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Critical Perspectives on Social Innovation 3:2025

ATONING FOR SOCIAL HARM: REDEMPTION AND SOCIAL INNOVATION

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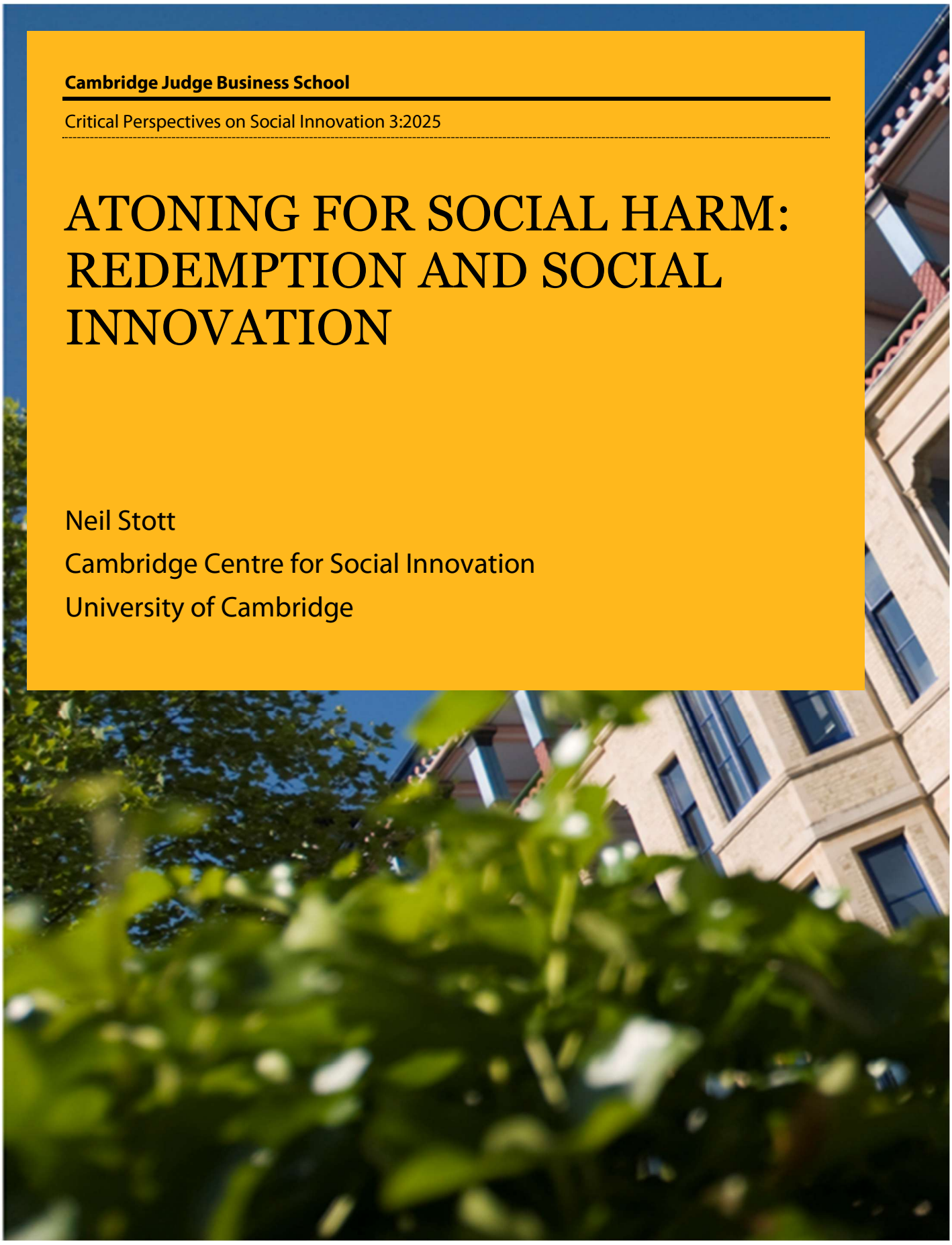

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Foreword

The Critical Perspectives in Social Innovation series of working papers is designed to provide challenging analyses. The purpose of the series is to critically examine prevailing assumptions, practices and narratives within social innovation. By bringing together academic research and practitioner insights, the series seeks to bridge the gap between theory and practice, encourage reflection, and support the development of a critically informed social innovation for a more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable world.

In this essay Neil examines the role of atonement and redemption in motivating social innovation. It explores how shame, guilt, anger, fear, and hope—the "Big 5" motivations for social innovation —shape individual and collective responses to social harm.

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Atoning for social harm: Redemption and social innovation

Recently, I was surprised when a university colleague revealed that their motivation to engage in social innovation was 'to atone' for harms committed during what many would regard as a long and distinguished career outside academia. I had not come across the concept of atonement juxtaposed with social innovation before. The social innovation literature tends to emphasises prosocial and positive motivations such as altruism and compassion[1] providing meaning and a sense of purpose. My colleagues' statement suggested that there might be other motivating factors. If so, what role did atonement for individual or collective social harms play?

The term 'social harm' refers to harms which[2] impacts individuals, communities, and societies, regardless of whether they are legally recognised as crimes. Social harm's origins are within Edwin Sutherland's 1949 seminal work on white-collar crime, which highlighted harmful actions committed by elites and corporations that were regulated by civil law rather than criminal law. Sutherland's ideas challenged the conventional focus on street-level crimes and opened the door to considering other forms of societal harm[3]. Social harms, therefore, include pollution, state violence, poverty and climate change.

So, how might we atone for social harms such the consumption of fossil fuels or the death of a migrant at sea? We may give something up or replace it with something less harmful - swapping from a petrol to electric car for instance. We may give back through time (volunteering) or financial donation. We might take to the streets to protest or seek public office to drive change. Or, become social innovators.

But why do we attempt to atone for social harms in the first place? Shame and guilt perhaps[4]. The shame of others suffering at our expense for cheaper goods such as bricks[5] or food[6]. The shame due to the actions of our nation in the support of slavery, genocide or ecocide. The guilt of privilege. The guilt of over consumption or avarice when others have none. The belated mea culpa of the billionaire whose philanthropic efforts are often dwarfed by accumulated harms during wealth making[7]. For the religious, a motivation is to avoid the less attractive option for the afterlife. Atonement is also underpinned by fear - the fear of inaction making matters worse - and the hope that a difference can be made. And let's not forget anger - anger at all the people or organisations who cause social harm. In all, I consider shame, guilt, anger, fear and hope to be the 'Big 5' motivators for social innovators.

Of course, to feel guilt etc. and atone for harms- social or otherwise- requires an acceptance that there is a harm and one bears all or part of the responsibility. What is a social harm and what and how to atone for is socially constructed. In milieu where, it is argued, the grand (or meta) narratives such as ideas of progress, an ideology or a religion which provided guardrails for collective thought and behaviours -as well as what needs to be atoned for -have lost their attraction[8], the social construction of harm and atonement has become ever more contested.

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[1] For example: Miller, T. L., Grimes, M. G., McMullen, J. S., & Vogus, T. J. (2012). Venturing for others with heart and head: How compassion encourages social entrepreneurship. *Academy of management review,* 37(4), 616-640.

[2] Pemberton, S. A. (2016). *Harmful societies: Understanding social harm*. Policy Press.

[3] Sutherland, E. H. (1983). *White collar crime: The uncut version*. Yale University Press.

[4] Miller, T. L., Grimes, M. G., McMullen, J. S., & Vogus, T. J. (2012). Venturing for others with heart and head: How compassion encourages social entrepreneurship. *Academy of management review,* 37(4), 616-640.

[5] Parsons, L. (2023). *Carbon colonialism: How rich countries export climate breakdown*. Manchester University Press. Manchester.

[6]Davies, J. (2019). Corporate harm and embedded labour exploitation in agri-food supply networks. *European Journal of Criminology*, *17*(1), 70-85.

[7] https://www.oxfamamerica.org/explore/stories/top-5-ways-billionaires-are-bad-for-the-economy/

[8] Lyotard, J.-F. (1984) *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

But what is my colleague - and social innovators more widely- really seeking? I suspect *redemption* is the end goal: the personal and collective redemption of being 'saved' from error, evil, or harm, and being restored to a better state. Redemption, therefore, is pursued through acts of atonement which involves making amends as well as personal and social transformation.

In this essay I explore the idea that a desire for atonement and the redemption of social harms lies at the heart of the contemporary global phenomenon of social innovation. In doing so, I briefly draw on theological thought to outline the idea of 'atonement' and 'redemption' as well as 'social atonement'[9] and 'social redemption'[10] were the focus moves from the individual to the collective - or social- sin of groups and societies. I then explore social atonement and social redemption in a social innovation context. I borrow -and secularise -Simon Maimela's[11] concepts of 'atoning work' and 'reconciling work'[12] to propose that social innovators are engaged in the interrelated activities of social atonement work and social redemption work.

Atonement and redemption

Atonement and redemption are powerful concepts in religious thought. Atonement is the central doctrine in the Christian tradition[13] and generally refers to actions taken to repair relationships fractured by wrongdoing, sin or evil, between individuals or between humanity and God[14]. Eleonore Stump argues that the problem for which atonement is required includes three elements. First, a disposition to moral wrongdoings, past wrongs and the potential for future wrongs. Second, past wrongs and the associated guilt of the wrongdoer and accompanying psychological damage and the knock on effect on others. Finally, shame which is "tied directly or indirectly to human wrongdoing"[15].

To atone may include seeking reconciliation or forgiveness. It may include acts of sacrifice, propitiation (appeasement) or giving satisfaction (such as to cancel a moral debt)[16]. How one atones can include an apology, repentance, truth telling, moral reformation, reparations, penance, punishment and with help from others[17]. Atonement, in various guises, features in most of the world's religions such as the 'selfless service, discipline and dependence on the divine grace through personal effort' - or atonement work- required to be saved or redeemed[18].

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[9] Chamberlin, J. A. (1913). The Social Atonement. *The Biblical World,* 42(2), 67–75. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3142373

[10] Pogin, K. (2021). Social sin, social redemption. *Religious Studies*, 57(1), 157-164. doi:https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412519000581

[11] Simon Maimela developed black theology and advocated for a liberation theology in the context of apartheid South Africa. https://www.unisa.ac.za/sites/corporate/default/Unisa-History-and-Memory-Project/Personalities/All-personalities/Simon-Maimela

[12] Maimela, S. S. (1982). The atonement in the context of liberation theology. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa,* 39, 45-54.

[13] Stump, E (2018), *Atonement*. Oxford Studies In Analytic Theology (Oxford, online edn). https://doi-org.ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/10.1093/oso/9780198813866.001.0001.

[14] Thurow, J. C. (2023) Atonement. *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2023 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.) https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2023/entries/atonement/

[15] Stump, E (2018), *Atonement*. Oxford Studies In Analytic Theology (Oxford, online edn).

[16] Thurow, J. C. (2023) Atonement. *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2023 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.) https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2023/entries/atonement/

[17] Ibid

[18] Mathew, B. (2016). Concept of Redemption in the World Religions: A Comparative Analysis of the Account of Redemption in Semitic Religions and Indian Religions. *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 21, 53-64. Quote p 62.

The end game of religious atonement is redemption. To be redeemed is to be delivered from sin, affliction, suffering or bondage (depending on the religious tradition) and transformed to something better - or a better place[19].

Social atonement and social redemption

Social atonement is a theological concept that extends the traditional idea of atonement - making amends for wrongdoing, sin or evil -from the individual to the collective or societal level[20]. Social atonement addresses the ways in which entire societies or groups are implicated in and respond to collective or social harms. For instance, Kathryn Pogin argues that sin is not merely an individual matter but is deeply embedded in social structures and collective practices, leading to 'social sin'[21]. Kristine Heyer writes that social sin "encompasses the unjust structures, distorted consciousness, and collective actions and inaction that facilitate injustice and dehumanisation"[22]. Simon Maimela talks of 'atoning work' which aims to abolish injustice, deprivation, degradation and misery[23]. While, in his 1913 essay, James Chamberlin emphasises social evils:

> "There are gross evils of which society is not yet conscious. There are organised evils which men condone as necessary or even defend as right, which in the day of our better development will be condemned and in society's final progress will be extirpated. There is a vast amount of work to do in the first steps of social progress. The social conscience must be sensitised. Society must be made to see and feel the presence of great evils"[24].

From a social atonement perspective, redemption requires not just personal transformation but collective action and social change. For Pogin, social redemption involves both following Christ's example and working toward justice and unity within communities[25]. Chamberlain argues "The agitator of society is its angel of blessing. Even an anarchist is not so great an enemy to social order as the condoner and defender of the evil that exists"[26]. And Maimela outlines the 'reconciling work' whereby humans "create life-nourishing and humanising structures ' and because 'God has succeeded in winning the victory over evil, Christians can start to embody and institutionalise this victory here and now in anticipation of the ultimate victory that comes with Christ's second coming"[27]. The initial victory being humans have atoned for their sins, reconciled with God and changed.

In sum, ideas on social sin, social atonement and social redemption aims to move from individual to collective wrongdoing and renewal. Such ideas are central to theological traditions which focus on social justice. Such traditions have had a powerful influence on social activism - as well as how both the religious and secular social activists framed their motivations for action.

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[19] Shulman, G. (2006). Redemption, secularization, and politics. In: Scott, D & Hirschkind, C (Eds). *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors*. Stanford University Press. pp 154-179.
[20] Kotsko, A. (2010). *The politics of redemption: The social logic of salvation* Clark. London
[21] Pogin, K. (2021). Social sin, social redemption. *Religious Studies,* 57(1), 157-164.
[22] Heyer, K. E. (2010). Social sin and immigration: good fences make bad neighbors. *Theological Studies*, *71*(2), 410-436. Quote p413
[23] Maimela, S. S. (1982). The atonement in the context of liberation theology. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa,* 39, 45-54. Quote p52
[24] Chamberlin, J. A. (1913). The Social Atonement. *The Biblical World*, *42*(2), 67-75. Quote p..72
[25] Pogin, K. (2021). Social sin, social redemption. *Religious Studies,* 57(1), 157-164.
[26] Chamberlin, J. A. (1913). The Social Atonement. *The Biblical World*, *42*(2), 67-75. Quote p..72
[27] Maimela, S. S. (1982). The atonement in the context of liberation theology. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa,* 39, 45-54. Quote p53

The role of religious individuals and organisations in social innovation remains important. Faith based social action is the backbone of health and education systems in many parts of the world. Although I base the following statement on anecdotal evidence - after years of public austerity and a shift from grants/philanthropy to entrepreneurial or impact finance approaches - the last voluntary organisations located in the poorest English neighbourhoods are often faith based. Moreover, the postmodern assertion that metanarratives are dead may well have been premature when considering religion. Religion still exerts considerable influence on the faithful, communities and societies and has experienced a resurgence in recent years[28].

Secular atonement and redemption

When reading theological explanations of social atonement and social redemption it is easy to see parallels with secular meta-narratives - the grand, overarching stories that explain history, knowledge, and society without recourse to religious explanations -such as the Enlightenment narratives of progress, Marxism and capitalism.

All secular metanarratives story arcs find people and societies lacking in some way, propose an ideal and a means to achieve perfectibility. For instance, Karl Marx wrote in 1844:

> "…there must be formed a sphere of society which claims no traditional status but only a human status…which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from all the other spheres of society, without, therefore, emancipating all these other spheres, which is, in short, a *total loss* of humanity and which can only redeem itself by *a total redemption of humanity*. This dissolution of society, as a particular class, is the *proletariat*." [29]

In other words, redemption of all from contemporary capitalism will come about when everyone becomes a proletariat and part of a unified 'collective humanity'[30].

I suggest that social change projects - regardless of scale or ambition- include what George Shulman calls 'rhetorics of redemption'[31]. For instance, a green project may include atonement for ecocide, reconciling with nature and a vision of an ecological society with humans and the planet in harmony. A project to integrate ex-prisoners may require atonement for past indiscretions, reconciliation with the public and the creation of a harmonious and stigma free workplace. Or the demand we, not the ex-prisoner, atone for the systemic incarceration of particular groups. From this perspective, rhetorics of redemption and strategies of atonement are powerful tools which aim to provide persuasive route maps to a shared outcome which motivates and delineates believers (the good) and unbelievers (the bad). But dangers lurk. As Shulman warns:

> "Rhetorics of redemption take various forms but always seem to produce the saved by marking and stigmatistigmatisinging the damned, to evoke a true world (of fulfilment and freedom) by devaluing the actual world. People seek redemption from real oppression and grievous injustices, to be sure, but sometimes they do so in ways that

[28] For instance, see: Stolz, J., & Voas, D. (2023). Explaining religious revival in the context of long-term secularization. *Religions*, 14(6), 723.
[29] Marx, K quoted in: da Silva, A.A. (2009). Redemptive Narratives in Marx and Nietzsche. *intersections* 10, no. 2 (2009): pp 151-159.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Shulman, G. (2006). Redemption, secularization, and politics. In: Scott, D & Hirschkind, C (Eds). *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors*. Stanford University Press. pp 154-179.

> turn them, resentfully, against ineradicable or valuable aspects of life and against a past they can neither change nor escape."[32]

Redemption rhetorics can provide the basis both for exemplary and poor behaviours. In part, this is the reason that many avoid metanarratives as they have a tendency to turn to an exclusionary dark side. History is replete with examples from all political and religious persuasions. Redemption rhetorics are part of what Alexander Herzen described as the 'altars of abstractions' - nation, church, progress, history - on which humans who resist the programme may well be sacrificed[33].

Even so, atonement and redemption - personal and social- remain powerful ideas which motivate action. In the next section I explore how social atonement and social redemption might apply to social innovation practice.

Social innovation, social atonement and social redemption

My premise is that all social innovators feel guilt, shame, anger, hope and fear to a greater or lesser degree. The 'Big 5' motivators may be the result of individual or collective actions, or both. For instance, I feel guilty about using an aeroplane and shame and anger for the collective failure to address carbon emissions. I hope that educating the next generations of social innovators[34] or peaceshapers[35] will make a difference and fear it is a spit in a rapidly deteriorating ocean. If my premise of the Big 5 has merit, how then do social innovators atone?

Following Maimela[36], I suggest that there are two intertwined processes; social redemption work -the process of how redemptive goals are set, patrolled and contested- and social atonement work - the techniques of how to atone.

Social redemption work

I portray social redemption work as the action of individuals and organisations to create, maintain or destroy redemptive pathways and strategies for atonement. In other words, the process of setting the parameters for what is to be atoned for, by whom and by what means.

Without an ultimate arbitrator -like a God-the secular social innovator may well be confused about what redemption might look like and how to get there. However, what we might feel shame or guilt about is socially constructed through the framing of social evaluation and the institutional struggles of competing ideas and interests. For instance, a government may attempt to shame citizens out of eating hyper-processed food and food companies for producing them -backed up by research on rising obesity. To protect profits, food manufactures may resist and subvert shaming attempts while researching new ways to tempt customers with the holy trinity of fat, sugar and salt[37].

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[32] Shulman, G. (2006). Redemption, secularization, and politics. In: Scott, D & Hirschkind, C (Eds). *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors*. Stanford University Press. pp 154-179.
[33] Berlin, I. (2013). *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*. Second Edition. Pimlico. London
[34] https://www.jbs.cam.ac.uk/masters-degrees/mst-social-innovation/
[35] https://www.jbs.cam.ac.uk/centres/social-innovation/peace-and-climate-lab/
[36] Maimela, S. S. (1982). The atonement in the context of liberation theology. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa,* 39, 45-54
[37] See: Moss, M. (2014). *Salt, sugar, fat: How the food giants hooked us.* W. H Allen. Moss, M. (2021). *Hooked: How Processed Food Became Addictive*. Random House.

In a social innovation context, the idea of social enterprise or a B Corp provides a compelling redemptive rationale and means to make amends for mistreating people and the planet in the name of profit. Institutional lines are drawn on what is and what does not constitute a social enterprise or B Corp, as well as what are acceptable practices for doing social business. An aspiring social entrepreneur can assuage their guilt and follow an accepted redemptive pathway to a social nirvana.

Contemporary social innovation redemptive narratives often include a somewhat blind faith in the ability of individual social innovators - with sufficient hope, new ideas and effort - to overcome social harms. Entrepreneurial solutions are paramount. The entrepreneurial social innovator narrative is very different from the redemption narratives of the cooperative movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century - or the community enterprises of the 1970-90s -which emphasised collective solutions and governance[38]. Yet, contemporary social innovators and social entrepreneurs have developed compelling redemptive pathways which attract companies, the public sector and social/voluntary sector alike. But, as the ultra-processed food example illustrates, for every action there is often a disproportionate reaction when vested interests feel threatened. There is no room for complacency as the experience of the British cooperative movement illustrates.

The cooperative movements redemptive pathway was challenged during the 1920 and 1930's when companies like the Lever Brothers orchestrated boycotts on selling good to the cooperatives[39] and newspaper barons ran campaigns exemplified by a headline in the Daily Express - 'The Curse of the Coops'[40]. Cooperatives were accused of unfair practices, being a socialist front, unpatriotic for buying foreign goods and underpaying staff[41].

Clearly, to succeed, a redemptive pathway has to be maintained by its supporters and be resilient enough to resist its detractors. However, unlike today's social innovators, cooperators shared a coherent redemptive narrative backed up with education, mutual support, political wing and the ability to counter such propaganda through their own newspapers and magazines -including the purchase a mass circulation Sunday paper[42].

Social atonement work

Following Joshua Thurow's categories for how to atone, social atonement work may include repentance, truth telling, moral reformation, reparations, penance or punishment[43]. To atone, a social innovator may appease their shame or guilt or satisfy redemptive goals along their chosen pathway through sacrifice: time, money or wellbeing. In doing so they may adopt a 'self 'or 'organisational social atonement strategy: more often than not, elements of both.

A *'self social atonement strategy'* focuses on the 'self-work -the intentional efforts by individuals to shape their identities, emotions, and roles [44] in the context of achieving redemption for social harms . The

[38] Stott, N., Fava, M. and Slawinski, N. (2019) "Community social innovation: taking a long view on community enterprise." In: George, G., Baker, T., Tracey, P. and Joshi, H. (eds.) *Handbook of inclusive innovation: the role of organisations, markets and communities in social innovation.* Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, pp.145-166

[39] Killingback, N. (1988). Limits of mutuality: economic & political attacks on cooperatives during the 1920s & 1930s. In: (Yea, S Ed) New Views on Cooperatives. Routledge. London.

[40] Gurney, P. (2015). 'The Curse of the Co-ops': Co-operation, the Mass Press and the Market in Interwar Britain. *The English Historical Review*, 130(547), 1479-1512.

[41] Ibid

[42] Ibid

[43] Thurow, J. C. (2023) Atonement. *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2023 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.) https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2023/entries/atonement/

[44] Lawrence, T. B., & Phillips, N. (2019). *Constructing organisational life: How social-symbolic work shapes selves, organisations, and institutions.* Oxford University Press. Oxford.

premise is that social innovation practice is inherently emotional[45]. For instance, Charlene Zietsma and Madeline Toubiana use the metaphors of the emotional rust, glue and fuel of social innovation. The glue connects social innovators to norms, values, practices and structures within a redemption pathway. Emotional fuel frames, motivates and drives action. Emotions may also cause rust and corrosion therefore undermining social innovators. Zietsma and Toubiana suggest that fear and shame might paralyse rather than inspire social innovators [46]. However, as Frederick Gross argues:

> "Shame is a painful fluctuation between sadness and anger that can have two outcomes: It can lead us down a cold and dark path that disfigures us and ends in solitary resignation, or a fiery luminous path that transfigures us and fuels collective anger."[47]

Table 1 provides examples of how the 'Big 5' motivations may impact on social innovators practice.

Table 1 Self social atonement work

Type	Example of motivations	Examples
Repentance	Guilt and hope: Feeling responsible for past or present social harms and aspiring to make amends for a better future	Acknowledging social harms and supporting projects, partnerships or ventures which attempt to overcome harms, such as Black Lives Matter.
Truth telling	Shame and hope: Confronting uncomfortable truths and seeking healing	Surfacing hidden injustices or systemic problems, and creating vehicles of atonement from 'allyship' to truth commissions
Moral reformation	Hope: Belief in the possibility of positive change and a more just society	Advocating for or leading change by embedding new ethical standards into personal practice & institutions—such as promoting fair trade, inclusive hiring, or sustainable practices—and advocating for policy reforms that deemed to be the root causes of social issues
Reparations	Guilt and hope: Recognising historical injustices and working towards restorative justice	Providing compensation, resources, or opportunities to groups affected by historical or systemic harms, such as financial reparations, land or museum artifact returns

[45] Stott, N., Tracey, P & Dwight, S. (2025) Social exits and social innovation. *Critical Perspectives on Social Innovation*. No 2 2025. Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation.
[46] Zietsma, C., & Toubiana, M. (2019). Emotions as the glue, the fuel and the rust of social innovation. In: George, G., Baker, T., Tracey, P., & Joshi, H. (Eds.). *Handbook of Inclusive Innovation: The Role of Organizations, Markets and Communities in Social Innovation*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
[47] Gros. F. (2025). *A Philosophy of Shame*. Verso. London

Penance	Guilt and shame: Feeling responsible for harm and seeking redemption through action	Engaging in public acts of restitution, such as dedicating resources to communities harmed by past actions, or personally volunteering time and expertise
Punishment	Shame: Responding to direct public condemnation and the need for accountability or self-punishment for the wrongs of others	Accepting legal, professional, or social sanctions; resigning from positions of power; or engaging in acts of self-discipline or public apology in response to wrongdoing

An *'organisational social atonement strategy'* focuses on the institutional and organisational work[48] of how private, public and social sector organisations achieve social redemption. Table 2 provides examples of private, public and social/civic responses to social atonement categories outlined above.

Table 2 Organisational social atonement work

Type	**Private sector**	**Public sector**	**Social/civic sector**
Repentance	*Unilever under Paul Polman:* acknowledged the negative externalities of consumer goods (e.g., packaging waste, poor nutrition) and launched the Sustainable Living Plan to shift toward more responsible practices.[49]	*UK Home Office Windrush apology*: public acknowledgment of wrongful deportations and commitment to compensation and policy reform[50]	*Oxfam* publicly apologising for past safeguarding failures, implementing new safeguarding policies
Truth telling	*Nike's labour practices disclosure*: After years of denial, Nike released a full list of its overseas factories and began reporting on labor violations, becoming	*NHS blood contamination scandal inquiry*: Government disclosure and public inquiry into decades of infected blood transfusions, with officials releasing documents	*Amnesty International* commissioned external reviews and focus group reports to investigate allegations of bias and racism within the organisation[53].

[48] Lawrence, T. B., & Phillips, N. (2019). *Constructing organisational life: How social-symbolic work shapes selves, organisations, and institutions.* Oxford University Press. Oxford.
[49]https://newint.org/features/web-exclusive/2017/04/13/inside-unilever-sustainability-myth
[50] https://www.gov.uk/government/news/home-secretary-apologises-to-members-of-windrush-generation
[53]https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/20/amnesty-international-has-culture-of-white-privilege-report-finds

	more transparent about its supply chain risks[51].	and testifying about failures[52].	
Moral reformation	*Danone's B Corp movement:* Shifted from a traditional multinational to becoming a purpose-driven firm by certifying business units as B Corps and adopting a "dual project" for economic and social goals.	*Police* reforms after the Macpherson Report: Introduction of new anti-racism training, codes of conduct, and institutional reforms in UK police forces following the Stephen Lawrence [54]inquiry.	*Forest Schools* aim to reconnect children with the natural environment[55]
Reparations	*Ben & Jerry's support for Black Lives Matter and equity audits:* the company funded Black-led organisations and called for public reparations in the U.S., attempting to address historical racial injustices[56].	*Scottish Government's* apology and financial compensation to survivors of historical child abuse in care institutions, along with legislative changes to support victims[57]	*Charities* establishing survivor funds or community restitution schemes after scandals or historical wrongdoing. For instance the Global Survivors Fund for conflict-related sexual violence [58]
Penance	*Novo Nordisk Foundation's reinvestment in global health:* After profiting from insulin for decades, the foundation now channels billions into affordable healthcare and chronic disease prevention in low-income countries[59].	*UK MPs expense scandal:* Return of misused expenses, resignations, sackings & jail sentences - combined with public apologies and reforms to the expenses system.[60]	*NGO Fambul Tok (Sierra Leone):* community-based truth and reconciliation ceremonies, where perpetrators of wartime violence publicly confess and seek forgiveness from victims.[61]
Punishment	*Volkswagen's Dieselgate fines and compliance overhaul:* imposed externally, VW's internal overhaul of compliance	*NHS trusts or local councils* placed in "special measures" or leadership removed after critical inspection reports or failures in care, with imposed	*Charities/NGOs* facing regulatory penalties, loss of funding, or external oversight after governance or safeguarding breaches.

[51] https://www.theguardian.com/business/2005/apr/14/ethicalbusiness.money
[52] https://www.england.nhs.uk/2024/05/publication-of-the-infected-blood-inquiry-final-report/
[54] https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5802/cmselect/cmhaff/139/13911.htm
[55] https://forestschoolassociation.org/what-is-forest-school/
[56] https://www.benjerry.com/values/issues-we-care-about/racial-justice
[57] https://www.gov.scot/collections/financial-redress-for-survivors-of-child-abuse-in-care/
[58] https://www.globalsurvivorsfund.org/
[59] https://www.novonordisk.com.pa/en/sustainable-business/access-and-affordability.html
[60] https://ico.org.uk/for-the-public/ico-40/mp-expenses-scandal/
[61] https://www.povertyactionlab.org/evaluation/community-reconciliation-sierra-leone

	and sustainability efforts reflects a case where punishment triggered internal efforts to regain legitimacy - albeit reluctantly[62]	oversight and restructuring.	For example fines for data protection breaches[63]

Organisational social atonement work consists of internal and external elements. Internally, organisational social atonement work encompasses the deliberate actions organisations undertake to acknowledge, address, and make amends for social harms with which they are associated -shaped by the 'big 5 motivations. Social innovators as social intrapreneurs attempt to shape organisational responses to social harms.

The role of external pressures is of especial importance, particularly for organisations who are responsible for extreme social harms, such as the fossil fuel industry or a genocidal state. The guilt, shame or fears of stakeholders, regulators and society regarding organisational activities shapes organisational responses.

Social innovators engage in social inclusion, social activism and socio-political work to ensure social harms are surfaced and acted upon[64]. Social inclusion work may include working with those impacted on by social harms. Social activism work may include campaigns, lobbying or taking to the streets to protest. Socio-political work 'is the process of political organising to overcome harms and achieve social, economic, and environmental justice'[65] and may include formulating law, policy or regulations.

Implications for future research and practice

Further investigation into how the Big 5 emotional motivations—shame, guilt, anger, fear, and hope—influence the design and outcomes of social innovation initiatives would be beneficial. Additionally, how these motivations manifest across various organisational contexts.

Another area that warrants exploration is the social construction of harm and atonement. As I argue, what counts as a social harm, social redemption and how atonement should be pursued, are not fixed or universally agreed upon; rather, they are shaped by shifting social norms and contested narratives. Researchers could examine how definitions of social harm and redemption are constructed and how the accompanying redemption strategies legitimate social innovation and inform practice.

In my view, social innovation practice is deeply shaped by the Big 5. I see social innovation practice as a process of redemption, involving personal and organisational efforts to make amends for harm and to pursue transformation. Redemption narratives can inspire powerful collective action, but social innovators need to be cautious about their potential to exclude, stigmatise others, or to foster hubris - or worse.

[62]https://www.theguardian.com/business/2016/jun/22/volkswagen-handling-emissions-scandal-shambles-investors-agm-german-carmaker
[63] https://www.civilsociety.co.uk/news/ico-fines-11-charities-for-breaches-of-data-protection.html
[64] Tracey, P. and Stott, N. (2025) Constructing 'problems' and 'solutions': social innovation as social-symbolic work. *Journal of Management Studies*
[65] Ibid p8

On a personal level, this means engaging in 'self social atonement work'. These actions might involve acknowledging past mistakes, supporting restorative projects, or advocating for change. At the organisational level, I have observed that successful social innovation often depends on organisations being willing to confront uncomfortable truths, accept responsibility, and take concrete steps toward redressing harm.

Conclusion

Reflecting on this brief exploration of the concepts of social atonement and social redemption, I am convinced that these ideas lie at the heart of social innovation. My own motivations—as well as those of many I have encountered—are deeply rooted in the Big 5: shame, guilt, anger, fear and hope. These emotions shape social innovators' sense of responsibility and drive action to make change as individuals or organisations. Personally, I ascribe to what Ulrich Beck described as hope embedded in despair[66].

What to atone for and what redemption may look like is not static but an ongoing, contested process. The boundaries of what counts as harm, who is responsible, and how atonement should occur are constantly negotiated in secular contexts. I have witnessed how social redemption narratives can inspire powerful changes, but I am also wary of their potential to exclude or stigmatise - and to encourage hubris. Social innovation demands humility, reflexivity, and resilience - and a recognition that the road to social transformation requires both a personal and collective reckoning with the worlds we are embedded in and demands sacrifices we may not be able to endure, nor make.

[66] https://www.juragentium.org/topics/wlgo/en/beck.htm

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