

Title

The Unintended Consequences of Innovation Studies

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Innovation has a long history. In fact, men have innovated from the very beginnings of humanity. Similarly, the word “innovation” is very old, dating back to antiquity. One finds early thoughts on innovation among Greek philosophers and historians, then among the Romans (Godin and Lucier, 2012). Yet at the time, innovation had a meaning totally different from that of today. In the second half of the twentieth century, innovation came to be studied in the context of economic thoughts and was theorized about. This gave rise to what is now called “innovation studies”: the economic, management and policy study of innovation (Fagerberg and Verspagen, 2009).

This communication takes a critical look at innovation studies and its representation of innovation. While innovation has been understood as “introducing change in the established order” for centuries, particularly the political order, it came to mean commercialized invention in a matter of decades. This has had important consequences on the place innovation holds in society. This communication discusses the intellectual history of innovation, focusing on three unintended (are they really unintended?) consequences of innovation studies on the study of innovation generally and on policy.

1. For 2,500 years, innovation was an eminently **contested** idea. It was pejorative and forbidden. The study of innovation in the twentieth century gave rise to a totally different representation. Innovation became an object of praise and fashion. The representation gave rise to **positive** assumptions about innovation. To most people, including researchers, innovation is always good. “Researchers have implicitly assumed”, claimed sociologist Everett M. Rogers in the very first edition of his classic book, “that to adopt innovations is desirable behaviour [rational] and to reject innovations is less desirable [irrational]” (Rogers, 1962: 142).

2. For centuries, innovation was essentially a **political** concept, regulated by Kings and laws. In contrast, in the twentieth century, innovation started being looked at from a **policy**-oriented framework (Godin, 2012). Innovation is now considered instrumental to national progress. Government should play a role and promote innovation, so claim many people. Such a representation made of innovation a panacea for solving every socioeconomic problem.

3. For most of its history, the concept innovation has had a **fuzzy** meaning. It has meant different things to different people. Most of the time, it served accusative purposes. Then in the twentieth century, the concept acquired a dominant and spontaneous meaning. Innovation became “restricted” to **technological** innovation – a representation that many actually try to broaden with still-fragmented conceptual schemes (e.g.: social innovation).

What role does innovation studies, or rather the assumptions of innovation studies, play in these conceptual developments? From a study of the literature, it is documented that:

1. **Normativeness.** Innovation studies’ representation of innovation is essentially normative. It evolves around a key ideology of modernity, namely economic issues and the “positive” contribution of innovation to economic growth. As a consequence, there is little if any questioning of what innovation really is but a normative perspective is offered from the start.¹

¹ Very few researchers stop at examining what innovation means, but start with their preferred definition. In the 1960-70s, this led people from many different horizons to criticize the concept and to suggest

2. **Appliedness.** In contrast to scholarly disciplines like history and sociology, innovation studies is a policy-oriented field. Together with national governments and international organizations like the OECD and the European Union, social researchers develop grand narratives, conceptual frameworks, statistics and policy recommendations aimed at supporting innovation as THE solution to socioeconomic problems.

3. **Technology-Centeredness.** Innovation studies' representation of innovation is essentially technological – and market-oriented: innovation is the commercialization of technological innovations. Invention (scientific discovery) is not innovation unless it is commercialized. Imitation (adoption of existing technological innovation) is not innovation because it is not original (first introduction to the market). The study of types of innovation other than technological (cultural, social and political) is relegated to the residual, if discussed at all, and “societal” studies are excluded from the field as defined (constructed) in recent bibliometric studies.

This communication concludes with a thought experiment: imagining alternative views of innovation and discussing the policy issues that logically arise from a different perspective on innovation:

- What policies would we have if innovation studies had been critical and reflexive instead of normative?
- What policies would we have if innovation studies had started with the study of problems (demand, or human and social needs) rather than with THE solution (innovation as supply)?
- What policies would we have if innovation studies had included in their analyses a broader range of innovations than only technological?

abandoning it. “Every change becomes an innovation simply because it has not been done before ... Such a definition sterilizes the term innovation” (Becker and Whisler, 1967: 463); innovation “has come to mean all things to all men” (Ames, 1961: 371); “we shall do better without the word innovation” (Machlup, 1962: 179); “the use of the term innovation is counterproductive” (Roberts and Romine, 1974: 4); “One of the vogue words these days is innovation. For some people it is even more – it is a value word that implies something good and positive. As with most popular words, it is misused and has different meanings for different people” (Holt, 1971: 235).

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