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The Being and the Ought to Be of Citizenship in European Social Innovation Discourse

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Abstract: Social Innovation is defined as both a concept and a tool for social change that, in recent decades, has formed the backbone of numerous policies implemented by the European Commission. However, part of the academic literature identifies several limitations in the discursive potentialities presented within the institutional framework. Accordingly, the aim of this article is to examine how European social policies on Social Innovation conceptualise the 'being' and 'ought to be' of citizenship, or the subject, from a critical Foucauldian perspective, with a view to problematising its implications for the analysis of the social reality represented in these policies. To this end, a qualitative strategy employing discourse analysis and the 'logics of critical explanation' approach is utilised, analysing 26 institutional documents from the European Commission issued between 2010 and 2024. The findings indicate that this discursive institutional framework construes citizenship as embodying a rational, active, capable, and conscious subject, committed to solving social problems. This conception of the 'being' of a citizen implies a significant transformation in the 'ought to be' of that citizen. If citizens are deemed capable of understanding and transforming their environment, they are thereby responsible for ensuring their own well-being and equipping themselves with the necessary skills to adapt to economic change, transforming them into "neoliberal subjects" within a Foucauldian framework. This new normativity appears to naturalise the functioning of social and economic structures and their dynamics, resulting in an undialectical analysis of social realities.

Keywords: social innovation; neoliberal subjectivity; politic discourse

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Citation: Talón Villacañas, Alba. 2024. The Being and the Ought to Be of Citizenship in European Social Innovation Discourse. *Social Sciences* 13: 552. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13100552

Academic Editors: Kittisak Jermsittiparsert, Ismail Suardi Wekke, Oytun Sozudogru and Jamaluddin Ahmad

Received: 1 August 2024
Revised: 13 October 2024
Accepted: 14 October 2024
Published: 16 October 2024

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1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, the European Commission (hereafter EC) has increasingly focused on the role of citizenship in Europe's adaptation to the modernisation of the economic system (European Commission 2007, 2010, 2020). A knowledge-based society, designed to respond to the emerging needs of the labour market, was established as a primary focus in light of the challenges posed by an ageing population, growing social inequality, accelerating technological globalisation, and shifts in the economic system (European Commission 2010; Misuraca et al. 2015). However, in practice, this normative transformation of the structural forms of societal organisation has encountered challenges that directly impact people's lives and needs: "the associated benefits and risks are not evenly shared, and some parts of the population have difficulty adapting and face the risk of unemployment and exclusion" (European Commission 2007, p. 3). Consequently, the EC recognised that the structural changes required to address these challenges would need to be accompanied by policies aimed at investing in human capital. Specifically, policies that would bring about changes in citizens' competences and skills, such as the *EACEA and the European Year of Skills*, to ensure that no one is excluded from the future social model.

As some of the literature indicates, this new European social policy has focused on the labour sphere and centred around key concepts such as employability, flexicurity, entrepreneurship, and Social Innovation (hereafter SI) (Serrano et al. 2012; Martínez and Amigot 2015). Some authors argue that the incorporation of these terms by the EC represents an attempt to align public policy discourse with managerial (Alonso and Fernández

2011) or business discourse (Herzog et al. 2015). This process is thought to have involved, on the one hand, a rearticulation of citizens' responsibilities, transforming them into active participants in their own welfare and social inclusion, alongside an objectification of social analysis and a naturalisation of the proposed lines of action (Serrano et al. 2012; Subirats et al. 2012; Bárcena 2015), and on the other hand, the establishment of the need to revive the concept of the 'innovative personality' as a prerequisite for economic growth and employment (Sztompka 1995), thereby equating the qualities associated with a good worker to those of a good citizen (Martínez and Amigot 2015).

In this context, the EC introduced a new paradigm of social policies which, aiming to support and align with the objectives of social and labour policies, focused on exploring, promoting, and scaling up the 'innovative personality' that could be realised through SI initiatives (Misuraca et al. 2015; European Commission 2020). SI thus positioned itself both as an object of public policy and as an optimal approach to achieving inclusive and sustainable economic prosperity with citizen participation (BEPA 2010), a priority established in the *Europe 2020 Strategy* (European Commission 2010).

It is therefore necessary to understand this concept, which has established itself as recurrent in European normative discourse. Thus, although over the years the European institutional discursive framework has employed various approaches to understanding SI (European Commission 2022a), it continues largely to adhere to the traditional definition of SI: "new ideas (products, services, and models) to meet social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations. It represents new responses to pressing social demands, which affect the process of social interactions. It aims to improve human well-being. SI is an innovation that is social in both its ends and its means. It is an innovation that is not only beneficial to society but also enhances individuals' capacity to act" (BEPA 2010, p. 9). Making this concept the subject of public policy involves recognising new activities that, while not generated a priori by the state or the market, are crucial for social welfare, economic growth, and addressing challenges such as social exclusion, poverty, climate change, and economic globalisation (European Commission 2013, 2022e, 2021b). To this end, several programmes and funding instruments have been deployed, with notable examples including: *the Programme for Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI)*, *Horizon 2020*, *Horizon Europe*, *Missions Europe*, and the *ESF Social Innovation + initiative (ESF+)*. In all of these, citizens are called upon to foster a new social contract that emphasises generating a culture of citizenship based on values, skills, and capabilities to mitigate the impact of technology-driven economic transformations and to promote a fairer and more sustainable future (European Commission 2013; Misuraca et al. 2015).

In parallel, academia has shown increasing interest in the phenomenon of SI, analysing its potential for driving social and systemic change. SI is often portrayed as a participatory, effective, and transformative process for addressing global challenges (Conejero and Redondo 2016; Jessop et al. 2016; Seyfang and Haxeltine 2012; Marques et al. 2017). However, a substantial body of literature also exists that, before emphasising the term's virtues, highlights its lack of clear definition and explores the potential implications this might have for its relationship with social and systemic change (Hernández-Ascanio et al. 2016; Zubero 2015; Rueede and Lurtz 2012; Gurrutxaga 2013; Swyngedouw 2009; Fougère et al. 2017). The key concerns raised by these studies include, in summary: the potential co-optation of innovative processes by specialised bodies that may not be fully aligned with social demands, thereby questioning their participatory nature; the weakening of the welfare state and its universalism in favour of private initiatives, which could undermine their effectiveness; and the exclusion of power relations in the analysis of social realities that underpin innovative processes, potentially casting doubt on the transformative nature of SI.

However, within this body of criticism, there is relatively little reflection on the implications that the 'being' and the 'ought to be' of citizenship or the subject hold for the model of social change that European SI policies are intended to bring about, although, as mentioned above, this object of study has been explored in the context of European labour policies

(Serrano et al. 2012; Martínez and Amigot 2015) and social exclusion policies (Arregui 2022; Crespo and Serrano 2007). Accordingly, this article has two research objectives: first, to characterise the 'being' and 'ought to be' of the citizenship model within the European SI discursive framework, drawing on the Foucauldian conceptualisation of the 'neoliberal subject'; and second, to problematise the implications of this model for the analysis of the social reality of European social policies on SI. To address these objectives, the study employs a qualitative methodological strategy based on discourse analysis as outlined by Van Dijk (2000) and Glynos and Howarth (2008). Specifically, this research technique is applied to a selection of 26 institutional texts from the EC pertaining to SI policy from 2010 to 2024. Through the development of deductive and inductive analytical categories, the study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of these texts, offering critical explanations of the discourse related to the research subject.

The structure of the document is as follows: The first section introduces the object of study and its discursive institutional context. The second section presents the theoretical framework, addressing the concept of SI and its relation to literature linking it to social change, as well as the framework necessary to understand the construction of the neoliberal subject in public policies. The third section details the methodological process used and analyses the EC documents on SI. The fourth and fifth sections present the results of the discourse analysis, organised into four categories that characterise the 'being' and 'ought to be' of the object of study and illustrate the implications for analysing the social reality of European social policies on SI. Finally, the conclusions offer reflections on the results and suggest new ways to understand the discursive framework of European SI.

2. Social Innovation as a Solution for Social Change

Although, as noted earlier, there is a lack of consensus within academia (Hernández-Ascanio et al. 2016; Zubero 2015; Rueede and Lurtz 2012; Gurrutxaga 2013) and the EC (European Commission 2022a; Misuraca et al. 2015) regarding the definition of SI and its potential for social change, the literature often presents the concept as a tool with significant transformative capacity in both structural and systemic terms (Seyfang and Haxeltine 2012; Marques et al. 2017; Edwards-Schachter and Wallace 2017). Thus, SI is expected not only to impact the economic sphere but also to induce changes in the political and cultural realms, interrelating macro and micro dynamics (Martínez-Celorrio 2017).

Many authors (Moulaert and MacCallum 2019; Mulgan et al. 2007) argue that SI fosters such transformations through its unfolding in social reality, which involves the following phases: diagnosis of problems and needs, generation of ideas and innovative solutions, design and implementation of actions, evaluation and feedback, and scaling and sustainability (Murray et al. 2010; European Commission 2022a, 2022b, 2022c).

For this innovative process to effect structural or systemic changes in social realities, Subirats et al. (2012) assert that it is essential first to define these realities as problematic and make their functioning comprehensible by breaking down the involved elements. As with any act of interpretation, this operationalisation of reality in public policy relies on, firstly, situated knowledge, which is inherently non-neutral, with certain causal logics and political solutions prevailing over others (Martínez and Amigot 2015); and, secondly, a technocratic and instrumental approach to the analysis of social reality (Jessop et al. 2016; Espiau 2017; Conejero and Redondo 2016). The fragmentation of social logics often obscures their relational, conflictual, and structural nature, prioritising technical/rational solutions (Rueede and Lurtz 2012; Zubero 2015). Consequently, the reduction of reality into measurable social problems presents a naturalised perspective that is difficult to interpret in structural terms (Hernández-Ascanio et al. 2016).

Furthermore, considering that this process occurs within a capitalist framework, public intervention must ensure, on the one hand, an argument about collective advantages in terms of the common good, and on the other, models of everyday actions that can challenge citizens (Boltanski and Chiapello 2010). The moral and normative relationship between capitalism and labour, as established by Weber (2004), has evolved into what is referred to

as the "new capitalist spirit", characterised by naturalised arguments to which adaptation is deemed necessary (Weiss and Wodak 2003). As Boltanski and Chiapello describe, "The spirit which, at a given moment in history, makes the process of accumulation possible, finds itself permeated by cultural productions which are contemporary to it, but which have been developed in most cases for purposes totally unrelated to the justification of capitalism" (2010, p. 27).

Having characterised the framework within which current public policies operate, European public institutions—disseminators of this "new spirit" (Boltanski and Chiapello 2010)—establish the discursive conditions necessary to communicate their message. As Crespo and Serrano observe, "These justifications, even if they are sufficiently substantial, acquire the status of self-evident facts. At present, this impression of substance is created by a continual appeal to economics, which is endowed with an appearance of political and ethical neutrality. This is particularly true of the discourse used by European institutions" (2007, p. 7). Specifically, this European discursive framework identifies social issues to be addressed through SI and evaluated by the Theory of Change (ToC) methodology (European Commission 2021c), aiming for scenarios of sustainable growth, competitiveness, and inclusion (European Commission 2020, 2022a, 2022b, 2024a). The state is presented as an obsolete entity, whose bureaucratic rigidity hinders flexibility and responsiveness to rapid social and economic changes such as "climate change; pollution; biodiversity loss; the digital transition; an aging population; and the need to build a more resilient, competitive, democratic, and inclusive Europe" (European Commission 2024a, p. 3). Discourses identifying the lack of institutional innovation and the misalignment between state policies and local realities reinforce the notion that the state is unable to provide adaptive or effective solutions (Hernández-Ascanio et al. 2016; Zubero 2015). In response to this perception, the model of new governance materialised in SI policies (European Commission 2018a, 2021a) emerges as an alternative that distributes power more horizontally, granting non-state actors an active role in the implementation of solutions. However, an evaluation of the ESF programme (European Commission 2018b) indicates that practical realities often diverge from discursive ideals. This report notes that only 35.7% of European SI programmes focused on addressing competencies (social issues) traditionally managed by the state. Social challenges and systemic changes remain largely at the discursive level.

The Role of Individuals in European SI Discourse

We have seen how the literature reflects on the apparent neutrality of social analyses that inform public policies. Now, we will explore in greater depth the subjects of their intervention. We noted that there are multiple policies (European Commission 2018a, 2024c). This has led to a range of public policies aimed at compensating for deficits in citizens' social and cultural capital, framed within the imperatives of progress and the common good associated with economic growth (Crespo and Serrano 2007).

In this context, public institutions discursively present a construction of the citizen being as a subject capable of knowing rationally and tackling the global problems described, urging them to commit themselves to the reality before them. Amigot and Martínez describe this normativity of 'being' as follows: "Discourses on human capital have provided new insights into subjective formation, shifting the focus from homo economicus—the market-driven subject of exchange guided by interest and calculation—to a subject expected to manage himself (and every aspect of his life) as capital whose maximisation must be promoted: the entrepreneur of the self" (2022, p. 5). Therefore, when we talk about the process of subjective construction or citizen 'being', we refer to the Foucauldian sense (Foucault 2005, 2009). Moving away from the traditional conception of an individual with a fixed or pre-existing essence, it is understood that the conception of the subject's being is a contingent construction that emerges from power relations and discourses that—understood as practices of knowledge production—name the individual, classify him or her, and position him or her within a defining and normative framework. This construction of the understanding of the subject (the 'being' of citizenship in this text),

understood as relational, in the context of public policy, is the result of a non-neutral process of subjectification that entails a specific normativity (the 'ought to be' of citizenship).

Specifically, the literature (Briales 2017; Serrano et al. 2012; Amigot and Martínez 2022) that reads Foucault (2005, 2009) perpetuates the idea that such understanding and normativity are not neutral and are embedded with a neoliberal logic within the space of public policies. This 'neoliberal subject' being referenced is understood through two traditional liberal qualities (Hayek 1966): the first is (economic) rationality, which associates citizenship with qualities of autonomy, coherence in the decision-making process, and the ability to use reasoning to understand the world objectively and beneficially; and the second is agency, which grants citizens the capacity to act according to rationality, that is, to self-govern (Giddens 1995).

However, the 'neoliberal subject' in Foucauldian terms contributes to the construction of the rational and agentic subject with a normativity that must be understood within its economic context. Thus, in contrast to a system that appears almost naturally given (non-contradictory, unchanging, and conflict-free), the individual is considered a responsible subject capable of integrating into its political and economic renewal (Bauman 2000). The qualities of the ideal person and citizen are dialectically mimicked by those that once defined the good worker (Martínez and Amigot 2015). This new collectivity is discursively constructed within public policies as the engine of development and change within the complex reality of capitalism (Sennett 2006). Specifically, the policies that target SI revive that 'innovative personality' which had previously been presented as a requirement for economic growth (Sztompka 1995).

Finally, we must consider the construction of this discursive strategy for the (re)legitimation of neoliberal rationality and the necessary transformation of subjectivities (Fougère et al. 2017). Far from being mere discursive desiderata, evaluations of projects funded by SI programmes conclude that "The vast majority of initiatives in the sub-sample (72%) are related to investing in people's skills and capacities to improve their opportunities for integration into society and the labour market. These are followed by initiatives addressing 'Investing in individuals throughout their lives' (46%), which aim to ensure that social protection systems respond to people's needs at critical moments during their lives" (Misuraca et al. 2015, p. 6).

3. Materials and Methods

This research has two main objectives: first, to characterise the 'being' and 'ought to be' of the citizenship model within the European SI discursive framework, drawing on the Foucauldian conceptualisation of the 'neoliberal subject'; and second, to problematise the implications of this model for the analysis of the social reality of European social policies on SI, in line with critical literature.

The study employs a qualitative methodological strategy using Van Dijk's (2000) discourse analysis technique, framed within the "logics of critical explanation" perspective of Glynos and Howarth (2008). Similar to Foucault's (2005) conceptualisation of discourse, these authors enable us to treat institutional texts—specifically, the European institutional discursive framework of SI—as sources of ontological and epistemological meaning regarding social reality (Fougère et al. 2017). This perspective not only helps to characterise the regime of SI discursive practice but also to understand its political implications. To conduct a critical and contextualised discourse analysis, Glynos and Howarth advocate for a strategy of equivalence and difference: "Logics of equivalence and difference thus emphasize the dynamic process by which political frontiers are constructed, stabilized, strengthened, or weakened" (2008, p. 12).

The analysis will examine key official documents on SI from the main Directorates-General (Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion; Education, Youth, Sport and Culture; Research and Innovation) that manage social policy within the European Commission from 2010 to 2024. It is worth noting that this analysis is not intended to be representative of the entire corpus of European policy documents but rather exploratory of the discursive

framework of SI in terms of 'the being' and duty of citizenship or subjectivity. In this sense, it appears appropriate to categorise these premises regarding citizenship within social policies, as they specifically address aspects related to daily life and tend to engage more explicitly with citizens as subjects of rights and responsibilities (BEPA 2010; European Commission 2018a, 2021a, 2021d). Moreover, it is necessary to justify that among the selected documents are included strategies, framework programmes, toolkits, and calls for proposals. The selection of these documents is informed by the EC's direct statement on the concept of SI: "the literature on SI is dominated by 'grey literature', such as policy advisory reports, applied research memoranda, and normative 'to-do' lists" (Misuraca et al. 2015, p. 20). This justifies the choice of the sources of information for this study. Furthermore, the decision not to include legislative documents (regulations, directives, decisions, opinions, etc.) is based, firstly, on the definition of 'grey literature' and, secondly, on the decision to avoid the discursive fragmentation of the object of study.

Regarding the document selection process, the search was conducted via the official website of the European Commission using the following search terms: "social innovation" + "EaSI" + "ESF". The latter two terms are justified by the EC's designation of the programmes: "ESF and EaSI Funds in general are key elements for mainstreaming social innovation, not only because they provide essential resources that can trigger innovation to address societal challenges, but also due to their 'contextualised' nature—stemming from shared management—that means they operate closer to the local and regional economy and social fabric (which is a key feature of social innovation)" (European Commission 2021c, p. 14). The search results yielded 42 documents that formally met the selection/exclusion criteria mentioned (non-legislative, only related to the Directorates-General for social policy, and aligned with the proposed time frame). From this initial selection, those referring only to "innovation" or "technological innovation" (n = 13) were discarded, as well as those mentioning "social innovation" but not focusing on it (n = 7). Finally, the selection was completed with documents related to funding instruments indirectly associated with SI policies, such as "Horizon Europe" and "EU Missions" (n = 4), resulting in a total of 26 texts for discourse analysis (see Table 1).

Table 1. Selected documents for discursive analysis.

Year of Publication	Title of Document
2010	Europe 2020: A European strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth
2010	Empowering people, driving change: Social Innovation in the European Union
2013	Guide to Social Innovation
2015	ICT-Enabled Social Innovation in support of the Implementation of the Social Investment Package (IESI)
2018a	The Lisbon Declaration. Social Innovation as a path to a sustainable, resilient and inclusive Europe
2018b	ESF performance and thematic reports: The ESF support to Social Innovation
2019	European Programme for Employment and Social Innovation (2014–2020): Actions to boost the development of finance markets for social enterprises
2020	Social innovation: inspirational practices supporting people throughout their lives
2021	Regulation (EU) 2021/692 for European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)
2021a	Building an economy that works for people: An action plan for the social economy
2021b	The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan
2021c	Finance your Social Innovation: Funding toolkit for early-stage social innovators

Table 1. *Cont.*

Year of Publication	Title of Document
2021d	Horizon Europe strategic plan (2021–2024)
2021e	Practical guide: Creating pathways of support for vulnerable young people to enter training and the labour market
2022a	Social experimentation: A practical guide for project promoters
2022b	The ESF and community-led local development: Lessons for the future
2022c	Scaling-up social innovation: Seven steps for using ESF+
2022d	Commission Implementing Decision on the financing of the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme and the adoption of the work programme for 2023–2024
2022e	Fostering creative solutions to Europe's societal challenges
2023a	EACEA and the European year of skills supporting upskilling and reskilling
2023b	2024 annual work programme within the framework of the European Social Fund Plus
2023c	EU Missions two years on: assessment of progress and way forward
2024a	Horizon Europe strategic plan (2025–2027)
2024b	Assessing and disseminating the results of the social innovation calls financed by the EU Programme for Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI) 2014–2020
2024c	New European Innovation Agenda on the move
2024d	Towards zero long-term unemployment in the EU: Job guarantees and other innovative approaches

Source: own elaboration.

Finally, the discourse analysis is conducted through a two-stage process: first, by describing the analytical categories derived from the theoretical framework (deductive) and the documents analysed (inductive); and second, by performing a comprehensive reading of these categories, establishing relationships of equivalence and difference (Glynos and Howarth 2008). A table outlining the analytical categories is presented below (Table 2).

Table 2. Analytical categories and subcategories.

Type of Analytical Category	Dimension	Category	Subcategory
Deductive/Inductive	The 'being'	Rational subject	The individual is able to understand reality through learning
Deductive/Inductive	The 'ought to be'	Active subject	The individual is capable of changing reality and, understood as a labour force, can solve structural problems, which are identified normatively
Deductive	The 'being'	Social reality	Reality is determined, can be fragmented and measurable.
Inductive	The 'ought to be'	Subjective implications of reality analysis	The individual, understood as a labour force within a reality that can change, becomes a neoliberal subject.

Source: own elaboration.

4. Results

4.1. Citizenship as a Rational Subject in European Social Innovation Policies

Before commencing the categorical analysis, it is pertinent to make an important observation. While it is methodologically essential to favour a characterisation of the 'ideal

types' that will be delineated in the analysis, the qualitative logic itself requires that this is understood not as a fixed construct, but rather dialectically. In some instances, it will be observed that in explaining the dimension of the 'being', certain elements of its normative aspect will be posited, and conversely, to enhance understanding. Nonetheless, it will be ensured that the meanings predominantly corresponding to each category emerge.

Thus, let us explore how the dimension of the 'being' in citizenship is characterised within the institutional discursive framework of SI in European social policies. The analysis of the documents shows that most of them address their discourse to two main strategic actors for deploying SI processes: firstly, public institutions or "public innovation" processes; and secondly, citizens, referred to as "innovators" (e.g., European Commission 2018a, 2021c) or, to a lesser extent, "experimenters" (e.g., European Commission 2024d). Conversely, organised civil society and the private sector are less frequently addressed in documents that aim to explain the 'step-by-step' of SI or to evaluate SI practices (e.g., European Commission 2020, 2021e, 2022c), although theoretical documents often identify these groups as key actors (e.g., European Commission 2018a, 2024c). While this focus may seem peripheral to the research aim of this paper, it has significant implications for the characterisation sought here. Citizenship is emerging as a co-protagonist in promoting social and systemic change through SI. For example, the document *The ESF and Community-Led Local Development: Lessons for the Future* states that "In responding to these challenges, we need new ways of doing, which put citizens at the centre of the action" (European Commission 2022b, p. 5). Another representative fragment of this characterisation can be found in the *Social Investment Package (SIP)*: "Investing in people's skills and capacities to improve their opportunities to integrate into society and the labour market" (Misuraca et al. 2015, p. 39).

From this premise, the SI discourse produces and reproduces a series of ontological and epistemological characteristics ascribed to the 'being' of the subject or citizen and their role in enabling social change. On one hand, citizens are depicted as capable of understanding their environment, as reality and its problems are presented as knowable, determined, and measurable. Numerous examples illustrate this, especially in practical documents that detail how problems can be addressed and solved through SI processes (e.g., European Commission 2019, 2021d, 2024b).

On the other hand, this understanding of the subject is framed as rational. The texts frequently suggest that solving (intelligible) problems involves training and informing citizens. Examples include documents such as *EACEA and the European Year of Skills* and *Horizon* Europe (2021–2024). A subject aware of the social reality in which they live and the consequences of their actions is seen as sufficiently equipped to overcome these challenges (e.g., BEPA 2010, European Commission 2013, 2022c). The EU's discursive framework reinforces this approach with educational arguments based on the principles of individual autonomy. That is, the individual capable of rationally understanding social reality is shaped by "learning throughout life", a central theme in European SI policies (e.g., European Commission 2024a, 2018b, 2013). A concrete example of this is the following excerpt from the *Social Investment Package (SIP)*:

"The idea of social investment (i.e., investing in people) has emerged as a means of providing an adequate standard of living for all citizens in the context of economic and financial crisis. This investment is intended to prepare citizens throughout their lives to confront risks, rather than simply repairing their consequences—especially considering the societal challenges Europe faces today. The need to invest in people's skills and capacities starts at a very early age and continues throughout their lives" (Misuraca et al. 2015, p. 39).

4.2. Citizenship as an Active Subject in European SI Policies

Continuing with the characterization of the 'ought to be' of the subject, the discourse on SI shifts from the need for learning to the capacity for action. The rational logic inherently calls for an active, responsible subject, capable of generating and equipping themselves

with the necessary elements for social change. An example of this is found in the *Horizon Europe* programme document (2021–2024):

"People will also have more equitable access to knowledge and skills required for making informed choices and being actively engaged in the sustainable management of natural resources, from production to consumption and disposal" (European Commission 2021d, p. 92).

Interestingly, this process is not only depicted as a self-conscious and logical aspect of the 'being' of the subject due to the learning they carry out, but also as a normative scenario directed by EU institutions. The documents frequently convey this normative aspect of citizenship through terms such as "reforming society" (e.g., European Commission 2021b, 2022a), "changing decision-making" (e.g., European Commission 2024a, 2024b), "changing values and attitudes" (e.g., BEPA 2010; European Commission 2021a, 2022d), or "teaching new skills" (e.g., European Commission 2010, 2023a, 2023c).

This normativity appears to be justified on two grounds: firstly, by the inherent potential of SI processes, and secondly, by the consideration of the citizen as a working subject. Concerning the first argument, all the documents analysed emphasize that individuals are expected to change and be changed under the objectives of "common good", "social welfare", "social progress", and "economic growth". For instance, Regulation 2021/692 for the *European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)* states: "Taking into account the changing realities of the world of work, the Union should be prepared for current and future challenges by investing in relevant skills, education, training, and lifelong learning, making growth more inclusive and improving employment and social policies, while considering economic and industrial sustainability, labour mobility, and aiming to establish a gender-balanced labour market" (European Parliament and Council 2021, p. 2).

Regarding the second reason for this normativity, it is notable that in almost half of the texts, the boundaries between citizenship and the labour force are blurred. Terms such as "work/labour force" (e.g., European Commission 2022a, 2021a, 2018b) and "workers" (e.g., European Commission 2021b, 2023a, 2019) are recurrent in discursive contexts that justify the use of SI as a means of promoting social progress. This conflation of terms reinforces an economic-centric view of reality, which is analysed in subsequent sections. Examples include:

"Europe needs to make full use of its labour potential to face the challenges of an aging population and rising global competition. Policies to promote gender equality will be needed to increase labour force participation, thus contributing to growth and social cohesion" (European Commission 2010, p. 16).

"Supporting manufacturing technologies, standards, and data availability [...] will empower workers, consumers, and the general public to ensure that technology benefits everyone" (European Commission 2024a, p. 14).

Having identified what the individual is and can be, and justified the need for changes in behaviour and skills, the next step is to characterize these new capabilities necessary for securing Europe's future. Among the most recurrent adjectives are "healthy", "empowered", "informed", "digital", and "resilient" (e.g., BEPA 2010; European Commission 2021c). The European institutional discursive framework is linked to a hypothetical future, achievable through the implementation of the described skills and facilitating SI processes. As stated in the *Horizon Europe* document (2021–2024): "Creating a more resilient, inclusive, and democratic European society, prepared and responsive to threats and disasters, addressing inequalities and providing high-quality health care, and empowering all citizens to act in the green and digital transitions" (European Commission 2021d, p. 9).

4.3. Subjective Implications of the Social Reality Depicted in European SI Policies

In the characterization of the 'being' and 'ought to be' of the citizen or subject proposed by European social policies on SI, some elements of the understanding of social reality (its being) that frame and justify the deployment of SI processes and initiatives have already

emerged. In this section, we will detail how key ideas reiterated in these public policies are presented and explore the implications for the shaping of a neoliberal subject.

SI policies, due to their role as tools for social or systemic change (e.g., European Commission 2013, 2020, 2022c, 2024b), include an analysis of social reality and the identification of social problems they aim to address. Typically, these issues are described—a way of the 'being' of reality is identified—through causal logic, where one fact necessarily leads to another. This chain of reasoning is evident not only in texts or sections of social diagnosis (e.g., European Commission 2021d, 2023a) but also in those detailing necessary interventions (e.g., European Commission 2018a, 2021c). Additionally, problems often receive ad hoc solutions, rather than being addressed dialectically or relationally. For example, "The development of the regional economy is a requirement for the creation of jobs, which facilitates the participation of vulnerable persons in the labour market and thus contributes to reducing poverty" (European Commission 2018a, p. 34).

Within this framework, SI is envisioned as being deployed across various fields: social services (e.g., Misuraca et al. 2015), labour policies (e.g., European Commission 2024b), and environmental policies (e.g., European Commission 2023c). The common objective that justifies the use of SI in such diverse areas is based on three normative premises regarding the 'ought to be' of reality: firstly, social challenges have changed, and the state does not know how to generate economic growth; and secondly, social welfare relies on citizens' adaptation to the economic system as a workforce.

Concerning the first premise, the analysis of social policy focused on the deployment of SI tends, in most cases, to question the problem-solving and adaptive capacity of bureaucratized institutions. The European Commission argues that if the object of public policy changes due to new social needs and demands, the way it is managed and the spaces where it is developed must change accordingly (e.g., BEPA 2010; European Commission 2013, 2018a, 2021b, 2023c). In this way, a primary space is offered to the new model of citizenship to be the protagonist of the desired change: economic growth.

"Of the challenges we have faced over the last decade, some of the most creative and resourceful solutions were initiated not by powerful, well-resourced institutions, but by compassionate, principled and committed citizens, entrepreneurs and civil society organisations, often in partnership with public authorities. We have seen renewed interest in using cooperatives as part of the solution for creating meaningful employment" (European Commission 2018a, p. 3).

Regarding the second, European documents consistently indicate that identifying social problems for SI intervention involves strengthening the competitiveness of the European economy through the technological sector (e.g., European Commission 2013, 2018b, 2023a; European Parliament and Council 2021). Despite the extensive period under analysis (2010–2024) and the various policies considered, the SI discourse predominantly portrays economic growth as the essential means to achieve a better quality of life and social cohesion. Examples of this enduring discourse include:

"Investing in research and development, innovation, education, and resource-efficient technologies will benefit traditional sectors, rural areas, and high-skill service economies. It will reinforce economic, social, and territorial cohesion" (European Commission 2010, p. 13).

"Investment in R&I in key digital technologies is crucial for improving Europe's competitiveness in the digital value chain, integrating world-leading digital capabilities and technologies into its economy and industry, and strengthening its position in global markets of innovative goods and services. Such investment is also crucial to ensure that digital technologies uphold, by design, Europe's principles and values, and people's rights" (European Commission 2024a, p. 14).

The third premise, which involves the dependence of social welfare on citizens' adaptation to the economic system, becomes clearer when examined in the context of economic growth. Many documents not only discuss changing skills and values to make citizens more 'resilient,' 'healthy,' 'empowered,' or 'digital,' but they also equate social welfare with

labour market welfare (e.g., European Commission 2019, 2023b). An illustrative example is found in the founding document of SI, *Empowering People, Driving Change*:

"The aim [of SI] is to create the socio-economic and cultural conditions for an innovative, risk-taking society. Overcoming marginalization and unemployment in the labour market, maintaining high health and education standards, and improving the quality of life in Europe go hand in hand with an innovative European knowledge-based society and a competitive Europe. An enabling welfare system based on a risk-sharing approach that is institutionally embedded and provides proactive support and trust to individuals as employees, entrepreneurs, family members, and citizens engaged in creating value" (BEPA 2010, p. 85).

Thus, regardless of the social issue addressed by SI—whether gender inequality, population ageing, climate change, migration crises, or social cohesion—the analysis often explains challenges solely through the labour factor (e.g., European Commission 2022a, 2021a, 2018b, 2021b, 2023a, 2019). The labour market becomes the "magic arena" where all social problems are presumed to be solvable, with SI serving as the ideal framework for entry into this arena. As stated in the *Europe 2020 strategy*:

"Better educational levels help employability, and progress in increasing the employment rate helps to reduce poverty. Greater capacity for research and development, as well as innovation across all sectors of the economy, combined with increased resource efficiency, will improve competitiveness and foster job creation. Investing in cleaner, low-carbon technologies will help our environment, contribute to fighting climate change, and create new business and employment opportunities" (European Commission 2010, p. 13).

In conclusion, the European social policies on SI analysed in this study appear to tend towards a discursive production and reproduction of the 'being' of the subject as rational and capable of understanding their environment (social reality). Furthermore, throughout the analysis, it has been observed how normative expectations often overlap with the configuration of this model of citizenship and the characterization of a reality subject to change. This expectation of the 'ought to be' of the subject is largely justified by the need for a reality of economic growth that cannot be addressed solely by the state, mimetising the rational and active subject in the 'neoliberal subject'. This reality, understood in terms of competitiveness and technological progress, is presented as an end in itself due to its appearance of well-being and social progress. These premises, as we have seen, constantly appeal to the subject to fulfil that construction of the 'ought to be' proposed discursively by the institutional framework of SI social policies.

5. Discussion

To address this point, we will use the perspective outlined in the methodological section by Glynos and Howarth (2008), known as the "logics of critical explanation". This approach will allow us to (re)construct the critical logic behind the institutional discourse of European SI and address the research objectives set out for this article.

Starting with the equivalences that respond to the first research objective, the analysis of the 'being' and the 'ought to be' of the subject or citizenship within European SI social policies reveals elements that, when interpreted through the theoretical framework, characterise it as neoliberal in Foucauldian terms. The findings indicate a tendency to portray the 'being' of the subject as a responsible protagonist of the social change pursued by SI policies; rational, in the sense of understanding social reality and its problems; and active, or capable of becoming so, based on self-conscious normative premises directed by public institutions. As highlighted in critical literature (Briales 2017; Serrano et al. 2012; Amigot and Martínez 2022), the prominence of entrepreneurial logics centred on the 'entrepreneur of the self' and economic reasoning has become significant in public SI policy.

However, as Glynos and Howarth (2008) suggest, generating critical explanations also involves identifying discursive differences. This means that in the process of characterising the subject, political implications derived from the analysis of reality emerge. Thus, European SI policies present fundamental contradictions that can support a critical explanation

of the phenomenon addressed. Below, we describe some reflections that help to inform our responses to the second research objective.

Among the implications of constructing this model of citizenship or subject in relation to the analysis of social reality (or differences in terms of Glynos and Howarth 2008), it is noteworthy that the construction of the subject is done in a way that is distanced from ucadialectical and conflictual understandings (Foucault 2005, 2009). Decision-making, from the perspective of economic rationality, is characterised by an emphasis on individuals' capacity to act autonomously and logically in pursuit of their personal interests. This approach promotes an agential interpretation (Giddens 1995) that highlights individual freedom and choice. However, this perspective can obscure the power relations and structural inequalities inherent in social practices (Fougère et al. 2017; Hernández-Ascanio et al. 2016). By promoting an image of 'omnipotent' and free citizenship, it creates the illusion that any individual, by following the correct steps and adopting a rational approach, can address and resolve complex social problems (Foucault 2009). This model suggests that poverty, inequality, and other social issues are merely matters of personal choice and action, ignoring the systemic barriers that limit individuals' options. Such a conception may influence public policies, which, by basing themselves on the premise that individuals should take responsibility for their circumstances, often fail to address the structural roots of social problems, thereby perpetuating inequalities rather than resolving them. Furthermore, while individuals possess the capacity to act, their choices are mediated by a social and economic context that can either restrict or facilitate their agency.

Nevertheless, the model of citizenship presented in SI social policies is shaped by normative premises that, far from being neutral, as critical literature suggests (Martínez and Amigot 2015), guide the 'ought to be' of the subject towards a particular way of promoting specific changes.

On the one hand, it seems that one way of promoting systemic transformations through the deployment of SI is by recognising that the subject is an agent of change who understands and solves problems more effectively than the state. As critical literature has pointed out (Gurrutxaga 2013; Hernández-Ascanio et al. 2016; Zubero 2015), the new model of citizenship not only has the capacity but also the responsibility to procure its own well-being (Sennett 2006). However, this phenomenon, observed in the texts, becomes a fundamental tool for problematising these policies. As some authors have suggested, understanding the subject from non-conflictual perspectives can undermine the transformative capacity of SI (Hernández-Ascanio et al. 2016; Rueede and Lurtz 2012; Swyngedouw 2009).

On the other hand, the social welfare that is to be pursued is presented as achievable only through the promotion of economic growth. SI policies, under discursive logics of systemic change, propose promoting skills and values that help individuals become more participatory, informed, adaptable, etc. This moral and normative relationship, observed in the analysed texts, reminds us of Boltanski and Chiapello's (2010) 'new spirit of capitalism', which disguises collective benefits as what ultimately becomes categorised as skills and values aligned with the capitalist labour market.

Thus, this discourse becomes plausible thanks to a naturalised, given, and fragmented analysis of reality (Weiss and Wodak 2003). This way of understanding the social environment and its functioning, widely employed in SI (Jessop et al. 2016; Espiau 2017; Conejero and Redondo 2016), guarantees a discourse that presents systemic solutions instrumentally. This links directly to the belief in the 'being' of the subject. If reality can be operationalised and its problems addressed in a fragmented manner, it seems logical to associate the subject's being with a capacity for total understanding, detached from any context. However, this simplicity of the 'being', the 'ought to be', and reality may operate discursively, but in practice, it presents many obstacles that suggest that SI-based policies operate on premises far removed from reality (Hernández-Ascanio et al. 2016). As critical literature (Briales 2017; Serrano et al. 2012; Amigot and Martínez 2022) and some institutional documents (European Commission 2018b, 2020) note, the evaluation of practical SI experiences reveals

a gap in the justification of all the potentialities attributed to the concept. Moreover, the persistent emphasis on changing, adapting, or (re)educating citizenship, supported by the literature (Crespo and Serrano 2007; Weiss and Wodak 2003), may obscure the true nature of this change. Instead, a work-centred logic seems to emerge that prioritises economic growth, which is difficult to reconcile with the SI discourse.

6. Conclusions

The aim of this article was to examine how European social policies on SI conceptualize citizenship or the subject from a Foucauldian critical perspective, and to explore the implications of the social realities presented in these policies. To achieve this, the study analysed the results and relevant literature, seeking to identify equivalences and differences in order to provide a critical explanation of this political practice.

This study reveals notable trends in the discourse surrounding European SI policies. Citizens are positioned at the heart of SI processes, which implies a responsibility for instigating social change. This central role is justified by characterizing the subject as rational, active, and in alignment with institutional norms. However, this characterization reveals certain contradictions, which enable a more critical perspective. Specifically, the portrayal of the subject often revolves around the enhancement and reform of labour skills to foster economic growth. Consequently, the discourse of empowerment is coupled with an implicit normativity that equates the ideal citizen with an effective worker in the technological era.

Moreover, the citizen model proposed by the European Commission assumes a reality and social problems that are presented as natural and measurable, devoid of conflict. The analysis of the texts reveals a conceptualisation of social reality characterised by a deterministic and causal logic. It is suggested that economic growth driven by SI promotes social welfare, thereby simplifying and overlooking the more complex structural dimensions of social issues. This underscores another significant contradiction between the ideal of an active subject and the power relations that constrain this agency.

Regarding the limitations, this exploratory study acknowledges that its findings should not be read as representative of the discursive institutional framework of SI but rather as an approximation to its possible characterisation informed by critical literature. Future research could continue to characterise the discursive institutional body that nourishes this object of study, SI, to extend the proposed reflections to a more representative number of documents. Furthermore, the discursive nature of the research leaves unexamined political practices that would greatly enrich the holistic view of the SI phenomenon. Therefore, it would also be interesting to attempt to identify these premises in local or practical contexts.

Finally, this article underscores the importance of critically examining social policy discourses, which often translate collective experiences into individual responsibilities within structural frameworks. Such an approach may limit the effectiveness of these policies in comprehensively addressing the identified social challenges. Therefore, it is essential to adopt more critical and reflexive perspectives that question underlying economic assumptions and support a more dialectical and conflictual approach if the goal is social transformation.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The original data presented in the study are openly available in The Open Science Framework at https://osf.io/vhd3p/?view_only=db988559dc0d4ef8b948e218fe760f5a (accessed on 1 August 2024).

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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