or a running organization (Murray et al., 2010). Casasnovas & Bruno (2015) stress that the incubators need to provide “offerings” that match the “requirements” of the social entrepreneurs. Similarly, Bradach (2015) employs a capability perspective to suggest that intermediaries offer technical assistance and “play a critical role in many fields by increasing the performance of constituent organizations and/or serving needs that extend beyond the capacity or interest of any one provider” (p. 13). Following the same positive note, incubators unleash creativity and entrepreneurial energy in finding innovative answers to social problems (Miller & Stacey, 2014). They have an inspirational role and enable peer-learning processes among the entrepreneurs by building collaborative networks and ecosystems (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015). As a consequence, the incubation helps nascent entrepreneurs build meaningful value-based relations (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015) and increase their social capital (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015; Kieboom, 2014; Levinshon, 2015).

However, a more critical stance has gradually emerged that challenged this optimistic appraisal of the incubation phenomenon, as well as the neutrality of the entrepreneurial creation processes unfolding in a protective incubation framework, “insulated” from their social contexts (Kieboom, 2014). The empirical study of Nicolopoulou et al., (2015) of an incubator-enterprise dyad showed the benefits of the incubation in case of an agreement of values between the two sides. However, when studying the same incubator network, Dey and Lehner (2016) shed light on the ideological nature of the incubator’s discourse in putting

forward a hedonistic image of social entrepreneurship and glossing over the challenges and struggles of bringing about social change. Where the first study portrays the benefits of a communitarian incubation approach to foster social innovation, the second points at a more complex relationship, which acknowledges the influence exerted to make individuals enroll and identify with a particular type of social entrepreneurs. The provision of entrepreneurial resources for which the incubation is praised, isn't a neutral process either. It can reproduce existing power relations, for example when entrepreneurs coming from deprived or marginalized communities cannot afford the price for gaining access to these services (Wittmayer, Avelino, & Afonso, 2015). The same form of "skimming" may happen in terms of access to seed capital (Steiner & Teasdale, 2016) when those entrepreneurs most likely to succeed are the ones with "drive and talent", capable of narrating entrepreneurial stories and coming from "privileged socio-economic groups" (p. 2). Moreover, Kieboom (2014) argued that these organizations can fall "prey to solutionism, tend to overlook the power of politics, overemphasize scaling of solutions, and underestimate the messy nature of human beings" (p. 7).

Despite these new insights into the power dynamics that underpin the incubation of social ventures, we know little about the ways in which the incubation enacts the construction of new types of entrepreneurial subjectivities. The nature and power effects of the incubator-entrepreneur interaction have remained understudied. So far, although the main outcome of the incubation is the creation of new social ventures, the nature of the incubators' influence on the very construction of these organizations has received little attention. This situation is astonishing given the ideological struggles spanning through the field of social entrepreneurship studies (Hjorth & Bjerke, 2006; Dey, 2013; Parkinson & Howorth, 2008) and the tensions and compromises that characterize the work of social enterprises in meeting their social and economic missions (Battilana & Dorado, 2010; Battilana & Lee, 2014; Bransden & Karré, 2014).

To better grasp this complexity, we argue for the need of more empirical studies that open the "black box" of incubation (Hackett & Dilts, 2008; Bergek & Norrman, 2008; Schwartz, 2013) and delve into this process as it is enacted *in situ*. Accordingly, this research aims at understanding the power struggles that underpin the processes of incubation of social innovations. We study how new entrepreneurial subjectivities, as well as new organizational forms that integrate the social-commercial dualism, emerge from the incubator-entrepreneur interaction.

We approach these questions through the concepts of *dispositif* and technologies of the self (Foucault, 1976, 1977, 1982, 1997; Deleuze, 1989; Heller, 1996) proposed by Michel Foucault. We introduce power as a fluid back-and-forth movement between controlling and normalizing forces, on the one hand, and forms of resistance, on the other hand, that describe a situation of "permanent provocation" (Foucault, 1982). Through this lens, we analyze how "dispositional" power and individual resistance articulate to each other

in the incubation process, seen as a subjectivation mechanism (Dey & Steyaert, 2014) geared to produce enterprising subjects capable of running successful social enterprises.

This paper draws on the in-depth longitudinal observation of the incubation process at a French pioneer social incubator, as well as interviews with the key participants to the incubation program - the incubator's staff, partners and three incubated projects. We analyze the incubation process from the prism of a dynamic succession of actions, reactions and counter-reactions, providing unique insights into the interplay of power and resistance between the incubator and the entrepreneurs, as well as into the formation of social enterprises.

Our study reveals that the emergence of the incubated social enterprise happens at the interface of a double dialectic. On the one hand, new social enterprising subjectivities are produced as a result of a confrontation between dispositional technologies of control and subjective resistance. On the other hand, the social entrepreneurial project is constructed upon a dualism between the commercial and social logics. As our results further suggest, it is only when a balance is found within each of these dialectical relations, that the incubation may result in a successful outcome. Through the three incubation processes that we analyzed, we point to different forms of (non)alignment at the intersection of these two dialectical tensions, underscoring the uncertainty of the incubation process of social innovations.

This paper proceeds as follows. We first offer some background literature on a power perspective of the social incubation phenomenon and link these considerations to the social-commercial dualism underlying the concept of social entrepreneurship. Next, we outline the research context, data and methods mobilized to investigate our research question. We then sequentially present our results in terms of the tensions stemming from the incubator – entrepreneur interaction, as part of the process of generating social innovations. Finally, we offer contributions and discuss some of our research's implications.

2. Conceptual framework. A Foucauldian perspective on social incubation

Foucauldian approaches to social entrepreneurship (Dey, 2010; Dey, 2013; Dey & Steyaert, 2014; Teasdale & Dey, 2019; Barinaga, 2013) have shed light on the enmeshment of the social entrepreneurship field in power relations. We home in this stream of research and use Foucault's relational vision on power according to which "there is no Power, but power relationships" (Foucault, 1989, p.187). As such, power represents

a “local and unstable [...] complex strategic situation in a given society” (Foucault, 1976, p. 112) that refers to a model of governance, as it influences the actions and modes of action of the other.

Research has shown that the shifting power relations triggered by social entrepreneurship indicate a change in the governing of societal issues, which are being aligned with neoliberal governmentality (Montgomery, 2016; Dey, 2013; Dey & Steyaert, 2014). This new model of governance of the social involves a shift in societal responsibility from the welfare state, towards individual social entrepreneurs (Dey, 2010). The transition is made possible through the enactment of a subjectivation process, which is the process by which conforming individuals are produced. This process incorporates two dimensions and can be “appreciated as an interplay between technologies of power, which normalize and objectify the individual and its behavior, and technologies of the self, which include the attempt to distance oneself from established power relations” (Loacker & Muhr, 2009, p. 269).

Therefore, it has been argued that the ideology of social entrepreneurship promoted at macro levels prompts individuals to adopt an entrepreneurial attitude (Sandberg, 2016; Eikenberry, 2009; Laville, Young, & Eynaud, 2015), as they are being confronted with the ideal representation of the entrepreneurial, calculable, governable, self-sufficient, competitive subject (Dey, 2013; Verduijn et al., 2017). Through the strategic use of language (Dey, 2010, 2013; Dey & Steyaert, 2010; Parkinson & Howorth, 2008), the social entrepreneurship discourses legitimate a new rationality that inscribes “ideas of efficiency, management savvy and entrepreneurship into the body of the social” (Dey, 2010, p.1).

However, at the same time, power relations imply resistance and a possibility of escape, or struggle, because “between a relationship of power and a strategy of struggle there is a reciprocal appeal, a perpetual linking and a perpetual reversal” (Foucault, 1976, p. 347). In line with this point, studies have shown that at the micro-level of daily practices, the practitioners of the social sector were capable of resisting the entrepreneurial discourse and the managerial subjectivities imposed on them (Parkinson & Howorth, 2008; Seanor et al., 2013; Teasdale & Dey, 2019). They engaged in practices of freedom that redefine and create alternative spaces of action (Dey & Steyaert, 2014). Such practices may include to cultivate ethical relations with others, to problematize the managerial problem-solving logic (Dey, 2013) of social entrepreneurship, or even to endorse it through a process of reflected judgement (Dey & Steyaert, 2014). Therefore, individuals are not passive receivers, they take an active role in constructing their own entrepreneurial selves by endorsing “disguised and nonconfrontational form of resistance” (Dey & Teasdale, 2015).

Foucault captures this co-existence of power and resistance through the concept of *dispositif*, featuring a network of relations between elements of knowledge, power and subjectivity (Foucault, 1977, 1980; Deleuze, 1992) that appears in response to a specific strategic need. Dey (2010) has argued that the strategic

function embodied by the social entrepreneurship *dispositif* is to problematize the social sector while also offering “practical knowledge for governing the issue at hand” (p. 11), i.e., the individual capabilities of the social entrepreneur and the managerial model of community service delivery (Parkinson & Howorth, 2008). His analysis points to the *dispositif*'s capacity to influence the action of individuals, their relations and self-relations “in ways that effect or bring about certain outcomes or at least make them more likely” (Raffnsøe, 2014, p. 248). However, as a dynamic “system of relations” (Foucault, 1977, 1980) the *dispositif* is also shaped and transformed by the very subjects, objects or practices it seeks to influence, rendering it “a structuring and structured logic that is observable across institutionalized practices” (Villadsen, 2008, p. 179). Therefore, the *dispositif* is amenable to continuous transformation and multiple *dispositifs* may overlap in different strategic points of the networks.

We mobilize this Foucauldian perspective on power to propose a dispositional analysis of the social entrepreneurship incubation phenomenon. The incubation *dispositif* embodies the strategic function of supporting the emergence of individuals and organizations that would bring the social entrepreneurship ideology to materiality and prove its efficiency in governing social matters. So far, the critical studies on intermediary organizations have shed light on the immanent political nature (Dey & Lehner, 2016; Dey et al., 2016) of social incubation work, by pointing the ideological nature of their discursive practices and their effects in shaping entrepreneurial subjectivities. However, few empirical studies have investigated the work of social incubators from the inside, in terms of the interplay of power relations characterizing the creation of social enterprises.

Moreover, previous analyses of the underlying relations of power and resistance in the social entrepreneurship field have been mostly asynchronous and treated “the two levels of governing separately, thus either focusing on the interventions that seek to redefine the role and responsibilities of the individual through strategies of self-control, or emphasizing the ubiquitous instances of micro-resistance on the local level” (Dey, 2013). Drawing on a dispositional lens, we propose to integrate these two levels: the pressures exerted by the incubator in producing ideological-compliant enterprising subjects, and the possibility of these individuals to resist and construct their own entrepreneurial selves in relation (and in reaction) to the normative pressures they experience.

As “the exercise of power is a ‘conduct of conducts’ and a management of possibilities” (Foucault, 1982, p. 341), we focus in the following paragraphs on two interlinked dimensions on which dispositional power manifests during the incubation: on one hand, the subjects who engage in the process and, on the other hand, the organizations which are created.

2.1. Constructing the ideal individual through subjectivation and resistance

The incubation *dispositif* triggers a first level of power struggles through the creation of new social entrepreneurial subjectivities.

The subjectivation process at play is particularly salient because the *dispositifs* “must produce their subject” (Agamben, 2009, p. 19) and must indicate “what the subject must be” (Foucault, 1998, p. 459), its status, position and legitimacy in a particular social context. Rather than being pre-determined, individuals are “dispositioned” or made to take up specific positions in relation to one another and to themselves (Villadsen, 2008, p. 180).

Social incubators play an important role in shaping “the way people conduct themselves by suggesting particular normative orientations of what it means to lead a ‘good life’” (Dey & Lehner, 2016, p. 4; Dey, 2013). Dey & Lehner (2016) show how incubators signal what it takes to be a social entrepreneur through ideological work that produces an image of the social entrepreneur as an “ideal subject”. Accordingly, the social entrepreneur leads a meaningful (working) life by creatively “changing the way in which business is practiced” (p. 8) while enjoying the process of igniting social change. These organizations construct a hegemonic status of social entrepreneurship around the articulation of “everyday heroism based on pragmatic solutions” (Dey et al., 2016). In turn, this representation meets general expectations that social entrepreneurs should be altruistic, responsible, self-organized (Dey, 2013), inventive and risk-taking individuals (Peredo & McLean, 2006).

Moreover, by aligning the individualistic nature of entrepreneurial endeavors with the comforting aspects of taking part in a community of like-minded people, the incubation *dispositif* transforms social entrepreneurship into an “object of desire” (Dey et al., 2016, p.), palatable to as many people as possible. A consequence of this ideological stance is that ultimately, producing change through entrepreneurship becomes devoid of difficulties, tensions and struggles and is turned into an endeavor accessible to anyone and even enjoyable, provided the individual has the will of becoming a social entrepreneur (Dey et al., 2016). Accordingly, the entrepreneurs - inherently ethical and “devoted to make a difference” (Mair & Marti, 2006, p. 1) - mobilize their “balanced judgement” (Mort et al., 2003, p. 82) to cope with the challenges of running a social enterprise.

So far, we have gained a better understanding of the incubation phenomenon from the perspective of the power and domination exerted by the incubator, but we ignore the individuals’ reactions, or possibilities of resistance to these technologies of control and normalizing pressures. Moreover, recent research has been

over relying on the discursive constructions of incubators and we lack empirical insights into the daily work of these organizations (Dey & Lehner, 2016). In light of these considerations, our current investigation puts forward a first question that addresses how dispositional power and individual resistance are articulated to each other in the incubation process.

To such end, we mobilize Foucault's concepts of *dispositif* and technologies of self. Specifically, "technologies of self" indicate how an individual relates to context-specific codes and rules, and constitutes oneself as a particular type of subject (Foucault, 1997, 1982, 2002; Loacker & Muhr, 2009). We aim to understand how the subject is constantly constructed and self-constructed at "the interstices of power, truth and the self" (Loacker & Muhr, 2009, p. 269; Dey & Steyaert, 2014), in a "process of becoming" (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002) which is mediated by the "practice of intensifying social relations" (Loacker & Muhr, 2009, p. 268) within the incubation.

In addition, we argue that the interplay of power and resistance within the incubation *dispositif* manifests itself both discursively and materially. Whilst the individuals expose themselves to the ideological nature of the incubator's discourse, they also (bodily) engage with the incubation practices and processes, as they are summoned to be present both temporally and physically throughout the incubation process. Thus, through the dispositional lens, we incorporate the role of incubation work in the analysis of power relations by approaching "the study from the angle of what 'was done'" (Foucault, 1998, p. 462).

2.2. Incubating the ideal organization through tensions

Social enterprises stand out for the fact that they aim to create both social and economic value (Austin et al., 2006) and take "the best of both worlds" (Tracey, Phillips, & Jarvis, 2011) by aligning market-based strategies with social welfare objectives. As they try to deal with competing organizational or institutional goals, logics and demands, these organizations are more inclined than others to conflict and tensions (Wry & York, 2015; Besharov & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2013; Battilana & Dorado, 2010; Battilana & Lee, 2014). According to Smith et al., (2013), the social – business tensions may manifest themselves at the individual and collective identities level, at organizational level due to conflicting structures, cultures and practices (Battilana & Dorado, 2010) or at interactional level, when facing conflicting expectations from multiple stakeholders.

However, the tensions stemming from the attempt to align a social and a commercial logic (Tracey et al., 2011; Stevens et al., 2015; Smith & Besharov, 2017; Austin et al., 2006; Townsend & Hart, 2008; Pache & Santos, 2013; Battilana & Dorado, 2010; Battilana & Lee, 2014) have not been analyzed in an incubation setting. Although these tensions can underpin diverse struggles throughout the lifetime of the social

enterprise, studies have generally focused on mature organizations, with the aim of understanding how these organizations maintained the balance between social and business logics on the long term (Smith & Besharov, 2017; Smith et al., 2013; Ramus et al., 2016; Young & Kim, 2015), especially when they set up to scale their activities (Perrini et al., 2010; Smith, Kistruck, & Cannatelli, 2014; André & Pache, 2014).

Fewer studies have dealt with the challenges faced by social entrepreneurs in the early stages of organizational creation (for exceptions see Teasdale & Steiner, 2016; Tracey et al., 2011; Renko, 2012; Berglund & Schwartz, 2013; Wry & York, 2015). Furthermore, these researches have mostly stressed the role of individual characteristics such as personality and prosocial motivation (Renko, 2012) in managing these tensions. Wry & York (2015) argue that the existence of conflict in social venture creation plays out within the self, as it is inherently “an identity conflict” triggered by a misalignment between the entrepreneur’s identity and the social welfare and commercial logics of the social enterprise. Berglund & Schwartz (2013) similarly talk about “identity struggles” as the nascent entrepreneurs learn how to face the everyday dilemmas of social entrepreneuring and engage in a “continuous balancing act between work and private life, unpaid and underpaid work, and the ideological tensions between the economic demands on starting and running a small enterprise with a social mission” (p. 13).

In underlying mostly the subjective dimension of dealing with the social-commercial dualism, less attention was given to the role of external feedback and socialization, which also play an important role in the early stages of entrepreneurial creation (Aldrich & Ruef, 2005; Sarasvathy, 2001, 2008). Despite the fact that the exposure of the nascent organization to external critical feedback is particularly salient in an incubation setting and that the organizational decisions taken at the foundation moment tend to have long-term effects (Lauterman, 2013), we currently lack insight into how entrepreneurial decision and organizational design are shaped through the power play of the incubation process. Following the argument that resistance can be used as “a chemical catalyst so as to bring to light power relations” (Foucault, 1982), we argue that the analysis of the antagonism of strategies in the process of defining the emergent social ventures is a necessary dimension in understanding the incubation *dispositif*, and the transformations it entails at the level of individual subjectivities. Therefore, we anchor in the specificity of social enterprises to embody a dual social-commercial mission, and pursue a second inquiry that questions the influence of the incubation *dispositif* on the articulation of these two social and commercial strategic logics.

3. Method

3.1. Alter'Incub in the regional incubation landscape

The region of Languedoc Roussillon (LR),²⁶ located in the South of France, is characterized by a longstanding expertise and culture of incubation practices for conventional, technological and innovative startups which earned Montpellier the second place as a world incubator city in 2017.²⁷ The numerous, mostly public-funded, incubators regrouped in a network called Synersud, within which each incubator had a defined perimeter of action in terms of geographical coverage, type of innovation, type of eligible project, etc. (Bakkali, Messeghem, & Sammut, 2010). This supportive entrepreneurial ecosystem legitimized and reinforced the belief that early stage support increased the chances of venture success, which created a predisposition for entrepreneurs to seek for incubation support. Alter'Incub emerged in this context in 2007 in Montpellier (Richez-Battesti & Vallade, 2009). It was created by the Regional Union of Cooperatives as one of the pioneers in the emerging field of social innovation in France, and the first French social incubator. Alter'Incub argued for the need to recognize and support innovative entrepreneurial forms that did not fit the dominant technological innovation paradigm of regional incubation support, but presented an interesting potential to answer social and regional development needs.

From an institutional perspective, Alter'Incub ambitioned to build traction around the new concept of social innovation through a collaborative and inclusive strategic approach. The incubator ignited a collaboration between public institutions, the social and solidarity economy and European development funding (Equal Est program), that led to the creation of an entire ecosystem dedicated to the emergence of social innovations (Richez-Battesti & Vallade, 2009). Gradually, a melting pot of regional actors was attracted in a collective endeavor to foster the development of an innovative social economy (Richez-Battesti & Vallade, 2009).

From a conceptual perspective, Alter'Incub held a leading role in the process of introducing, defining and characterizing social innovation at regional and national levels. The incubator collaborated on the elaboration of a national law on the social and solidarity economy (SSE) that defined social innovation as entrepreneurial projects answering “unmet or poorly fulfilled social needs”, either through products and services “under current market conditions or in the context of public policies”, or through “an innovative form of enterprise, an innovative process of producing goods or services or an innovative way of organizing

²⁶ Currently reorganized under the new name of Occitanie.

²⁷ Ranking made by UBI Global, Incubation Impact & Network.

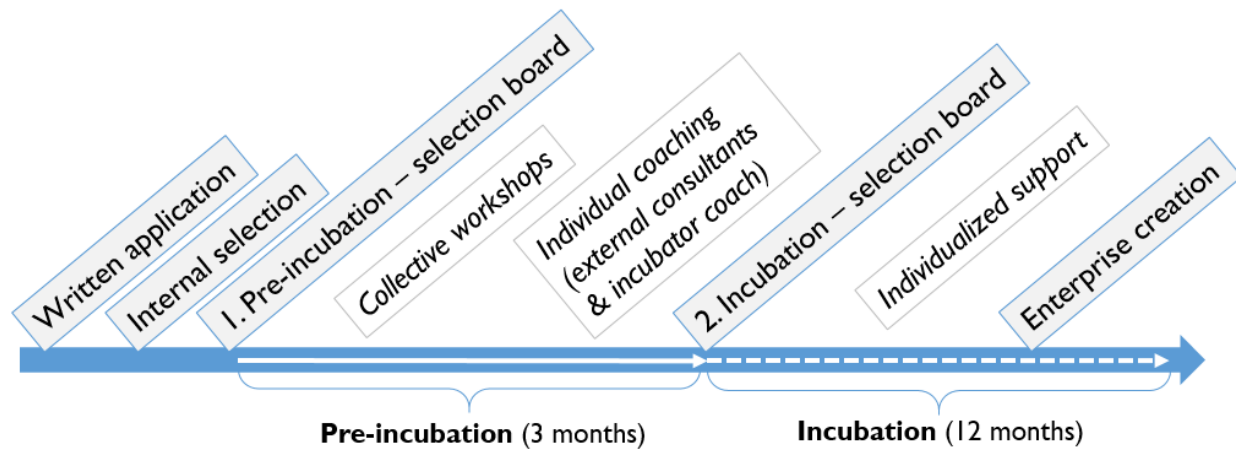
work”²⁸. For its role in advancing the development of social enterprises, Alter’Incub was selected as one of the good practice examples put forward by the OECD’s compendium “Boosting social enterprise development” in 2017, and its Director was granted the Social Engagement Award in 2014 by Ernst & Young.

Lastly, from an operational perspective, the support blended the competences of the Regional Union of Cooperatives in developing collaborative enterprises such as cooperatives and collective interest companies (SCIC – *société cooperative d’intérêt collectif*) with methodologies borrowed from business incubators. As other regional entrepreneurial support services, the incubation services proposed by Alter’Incub were free of charge for the entrepreneurs and were essentially financed through public subsidies, including European funds. To benefit from the incubation support, the project leaders had to pass a first selection process based on a written application and a face to face interview with a selection board composed of the main stakeholders of the incubator (representatives of the regional network of incubators, other innovation support structures, innovation advisers, regional development experts, and the regional public institutions). The screening of the projects focused on the evaluation of the social needs and their innovative solutions, the viability of the economic model, the reliability of the project team, the fit of the offer to the readiness of the market, the market strategy and the legal constraints. If accepted, the projects would participate in a first pre-incubation phase, designed as an intensive three-month period of collective trainings and individualized support from the incubator’s team and external consultants. A second selection would then be organized at the end of this first phase, and unlock another twelve months of individual support for the implementation of the chosen projects.

²⁸ Loi ESS (2014) chapter IV, article 15.

Figure 10 - Organization of the incubation program

Source: developed by the authors



At the time of the research, the incubator made on average three calls for projects per year, and had incubated 124 projects, of which 57 operated as enterprises (Alter'Incub leaflet, 2017). We studied the incubation process initiated in February 2016. Among the 25 project applications, eleven were auditioned and only five were selected for the pre-incubation. In this incubation cohort, we focused our analysis on three initiatives, here named EduCare, WoodCo and Teams4Good. Except for Teams4Good, they all went through the entire incubation process.

WoodCo

WoodCo was initiated by Emma and Noah, two workers in the field of woodcraft who had no previous business management experience. They wished to emancipate people from consumerism and fight the drain of local knowledge caused by the giants of the furniture industry by enhancing the work of small local carpenters.

The project holders envisioned WoodCo as a shared space around woodcraft, where local artisans of the LR region would share their passion for the work of wood with amateurs (e.g. Do It Yourself). This space would mutualize all the necessary carpentry tools among the local artisans and would facilitate the exchanges between the professionals and the amateurs (e.g. through workshops), so as to raise people awareness and empower them to design and create their own pieces of wood furniture or decoration “by the re-appropriation of the means of production” and by “stopping to contribute to an aberrant consumption of goods” (Noah). The project equally meant to help, through a collaborative model, the small independent carpenters of the region to access market opportunities in the urban area more easily and to benefit from

costly numerical control machines that were changing the nature of the carpentry work. To achieve these objectives, the professionals and the amateurs would share the same space and the leaders were imagining an exchange mechanism through which the craftsmen would provide free of charge trainings to the beginners. The operating costs would be covered by a complex grid of access fees depending on the length and type of machines used by either of the two categories of clients.

EduCare

EduCare was a healthcare project led by William with a group of five experienced special needs teachers trained in the field of socio-educational support for physically or mentally disabled children. In its daily practice within the institutionalized care sector, the team was confronted with two contradicting realities. On the one hand, a large number of children with disabilities could not benefit on time from professional care due to the limited number of places available in specialized care institutes and to reduced budgets. On the other hand, special needs teachers faced high unemployment rates due to the recruitment deadlock in these same under resourced care institutes. This was also the case of half of the team members, who were unemployed.

With EduCare, the team proposed to overcome this situation via an initiative that would reduce the financial and psychological burden imposed on the families, and offer employment solutions for the special needs teachers. Their solution consisted of a new form of educational intervention, based on delivering special care twice a week directly at the homes of the children who were queuing for a place in a specialized institution, as an intermediary solution until a place would become available. The assistance would be given initially by the team members who were unemployed, and would be later on extended to other unemployed special needs teachers that the team wished to federate under the project. This model differed from existing solutions where the specialized teachers offered their services individually as freelancers. For the project to be both accessible and viable, the team wished to apply for an authorization from the County Council in order to operate as a registered provider of social services to individuals. This official status would allow the benefiting families to qualify for a certain level of tax exemption and thus, would considerably reduce the price of the service. The project holders further envisioned a solidarity scheme in which families with higher revenues would pay a higher price in order to make the service more affordable for lower income families.

Teams4Good

Teams4Good emerged from the observation of a vast “wastage” of entrepreneurial ideas due to the fact that many people abandoned their ideas simply because they were unable to find the additional competences or

people they needed to share and materialize their ideas with. Composed of a team of six members, all already employed, scattered across France and Belgium, the project was initiated by John, who had previous entrepreneurial experience in the launch of a cooperative bar in the West of France.

Teams4Good was designed as a social network aiming to foster the match between enterprising ideas and competences, by helping people to team up in order to realize their projects. On a tailored web platform, the people with ideas would present their projects and needs and justify their ethical value creation in various fields such as arts, education, ecology, spirituality, journalism, technology, economy, etc. (Teams4Good, application file). With the help of an in-house algorithm, people with the relevant competences or similar interests would be proposed as a match to the project initiators in order to enable them to kick start their initiatives. Moreover, on the basis of the different project development needs that the project members would specify in their profiles, the platform would send targeted advertisements for relevant products or services from enterprises that would subscribe a contract from Teams4Good.

3.2. Research Design and Data Collection

Our investigation is based upon an embedded case study design (Yin, 2009; Scholz & Tietje, 2002) applied to Alter'Incub and three incubated initiatives. This design is suited to our goal of understanding and capturing the interactional nuances in each of these three processes while making comparisons across the three sub-cases of entrepreneurial project incubation. We purposively chose Alter'Incub (Patton, 1990) for its uniqueness and recognition in the French social innovation field (Richez-Battesti & Vallade, 2009).

Contacts with the organization existed before the launch of this study, thanks to the incubator's on-going interest in working collaboratively with social sciences institutions in the region. To pursue the current research, the access to the field was negotiated as part of a wider comparative study of incubation models for social innovation around Europe, to which Alter'Incub was invited to participate. The data collection was longitudinal (Langley, 1999; Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas, & Van de Ven, 2013; Van de Ven & Poole, 2005) and involved three steps. We used varied sources of data and interviewed key informants with different roles and levels of involvement in the incubation process to triangulate perspectives (Eisenhardt, 1989).

An **initial exploratory phase** started in November 2014 during which in-depth interviews were made with key informants from the management and operational teams of Alter'Incub, the main stakeholders supporting the incubator and the institutional partners involved in the selection process of social innovations (in total 18 interviews). At this level, we aimed to develop an “encompassing and emphatic case understanding” (Scholz & Tietje, 2001, p. 30), to grasp the incubator's organizational model and its

perspective on social innovation and social entrepreneurship. We participated in 10 selection boards and 6 internal meetings tackling the strategic evolution and positioning of the incubator in the French ecosystem. These discussions pointed at the incubator's work in developing new economic models capable of accommodating a social purpose, but it remained difficult for us to apprehend these practices only discursively, taken apart from their contextualized enactment. Therefore, during this phase we became interested in opening the "black box" of incubation to study how the incubator produced these novel organizations, precisely in terms of aligning mission and means in creating socially innovative market-based organizations.

Our aim to analyze incubation "at work" justified a longitudinal approach and a longer engagement with the incubator, in an attempt to gain a more authentic understanding of incubation practices (Dey & Teasdale, 2015). The first three months of the incubation process, labelled as the pre-incubation phase, appeared to be the most intense period of incubation activity, and a decisive one in identifying the projects' potential for social innovation and a successful pursuit of the incubation. The evaluative nature of this phase made it very stressful for the project teams and asked for a strong commitment before the projects were granted access to the next 12 months of individual incubation support. Therefore, in a **second phase of the research**, and the most consequent in terms of depth of the data collected, a short-term ethnography (Pink & Morgan, 2013) was conducted during the pre-selection phase of the three selected projects. This form of ethnography is focused (Knoblauch, 2005) and "intense/intensive" (Pink & Morgan, 2013, p. 353), hence particularly suited when the focus of the research is turned toward the details of everyday practices, made of "practical activity (what people are actually doing as they move through the world) and the nonrepresentational (the unspoken, unsaid, not seen, but sensory, tacit and known elements of everyday life)" (Pink & Morgan, 2013, p. 353).

From March to May 2016, the first author integrated the incubation process as an observer and became more enmeshed with the organization over time. We wished to observe what the incubator was doing to and with the initiatives selected for incubation, how this interaction evolved, towards what results and how the tensions were managed. First, the first author took part as board member in the national selection process launched in February 2016. Five initiatives were selected and each was assigned to one of the two incubation coaches. For practical purposes, we focused on one of the coaches and the projects he supported, thus, the choice of the three initiatives included in this study was arbitrary. We followed the evolution of these initiatives throughout the incubation program, with a particular focus on the 3 months of pre-incubation/evaluation. During these 3 months of observation, the first author participated to the series of collective trainings delivered and engaged with the practical exercises or challenges assigned to the entrepreneurs. *In situ* observation allowed for first-hand experience of the interaction between the incubator

and the projects, and of the ways in which this interaction shaped the evolution of the projects and the project holders. Moreover, the first author took part in almost every individual meetings that the three selected projects had with their incubation coach or with external consultants (for a detailed overview, see Table 7 in annex).

The **last phase of our data collection** consisted in follow-up interviews with the participants and the incubation coach to keep up with the main evolutions of the projects. We also continued to participate to most of the events organized by the incubator in an attempt to keep track of the evolutions of the organization and its incubation initiatives, until mid-2018.

3.3. Data analysis

We engaged in the incubation process with the intuition – emerging from the literature on social enterprises – that supporting the emergence of innovative social enterprises would not be an easy task, neither for the incubator, nor the entrepreneurial teams. During the observation, we focused as much on the content of the incubation – what was being done – as on the nature of the discussions and assignments during this process – how it was done. We paid particular attention to the ways in which the participants interacted with the incubator and the tasks, tools and objectives they were assigned, in an attempt to understand the evolution of the projects, the conditions of these evolutions, as well as the subjects or activities that emerged as sensitive.

As we witnessed the emergence of divergences and oppositions, some to be reabsorbed, some that would crystallize and constrain the evolutions of the projects, we became interested in the Foucauldian perspective on power. We were struck by the strong emphasis put by the incubator on the necessity for the participants to develop an entrepreneurial behavior, and by the assemblage of tools and practices mobilized to support the design of business models for social innovations. Thus, we introduced the notion of *dispositif* in our analysis to capture this strategic objective of proving the economic interest of socially-oriented projects, carried through the entire ecosystem of institutional support for social innovation in the regional context. Hence, the incubation *dispositif* “is not ‘located’ spatially within a particular organization, in a policy field or in a sector of society; it rather belongs to a specific historical form of problematizing our existence, which would normally traverse these boundaries” (Villadsen, 2008, p.180). For the purpose of this study, we chose to focus on the case of Alter’Incub that we saw as emblematic of the enactment of the *dispositif* through its main strategic function of producing socially entrepreneurial subjects.

At the end of our field observation, we analyzed our data longitudinally in an attempt to trace the evolution (Langley, 1999; Langley et al., 2013) of each project in a symmetric manner, by identifying which

incubation action triggered what individual reaction and how the incubator-individual interaction evolved over what we identified as three important moments of the ethnography: the first pre-selection board, the three months of pre-incubation, and the second selection board. As shown in Figures 12, 13 and 14 (in annex), we identified key moments of tension in the evolution of each project. By comparing and contrasting the trajectories of the three incubated projects, we further identified two levels at which these conflicts were unfolding: the level of individual subjectivities, and the level of the projects' design and implementation, presented below in our results. The names of all incubation participants have been anonymized.

4. Results

We follow the evolution of the three selected projects throughout the pre-incubation program by focusing on three important moments: the entry into the program, the emergence (and deployment) of tensions, and the forms of tension resolution constructed at the end of the program.

4.1. In the starting blocks: evaluating and giving chances

The selection board is the first contact between the projects and the normalizing forces of the *dispositif* and offers an arena for the exercise of power. It is a codified mechanism based on rules, procedures and specific tools (eg. powerpoint presentations, selection grid) meant to serve the strategic objective of identifying the right entrepreneurial profiles in the most effective way. As such, it disposes the individuals taking part in the process: seated, the board members decide if they “take a bet” (Board member, Innovation manager) on a project and “give them a chance” (Board member, Project manager – entrepreneurial support), while standing, the project teams attempt to seduce in an eight-minutes' pitch in order to be granted access to the entrepreneurial development resources.

Entrepreneurial spirit underpinned by a collaborative approach.

During the discussions, the board members subjectively “feel if the people are worth it” (Board member, Local development expert), “feel if they are able to make things happen, to create a market, to access market targets that are little identified” (Board member, innovation manager). Finding the right profiles appears to be essential because “people who have ideas, there are many! but people who are able to transpose them into a project, not that many” (Board member, Local development expert).

The fact that William (EduCare's leader) "talks very well, he is charismatic!" (Alter'Incub's Deputy Director) signaled the leader's capacity to be convincing and "sell" the project not only to the board, but also to future clients or partners. At the same time, beyond charisma and extroversion, it was expected that the entrepreneurs' pursuit of their projects was more than seizing an opportunity, it was a "calling [...] it's a mission [...] something that comes from their guts" (Board member, Entrepreneurial coach). In the case of Teams4Good, the leader's authenticity wasn't convincing due to the startup nature of the project. The board members felt that "if it works, in 3 years he sells [the company]!" (Board member, Project manager – innovation aids). Consequently, they challenged John's intentions and the territorial embeddedness of his project: "Why did you choose Lozère and until when? It's a project that can be done anywhere! (Board member, Local development expert). However, John's previous experience as the co-founder of a cooperative bar made up for some of the board's hesitations in accepting the project, based on a belief that Teams4Good could be "one of the projects we help out in order to try to bring them towards the social and solidarity economy" (Board member, Project manager – innovation aids).

Moreover, the board tried to appreciate if the teams were legitimate in carrying initiatives emerging "from the territory, for the territory" (Board member, Project manager – entrepreneurial support) and if they were willing to partner or share the governance with relevant external stakeholders. The board reacted positively to Emma and Noah's (WoodCo) professional background (in the wood sector), which justified their role in animating and bringing added value to the community: "They know what they are talking about! And they have to be credible in front of the carpenters because it is a field where we instantly verify one's professionalism" (Board member, Local development expert). However, they felt reticent about their capacity to federate this community. Equally, EduCare sent reassuring signals in response to one of the board member's reaction that they "will put a bomb on existing institutions!" (Board member, Local development expert). They argued that despite the rule-changing nature of their envisioned service, they were willing and even eager to enter in a partnership with the public institutions in charge of children in handicapped situations. Concerned with the project's legitimacy and willing to avoid institutional clashes, the incubator recommended to create a supervisory committee with the relevant public and associative institutions.

The enactment of the selection board displayed the salient (and dominant) nature of economic and market criteria in the screening process. The market embedding of social innovations was problematized as "*le nerf de la guerre*" (Board member, Project manager – technological innovation) precisely "because it is the economic model that makes the social innovation viable or not" (Matthew, incubator coach). Moreover, as previous cases of incubation failure were associated with "project teams that didn't hold up well" (Julie, Alter'Incub), personal traits of the project leaders such as entrepreneurial capacity, ability to sell,

willingness to collaborate, emerged as an essential condition of the realization of the projects during the later phase of incubation.

Ideas for changing the world in an economically realistic way.

If serving social or environmental needs was a *sine qua non* condition for being accepted in the incubation, the projects should also prove that they could take an entrepreneurial organizational form, since an “enterprise of the social economy [...] is in a competitive field, it’s on the market, it sells products, services, it has clients and its services have a price!” (Board member, Local development expert).

The board members thus asked the teams from the outset about how they would deliver economically sustainable products or services: “[Do] you have an idea today of your economic model? How will you build the different layers [of your offer]?” (Board member asked WoodCo), “You have not talked about the economic model, it would be good to have an idea!” (Alter’Incub’s deputy director asked Teams4Good). Similarly, when EduCare announced a price estimation of their home-based service as being three times cheaper than the solutions offered by the conventional care institutions, it was challenged by the board who considered their hypotheses as unrealistic and “clumsy” (Alter’Incub’s Director). This economically pragmatic lens entailed a “realistic” approach of the social objectives that could be achievable by the projects, which were not expected “to change the world [...] but to show us what is feasible, that the project is realistic and dimensioned according to his/her own means. So yes, [the project] has to be ambitious, but feasible!” (Board member, Project manager – technological innovation). This concern for the economic feasibility of the projects translated into objectives that the projects were expected to meet during the three months of pre-incubation, such as segmenting their market, fixing their offer and the pricing, estimating the running costs, finding the first clients or making a proof of concept.

4.2. The race: balancing idealism and pragmatism

The pre-incubation program is an intensive evaluation process and offers a challenge in terms of both personal and project development: the teams are expected to show tangible results in a three-months period and to provide answers to the questions and recommendations produced by the selection board. The program is designed around attaining specific, measurable and pragmatic milestones defined on a case by case basis with each entrepreneur.

The project-incubator interactions during this phase depict an entanglement of struggles between individual subjectivities and the normalization forces of the incubation *dispositif*. These struggles result in two levels of tensions – decisive for the pursuit of the incubation – that we expose hereafter. If the first incorporates

the subjective level of entrepreneurial becoming, the second revolves around choices of social venture design in terms of economic and governance models.

Confronting oneself with the ideal representation of the social entrepreneur.

The pre-incubation program is grounded in the belief that “we are not born entrepreneurs, we become one” (Matthew). The subjectivation process will not only challenge the teams to gain or unleash their entrepreneurial capacity, but also include these individuals’ reactions and struggles to construct their identities, to be and to act according to the image of a social entrepreneur promoted by Alter’Incub, while also safeguarding a possibility of resistance.

Alter’Incub perceived the two leaders of **WoodCo** as lacking the energy and drive of successful entrepreneurs and interpreted this as an obstacle, particularly in the construction of the community of carpenters and amateurs. At their first meeting, the incubation coach confronted the team with the board’s feedback:

“*Matthew*: ‘The project leader seems competent, but not very enthusiastic’. Does it shock you? [...] You’re not bothered that we have this impression?

Noah: I do not exude an incommensurable energy because this is not my nature. But then, I move on, that’s it. It is a quiet force...”

In response to a perceived shyness, Noah defended his own identity. The two project leaders didn’t oppose as much the entrepreneurial method and approach, as they did the ethos of competition and profit-making surrounding the conventional image of the entrepreneur. Their coach, however, pushed them and tested their reactions in different manners, such as offering contacts with potential partners and verifying whether the entrepreneurs took the initiative to quickly react and meet them.

In contrast, **EduCare leaders** displayed an attractive energy and motivation that federated supporters to their cause in a quick and emphatic manner. Their tight embedding in the field of socio-educational support for children with disabilities offered them legitimacy in proposing services that matched the needs of potential beneficiaries. However, the incubator found that their professional background hindered the switch from an employee to an entrepreneurial risk-taking mentality: “a point of vigilance [in relation to the team]: only specialized educators! [...] When we are talking purely about their job, there are no worries. Except that this is not what it means to be an entrepreneur. This means being an employee!” (Matthew). The team’ reluctance to take the risk of quickly implementing the project was strongly rooted in their financial fragility (half of them were unemployed) and in their dependence on a highly reputational and institutionalized local labor market, as alarmingly stressed by the team leader: “if tomorrow we lose our

job, we have to move to another region!” (William). Their over-cautious approach stemmed from the fear that they would be sabotaged by the existing powerful handicap associations, who already perceived them as market competitors. In front of the hurdles and delays in arranging a meeting with the public representatives, William stressed that “we need the security of saying: do not forget, guys [addressing the public administration], we came to see you! [...] we took all the necessary [administrative] steps”. The perceived surrounding institutional hostility also made the team postpone the creation of a steering committee, as recommended by Alter’Incub.

Contrary to the two previous teams, John, the leader of **Teams4Good**, displayed the dynamism and business attitude of an entrepreneur. He independently drew the development plan of his project (fine-tuning the business plan, setting up legal documents, participating in entrepreneurial contests), that he pursued in a determinate manner, irrespective of the support offered by the pre-incubation program or by his coach. He felt that he wasn’t fully understood by the incubator due to the technological and web-based characteristics of his project, and he confronted the evaluation logic and legitimacy of Alter’Incub: “I do not want to do the kind of guy who pretends to learn when he does not learn much and feels that he is wasting his time from the beginning [...] it’s also up to them to prove themselves, you know, not me / we [...] I want concrete, custom-made, relevant stuff, not elementary courses and knee-jerk reactions” (John). Conversely, the incubator considered his engagement in the pre-incubation as insufficient: “the project leader is a little difficult [...] people who are focused on themselves don’t bother me, but here it’s a little extreme in the sense that he does not give any time to the other incubated projects. During the collective trainings, he’s only interested when we talk about his project” (Matthew). Additionally, the incubator attempted to reshape the project and instill a stronger social dimension in John’s vision: “I think you have plenty of possibilities that are very interesting to enter [the field of] social innovation, but it is not yet a social innovation. [...] What is really interesting is to be able to allow project leaders to acquire the skills to carry out their project, that’s where the social innovation is! But then you have to prove it, to confirm it, to go further! Maybe with these categories [of projects]. We can reflect together. It’s a good working base but you have to go further.” (Matthew). John, however, opposed the proposition of tailoring the website for specific categories of impact initiatives (i.e. humanitarian, local development, green initiatives) and argued for a broader and more inclusive perspective: “there will be a great diversity of projects and we are proud of it because good ideas can come from everywhere and it would be a great pity to build up a website that does not host and does not propose a solution to all the ideas that can be good for our society”. John’s unwillingness to change and incorporate the incubator’s advices gradually became the main obstacle to the project’ incubation, as stressed by his coach: “If he does not hear you, you will not be able to question anything in his project!” (Matthew).

Creating a social venture while facing temporal misalignments.

The implementation pressures of the pre-incubation featured the teams of WoodCo and EduCare as not advancing quickly enough and not living up to the performance expectations of the incubation.

The leaders of **WoodCo** envisioned their role as builders of a community of local carpenters and amateurs, that would be based not only on trust and shared values, but also on democratic decision making and shared financial risks. Their communitarian/collaborative vision aimed “to respond to social problems by pooling the resources, the know-how... [and to enable consumers] to take part in the way we consume and the way we produce” (Emma). This motivated them to co-create their offer and to design the shared space with their main stakeholders by organizing focus groups – a method they had no previous experience with. This authentic but time-consuming process was in tension with the incubator’s demands and insistence to rapidly specify the characteristics and the pricing of the offer, and to find economically viable clients: “The market: it’s moving forward, clearly, it’s moving forward with the focus groups, etc. but not enough, not fast enough! Three months it’s very short! Three months it’s very, very, very hot!” (Matthew).

Due to its professional attachment to the values of the social care sector, the team of **EduCare** wished to work in complementarity with the public sector: they imagined that they would be granted access to the waiting lists and serve the families in need, by intervening upstream of the process of getting an institutional placement for their children. If for Alter’Incub, obtaining the public authorization was only one variable in specifying the project’s economic model (i.e., receiving a subsidy or not), for the team it was a cornerstone of the political struggle to make their profession – and project – institutionally recognized. As underlined by William: “The reality of our job: in fact, we do not exist! Technically, legally, in the political spaces [...] and we will try to reverse this image with EduCare” (William). The team was, therefore, ready to invest time and efforts in establishing trustworthy relations with the public institutions. They initiated several demands for appointments with public officials and argued against a quick start of the services: “Instead of losing a little time before starting the activity in order to start properly, if we start the [economic] activity we will lose twice as much time afterwards in building a healthy partnership with the institutions” (Tony). The project’s idealist goal contradicted the incubator’s pragmatic approach to the partnership. While initially supporting the team’s quest of the authorization and proposing to offer assistance in the negotiations with public representatives, the incubator later backed off in front of the uncertainty (and delays) of the political decision-making process.

Following several unsuccessful meetings with the local public representatives, the coach, backed by an external consultant, offered an alternative solution to circumvent the reliance on the public institution and speed up the implementation. They proposed to launch a proof of the concept with families that could afford

the full price of the service, in order to prove that the initiative was economically sound and cost-effective. This economic demonstration would afterwards become an argument to convince the public partner: “it’s almost a little bit stronger because you really have something to show” (External consultant). The team resisted this proposition as going against its values, arguing that: “we will be shot at for the financial side, and for the ethical side, in the sense that we intervene like savages. It becomes social poaching! And the institutions will come to attack us and those with whom we wanted to work with and to build a partnership with will criticize us from the very first weeks of activity” (Tony). Though understanding their reluctance, towards the end of the program, the coach pressured the team to set a deadline in the pursuit of the public authorization.

If the time was too short for the previous projects, for **Teams4Good** the pre-incubation was taking too long. The experienced and proactive project leader contested the evaluative nature of the pre-incubation and expressed discontent with its timing and lack of adaptability to the development needs of his project: “I feel that the rhythm of the three-months pre-incubation doesn’t match our planning. [...] There are lots of demands and constraints [from Alter’Incub] but we can only receive incubation support after three months!” (John). For John, the pre-incubation didn’t progress as quickly as he wished and the obligation of going through all the different phases together with the other projects was redundant: “They are supposed to accompany and help a project, it starts by understanding it well, not making me repeat five times. And then, not to naively contradict the guys who have been working on it for a long time. I understand this for a project that is just starting, but for a project that has existed for two years ... a little discernment” (John). As the only representative of his team in the incubation (the others lived in different parts of the country or abroad), John carried out all the burden of the incubation and needed to drive a total of five hours to participate in each of the trainings that were held in Montpellier. He, thus, thought of his participation to the program in terms of return on the time he invested: “The worst would be to hear that we are not selected for the incubation, you know? Haha it would be something to have spent so much time, so much money for nothing!” (John).

“Who is going to pay?” – the quest for sustainable economic models.

The search for sustainable economic models entailed several levels of tension during the pre-incubation. As underlined by a board member, the teams “are people with ideologies of changing the world. These are things that sometimes are far away from the reality of business and they have to work on it! [...] They have to accept that this is not the non-profit sector where we do everything voluntarily and everything is free, and that to be an enterprise you have to sell something” (Board member, Project manager, Regional business incubator).

Market segmenting *versus* community building.

If the two leaders of **WoodCo** envisioned the creation of a democratic community of carpenters and amateurs as a core ideological foundation of their enterprise project, Alter'Incub counter-proposed a development plan that prioritized the search of a viable market segment that would determine the type and purpose of the community. The project team started their field analysis by surveying the needs of the amateurs, which they placed on the same level of importance as the professional carpenters'. Moreover, they had difficulties in articulating an economic model meant to monetize the communitarian exchanges between the members: "since there is the community that gives life to all our fields of activity, [these activities] are interdependent. [...] but in fact, I do not know how to show [the link represented by the community] in the economic model [...] in fact, how to integrate it into the economic model? How to model it? How to integrate it in the [financial] sheet?" (Noah). On the contrary, the incubator raised concerns about the heavy investment needs (in terms of space rental and professional carpentry machines). Consequently, it pushed the team to change its focus from community building to economic modelling in order to prove the project's feasibility by better defining the offer of services and by estimating the running costs. From the incubator's perspective, the membership of amateurs only represented a small and insufficient part of the necessary revenues: "They have a target: professionals and individuals. They focused mainly on individuals, whereas they should have started with the professionals because it is the solvent target in this case, the one that will sustain the project. At the last appointment, they had only interviewed two or three [professionals]. It was very, very weak" (Matthew). Thus, the coach pushed the project to reorganize its priorities and focus on the services for the financially solvable demand, namely the professional carpenters. The incubator envisioned an enterprise which would serve only the needs of the carpenters, at the expense of the amateurs which were rather seen as an additional brick to be abandoned or postponed for a later development stage.

Financial viability *versus* service accessibility.

EduCare's idealist mission of ensuring universalistic access to its services opposed the incubator's pragmatic focus on prioritizing the financial feasibility of the enterprise. For the team, the organization would adapt its services, prices and functioning to the financial possibilities of the families in distress which "would also mean to work according to the social allowances that the families receive" (William). Receiving the public authorization as well as different other financial prizes would feed into subsidizing the service price so as to render it accessible to all types of families, irrespective of their level of revenues. As defended by one of the team members, the project's objective "is to be able to answer to everyone! So, everyone includes both parties! We cannot focus on just one part of the market, but on everyone, including people who can receive [social] allowances" (Tony). Turned rather towards efficiency and the practical

dispositions for launching the project as soon as possible, the incubator counter-proposed a fully private model targeting only the solvable families: “I understand the ethical side but can’t you consider to launch with 100% of families who pay? So it’s not at all in line with your ethics, I got it, but at least it allows you to start the project and to show that it works, to set up the organization, the coordination” (External consultant). The project strongly opposed this commercially-focused strategy throughout the pre-incubation: “it’s been already several times that we are offered [the private model]! Everyone is coming back to this model! Except that in the long run it gives us the hat of elitist functioning. [...] We are already categorized as traders of handicap; this is the hat we will have!” (Tony, team member).

Entrepreneurial risk-taking *versus* social embedding.

Teams4Good’s international aspirations and start-up ethos contradicted the incubator’s perspective of supporting regionally embedded organizations. Rather risk-adverse and reticent to the volatility of global start-up models, the incubator advised John to start small and to construct the web platform gradually, by adapting it to the needs of a local community of users. Contrary to this regional development focus, Teams4Good aimed at a national launch of the platform. Thus, the project would provide an all-inclusive web framework capable of answering the general needs of all type of users, as a way to ensure the economic viability of the platform. To sustain the high development costs, John planned to tap on a variety of financing sources (private individuals, crowdfunding, entrepreneurial competitions, etc.) and gradually abandoned the initial idea of creating a cooperative, which he now saw as unsuited: “A priori, a scop²⁹ is not flexible. There are plenty of benefits, but it has a handicap in that it does not have the flexibility required from a start-up in the digital sector to achieve its objectives.”

In addition, the incubator questioned the project’s economic model which was based on selling the platform users’ information for advertisement purposes: “You don’t know if it really works, you...we do not necessarily master the sales... this model of... this source of revenues. In addition, you can put it in place only once you have built a community that is quite consistent!” (Matthew). In front of the incubator’s ethical concerns with data selling, Teams4Good announced developing different tools that would prove its good will, such as an ethical chart, a positive impact index that would help promote the most impactful projects on the website, or even a label to ensure users of the good use of the information they make available on the website. The incubator, however, saw these engagements as marginal safeguards instead of real measures with an impact on the core of the project.

²⁹ Cooperative and participative enterprise

4.3. The finish line: doors closing, doors opening

The incubation process featured unpredictable outcomes. If the tensions emerging from the interaction between the incubator's expectations and the projects' own subjectivities smoothed out in the case of WoodCo, they led to the end of the cooperation with Teams4Good and to an unsuccessful incubation in the case of EduCare.

WoodCo – alignment on a cooperative model

The cooperation between WoodCo and Alter'Incub consolidated around the transformation of the project in a collective interest company. This organizational form matched the leaders' objectives to create a strong value-based, democratic community, while representing an important asset for the incubator. Adjustments were made on both sides.

Emma and Noah eventually followed the incubator's advice of grounding their economic model in the needs of the solvable demand. They delayed the offer to the amateurs, but did not abandon it. The leaders' authentic engagement in co-constructing the project with the carpenters loosened the incubator's pressure for quick results: "The co-construction was excellent, [the pricing] is validated [with the craftsmen]! That's better than a market study! They were good! So today the offer is fixed. The investments, the need for machines ... the costing is done! [...] they were exemplary! not always efficient, but exemplary throughout the process, really!" (Matthew).

Emma and Noah persevered in constructing themselves as authentic entrepreneurial subjects: "We were like the branch that bends but does not break [...] assimilating everything [from the incubator's recommendations] like a sponge, but in order to build something that belongs to us" (Noah). The entrepreneurs let themselves be guided through the implementation steps but guarded their initial idea. In the process, the incubator coach recognized and encouraged the change in their entrepreneurial approach:

Matthew: Little by little there is this entrepreneurial posture that takes over and it is rather interesting. I had a lot of fears about it concerning you two. I'm transparent with you. You are two people rather reserved and I was afraid that it would block you!

Emma [laughing]: it can be cured!"

EduCare – misalignment on an associative model

Initial cooperation was possible between EduCare and the incubator, as both sides showed comprehension of the other's expectations. The team was very invested in the trainings delivered and as stressed by Tony:

“the more we fine-tune, it is really the social economy and the social innovation that structure our project, to get out of a simple educational project”. In front of the board’s pressures to set a deadline, the project negotiated for a six-months delay before reconsidering the subsidized model, and even sent reassuring signals: “certainly, today we have this positioning, but we have talked in our team about B plans, C plans, because we don’t have thirty years ahead of us to devote to waiting. So we have heard [you] too, know that it echoed!” (Emily). However, during the twelve months of full incubation the team froze the development of the project, and the coach questioned again their entrepreneurial capacity: “they don’t work! There isn’t a true leader in the team to ensure that they work! [...] [William] is a leader to gather them but not to delegate tasks. He is a good captain, but not a manager!” (Matthew). Matthew’s attempts to convince the team to launch a pilot test continuously hit their unwillingness to compromise their ethical mission and enter the market before being institutionally recognized. The team eventually chose to register their project under a non-profit associative form, in the wait of the public authorization.

Teams4Good – misalignment on a start-up model

The evolution of the conflict between Teams4Good and the incubator signaled John’s gestures at meeting the incubator’s expectations, on one hand, and the incubator’s disbelief of his true engagement, on the other: “we have someone who wants to enter the boxes without really wanting to be there” (Board member). In response to the received criticism, John was willing to integrate “social firewalls” to prove the social mission of the project. He announced the introduction of “social leads” that would protect the privacy of the users. These propositions were received with skepticism by the incubator: “These are only beautiful words! [...] He is good with the talking, blah, blah, but there is no content! [...] I have the impression that he is luring us with a bait, to see if we bite. And if we bite, he develops! If we do not bite, he forgets!” (Matthew). The impossibility of reaching an agreement on the project’s social mission, together with the incubator’s assessment that the social innovation was more of an opportunistic move than “clearly identified in the project’s DNA” (Matthew), signaled the end of the collaboration after the three months of pre-incubation.

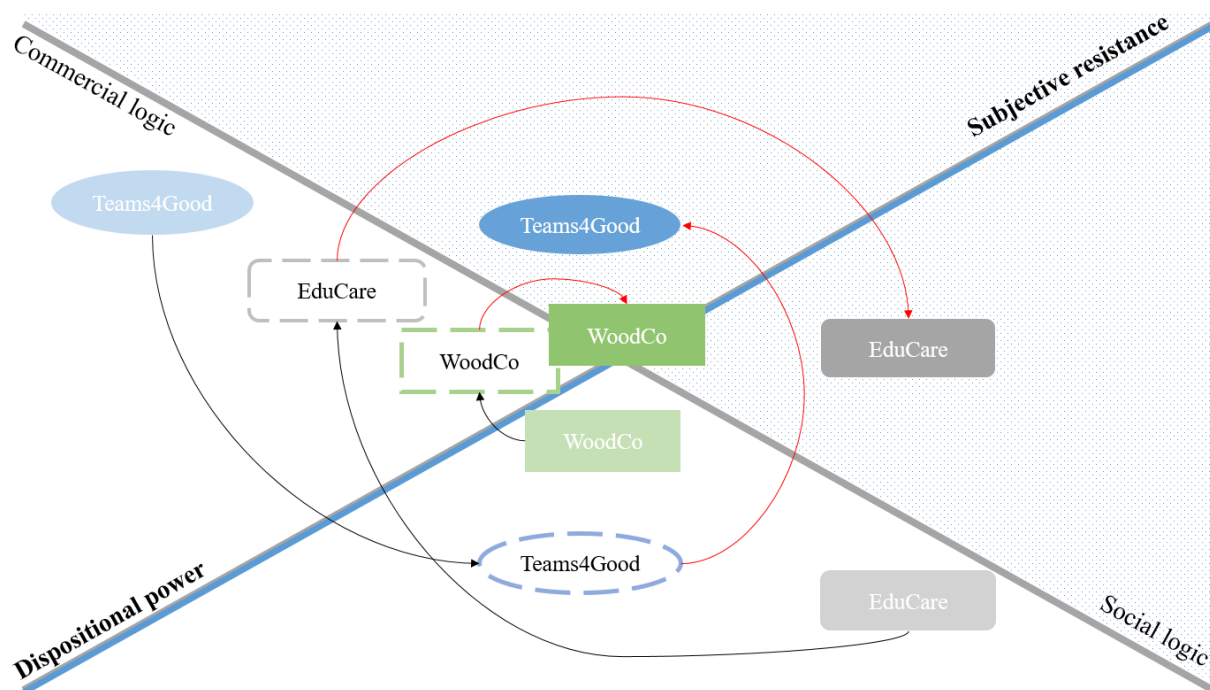
5. Discussion and concluding thoughts

This paper has empirically investigated the process of incubation of social enterprises, thus responding to recent calls to engage more directly with the social incubators’ work (Dey & Lehner, 2016; Dey & Teasdale, 2015). While various researches have stressed the tensions inherent to mature social enterprises, our approach sheds light on the ways in which the social-economic dialectic plays out in the startup phase of

social ventures. By opening the “black box” of incubation (Hackett & Dilts, 2008; Bergek & Norrman, 2008; Schwartz, 2013), we make visible the underlying power effects of incubation and show that the social entrepreneurial project emerges out of a double dialectical relation: one that opposes technologies of control and subjective resistance, and another occurring between the commercial and the social logics inherent to social entrepreneurship (see Figure 11). The three empirical cases that we analyzed signal different forms of (mis)alignment at the intersection of these dialectical tensions.

Figure 11 - The double dialectical underpinning the social incubation phenomenon

Source: developed by the authors



5.1. Social incubation as a space of power and resistance

We shed light on the power relations that underpin the processes of social venturing and entrepreneurial identity building (Germain & Jacquemin, 2017) and we contribute to the debates in critical entrepreneurship studies around the oppressive and emancipatory potential of entrepreneurship (Tedmanson et al., 2015; Verduijn et al., 2014) from a social incubation perspective.

In our analysis, the incubation of social enterprises stands out as a politicized space within which power and resistance are inseparably exerted (Dey, 2013; Foucault, 1982; Agamben, 2009). Through a

longitudinal study of the incubation, we shed light on the existence of a subjectivation mechanism, which calls upon subjects to assimilate entrepreneurial models of thought and action (Verduijn et al., 2017; Tedmanson et al., 2015): being efficient sellers, but also collaborative workers, being open to external remarks and critiques, but also determined and focused, being economically rational, but also devoted to a social mission. This subjectivation process is fundamental in securing the *dispositif's* strategic objective of producing new forms of “enterprising subjects” (Dey, 2013; Dey & Lehner, 2016), capable of demonstrating the viability of a market-based approach to the resolution of social needs.

Our first contribution is to propose a novel understanding of the ways in which social enterprising subjectivities are constructed during the incubation, as a result of a power-resistance struggle between the disciplining forces of the incubation *dispositif* and the individuals’ possibilities of resistance. We, therefore, add a complementary dimension to previous researches on social incubators which have mostly focused on the disciplining effects of power, and casted the construction of the social entrepreneur as a “totalitarian process” (Dey, 2013).

The incubation aims to transform individuals into social entrepreneurs through the interplay of practices and disciplining mechanisms, among which the strategic use of discourse has been already studied (Dey & Lehner, 2016; Dey et al., 2016; Ogbor, 2000). We showed that the incubation embodies a pragmatic, efficiency-led approach in terms of project implementation. Through the incubator’s tightly knit processes, fixing of milestones and challenges, as well as on-going evaluations, the teams are summoned to constantly give accounts (Loacker, 2009) and adapt themselves to a race against the clock in order to achieve quick results in a three-months period of incubation. Under pressures to obtain results and lock certain features of the project (partnerships, offer, service characteristics, pricing) at an early stage, the individuals are confronted with the ideal representation of the social entrepreneur, with its normalized attitude, virtues and competences, but they are not necessarily supported in the transformations they are expected to undertake. Left to themselves, their subjectivities become a marginal space of adjustments, subordinated to the strategic objective of designing a viable market-based model for answering social needs.

Dispositional power, thus, triggers a reaction from the individuals taking part in the incubation because it pushes them into becoming “self-optimizing individuals”, constantly improving themselves (Verduijn et al., 2017, p. 39). However, Foucault’s concept of technologies of self indicates a two-way process. If the individual may attempt to incorporate elements of the ideal representation of the (efficient, collaborative) social entrepreneur into his/her own self and behavior, she may as well resist the normalizing forces of the *dispositif* and endorse a critical stance (Dey, 2013) through “micro-manifestations of emancipation” (Tedmanson et al., 2015, p. 441). The individuals are not passive vis-à-vis the ideological content of the discourses (Dey & Lehner, 2016; Dey et al., 2016) they are exposed to during the incubation. Nor are they

unreflexively taking part in the incubation process and activities, or using the tools meant to reshape and reframe their projects. On the contrary, they are problematizing the solutions and the guidance offered by the incubation, confronting the later with their specific subjectivities (Wry & York, 2015) in terms of the objectives and values that they attach to their project.

We have shown that within this process of becoming, the reactions of individuals oscillate between surrendering and keeping their autonomy, as they selectively adhere to (WoodCo), negotiate (EduCare) or even reject (Teams4Good) the subjectivity of social entrepreneurship which is proposed to them. When the pressures to conform are too strong and the differences between the ideal representation and the individuals' subjectivity is too substantial, the power-resistance dialectic may trigger an unsuccessful incubation. This might happen in both directions: either from a socially-oriented individual who (attempts to, but finally) refuses to envision his/her mission commercially (EduCare), or from a business-oriented individual who refuses to become a docile, socially-oriented subject (Teams4Good). WoodCo offers an in-between case, where a collaboration is possible because the social and commercial logics that Moss et al. (2011) link to the normative and utilitarian identities of social entrepreneurs, are both integrated in the entrepreneurial project. Thus, when the individuals are gradually adopting a more entrepreneurial stance (in the development and implementation of the business model) while managing to construct a space of resistance within the influence of power (Dey & Steyaert, 2014) (to safeguard their vision of community and collaboration), the power-resistance opposition may be productive and lead to a compromise. This subjectivation process indicates that the construction of the enterprising individuals is infused with a dialectical movement of power-resistance (Dey & Steyaert, 2014) and emerges out of an ongoing and precarious practice (Driver, 2017; Berglund & Schwartz, 2013) at the core of the incubator-project interactions.

5.2. Social incubation as an evolving social-commercial dialectical tension

Our second contribution is to offer a new perspective on the incubation by analyzing the emergence of social enterprises as a process marked by struggles in striking a balance in the social-commercial dialectical tension (Wry & York, 2015; Battilana & Dorado, 2010; Pache & Santos, 2013; Stevens et al., 2014) inherent to social entrepreneurship.

Firstly, in responding to its strategic objective, the *dispositif* acts as an entrepreneurializing force that inscribes a stronger commercial logic in socially-oriented projects. In this sense, the *dispositif* “has a particular way of structuring light” (Villadsen 2008, p. 180): it stresses the necessity of viable market

models for social innovations and renders the social more entrepreneurial, as pointed out by the critical literature on social entrepreneurship. It produces “truth” that tends to depoliticize the choice of a market-based model in the implementation of social innovations, by justifying this choice on the basis of efficiency criteria. Thus, the legitimacy of the market model is anchored in its capacity to generate the necessary revenues to quickly and independently launch the initiatives. Therefore, other economic models based on non-monetary communitarian exchanges (initially, WoodCo) or public financing (EduCare) are marginalized on the basis of their uncertainty or inflexibility (eg. dependence on public subsidies, or low client solvability) and are dismissed as being non-entrepreneurial (Tedmanson et al., 2015; Dey & Mason, 2017). WoodCo – the only project that successfully finished the incubation – managed to hold the social and the commercial logics and in doing so, confirmed the strategic project of the *dispositif*: it is possible to respond to social needs via a viable market-based organization. On the contrary, EduCare illustrated the difficulties of finding an alignment in the case of projects holding a strong social logic, which in this case aligns with public sector values.

Secondly, we showed that the *dispositif* could also engage in the reverse process of attempting to reinforce (or construct) a social mission within strong market-focused projects. Just as there is no power without resistance, an incubated project cannot endorse a business logic without a social logic. Teams4Good is a case of such non-alignment as the entrepreneur envisioned only minor changes and refused to reframe his project based on the social logic suggested by the incubator. Critical approaches to social entrepreneurship have signaled that the social tends to be taken for granted and become “so patently obvious as to require no further explanation” (Cho, 2006, p. 37), while “the ‘economic’ is considered as a crucial framework condition” (Stevens et al., 2014, p. 2). However, in the practice of social ventures incubation, striking a balance between the two (whether this means making the projects more social or more commercial) doesn’t happen without a confrontation. We show that despite the strategic logic of the *dispositif* to set the search for viable business models as the cornerstone of the incubation, the *dispositif* cannot turn a blind eye on the social dimension of projects, nor focus entirely on the development of the business model. From our analysis, the incubation works only when a compromise is found in-between the two opposed dimensions, compromise which acknowledges both “the becoming social of entrepreneurship and the becoming entrepreneurial of the social” (Steyaert & Hjorth, 2006).

Based on the confrontations at play between these two dialectical levels of tension of the incubation work, i.e., power *vs* resistance and social *vs* commercial, our analysis underlines the non-determinate outcome of the incubation *dispositif*. We show that the incubation of social enterprises is subject to constant struggles, tensions and compromises between the incubator and the project teams, which can lead to uncertain results. Emerging from this view, the act of social entrepreneurship appears less as a stable and identifiable

endeavor governed by the action of professionalized and resourceful incubators, than as a mutable, even fragile construction, subjected to negotiation and constructed through the accumulation of daily organizational practices and choices. We suggest that future empirical research is needed to delve deeper into the power dynamics of social incubation and consider the outcome of this process, i.e. the power effects of incubation practices and the results obtained in terms of the types of organizations produced and the social change objectives that are being aimed at.

6. Annexe to Chapter III

Table 7 - Summary of data sources

Data type	Source	Length
Semi-directive interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Incubator management team (2) and operational team (3) - Institutional partners of the incubator (6) - Members of the selection boards (10) - Incubated projects (5) 	Total of 26 interviews The interviews lasted in between 45 min and 2 hours
Direct observation	<p>Incubation process (spanning 3 months)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>selection boards</i> in pre-incubation and incubation (10) approx. 40 projects auditioned - <i>collective trainings</i> (kick-off day, lean management, social design, strategy and marketing, economic models, innovative economic models, social innovation, entrepreneurial approach, legal aspects) - <i>individual coaching</i>: project-incubator coach meetings (5), project-incubator-consultant meetings (5) <p>Incubator internal meetings (6) and general assembly (1)</p> <p>Entrepreneurial or communication events</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>International meetings of social innovation</i> (2) - <i>YESS academy</i> (2) – <i>entrepreneurial contest</i> - <i>The incubator's 10th year anniversary</i> - <i>The launch events of the co-working and acceleration facilities</i> - <i>Diverse regional events on social innovation and entrepreneurship</i> 	<p>Approx. 10 days</p> <p>10.5 days</p> <p>6 days</p> <p>Approx. 4 days</p> <p>Approx. 4 days</p>
Secondary data	<p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - annual activity reports, promotional leaflets - incubation methodology guides - incubation training materials and tools 	

Figure 12 - Evolution of the incubation interaction for the project EduCare

Source: developed by the authors

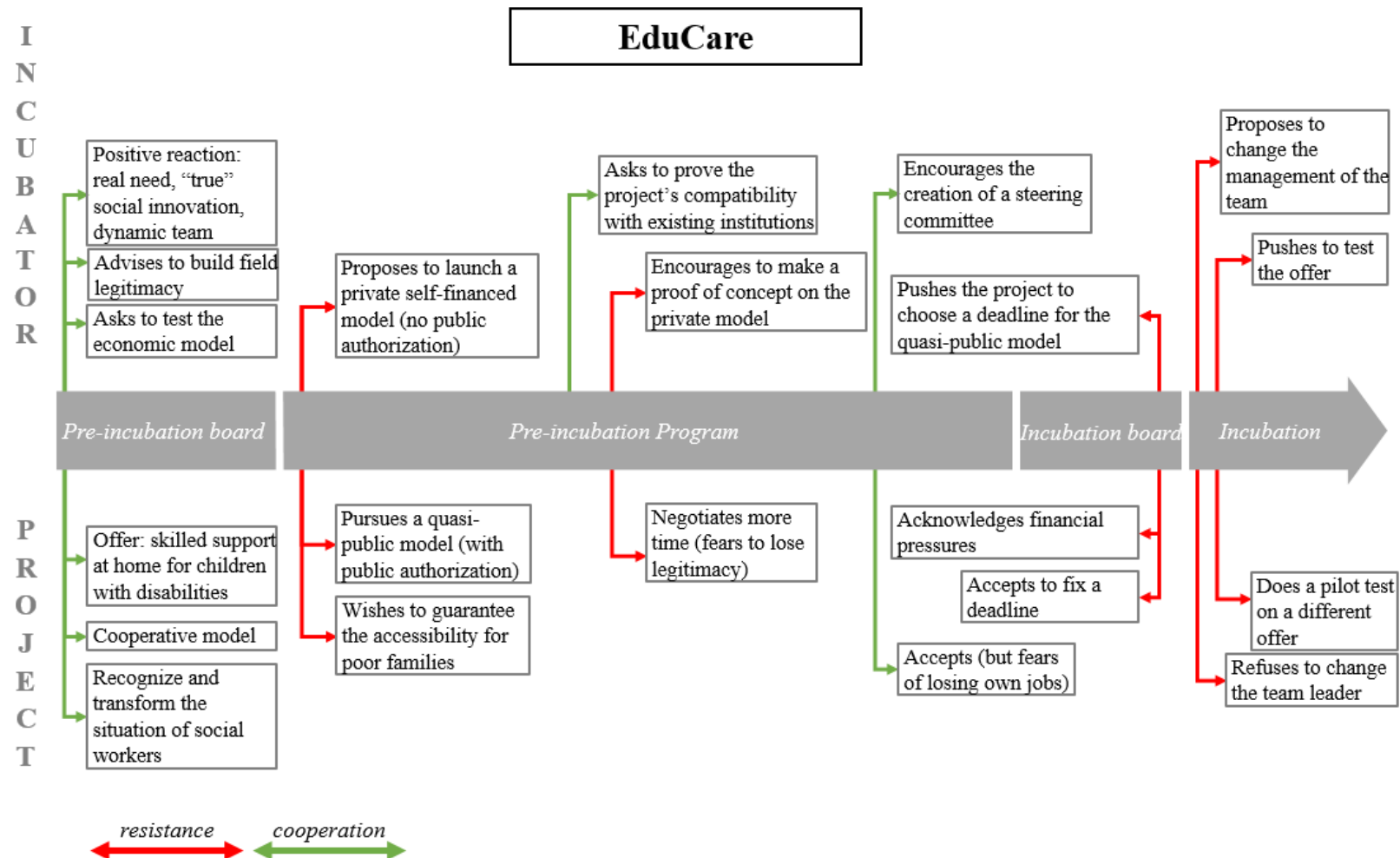


Figure 13 - Evolution of the incubation interaction for the project WoodCo

Source: developed by the authors

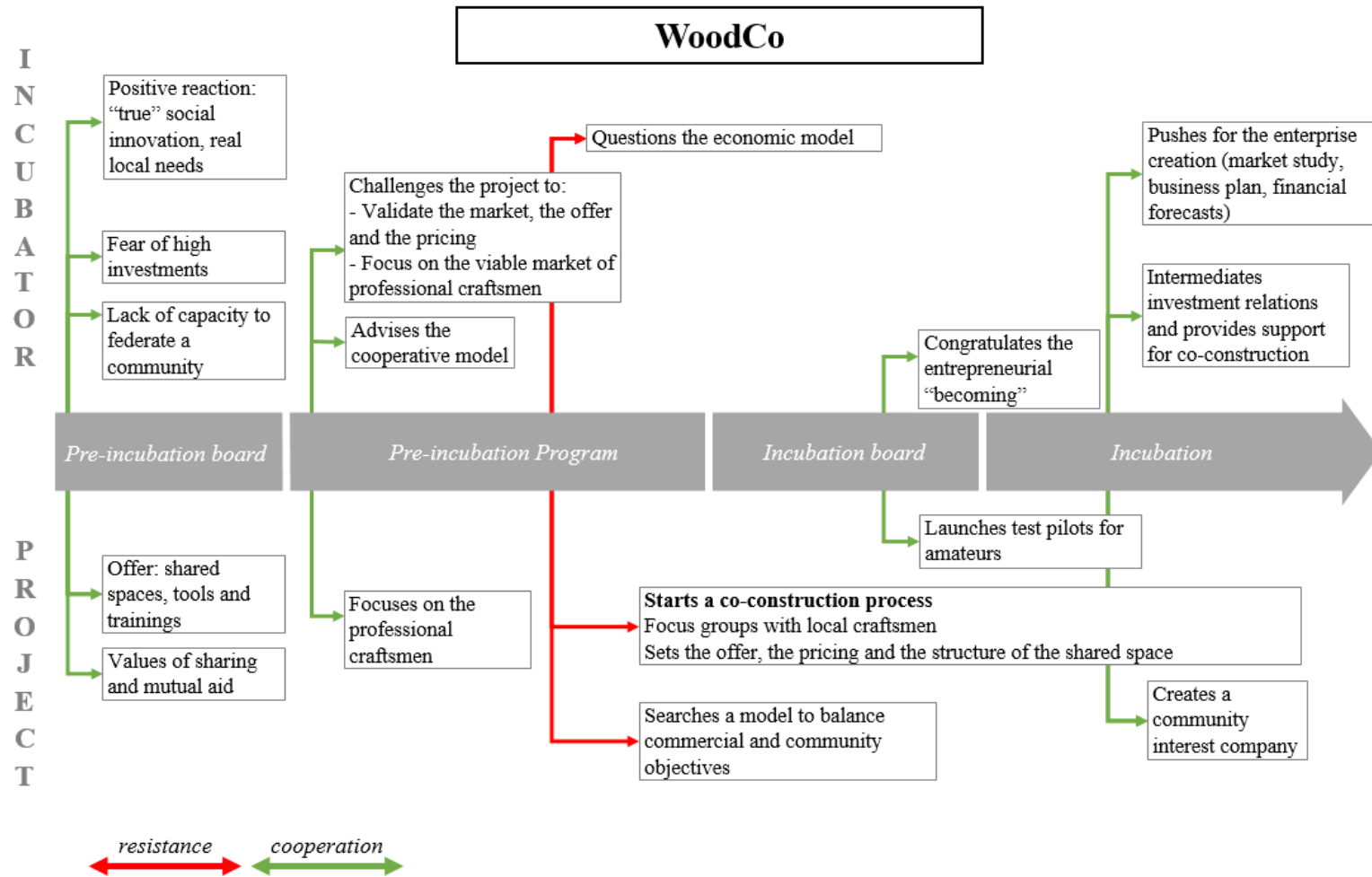
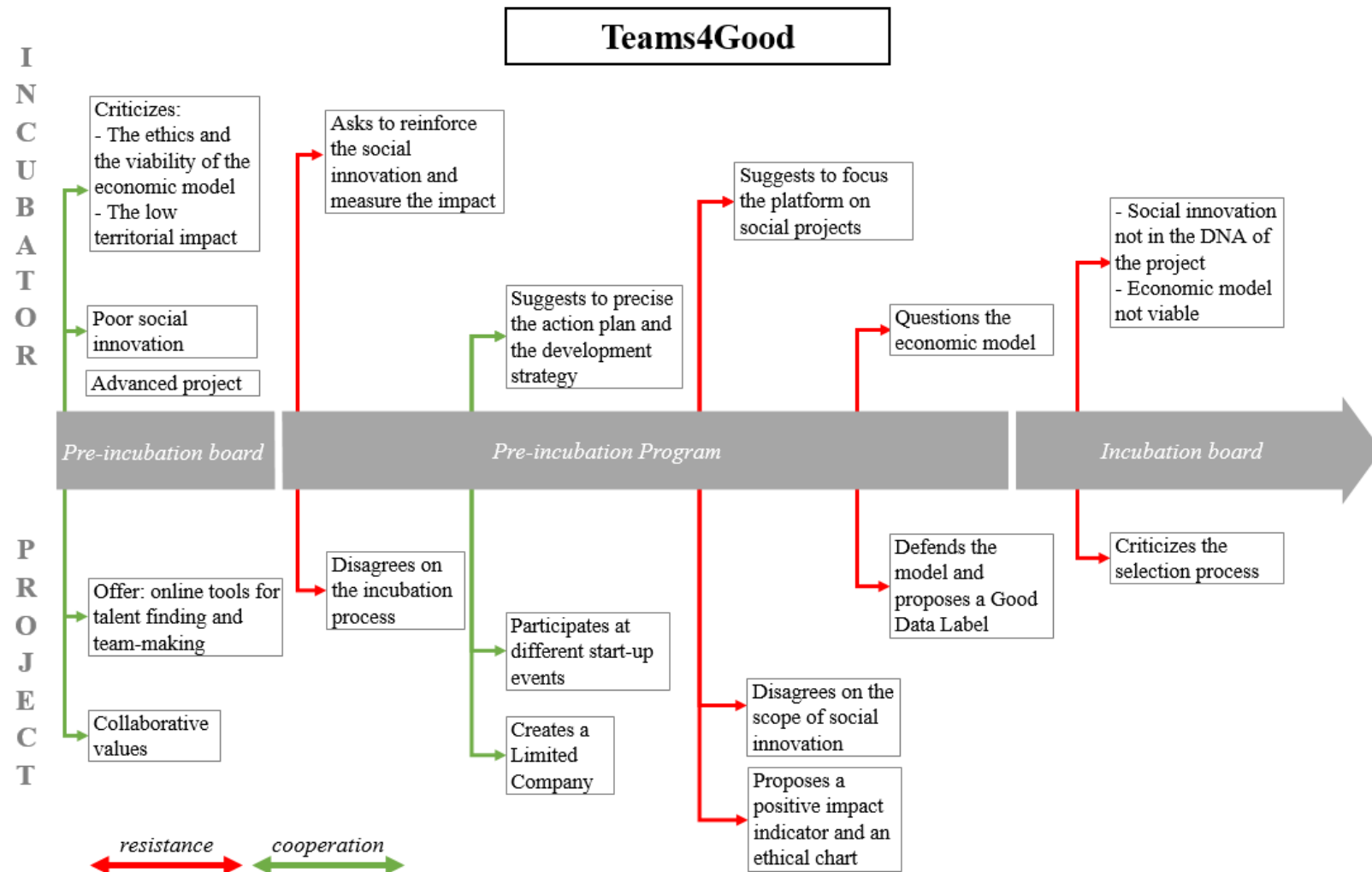


Figure 14 - Evolution of the incubation interaction for the project Teams4Good

Source: developed by the authors



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Conclusion générale

- *Conclusion générale* -

Si ce travail doctoral touche à sa fin, ce n'est que pour ouvrir le chemin vers de nouvelles discussions autour des défis de l'accompagnement des innovations sociales, dans l'optique de mieux développer le potentiel de ces initiatives transformatrices.

Cette thèse s'est proposée d'analyser le lien encore peu étudié entre l'incubation et l'innovation sociale, ainsi que ses effets. L'objectif a été de proposer une meilleure compréhension des incubateurs sociaux et de leurs activités. Dans ce but, nous nous sommes focalisé sur les pratiques mises en place par les incubateurs pour promouvoir l'innovation sociale et l'incarner dans les organisations incubées.

Notre démarche s'est déclinée à travers trois questions de recherche :

1. *Quel sont le rôle et le travail des incubateurs dans la diffusion de l'entrepreneuriat social ?*
2. *Comment les pratiques d'incubation influencent-elles la construction des innovations sociales ?*
3. *Comment de nouvelles subjectivités et formes organisationnelles sont-elles construites au travers de l'incubation sociale ?*

Ces questions ont été chacune traitée dans l'un des articles composant cette thèse, qui ensemble apportent une vision multidimensionnelle du rôle et des pratiques des incubateurs sociaux. Le **premier article** (chapitre I) examine comment les incubateurs sociaux agissent afin de promouvoir l'innovation sociale en tant que nouvelle approche entrepreneuriale dans la résolution des problématiques sociales. Le **deuxième article** (chapitre II) met en lumière l'influence des pratiques d'incubation sur le façonnement des initiatives incubées et sur les compromis élaborés entre leurs objectifs sociaux et économiques. Enfin, le **troisième article** (chapitre III) s'intéresse à l'interaction *incubateur – porteur de projet* et s'attache à observer les tensions à l'œuvre dans la construction des innovations sociales.

Cette conclusion générale vise tout d'abord à faire une synthèse des principaux résultats obtenus (1). Ensuite, nous présentons les contributions générales de la recherche (2) et nous exposons les limites ainsi que les pistes de recherche futures (3).

1. Synthèse des principaux résultats

Le **premier chapitre** analyse de manière comparative les activités des quatre incubateurs sociaux dans la diffusion et la légitimation de l'entrepreneuriat social au sein de leurs contextes institutionnels. En prenant appui sur la théorie néo-institutionnelle, l'article met en évidence le rôle des incubateurs en tant qu'entrepreneurs institutionnels qui agissent à la frontière des champs (privé, public, non-lucratif) pour

promouvoir l'entrepreneuriat social. Il illustre les stratégies discursives utilisées dans chaque contexte pour attirer différentes formes de support et rendre l'entrepreneuriat social une solution souhaitable. L'article met en évidence l'existence d'un processus d'institutionnalisation multi-niveaux similaire dans les quatre cas étudiés, qui se compose de trois phases : (1) l'articulation des visions alternatives du changement, basées sur une approche entrepreneuriale, (2) la matérialisation de ces visions dans la création de projets sociaux entrepreneuriaux grâce à l'attraction de ressources et la création d'espaces transversaux de collaboration, et enfin, (3) l'ancrage du domaine émergent de l'entrepreneuriat social dans des contextes socio-économiques plus larges. En outre, nous montrons le rôle stratégique joué par le positionnement des incubateurs en tant qu'organisation frontrière. Dans ce rôle, les incubateurs articulent tant un travail institutionnel qui transforme les frontières entre les champs, qu'une démarche entrepreneuriale qui consiste à saisir les opportunités, à prendre des risques, à imaginer des services innovants.

Le **deuxième chapitre** met en lumière l'influence des pratiques d'incubation sur les porteurs de projet et les initiatives incubées. En s'appuyant sur une étude qualitative approfondie du processus d'incubation chez un incubateur français pionnier, l'article s'attache à analyser ces pratiques au moment de leur réalisation *in situ*. Nous mobilisons une approche performative afin d'illustrer la matérialité des pratiques qui participent activement à la définition des innovations sociales, au cœur des articulations entre les équipes accompagnatrices et les porteurs de projet. Ainsi, nous identifions trois effets performatifs des pratiques qui sous-tendent le dispositif d'incubation. Elles agissent dans le sens d'une *marchandisation* des problématiques sociales, d'une *entrepreneurialisation* des individus et d'une *managérialisation* des organisations.

Le **troisième chapitre** s'intéresse à la relation incubateur – porteur de projet. Il analyse de manière longitudinale le processus d'incubation de trois projets, au sein du même incubateur français. Cette approche nous permet d'illustrer l'évolution de l'interaction entre l'accompagnement et les projets, et d'identifier les points clés d'avancement ou de blocage dans l'incubation. Nous mobilisons le prisme de lecture du dispositif foucauldien afin de mettre en exergue les relations de pouvoir qui sous-tendent ce processus. Nous montrons que l'incubation incarne un processus de subjectivation censé créer des subjectivités entrepreneuriales. Au travers des trois cas étudiés, nous mettons en évidence différentes formes de résistance à ce processus de la part des porteurs de projet qui s'efforcent de créer leur propre subjectivité entrepreneuriale. Les tensions générées se manifestent dans le design des entreprises incubées elles-mêmes, au niveau de la délimitation des objectifs sociaux poursuivis et de la modélisation des modèles économiques. Nos résultats pointent les conditions de réalisation d'un alignement entre l'incubateur et les porteurs de projet. Cette recherche d'alignement se fonde sur la construction d'un compromis, qui est nécessaire à l'aboutissement des projets.

2. Contributions

Cette thèse présente plusieurs contributions. Elle améliore la compréhension des incubateurs sociaux et de leur lien à l'innovation sociale par une approche multidimensionnelle. Les incubateurs sont analysés tant du point de vue de leur rôle de promouvoir l'entrepreneuriat social en lien avec leurs contextes institutionnels respectifs, que du point de vue des pratiques et des processus d'incubation qu'ils mettent en place.

Sur le **plan théorique**, les contributions de cette recherche se situent au croisement des littératures portant sur les incubateurs et sur les approches critiques en entrepreneuriat social.

Cette thèse élargit les analyses sur les incubateurs et apporte un éclairage nouveau sur leur rôle. Les recherches actuelles ont mis en valeur leur fonction de support à l'entrepreneuriat et à la croissance, dans une optique d'amélioration de leurs performances économiques et entrepreneuriales (Bakkali, 2013 ; Bakkali, Messeghem & Sammut, 2013 ; Messeghem et al., 2017). Nos résultats montrent que dans ce champ émergent, les incubateurs peuvent également endosser d'autres rôles et poursuivre des objectifs sociaux, voire normatifs. Ils peuvent se construire un rôle d'entrepreneur institutionnel et agir activement à la promotion du nouveau champ, à la recherche de ressources et au façonnement de formes organisationnelles socialement innovantes. Notre premier article étudie ces questions dans une démarche comparative qui situe les incubateurs dans leurs contextes d'émergence, en continuation des travaux ayant étudié les dimensions spatiales des écosystèmes d'accompagnement entrepreneurial (Theodoraki & Messeghem, 2017 ; Spigel, 2017 ; Roundy et al., 2017).

Nos résultats contribuent également à approfondir les connaissances dans le champ encore émergent de l'entrepreneuriat social. En effet, les deuxième et troisième articles abordent les incubateurs sous une nouvelle perspective, celle des processus et pratiques mises en place lors de l'incubation. Ils focalisent l'analyse au niveau micro, sur les pratiques d'incubation, leurs effets et les interactions *incubateur – porteur de projet*, des dimensions encore peu étudiées.

Dans la continuation des perspectives critiques en entrepreneuriat social (Dey & Steyaert, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2018), notre analyse met en lumière les relations de pouvoir qui sous-tendent l'incubation sociale. L'incubation est ainsi abordée en tant qu'arène où émergent des tensions en lien avec la définition des missions sociales et économiques poursuivies par les projets incubés.

De ce point de vue, l'incubation présente un double visage. D'un côté, il s'agit d'un espace qui permet et favorise l'émergence et la concrétisation de nouvelles idées entrepreneuriales destinées à répondre à

diverses problématiques sociales. Cet espace rend possible l'apparition d'organisations, services et produits qui n'auraient peut-être pas eu les mêmes chances d'aboutissement sans l'accompagnement de l'incubateur. Pour certains porteurs de projet, le processus d'incubation peut se révéler émancipateur et constituer une étape clé dans la construction de leur propre subjectivité entrepreneuriale. Dans les cas de possibilité de cet alignement incubateur – entrepreneur, l'innovation sociale peut se cristalliser dans des entreprises sociales au travers d'ajustements et de compromis.

D'un autre côté, l'incubation incarne un processus de subjectivation qui peut s'avérer contraignant, voire intenable pour certains porteurs de projet. La mise en forme progressive des projets d'innovation sociale se fait en interaction avec des pratiques et des processus qui tendent à conformer l'individu à une représentation idéale de l'entrepreneur social. En outre, le dispositif d'incubation établit un contrôle de l'espace de création entrepreneuriale et rendent gouvernable le processus par lequel les objectifs sociaux des projets seraient atteints. Les prismes de lecture de la performativité et du dispositif foucauldien nous permettent dès lors de mettre en évidence l'existence d'effets d'exclusion ou d'inclusion à l'œuvre dans le processus d'incubation. Ces effets se manifestent par la marginalisation des problématiques sociales difficilement encastrables dans une mécanique marchande, des profils individuels qui ne présentent pas les traits entrepreneuriaux attendus, voire des approches entrepreneuriales qui ne reposent pas sur un modèle économique conventionnel.

Nous contribuons ainsi à la compréhension du travail d'accompagnement des incubateurs sociaux, par ce prisme analytique qui explique l'émergence des innovations sociales en tant que construits locaux, issus d'une accumulation de pratiques, de tensions et de compromis.

Sur le **plan méthodologique**, cette thèse analyse l'objet de recherche depuis plusieurs perspectives et combine des approches comparatives avec des études de cas uniques. Si l'approche comparative est très répandue dans l'étude des incubateurs conventionnels – plutôt sous forme quantitative –, elle reste peu mobilisée dans celle des incubateurs sociaux. Une autre contribution méthodologique réside dans la réalisation d'une courte ethnographie au cœur du processus d'incubation sociale, qui à notre connaissance, n'a pas encore été faite.

Enfin, nous apportons une **contribution managériale** au débat concernant les instruments de soutien à l'innovation sociale. Notre recherche met en lumière tant les possibilités offertes par l'incubation sociale que ses contraintes et limites. A un moment où l'approche par l'incubation prend de plus en plus d'ampleur et gagne l'intérêt des acteurs publics et privés soucieux de favoriser l'émergence d'initiatives socialement innovantes, cette recherche peut offrir quelques pistes de réflexion, situées à deux niveaux : celui des pratiques, et celui des structures d'accompagnement elles-mêmes. Concernant les pratiques d'incubation,

les résultats de cette recherche indiquent le besoin d'une approche plus réflexive quant aux implications subjectives de l'accompagnement, surtout dans le cas de projets animés par de fortes missions sociales. S'agissant des structures d'accompagnement, alors que les incubateurs se positionnent de plus en plus en tant qu'acteurs du changement, notre recherche apporte des éléments de compréhension quant aux pressions institutionnelles qu'ils perçoivent. Ces pressions influencent leurs approches d'incubation, ainsi que les ressources mises à disposition des entrepreneurs, et peuvent de ce fait influencer la nature des innovations sociales soutenues.

Le tableau 8 résume les résultats et les contributions apportés aux questions de recherche posées par chaque article.

Tableau 8 - Synthèse des principaux résultats et contributions

Problématique	Questions de recherche	Résultats	Contributions
Chapitre 1. Entrepreneurial boundary bridging as institutional work: delving into the work of social incubators			
Quels sont le rôle et le travail des incubateurs dans la diffusion de l'entrepreneuriat social ?	<p>Quels sont les processus de changement institutionnel qui caractérisent le travail des incubateurs sociaux dans des configurations institutionnelles différentes ?</p> <p>Quelles sont les caractéristiques du travail institutionnel des incubateurs ?</p>	<p>- Caractérisation du processus d'institutionnalisation de l'entrepreneuriat social à 3 niveaux (<i>a.</i> articulation de visions de changement entrepreneuriales, <i>b.</i> matérialisation de ces visions par un travail entrepreneurial et de <i>bridging</i>, <i>c.</i> ancrage du champ de l'entrepreneuriat social dans des contextes socio-économiques plus larges)</p> <p>- Identification de deux dimensions centrales du travail institutionnel des incubateurs</p>	<p>- Proposition d'une nouvelle vision des incubateurs en tant qu'entrepreneurs institutionnels qui agissent à la frontière des champs afin de promouvoir l'entrepreneuriat social</p> <p>- Modélisation des incubateurs en tant qu'organisation frontière</p> <p>- Proposition d'une analyse processuelle multi-niveaux du travail institutionnel des incubateurs sociaux</p> <p>- Démonstration de l'imbrication du travail entrepreneurial et de <i>bridging</i> lors des 3 phases du processus d'institutionnalisation</p> <p>- Exploration empirique du lien entre l'émergence des incubateurs et leurs contextes institutionnels</p>
Chapitre 2. A performative approach to social innovation incubation practices			
Comment les pratiques d'incubation influencent-elles la construction	Quels sont les effets performatifs des pratiques d'incubation sociale ?	- Identification de trois effets performatifs des pratiques (<i>a.</i> la marchandisation des problématiques sociales, <i>b.</i> l'entrepreneurialisation des individus, et <i>c.</i> la managérialisation des	<p>- Proposition d'une vision alternative de l'incubation qui prenne en compte la socio-matérialité des pratiques</p> <p>- Conceptualisation de trois effets performatifs des pratiques d'incubation</p>

<p>des innovations sociales ?</p>	<p>Comment la dialectique social-marchand se manifeste-t-elle au travers des pratiques d'incubation ?</p>	<p>organisations) et des liens qui existent entre elles</p> <p>- Démonstration du caractère non-neutre des pratiques d'incubation en termes d'attention et ressources allouées aux objectifs sociaux et économiques des initiatives incubées</p>	<p>- Mise en lumière des effets d'exclusion et d'inclusion performés au travers des pratiques et de leurs effets sur les finalités sociales et économiques des initiatives incubées</p> <p>- Illustration de l'émergence des innovations sociales en tant que constructions socio-matérielles</p>
<p>Chapitre 3. Incubating social innovation, between subjectivation and resistance. A Foucauldian perspective.</p>			
<p>Comment de nouvelles subjectivités et formes organisationnelles sont-elles construites au travers de l'incubation sociale ?</p>	<p>Comment l'interaction incubateur-individu influence-t-elle l'évolution des initiatives incubées ?</p> <p>Comment cette interaction peut être source de tensions ?</p>	<p>- Mise en évidence de l'existence d'un processus de subjectivation visant à entrepreneurialiser les individus prenant part à l'incubation</p> <p>- Identification de deux tensions dialectiques qui influencent le résultat de l'incubation : <i>a.</i> l'opposition entre les technologies de contrôle exercées par le dispositif et les actes de résistance des porteurs de projet, et <i>b.</i> la tension entre les objectifs économiques et sociaux avec lesquels les porteurs doivent composer</p>	<p>- Ouverture de la « boîte noire » de l'incubation sociale</p> <p>- Proposition d'une approche de l'incubation qui prenne en compte les rapports de pouvoir dans la construction des subjectivités entrepreneuriales et des innovations sociales</p> <p>- Mise en exergue de la façon dont la dialectique social-marchand se manifeste dans le cadre de l'incubation</p> <p>- Identification de pistes analytiques qui informent les conditions de réalisation de la collaboration incubateur - incubé</p>

3. Limites et perspectives futures

Cette recherche présente les limites inhérentes aux études qualitatives, auxquelles se sont rajoutées celles du format de présentation que nous avons choisi, la thèse par articles.

Ainsi, cette recherche mobilise plusieurs cadres théoriques qui bien que complémentaires au regard de nos objectifs de recherche, présentent un certain éclectisme. Ce choix résulte de notre travail réflexif élaboré à partir du terrain au fur et à mesure de notre cheminement de recherche. Néanmoins, du fait de la richesse et la complexité des différentes théories mobilisés, il rend difficile la construction d'un cadre théorique intégrateur.

D'autres limites sont liées au choix d'une approche par l'étude de cas (Flyvbjerg, 2011 ; Stake, 2015 ; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Si cette démarche nous a permis d'approfondir les mécanismes de l'incubation, jusqu'au niveau des micro-pratiques, ce niveau ne s'applique qu'à l'un des cas étudiés. Il mériterait d'être observé dans d'autres cas d'incubateur, où les effets performatifs et les interactions observées seraient susceptibles de prendre des formes différentes.

Ainsi, au regard de la diversité du paysage actuel de l'incubation sociale, nous n'avons étudié qu'un nombre limité d'incubateurs et de projets incubés. Ces derniers nous ont permis de modéliser des situations d'alignement et de désalignement, mais d'autres perspectives pourraient d'être mises au jour par l'observation de différents projets. De la même manière, la performativité des pratiques d'incubation peut prendre des formes différentes et/ou de donner lieu à d'autres formes de théorisation selon les incubateurs étudiés, et les prismes adoptés pour leur étude. Par conséquent, si l'analyse que nous produisons est « adéquate au phénomène » et aux cas que nous avons étudiés (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 554), elle offre un savoir situé, qui se veut guide de lecture et de compréhension sans prétendre à une forte généralisation.

Enfin, cette thèse soulève de nouvelles questions et ouvre des perspectives de recherche futures.

Une première voie de recherche se situe au niveau de l'analyse des projets incubés, dans une perspective longitudinale. Nous avons étudié la phase émergente des projets – le passage de l'idée au projet d'entreprise – mais il serait également intéressant d'observer les trajectoires d'évolution de ces initiatives socialement innovantes au-delà de l'incubation, afin d'analyser les effets de l'accompagnement sur le long terme. Des recherches futures pourraient ainsi s'intéresser à un autre moment clé lors duquel ces entreprises sont également amenées à chercher un accompagnement, celui du changement d'échelle. Dans ce sens, et du fait que le champ d'entrepreneuriat social arrive à une certaine maturité, la question de la pérennité des projets, mais aussi des moyens nécessaires pour accroître leurs contributions sociales, est un sujet qui suscite de

plus en plus d'intérêt. En témoigne, dans notre étude comparative, le cas des incubateurs qui décident de prolonger leur action dans la phase post-crétion.

De ce point de vue, si notre point de pivot dans l'étude de l'innovation sociale a été l'incubateur, il serait aussi intéressant d'étudier ce processus du point de vue de l'entrepreneur ou de l'équipe fondatrice. Pourquoi les entrepreneurs sociaux choisissent une structure d'accompagnement plutôt qu'une autre ? Comment vivent-ils l'incubation ? Quelle utilité en tirent-ils ? Mais aussi, que se passe-t-il lorsque les porteurs de projet ne sont pas acceptés dans l'incubation ? Quelle est leur trajectoire d'évolution en dehors de ce processus ?

Une deuxième voie de recherche concerne l'évolution des incubateurs sociaux et de leurs pratiques. La recherche sur ces structures est en retard par rapport au dynamisme de ce champ organisationnel – dont témoigne, par exemple, les annuaires et les cartographies réalisés par l'Avise en France. Il s'agirait de mieux comprendre comment évoluent ces acteurs et leurs approches de l'innovation sociale. Dans cette perspective, l'une des pistes offertes par notre premier article était d'étudier l'influence de la démarche entrepreneuriale des incubateurs et des financements ou partenariats qu'ils recherchent, sur la nature de l'accompagnement offert et sur les formes d'innovation sociale soutenues.

Il s'agirait aussi ici d'approfondir notre compréhension des méthodologies et pratiques d'accompagnement à l'innovation sociale. Dans ce sens, plusieurs questions se poseraient : pourquoi certaines pratiques s'imposent-elles dans l'incubation et comment se diffusent-elles dans ce milieu ? Y a-t-il des pratiques et des processus d'accompagnement qui adoptent d'autres philosophies d'intervention, et avec quel genre d'effets et de résultats en termes d'innovation sociale ? Sur ce volet, il serait particulièrement intéressant d'étudier comment l'incubation peut être rendue « sensible » au temps plus long et aux enjeux politiques dont certaines formes plus radicales d'innovations sociale se saisissent, en ouvrant par exemple à des changements d'habitudes, de mentalités, voire réglementaires.

Sur ce dernier point, nous concluons par un parallèle avec la réalisation de notre propre thèse qui pourrait aussi être vue en tant que pratique entrepreneuriale et projet « incubé » pendant les 5 dernières années. En tant que projet entrepreneurial passé par la « fabrique » de l'incubation, et selon les pratiques d'incubation privilégiées, ce travail de thèse aurait-il passé toutes les étapes d'incubation ? Compte tenu des changements de situation, des nombreuses pistes poursuivies et parfois abandonnées, des idées qui sont restées au stade d'idées, de ses remises en question et de ses moments d'Eureka, de ses dépassements de délais, quel incubateur social aurait-il misé dessus ? A quoi aurait ressemblé le résultat final de cette thèse et quelle aurait été sa contribution ?

- *Conclusion générale* -

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L'incubation sociale. Trois perspectives sur le travail des incubateurs dans la promotion et l'accompagnement des innovations sociales

Face au potentiel de l'innovation sociale à proposer des nouvelles solutions entrepreneuriales aux problématiques sociales actuelles, l'incubation a été promue comme un moyen de prédilection pour stimuler et accompagner son émergence. Cette thèse se propose d'approfondir notre connaissance sur les incubateurs sociaux et d'explorer les liens encore peu étudiés entre l'incubation et l'innovation sociale, ainsi que leurs effets. Le prisme de l'analyse est focalisé en particulier sur les pratiques mises en place lors de la promotion et de l'incubation des innovations sociales. Trois études empiriques ont été menées et portent chacune sur une dimension spécifique du travail des incubateurs. Le premier article adopte une perspective néo-institutionnelle pour montrer comment les incubateurs sociaux agissent dans leurs contextes institutionnels afin de légitimer l'innovation sociale en tant que nouvelle réponse aux besoins sociaux. Sur la base d'une analyse comparative de quatre incubateurs pionniers en Europe, les résultats montrent le rôle clé de ces organisations-frontières en tant qu'entrepreneurs institutionnels, dans la promotion des discours favorables à l'innovation sociale, la création de nouvelles collaborations et l'attraction de ressources vers les démarches d'incubation. Le deuxième article met en lumière l'influence des pratiques d'incubation dans le façonnement des innovations sociales incubées et dans les compromis établis entre leurs objectifs sociaux et économiques. A partir d'une approche en termes de performativité, l'analyse qualitative approfondie des pratiques d'incubation au sein d'un incubateur français, identifie trois effets produits par ces pratiques : la marchandisation des problématiques sociales, l'entrepreneuralisation des individus et la managérialisation des organisations. Enfin, le troisième article s'intéresse au niveau micro de l'interaction incubateur – porteur de projet et s'attache à observer les tensions à l'œuvre dans la construction des innovations sociales, selon une perspective foucauldienne. L'étude longitudinale du processus d'incubation de trois projets met en lumière l'existence d'une interaction créatrice de subjectivités entrepreneuriales et identifie des conditions pour une incubation réussie. L'ensemble de ces résultats contribue à ouvrir la « boîte noire » de l'incubation sociale et met en évidence les défis posés par la promotion et l'accompagnement des initiatives qui poursuivent des objectifs à la fois sociaux et économiques.

Mots-clés : Incubateur social, innovations sociale, entrepreneuriat social, tensions, pratiques d'incubation

Social Incubation. Three perspectives on the incubators' work in promoting social innovations

Considering the potential of social innovation to offer new entrepreneurial solutions to current social problems, the incubation of entrepreneurial projects has been promoted as a privileged method to stimulate and support its emergence. This research aims to deepen our knowledge on social incubators and to explore the links between incubation and social innovation, as well as their effects. The analysis focuses primarily on the practices put in place during the promotion and incubation of social innovations. Three empirical studies have been conducted and each focuses on a specific dimension of the incubator's work. The first article adopts a neo-institutional perspective to show how social incubators work to legitimize social innovation as a new response to social needs, in their specific institutional contexts. On the basis of a comparative analysis of four pioneer incubators in Europe, we show the key role of these boundary bridging organizations as institutional entrepreneurs, in promoting a discourse supportive of social innovation, in creating novel collaborations, and in attracting resources to the incubation process. The second article highlights the influence of incubation practices on the shaping of the social innovations and on addressing the tradeoffs between their social and economic goals. From the lens of performativity theory, the in-depth qualitative analysis of incubation practices in a French incubator allows to identify three effects produced by these practices: the commodification of social problems, the entrepreneurialization of individuals, and the market-embedding of their novel organizations. Finally, the third article focuses on the micro level of the incubator - entrepreneur interaction and on observing the tensions at work in the construction of social innovations, in a Foucauldian perspective. The longitudinal study of the incubation process of three projects highlights the existence of an interaction conducive to the creation of entrepreneurial subjectivities. Overall, these results contribute to open the "black box" of social incubation and highlight the challenges raised by the process of promoting and supporting initiatives that pursue both social and economic goals.

Keywords : Social incubator, social innovations, social entrepreneurship, tensions, incubation practices