

Innovation:

Past and Future of a Contested Concept

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The study of innovation is more than one hundred years old. It is perhaps worth asking: Has the study of innovation changed during this period? And if so, to what extent? In my contribution to the *Atlas of Social Innovation*, I suggested that we may have simply substituted one religion for another. The story goes like this.

The concept of innovation entered our everyday vocabulary during the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries as a linguistic weapon. Both the reformers and the Catholics accused each others of innovating in matters of the Church. At the time, the concept was essentially political and pejorative. Innovation was forbidden.

The concept changed meaning in the nineteenth century, due in part to the term social innovation. Innovation gradually came to be talked of positively in terms of utility. Innovation serves political, social and material progress. Again, religion is at the heart of the matter. After the French Revolution, socialism as a new spiritual power or religion started making use of the concept of innovation, and socialists coined what became a brand in the late twentieth century – social innovation – with explicit references to Christianity .

In my contribution to the *Atlas*, I followed this story until the twentieth century and argued that innovation has become our modern religion. Social innovation is one of many X-innovation terms, as I call them, which became buzzwords and brands in the last few decades: responsible innovation, sustainable innovation, etc., and now, digital innovation.

I ended my contribution with some suggestions as to what could be (or should be) the next step in this story: a critical view of innovation. To this end, I suggested four ideas:

- Questioning our representation of innovation, the more so if called an ‘alternative’ representation, and asking to what extent our assumptions are normative and performative.
- Placing innovation as a solution into the balance with other possible (but less fashionable) means to achieve “progress”. Innovation may not always appear to be the best solution.
- Asking whether we are writing an academic work as a scholar or as an ideologue (in scholarly journals).
- Taking seriously the scholarly imperative to discuss, argue and criticize.

Today, I would like to expand briefly on these suggestions, in a totally different direction, and a very fruitful one I believe. For my part, a critical view of innovation involves understanding and explaining why and how we got there. As I said, throughout history the concept of innovation and its uses did not always have a positive connotation. First, I suggest that we, as scholars, need imperatively to conduct *intellectual or conceptual history*. To appreciate what we mean by innovation, we need to trace the origin, meanings, development and

uses of the concept over the centuries. Is innovation a mere synonym for novelty, as most people make use of the concept today? Or is innovation the use of new ideas in practice? Or is innovation the commercialization of invention? Conceptual history explains how, why and to what extent the context and the language of a time (beliefs and ideologies) explain the interpretations and contestations of a concept. Perceptions have not always been what they are today, and understanding why may help to relativize our current conceptualizations.

Secondly, I recommend making use of *political theology*, a term coined by Carl Schmitt in 1922. Political theology studies the contribution of theology to political concepts. I suggest that the modern concept of innovation contains residuals or survivals of the religious connotation of the seventeenth century. As a concept first used widely in religion, innovation subsequently travelled to other spheres (political, social and economical), keeping some of the original meaning or connotation. I prefer to talk here of de-sacralisation than secularization (a liquidation of the religious). To be sure, the modern connotation is entirely different from that of the seventeenth century. In a sense, over the centuries there has been no continuity in the history of the concept. The concept began as a negative in classical Greece, then became positive in the Latin tongue, then changed again to the negative during the Reformation, then to the positive in the twentieth century. The absence of theorization about innovation before the twentieth century may explain the situation. We had to await Jeremy Bentham in the early nineteenth century, Gabriel Tarde in the late nineteenth century and, above all, the twentieth century for theorizations. Francis Bacon's Essay of 1625 *Of Innovation* remained a dead letter.

In another sense, continuity exists in the sense of survivals. The religious meaning simply changed connotation, from the negative to the positive. Let's take a few words used to talk of innovation in the seventeenth century and look at the change in meaning in the twentieth century. Innovation as novelty or fancy became novelty applied (in context). Heretical innovation as liberty and choice shifted to creativity and originality. Innovation as revolt (sudden and violent) gave rise to revolutionary innovation. Innovation as design (plot and machination) turned into planned change. Innovation as a noun and verb came to be defined as a process. Briefly stated:

- Innovation is no longer seen as subversive of orthodoxy, but simply opposed to traditional ways of doing things.
- The innovator is not a heretic. He is simply different from the masses or from his fellows. He may be a deviant, but in a sociological sense: an original, a marginal, a nonconformist, unorthodox.
- The innovator is ingenious and creative. He is an experimenter, an entrepreneur, a leader; he is the agent of change.

Thirdly, I strongly suggest taking revisionism seriously. My work on innovation started over ten years ago, when I realized that a historical and critical reading of the concept was totally

missing in the literature. How could so central a concept of our everyday vocabulary have no historiography, philology and sociology?

In a first step, revisionism means a reflective look at the economics of innovation, or *economism*. The historiography of the concept of innovation, if the little existing literature really deserves that name, suggests that the concept of innovation comes from Joseph Schumpeter. Schumpeter has become the pope of the literature on innovation – a pope is considered infallible. In the last few years, I documented that Schumpeter is not the scholar to be studied to understand innovation's origins. First, the concept owes its original use to the Reformation, a time when innovation acquired many of its modern conceptual attributes. Second, the development of the modern concept of technological innovation owes its existence to practitioners in the 1950s-60s (engineers, managers and policy-makers). Schumpeter was resurrected in the 1970s for purposes of legitimacy: giving legitimacy to a new academic field.

In a second sense, revisionism means *critical* study. The mainstream literature is hagiographic. It espouses a sympathy for the object studied (innovation), to use sociologist Howard Becker's term. Sociologist Everett Rogers talks of a pro-innovation bias. The more recent literature, which portrays itself as a contestation of industrial and technological innovation, is no exception. Social innovation, responsible innovation, sustainable innovation, to name but a few fashionable X-innovation terms, study innovation as a positive concept, using superlative terms. We have simply sanctified an old concept and made a positive value of it.

The study of innovation along the four dimensions suggested above is in sharp contrast to the study of innovation as it is conducted today. In a scholarly world full of fads and buzzwords, we do not need a further theology but rather a critical perspective. I must admit that I find it quite difficult to make converts. Our field is a policy-oriented field and this explains a lot, perhaps. As Rogers put it long ago: the source of the innovation bias is "the tendency for researchers to look at the process from the source's viewpoint, rather than from the receiver's. This taking of the source's viewpoint in turn may stem from the sponsorship of most diffusion research by sources of innovations (that is, change agencies)". Students of social innovation may believe they do not take this viewpoint – social innovation is defined in terms of social 'needs'. But is that really the case? Similarly, in perfect harmony with the scholarly literature, policy-makers suggest that:

Most current social, economic and environmental challenges require creative solutions based on innovation (OECD, 2010).

Innovation is our best means of successfully tackling major societal challenges, such as climate change, energy and resources scarcity, health and ageing, which are becoming more urgent by the day (European Commission, 2010).

Again, is this really the case?

These are just a few questions that I offer to conclude this conference, questions that are, I believe, the necessary starting point for a new and constructive viewpoint on innovation.