

**Innovation after the French Revolution, or,
Innovation Transformed:
From Word to Concept**

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Abstract

For centuries, innovation has been a pejorative concept, and there has been no study of what innovation is. How, when and why did innovation become an object of theory – and dreams? This paper is about that key moment in the history of innovation as a concept. Innovation got rehabilitated at the moment when it came to be defined as utility or progress. This occurred between c.1750 and c.1850: innovation becomes instrumental to political and social – and later economic – goals.

L'esprit d'innovation ... est le plus beau don que la nature ait fait aux hommes. Sans lui, l'espèce humaine croupiroit [The spirit of innovation...is the greatest gift that nature has given to men. Without it, the human species would stagnate] (Jacques-Pierre Brissot de Warville, *De la vérité*, 1782).

On ne doit jamais craindre d'innover, quand le bien public est le résultat de l'innovation ... Chaque siècle ayant d'autres moeurs, & des usages nouveaux, chaque siècle doit avoir de nouvelles loix [We must never be afraid to innovate, when innovation results in the public good...Just as every century has different morals and new customs, every century must have new laws] (Comte de M***, *L'innovation utile, ou la nécessité de détruire les Parlements: Plan proposé au Roi*, 1789).

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Introduction

“Not one in a hundred amongst us participates in the ‘triumph’ of the Revolution society Thanks to our sullen resistance to **innovation**, thanks to the cold sluggishness of our national character, we still bear the stamp of our forefathers. We have not (as I conceive) lost the generosity and dignity of thinking of the fourteenth century; nor as yet have we subtilized [*sic*] ourselves into savages. We are not the converts of Rousseau; we are not the disciples of Voltaire; Helvetius has made no progress among us”. So spoke Edmund Burke in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Burke, 1790: 64). To Burke, innovation is revolution – and revolution is innovation.

Burke (1729-1797), an Irish statesman and political philosopher, deputy (Whig) in the English House of Commons and founder of the political review *Annual Register*, offers two arguments against innovation. First, custom or “inheritance derived to us from our forefathers” is “the result of profound reflection; or rather the happy effect of following nature”. In contrast, “A spirit of **innovation** is generally the result of a selfish temper and confined views” (Burke, 1790: 31).

Burke’s second argument is a preference for the middle ground – which amounts to what he calls reform. “As in most questions of state, there is a middle. There is something else than the mere alternative of absolute destruction, or unreformed existence” (Burke, 1790: 158). According to Burke (*A Letter to Noble Lord*, 1796; in Ritchie, 1991: 290):

¹ Special thanks to Pierre Lucier and Apostolos Spanos for commenting on a first draft of this paper.

There is a manifest marked distinction, which ill men, with ill designs, or weak men incapable of any design, will constantly be confounding, that is, a marked distinction between Change and Reformation. The former alters the substance of the objects themselves ... Reform is, not a change in the substance, or in the primary modification of the object, but the direct application of a remedy ... *To innovate is not to reform.*

Burke held similar views throughout his life. Whether in his speeches to Parliament or his diverse correspondence, Burke cried out against “The greatest of all evil: a blind and furious spirit of **innovation**, under the name of reform” (*Letter to William Elliot*, 1795; in Ritchie, 1991: 271).

Such thoughts may seem strange to many readers. Today, we entertain a totally different representation of innovation. Innovation is essentially a good and positive thing. How, when and why did innovation become positive – and become a fashion? For centuries, innovation was a pejorative concept, and there was no study or theory of what innovation is (Godin, 2012a). Such is the representation of innovation in pre-revolutionary France. This representation rests on a word of ordinary language and a word of opprobrium – innovation. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are well known for their distrust of language and *Ars rhetorica* (Skinner, 2002). Language is subject to much abuse, according to many,² above all to the philosophers who in reply articulate projects for a universal language (Barny, 1978; Ricken, 1982; Slaughter, 1982). Such is the case with innovation. Everyone uses the concept but everyone disagrees on what innovation is.

Innovation developed a positive connotation only at the moment when it came to be defined as progress and utility. This change in the meaning of innovation was not a response to (contradictions in) disputes, as has been the case for various political concepts (Ball and Pocock, 1988). To be sure, innovation is an eminently political and contested concept, as will become clear to the reader in the following pages. Yet it does not figure in the vocabulary of statesmen and political theorists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, except as a ‘non-concept’: when talked of, it is talked of negatively. Innovation became an honourable concept in response to a new context. This paper is about this key moment in the history of innovation. After centuries of experience with

² For an example of abuse, see Goulemot (1968) on the word revolution.

and talk of innovation in negative terms, innovation turned positive and became an object of thoughts and dreams. This occurred after 1789: innovation became instrumental to social and political – and later economic – goals.

In the past few years, I have dealt at length with the pejorative representation of innovation, particularly in England. Innovation was forbidden by law in both religious and government matters. The concept started being used widely after the Reformation and increasingly so in the seventeenth century against any deviant, whether a puritan or a republican (Godin, 2010; 2012b; 2013a). This representation was shared in every Western country. The present paper concentrates on France, although not exclusively, and on the emergence of a new representation of innovation.³ The first part traces the representation of innovation in the century before the French Revolution. It shows that innovation was a negative concept used for accusatory purposes. “The purpose of all opprobrious language is, not to describe, but to hurt”, suggests C. S. Lewis in *Studies in Words*. “We call the enemy not what we think he is but what we think he would least like to be called” (Lewis, 1960: 122). The second part documents the rehabilitation of innovation, a rehabilitation that occurred between c.1750 and c.1850, that period of history Reinhart Koselleck designates as *Sattelzeit*, when many words changed meanings due to a “shift in the conception of time and a reorientation towards the future”.

Innovation Before the French Revolution

For centuries, few people talked of innovation in a positive way. To be sure, innovation was experienced everywhere, but as a concept it had a pejorative connotation. Innovation is political, and was understood as deviance, either in religion (heresy) or politics (revolution), the two being interwoven for centuries. Innovation is “introducing change to the established order”. The political connotation of innovation needs to be stressed here because the literature on political thought has not included the concept among political

³ On methodology, see Appendix 1.

ideas.⁴ The literature focuses rather on sovereignty, liberty, virtue, democracy, the republic, the constitution, the state and revolution. Yet innovation is a political concept too, first of all in the sense that it was regulated by Kings for centuries, forbidden by law and punished.⁵ Advice books and treatises for Princes and courtiers support this understanding, and include instructions not to innovate. Books of manners and sermons urge people not to meddle with innovation, and bishops visit parishes to make sure that the instruction is followed. From the Renaissance onward, innovation is also a linguistic weapon used by political writers and pamphleteers against their enemies.

Burke uses the concept in the same sense. England has a long history of such uses. Two controversies of the seventeenth century crystallized the meaning of innovation in that country for centuries to come. One controversy concerned the ‘purity’ of Protestantism and the “innovating” King Charles I and his protégé Archbishop William Laud (Godin, 2010). The other was that of the Republicans as political innovators against the monarchy (Godin, 2013a). In both cases, the “innovators”, as they were called, or rather accused of being, lost their case. Charles and Laud were beheaded, and the Republican experiment ended with the restoration of the monarchy.

France is no different. In both religion and politics, innovation is a bad word, statistically speaking.⁶ Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet (1627-1704), French bishop, theologian and polemicist, was an ardent opponent of innovation, particularly the Reformation.: “Évitez lez nouveautez dans vos discours, car les choses n’en demeureront pas là; une nouveauté en produit une autre, & on s’égare sans fin quand on a une fois commencé à s’égarer” [Avoid novelties in your conversation, since things will not stop there; one novelty produces another, and one loses one’s way ceaselessly once one begins to go astray] (Bossuet, 1688: préface). In every work and in many letters, Bossuet does not refrain from using the word innovation against the Protestants. *Histoire des variations des Églises protestantes* (1688) is a work against the Protestants’ “spirit of **innovation**”. To Bossuet,

⁴ Neither has “innovation studies” to which innovation is essentially an ‘economic’ concept: (technological) innovation is the source of economic growth.

⁵ Edward VI (England and Wales, 1548), Henri III (Navarre (Henri III, 1586; 1589), Charles I (England and Wales, 1626; 1628; 1638; 1641), Louis XVI (1775).

⁶ One may find occurrences of positive uses before 1789, but they are very rare compared to the pejorative.

a society needs rules, and rules require an authorized interpreter. But the Protestants vary on fundamental points. They commit the “crime d’**innovation**” [the crime of innovation].

In his *Lettre pastorale* (1698) written in opposition to the bishop of Chartres, whom he accused of “variations”, Bossuet denies any innovation in the Catholic Church. These are only “accusations en l’air” [idle accusations], claimed Bossuet (*Opuscules*, 1751: 226). The “**novateurs**” [innovators] are rather the Protestants (*Opuscules*, 1751: 225):

Jamais on ne montrera dans l’Église Catholique aucun changement que dans des choses de cérémonie & de discipline, qui dès les premiers siècles ont été tenues pour indifférentes. Pour ces changements insensibles qu’on nous accuse d’avoir introduits dans la doctrine; dès qu’on les appelle insensibles, c’en est assez pour vous convaincre qu’il n’y en a point de marqués, & qu’on ne peut nous montrer d’**innovation** par aucun fait positif. Mais ce qu’on ne peut nous montrer, nous le montrons à tous ceux qui nous ont quittés: en quelque partie du monde Chrétien qu’il y ait eû de l’interruption dans la doctrine ancienne, elle est connue: la date de l’**innovation** & de la séparation n’est ignorée de personne [Never has there been any change in the Catholic Church other than in matters of ceremony and discipline, which since the earliest centuries have been held to be minor. As for the imperceptible changes we are accused of having introduced into doctrine, as soon as you call them minor, that is sufficient to convince you that there is in it no distinguishing mark, and that they cannot show us **innovation** by any positive fact. But what they cannot show us, we show to all who have left us: in whatever part of the Christian world there has been any interruption in the old doctrine, it is known: the date of the **innovation** and of the separation is not unknown to anyone].

Bossuet forgets here the controversy on innovation in England (1637-41), when the bishops accused the Protestant church of innovations in discipline and doctrine, precisely because it was believed that the innovations brought this church toward the superstitious and “innovating” Catholic Church. He forgets also that what he calls “indifférentes” [minor] innovations (insensible changes or small innovations) are nevertheless innovations to many divines, because of their symbolic value.

In the 1670s, Bossuet worked on a ‘book of advice’ to the Prince, namely the Dauphin (Louis XIV’s son), for whose philosophical, political and religious education he was responsible. At the time, many books of advice included instructions on innovation. So does Bossuet’s *Politique tirées des propres paroles de l’Écriture sainte*. The work is composed of ten books, each divided into articles and each article into propositions. The work was published posthumously in 1709. *Politique* offers rules and duties in light of

the Bible. It is God who speaks in this book, not Bossuet. Book Seven is concerned with the duties of a Prince. It starts with religion and includes the following propositions (Lachat, 1864: 32-39):

1. La vraie religion a pour marque manifeste son antiquité. [True religion has as its distinguishing mark its antiquity.]
2. Toutes les fausses religions ont pour marque manifeste leur **innovation**. [All false religions have as their distinguishing mark their **innovation**.]
4. Cette marque d'**innovation** est ineffaçable. [This mark of innovation cannot be erased.]

Such a representation of innovation in religion is far from unique. In 1746, Denis Diderot (1713-1784), philosopher and co-editor of the *Encyclopédie* (1751), published his first work – anonymously. The *Pensée philosophiques* is a pamphlet on religion, condemned to be burned by Parliament as soon as it appeared. Composed of a series of letters, the thirteenth starts as follows: “Toute **innovation** est à craindre dans un Gouvernement ... Le Christianisme même ne s’est pas affermi sans causer quelques troubles. Les premiers enfans de l’Eglise sont sortis plus d’une fois de la modération & de la patience qui leur étoient prescrites” [All innovation is to be feared in a Government...Christianity itself was not consolidated without causing some troubles. The Church’s first children departed more than once from the moderation and patience that were prescribed for them]. To Diderot, citing the Emperor Julian, the Christians “n’épargnent aucun moyen, ne laissent échapper aucune occasion d’exciter des révoltes” [spare no means, miss no opportunity to arouse revolts]. Yet, “C’est par la raison & non par la violence qu’il faut ramener les hommes à la vérité” [It is through reason and not by violence that we must bring men back to the truth].

Many responses, most of them published anonymously (1747; 1751a; 1751b; 1761), followed the publication of the pamphlet. The type of reply is shared by most of the writers involved in the controversy. Innovation *per se* is not a bad thing; everything is in the particular. “L’**innovation** est à craindre dans un Gouvernement, je n’en disconviens

pas; mais ce n'est pas à dire qu'on doive s'abstenir de tout examen, & que l'ancienneté soit un titre incontestable de bonté" [Innovation is to be feared in a Government, I don't deny that; but that does not mean that we should abstain from any examination, and that antiquity is necessarily an indication of goodness] (Anonymous, 1751b: 150). To the anonymous author (Baron de M***), the problem is not religion; it is rather human nature (individuals) that is to blame.

To another critic the issue is also individuals. A true religion is never the source of "dangerous **innovation**". The problem is the disciples. Yet, the writer introduces an argument that would become popular much later (Formey, 1756: 161):

Toute **innovation** est à craindre dans un Gouvernement? Quoi! Lorsqu'il y a des défauts essentiels, des abus crians, qui menacent un Etat de sa ruine, il vaut mieux que tout périsse que de hazarder une **innovation**. Je sais bien qu'en Politique il faut une grande circonspection; qu'il y a certaines choses qui pourroient mieux aller, mais dont la Réformation entraineroit des désordres pires que ceux qu'on se propose de réformer. Cependant, en Politique même, le mal peut se trouver tel qu'il ne puisse plus être dissimulé ni toléré. [All **innovation** is to be feared in a Government? What! When there are essential flaws, glaring abuses, that threaten a State with ruin, it would be better if everyone perished than to risk an **innovation**. I realize fully that in politics, a great deal of circumspection is required; that there are certain things that could go better, but that the Reformation led to worse disorders than those it was proposed be reformed. However, even in Politics, evil may find that it can no longer be concealed or tolerated.]

By the 1760s, many knew that Diderot was the author of the pamphlet. For example, a further critique which deserves mention, published anonymously again, refers to the *Encyclopédie* as containing from Diderot (not mentioned by name) a more credible source of information on Julian. This writer replies with the same kind of argument as Jean Henri Samuel Formey above (Anonymous, 1761: 254):

Est-il bien vrai, Monsieur, que *toute* **innovation** soit toujours à craindre? A parler en général, il seroit sans doute à souhaiter que tout gouvernement persévérât dans sa première constitution; parce qu'il n'est guères d'**innovations** qui ne causent un certain trouble ... Mais si le bien peut quelquefois dégénérer en mal, ne peut-on pas aussi convertir le mal en bien? Ce n'est qu'à force de changemens qu'on arrive à la perfection [Is it really true, Sir, that *any* **innovation** is always to be feared? Generally speaking, it would no doubt be desirable that every government continue in its initial form; because it is hardly **innovations** that cause a certain amount of trouble...But if the good may sometimes degenerate into bad, can we not also convert bad into good? It is only by force of changes that we may arrive at perfection].

To the anonymous writer, innovation is progress (Anonymous. 1761: 254-55):

C'est comme si [Diderot] disait que la création du jour a été une *innovation* funeste, & qu'il eut mieux fallu demeurer dans une nuit éternelle. Chaque Législateur a *innové*, puisqu'il a donné des Loix nouvelles, & prescrit une forme de gouvernement inconnue jusqu'à lui. Etoit-il plus expédient pour les peuples de rester dans leur état de rusticité & de barbarie, que d'écouter des hommes qui leur dictoient des Loix propres à les civiliser & à leur procurer tous les avantages de la société? [It is as though (Diderot) said that the creation of day was a disastrous *innovation* and that it would have been better to remain in an eternal night. Every Legislator has *innovated*, since he has created new laws and prescribed a form of government unknown before his time. Would it be more beneficial for people to remain in their rustic, barbaric state than to listen to men who dictate to them Laws that would civilize them and gain for them all the advantages of society?]

I will return to this kind of argument later. Such an argument was very rare at the time. It was rather Bossuet's representation of innovation that got a hearing in France, including French politics. The debate in the National Assembly regarding the new constitution (1789) was in essence a debate on whether the constitution was to be a reformation of what was regarded as an existing constitution (or form of government) or inaugurating an entirely new constitution *de novo*, as Keith M. Baker puts it (Baker, 1990: 275). In the end, the French opted for the latter instead of tradition.⁷

Yet this debate was not conducted using the concept of innovation, in particular among the innovators themselves. No revolutionary thought of describing his project in terms of innovation. Innovation is a word, used by the critics of the revolution. When used, innovation is used without discussing its meaning. Above all, the denotation or criteria vary, depending on the speaker or writer. Two men may agree on the (lexical) meaning of innovation, yet they do not necessarily find the same things novel. To some, the General-Estates is an innovation, to others, no – except for the *privilégiés* “qui ne se plaignent que de l'esprit d'*innovation*” [who complain only about the spirit of *innovation*] as Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès puts it in *Qu'est-ce que le Tiers-État?* (Sieyès, 1789: 101). To Jacques-Pierre Brissot de Warville, *girondin* assassinated, the General-Estates is rather a restoration (Brissot, 1989: 135). To some others the new constitution is an innovation –

⁷ On the thesis that the goal of the French revolutionaries was restoration (of rights and liberties) rather than innovation, see Arendt (1963). On the opposite thesis, see Dippel (1976) on the American revolution.

an “**innovation** hasardeuse” [dangerous **innovation**] as stated by Jacques Necker, comptroller of finances under Louis XVI (Necker, 1792: 351) – ⁸ to others, no. To still others, like the clergy, a new mode of election with more equal representation to the people (one house rather than three Orders) is an innovation; to others, no. Only the Revolution is unanimously declared an innovation – as Burke does – at least by its critics. In fact, the analogy with or association between innovation and revolution abounds in the literature of the time. “La réforme conduit à l’**innovation**, l’**innovation** à la révolution, la révolution à l’anarchie et au désordre” [Reform leads to **innovation**, **innovation** to revolution, revolution to anarchy and disorder], such was the common opinion, as reported by Abbé Arthur Dillon in his *Progrès de la révolution française en Angleterre* (Dillon, 1792: 13).

Yet compared to England, very few titles on the “spirit of innovation” were produced in pre-revolutionary France. Nevertheless, the word appears in hundreds of documents, and the meaning is similar to that in England. The debates at the General-Estates of 1789 are quite representative of the representation of innovation. Innovation is used essentially by the critics of the Revolution. It serves to qualify the changes brought to the constitution as “dangerous” and to stress the nefarious (“alarmantes” [alarming]) effects of the Revolution. Every critic contrasts innovation, as Burke does, to custom. That no “**innovation**” be introduced that “would destroy or alter the essence of the monarchical government” is the message from Jean Marie Prudhomme, bookseller and author of over a thousand pamphlets, in his proposal for a constitution based on a summary of the *Cahiers* presented to the General-Estates (Prudhomme, 1789). To this end, Prudhomme stresses particularly that no innovation be introduced in the mode of representation of the three Orders.

⁸ The new French constitution is a source of anarchy (“vingt-six millions de Souverains” [twenty-six million Sovereigns]), as opposed to the English model. “C’est une entreprise hasardeuse que de vouloir porter une **innovation** politique à l’extrême; & c’est une entreprise singulière, que d’exécuter ce plan sans aucun sentiment profond” [It is a risky undertaking to desire to bring about an extreme political innovation, and it is a remarkable undertaking to execute this plan without any profound feeling] (Necker, 1792: 350-51).

In a similar vein, an anonymous writer produced a pamphlet on the “précautions à prendre contre les **innovations** présentées aux ÉTATS-GÉNÉRAUX” [precautions to be taken against **innovations** presented to the GENERAL-ESTATES]. The writer lists the “innovations dangereuses” [dangerous innovations] brought into the mode of representation at the General-Estates that add up to a change to the “droit résultant des formes antiques et constitutionnelles” [law resulting from antique and constitutional forms] (Anonymous, 1789b: 7). The innovations “portent l’empreinte de l’ARBITRAIRE, qui est le fléau des Empires” [bear the imprint of the ARBITRARY, which is the scourge of Empires] (Anonymous, 1789b: 8). The three Orders, he claims, “n’entendent nullement être tenus de se conformer à ces **innovations**” [in no way intend to be required to conform to these **innovations**] (Anonymous, 1789b: 14).

Again, representation is the issue discussed by the *chevalier* Marie Thérèse Léon Tinsseau-D’Amondans in his *Parallèle des deux déclarations du Roi*. To the chevalier “Trois ans de crimes & de délire viennent de renverser cet empire florissant” [Three years of crimes and delirium have just undone this flourishing empire] (Tinsseau-D’Amondans, 1792: 3). “Ce sont les **innovations** fondamentales qu’on y a faites [these were fundamental innovations that were made] (to the constitution), lors de la convocation des états-généraux, qui ont perdu le royaume” [during the convocation of the general-estates, that have lost the kingdom] (Tinsseau-D’Amondans, 1792: vii). The *chevalier* discusses four “innovations fondamentales” [fundamental innovations] to “l’usage ancien & constant de la monarchie” [the ancient and unvarying usages of the monarchy]⁹ and concludes as follows: we must delay the discussion of “toute **innovation** qui a besoin d’essais, qui exige une longue discussion ou des rassemblements qui prolongés ne serviraient qu’à entretenir le mouvement & l’agitation des esprits. Il faut attendre que

⁹ 1. “la double représentation accordée au tiers-état, donnant à celui-ci une supériorité de suffrages au détriment des deux autres ordres” [the double representation ascribed to the third estate, giving it a superiority of votes to the detriment of the other two orders]; 2. “la réunion des États-Généraux en une assemblée unique, assurant ainsi une majorité au tiers-état” [the grouping of the General-Estates into a single assembly, thus ensuring a majority for the third estate]; 3. “les pouvoirs illimités données aux députés (voter selon leur conscience et intérêt et droit de ne pas reconnaître la décision adoptée à la majorité), en lieu et place des mandats impératifs” [the unlimited power given to deputies (to vote according to their conscience and interests and the right to not recognize the decision adopted by majority), in place of imperative directives]; 4. “l’**innovation** que sont les États provinciaux (par rapport à un pouvoir unique)” [the **innovation** that the provincial States represent (as compared to a single power)].

cette fièvre politique soit calmée. Il ne s'agit pas d'améliorations ... Tout a été détruit; il faut commencer par tout rétablir" [any **innovation** that requires experiment, that requires a long discussion or assemblies which when prolonged act only to maintain movement and agitation of minds. We must wait until this political fever has calmed down. It is not a matter of improvements...Everything has been destroyed; we must begin by re-establishing everything] (Tinseau-D'Amondans, 1792: 47-48).

In contrast to the previous views, Guy Jean Baptiste Target, magistrate in the Parliament of Paris before the Revolution, argues for innovation in his *L'Esprit des cahiers présentés aux États-Généraux*. Written in the form of a law, with 693 articles, *L'Esprit des cahiers* sums up every matter discussed during the General-Estates: constitution, administration and law, commerce, public finance, religion, education. Yet Target avoids using the word innovation. All over the text, Target's keyword is regeneration (and revolution), not innovation.¹⁰ Target wants a "réforme absolue" [absolute reform]. "En général, les réformateurs se sont plus attachés à détruire qu'à édifier, à censurer les vices de l'administration qu'à les remplacer par une meilleure ... J'ai cherché en vain un édifice complet & détaillé" [In general, reformers are more partial to destroying than to building, to censuring the vices of the administration than to replacing them with something better...I have searched in vain for a complete and detailed structure] (Target, 1789: vi).

Yet in conclusion, Target admits to innovating: "Je m'attends qu'on me reproche de m'être livré dans cet écrit à l'esprit d'**innovation**, de l'avoir porté à l'excès ... De ce reproche je ne supprime que le mot excès, tout le reste est vrai"[I am waiting for someone to reproach me for being given in this writing to the spirit of **innovation**, of having carried it to extremes...From this reproach I eliminate only the word excess, all the rest is true] (Target, 1789: 493). To Target, to reform (regenerate) a corrupt state requires innovation. France wishes great changes ("ne demande-t-on pas à grands cris la *régénération du royaume?*" [do we not loudly demand the *regeneration of the kingdom?*]) and the changes cannot be done without innovation. "J'ignore l'art de

¹⁰ On regeneration, see Baecque (1988).

produire de très-grandes choses avec de très-petits moyens” [I know nothing of the art of producing very great things by very small means] (Target, 1789: 494).

When innovation is used by others than critics, it is normally used in a defensive mode. In a discourse pronounced before the National Assembly on June 17 1789, the revolutionary Honoré Gabriel Riquetti, comte de Mirabeau (1749-1791), claimed that liberty is not a matter of philosophy (science) or principles but of daily experience. Before outlining his own proposal for a declaration of rights, Mirabeau praises the American Declaration for such a pragmatism or middle ground, and at the same time minimizes any innovation in his own project. “Nous serons mieux entendus à proportion que nous nous rapprocherons davantage de raisonnements [simples]. S’il faut employer des termes abstraits, nous les rendrons intelligibles, en les liant à tout ce qui peut rappeler les sensations qui ont servi à faire éclore la liberté, et en écartant, autant qu’il est possible, tout ce qui se présente sous l’appareil de l’**innovation**” [We would be better listened to in proportion to how closely we approach (simple) reasoning. If we must employ abstract terms, we will make them intelligible, by linking them to anything capable of recalling the sensations that served to kindle liberty and, to the extent possible, by keeping away anything presented under the trappings of **innovation**] (Mérilhou, 1825: 208). Similarly, Gérard-Trophisme Lally-Tollendal, member of the Assemblée nationale constituante (as representative of the Lords), in a discourse to the *Chambre de la noblesse* (House of Lords) on 15 June 1789 states: “Et quant à cette expression d’**innovation**; quant à cette qualification de **novateurs**, dont on ne cesse de nous accabler; convenons encore que les premiers **novateurs** sont dans nos mains; que les premiers **novateurs** sont nos cahiers; respectons, bénissons cette heureuse **innovation** qui doit tout mettre à sa place, qui doit rendre tous les droits inviolables, toutes les autorités bienfaisantes, et tous les sujets heureux” [And with regard to this expression **innovation**; with regard to this characterization of **innovators**, with whom we are incessantly overwhelmed; let us agree once more that the first **innovators** are in our hands; that the first **innovators** are our schoolbooks; respect and bless this happy **innovation** that should put everything in its

place, that should make all rights inviolable, all authorities beneficent, and all subjects happy] (Lally-Tollendal, 1789: 164-65).¹¹

Law holds the same pejorative view of innovation, that “goût léger du siècle” [frivolous taste of the century] and “appât qu’employent les nouveaux docteurs” [bait used by new doctors] because it is “la manie de ceux [à qui] ils enseignent ... Ils peuvent ainsi combler leurs classes” [the odd habit of those (to whom) they teach...They can thus fill up their classes]. So wrote a professor of law on the spirit of innovation in education (Dupin, 1808: 118-19). Among several projects in the eighteenth century on the collection of ancient laws, the *Recueil général des anciennes lois françaises, depuis l’an 420 jusqu’à la révolution de 1789* offers the following rationale for the study of past laws. In the introduction to volume one, François-André Isambert, lawyer and adviser to the King at the *Cour de Cassation*, reminds readers of the following two facts (Jourdan et al., 1789):

Le mérite d’un législateur consiste moins à créer, qu’à profiter de ce qui est, pour asseoir un édifice durable et solide ... et cette manière de procéder est souvent préférable aux **innovations**. Nos voisins [England] ont leur raisons pour être plus attachés que nous à ces anciennes lois. Constitués de bonne heure, ils ont eu plutôt à défendre les anciennes maximes de leurs pères, qu’à courir après les **innovations** ... Aussi le cri des Anglais est-il aujourd’hui ... *Nolumus leges Anglioe mutare*. L’idée d’une réforme, quelque nécessaire qu’elle paraisse, éprouve dans ce pays une résistance presque invincible [The value of a legislator consists less in creating than in taking advantage of what is, in order to build a solid, durable edifice...and this manner of proceeding is often preferable to **innovations**. Our neighbours (England) have their reasons for being more attached than we are to these old laws. Established early, they

¹¹ Twenty-five years earlier, Jean-Jacques Rousseau too used the word innovation while discussing the veto. “Il n’y eut jamais un seul Gouvernement sur la terre où le Législateur enchaîné de toutes manières par le corps exécutif, après avoir livré les Lois sans réserve à sa merci, fut réduit à les lui voir expliquer, éluder, transgresser à volonté” [There has never been a single Government on earth where the Legislator, bound in every way by the executive body, after having delivered the Laws without regard for its approval, should be reduced to having them explained to him, evaded, transgressed at will] (Rousseau, 1764: 156). Rousseau makes uses of innovation only because the anonymous author he criticizes does so. To the anonymous author a veto is a safe measure against innovations to the constitution. To Rousseau, this is the most subtle fallacy. It is rather a government that innovates: “Qui est-ce qui peut empêcher d’**innover** celui qui a la force en main, & qui n’est obligé de rendre compte de sa conduite à personne? ... Celui qui a la Puissance exécutive n’a jamais besoin d’**innover** par des actions d’éclat. Il n’a jamais besoin de constater cette **innovation** par des actes solennels. Il lui suffit, dans l’exercice continu de sa puissance, de plier peu à peu chaque chose à sa volonté” [Who can forbid the person with the power in his hands, and who need answer to no-one for his conduct, from **innovating**? The person who has the Executive Power need not **innovate** through glorious deeds. He need never acknowledge this **innovation** by any solemn proceeding. All he need do in the ongoing exercise of his powers is to bit by bit bend each thing to his will] (Rousseau, 1764: 158-59).

had rather to defend the old truisms of their fathers than to run after **innovations**...Also, the cry of the English today is...*Nolumus leges Anglioe mutare*. The idea of reform, however necessary it appears, in this country encounters an almost invincible resistance].

Chez nous, au contraire, l'esprit d'**innovation** a été permanent. Il a été favorisé par nos Rois ... mais l'impulsion était donnée: le peuple ... voulut, à son tour, conquérir un état politique, et participer au gouvernement; la révolution éclata; une constitution fut ... improvisée ...; la haine des anciennes institutions s'est montrée à un degré qu'on n'avait pas connu dans la révolution d'Angleterre [Here among us, to the contrary, the spirit of **innovation** has been permanent. It has been favoured by our Kings...but the impulse was given: the people...wanted to have their turn to conquer a political state, and participate in the government; revolution explodes; a constitution was...improvised...; the hatred of the old institutions has increased to a degree we never saw in England's revolution].

To Isambert, that a ruler's main task is "creating new laws" and that France is imbued with the "spirit of innovation" are insufficient reasons for not studying past laws. "Mais, parce que le système de Louis XIV et de Louis XV, a fait place à un autre, conforme aux nécessités du siècle où nous vivons, est-ce donc une raison, pour que nous dédaignons l'étude des monumens des siècles passés?" [But because the system of Louis XIV and Louis XV gave way to another, conforming to the requirements of the century we live in, is that then a reason for us to despise the study of the memorials of centuries past?]

All in all, the representation of innovation that prevailed in 1789 is not different from that offered in the French *Encyclopédie* of 1751, itself a representation of centuries of uses of the concept: innovations are "difformités dans l'ordre politique" [deformities in the political order], as the *Table analytique et raisonnée des matières contenues* in the *Encyclopédie* puts it (Diderot, 1780: 41). To the encyclopedists, innovation is a "nouveau, ou changement important qu'on fait dans le gouvernement politique d'un état, contre l'usage & les règles de sa constitution"[novelty, or important change one makes in the body politic of a state, against the tradition and the regulations of its constitution]. Innovation is contrasted to gradualism: "les révolutions que le tems amene dans le cours de la nature, arrivent pas-à-pas; il faut donc imiter cette lenteur"[the revolutions that time brings in the course of nature arrive step by step; we should then emulate this slowness] (*Encyclopédie*, 1774, Volume 30, art. Innovation: 757). Similarly, "novateur" – to the French "on ne dit pas **innovateur**: le mot usité est *Novateur*"[we don't say "**innovateur**": the commonly used word is "*Novateur*"], suggests a dictionary

of the time (Féraud, 1786) – is “toujours en mauvaise part” [always improper] because men are attached to established things.

Yet at the same time, the representation of innovation began to change. The *Encyclopédie* admits both bad *and good* innovations: “Les **novateurs** en littérature peuvent corrompre ou perfectionner le gout; en religion, exciter ou calmer les troubles; en politique, sauver ou perdre une nation” [**Innovators** in literature can corrupt or perfect taste; in religion, excite or calm troubles; in politics, save or ruin a nation] (*Encyclopédie*, 1765, Volume 11, art. Novateur: 254). In the same volume, nouveauté (novelty) is defined as “tout changement, **innovation**, réforme bonne ou mauvaise, avantageuse ou nuisible” [any change, **innovation**, reform good or bad, beneficial or harmful]. However, such a positive acknowledgment is timid. Echoing, or rather citing Francis Bacon, the *Encyclopédie* suggests that one should only accept innovation “peu à peu & pour ainsi dire insensiblement” [bit by bit and, so to speak, imperceptibly] (*Encyclopédie*, 1765, Volume 11, art. Nouveauté: 265). “Il est bon de ne pas faire de nouvelles expériences pour accomoder un état sans une extrême nécessité & un avantage visible. Enfin, il faut prendre garde que ce soit le désir éclairé de réformer qui attire le changement, & non pas le désir frivole du changement qui attire la réforme” [One must avoid creating new experiments to accommodate a state without an extreme necessity and a visible advantage. Ultimately we must be careful that it is the enlightened desire to reform that brings about change, and not the frivolous desire for change that brings about reform] (*Encyclopédie*, 1765, Volume 11, art. Nouveauté: 266).

Innovation and Instrumentality

With time many people became conscious that innovation is first of all a word, a word used for polemical purposes. Innovation was not the subject of inquiry, study or theory. It was a linguistic weapon used against an enemy: the revolutionary, the republican and, in the nineteenth century, the socialist. “The word **innovation** is so extremely offensive, that like a harsh note in music, it is grating to the feelings of all who hear it: antiquity and old precedents are now in fashion, and must upon all occasions be quoted”. So spoke

Reverend Samuel John Nash in England in his *Address to the Board of Agriculture on the Subject of Enclosure and Tithes* (Nash, 1800: 2). To Nash, innovation is progress. “If ancient customs were always to be pleased, we might as well say that our military should be armed with bows and arrows, rather than fire arms” (Nash, 1800: 3). Nash proposes eliminating all vestiges that make people remember tithes, above all abolishing the term tithes itself.

Nash was right. The word innovation is offensive ... and much more. “On tremble au seul mot d’**innovation**“; [we cringe at the very word **innovation**] ¹² a “mot maudit” [damned word], as the fourierist Victor Considerant put it (Considerant, 1834: 312); “on abuse singulièrement aujourd’hui du mot *innovation*”. [we particularly abuse the word **innovation** these days] ¹³ To many, the “reproche d’innovation” [reproaching innovation] is only a “préjugé” [prejudice], “une maxime de la stupidité et de la tyrannie” [the byword of stupidity and tyranny], ¹⁴ “une crainte peu réfléchie” [an unthinking fear], ¹⁵

¹² Gaspard-Louis Rouillé d’Orfeuill, *intendant* under the Old regime, in his philosophical and political ‘dictionary’ *L’alambic des Loix* (Chapter **Innovation**). One should distinguish innovation as artifice coming from a “source empoisonnée” [a poisonous source] or an interested party, from an innovation which is “le fruit d’un long travail, & d’une expérience réfléchie” [the fruit of extensive work and well-considered experiment] (Rouillé d’Orfeuill, 1773: 76).

¹³ Cyprien Desmarais, royalist writer, on the *querelle* between classicism and romanticism. Romanticism is “un être tout libéral”, [a wholly liberal being] an “**innovation**” [innovation]. Yet “on abuse singulièrement aujourd’hui du mot *innovation*, introduit dans le langage politique. Il est évident que le libéralisme, qui prétend vivre d’*innovations*, ne devrait appeler de ce nom que les *innovations* qui peuvent avoir pour lui des conséquences fécondes; or, comment peut-il réclamer, comme étant de son domaine, une **innovation** [romantisme] qui le tue” [These days we use overuse the word *innovation*, introduced into political language. It is obvious that liberalism, which claims to live by *innovations*, need call by this name only those *innovations* that may have fruitful consequences for it; how can it claim, as being part of its province, an **innovation** (Romanticism) that destroys it] (Desmarais, 1826: 116).

¹⁴ Pierre-Henry Thiry Holbach Dumarsais in his *Essai sur les préjugés*. “L’antiquité donne toujours du poids et de la solidité aux opinions des hommes ... Ils s’imaginent que ce que leurs ancêtres ont jugé convenable ne peut être ni altéré ni anéanti sans crime et sans danger ... Ils s’en rapportent aveuglément aux décisions de ceux qui sont plus âgés qu’eux ... Il ne faut rien changer ... toute **innovation** est dangereuse” [Antiquity always gives some weight and solidity to the opinions of men...They imagine that that which their ancestors deemed useful can be neither altered nor destroyed without crime and without danger...They blindly rely on the decisions of those older than them...nothing must be changed...any **innovation** is dangerous] (Dumarsais, 1822: 141-42). “Ne rien changer, ne rien **innover**, sont des maximes ou de la stupidité ou de la tyrannie” [Change nothing, **innovate** in nothing, these are the bywords of stupidity and tyranny] (Dumarsais, 1822: 143).

¹⁵ Isaac Beausobre, Calvinist divine and ecclesiastical writer, in *Introduction générale à l’étude de la politique, des finances et du commerce*: “S’il est déraisonnable de laisser le gouvernement des affaires à ces hommes qui passent leur vie à faire des projets; il l’est autant de ne jamais écouter ceux qui proposent de nouvelles vues, & de s’en tenir à ce qui se pratique, dans la crainte peu réfléchie du danger des **innovations**” [If it is unreasonable to leave the governance of things in the hand of those men who spend

that of an “esprit borné” [a short-sighted mind].¹⁶ “From this appeal”, concluded an anonymous writer, “there is no appeal” (Anonymous, 1844).¹⁷

Jean le Rond d’Alembert (1717-1783) summarizes the uses made of innovation perfectly. Innovation is a cry, “le cri de guerre des sots” [the war cry of fools]. In his *Éloge de L’Abbé François Régnier Desmarais*, (1786), d’Alembert asks why organizations [Corps] have “moins de sens & de lumières que les particuliers” [less sense and enlightenment than individuals]. It is because (Alembert, 1786: 293):

elles craignent le plus léger changement dans leurs principes, leurs opinions, leurs usages ... [D]ès qu’on propose une chose nouvelle, quelque raisonnable qu’elle soit, le cri de guerre des sots est toujours, *c’est une innovation*. Il n’y a, disait un homme d’esprit, qu’une réponse à faire à cette objection, c’est de servir du *gland* à ceux qui la proposent; car le pain, quand on a commencé d’en faire, était une grande **innovation** [they fear the least change in their principles, their opinions, their usages...(A)s soon as someone proposes a new thing, however reasonable it may be, the war cry of fools is always, *it is an innovation*. There is, to a man of spirit, only one answer to be made to this objection, and that is to serve acorns to those who propose it; since bread, when it was begun to be made, was a major **innovation**].

Innovation’s rehabilitation came about due to many arguments, above all progress and utility. Thoughts on innovation as utility open an entirely new semantic field. From a focus on the past and the present (innovation as heresy and deviance), it was transformed and now allows one to talk about the future: innovation is an instrument for founding a new society and a new political order.¹⁸ Innovation is not harmful but useful. There are good and bad innovations. Beginning in the nineteenth century, the “dangerous innovation” turns into innovation with superlatives: the “Happy Innovation”, the “Great Innovation”. Innovation also gets ‘technicized’. People start talking of “political

their lives undertaking projects; it is just as unreasonable never to listen to those who propound new views, and to hold to that which is currently done, out of an ill-considered fear of the danger of **innovations**] (Beausobre, 1791: 52).

¹⁶ In the frontispiece to Louis-Sébastien Mercier’s *Fragments de politique et d’histoire*: “**Innovation, innovation!** dit ou répète un esprit borné. Oh! C’est bien l’erreur qui est nouvelle auprès de l’ordre éternel des choses” [**Innovation, innovation!** says or repeats the short-sighted mind. Oh! It is truly the new error with regard to the eternal order of things] (Mercier, 1792).

¹⁷ Similar accusations abound in England: cry of innovation, disease of the mind, deadly poison, conduct worthy of children.

¹⁸ To be sure, there was a future-oriented perspective before the sixteenth century. Yet it was eschatological rather than teleological. See Koselleck (1968).

innovation”, “innovation in law”, “linguistic innovation” instead of just innovation. This is a sign that people were appropriating a word in general use for more specific purposes.

The increasing use of innovation in a positive sense amounts to a perceived change in the world and a corresponding change in the conception of society. There occurs a “shift in the conception of time and a reorientation towards the future ... against which structural changes are perceived, evaluated and acted upon” (Ritcher, 1995: 35). Four characteristics of this change are:¹⁹

1. *Pervasiveness*. Change is everywhere, at least semantically (Koselleck, 1969; 1977): religion (Reformation), politics (revolutions), economics (industrial revolution), science (scientific revolution). While everything was perceived as continuous before, people now become conscious or aware of changes in every sphere of society. They accept change, even promote changes.

2. *Rapidity*. Change is radical and revolutionary. While it was previously thought that change is mainly gradual and evolutionary (Nisbet, 1969), change is now sudden. Revolutions become the emblem of change.²⁰

3. *Temporal dimension*. Change is future-oriented, namely instrumental to social transformations rather than oriented to preserving the past. Change is productive (useful) rather than destructive (of customs) or, if destructive, is so in a positive manner. Radical change and revolutions announce new possible futures (Koselleck, 1969; Lusebrink and Reichardt, 1988; Ozouf, 1989; Reichardt, 1997).

¹⁹ On early representations of change, see Nisbet (1969), particularly pp. 166-88. Nisbet analyzes the representations or theories of change according to six characteristics: natural, directional, immanent, continuous, necessary and proceeding from uniform causes.

²⁰ “Tout est révolution dans ce monde” [Everything is revolution in this world] (Louis Sébastien Mercier; cited in Koselleck, 1969: 48); “Le monde se conduit par des révolutions continuelles” [The world unfolds through continual revolutions] (Gabriel Bonnot de Mably; cited in Baker, 1988: 47); “My dear philosopher, doesn’t this appear to you to be the century of revolutions?” (François-Marie Arouet Voltaire, in a letter to d’Alembert; cited in Baker, 1990: 203); “Les révolutions sont nécessaires, il y en a toujours eu, et il y en aura toujours” [Revolutions are necessary, there have always been revolutions, and there will always be revolutions] (Denis Diderot, *Encyclopédie*).

4. *Source*. Man becomes conscious of his own action. While change was previously explained by God, nature or necessity, man becomes aware of history and his capacity to shape his own destiny (Koselleck, 2002a).

Such changes could not but be named using new words, or re-descriptions of existing words.²¹ Such is the case with innovation. Words are semantic conditions (factors) of events, as much as indicators of history (Koselleck, 2002b). They are an integral part of the event, a crucial ingredient of its happening. First, words give significance to events. Second, words articulate new possibilities (Sewell, 2005: 245-51).

After 1789, one central argument on innovation develops that gave the concept a positive connotation. Innovation is discussed in terms of progress, as Nash did (see p. 17 above): “If it had not been for this happy spirit of **innovation**, what would be the state of mechanics, mathematics, geography, astronomy, and all the useful arts and sciences” (Pigott, 1792: 171). On the one hand the literature on progress, including encyclopedias and *dictionnaires critiques*, starts using “innovation” in a positive sense – such was not the case during the previous century (the Encyclopedists, Nicolas de Condorcet, Anne Robert Jacques Turgot). On the other hand, the discourses on innovation begin making use of “progress”, thus contributing to make honourable what was, until then, an odious word (innovation). As Robert Nisbet puts it, like Auguste Javary before him,²² after 1750 progress is the dominant idea, the “developmental context for other ideas” (Nisbet, 1980: 171; Koselleck, 2002b).

Innovation as progress is understood as utility. Innovation is essentially what is useful or productive of good effects: the improvement of the material conditions of men, but also their political and social conditions. Bentham offered a full-length argument here (Godin, 2013c). Yet, the argument existed before him. For example, Guillaume Cave (16??-

²¹ On some concepts of change (called concepts of “movement”), see Koselleck (1977).

²² “L’idée de progrès ... conçue comme loi générale de l’histoire et de l’avenir de l’humanité ... appartient en propre à notre siècle” [The concept of progress...conceived as the general law of history and of humanity’s future...belongs particularly to our century] (Javary, 1851: 1).

1713), an English doctor of theology and chaplain of Charles II, included a chapter on “De l’**innovation** qui étoit imputée au Christianisme” in his *La religion des anciens Chrétiens, dans les premiers siècles du Christianisme* (1671), translated into French in 1711. Cave offers two arguments against those who “font passer la religion Chrétienne pour une religion moderne & qu’on venoit d’inventer” [pass off the Christian religion as a modern religion and say it was recently invented] (Cave, 1671: 19). One argument is to the effect that all things that exist were new at their beginning. The other argument is progress: “Il est sans contredit naturel à l’homme, de préférer le meilleur au moindre, ce qui est utile à ce qui ne l’est pas” [It is without doubt natural for man to prefer the better to the lesser, that which is useful to that which is not].²³

Another such pre-revolutionary use is from Robert Robinson (1735-1790), an eminent English dissenting divine and Baptist minister, whose political views caused some concern in the Church – but were cited by Burke. In a pamphlet published in 1782, Robinson looks at the principles guiding the many petitions to Parliament asking for changes and new laws. To Robinson, the controversies (religious and political) that divide England rest on mistakes. One of the true principles guiding the petitions is innovation. There is “necessity of reforming abuses at all times, and in all places, where they are found, without being frightened at the din of novelty, novelty” (Robinson, 1782: 62-63):

Innovate! England ... has done nothing but **innovate** ever since the reign of Henry the seventh She has imported the inventions and productions of the whole earth, and has

²³ According to Cave, the Christian writer Arnobe (c.240-304) says: “de grace, quel tort cela nous fait-il [que notre religion soit nouvelle]? Ne pouvons nous pas reprocher le même défaut aux premiers tems du monde, que les gens vivoient pauvrement & miserablement, jusqu’à ce qu’ils soient peu à peu parvenus à une manière de vie plus magnifique & plus illustre ... Il est sans contredit naturel à l’homme, de préférer le meilleur au moindre, ce qui est utile à ce qui ne l’est pas” [For goodness’ sake, what wrong does this do us (that our religion is new)? Can we not criticize the same fault in the world’s earliest days, that people live poorly and miserably, until they are brought step by step to a more magnificent and enlightened way of living...It is doubtless natural for man to prefer the better to the lesser, that which is useful to that which is not] (Cave, 1671: 28-29). Second, according to Cave again, Saint-Ambroise (340-397) says: “Vous dites que nôtre religion est nouvelle, & la votre ancienne, mais ... si la nôtre est nouvelle, elle vieillira avec le tems, & la vôtre qui est, dites vous, ancienne, a été nouvelle pendant un certain tems. Il ne faut mesurer ni la bonté ni la dignité d’une religion au tems qu’elle a duré, mais à l’excellence de son culte” [You say that our religion is new, and that your is old, but...if ours is new, it will grow older with time, and yours which is, you say, old, was new for a certain time. We must not measure either the goodness or the dignity of a religion by the time it has lasted, but by the excellence of its worship] (Cave, 1671: 30).

improved and enriched herself by so doing. New arts, new manufactories, new laws, new diversions, all things are becoming new ... The truth is human knowledge is progressive, and there has been a gradual improvement in every thing; this age knows many things the last was ignorant of, the next will know many unknown to this, and hence the necessity of frequent **innovations** ... The love of novelty is so far from being dangerous, that it is one of the noblest endowments of nature. It is the soul of science, and the life of a thousand arts.

As the nineteenth century progressed, such uses of innovation multiplied – including in religion.²⁴ France was no exception. Echoing the anonymous replies to Diderot (see p. 11 above): “Où en serions-nous, hélas! si nos ancêtres avaient eu pour les leurs l’aveugle vénération que l’on exige de nous pour les préjugés antiques? L’homme serait encore sauvage” [Where would we be now, forsooth, if our ancestors had possessed the blind veneration for their own ancestors that is required of us for ancient prejudices? Man would still be a savage], claimed Pierre-Henry Thiry Holbach Dumarsais in his *Essai sur les préjugés* (Dumarsais, 1822: 143). Similarly, to Abbé Guillaume-André-René Baston, vice-president of the Academy of Sciences of Rouen: “L’**innovation** ne sert pas seulement à détruire ce qui est mauvais ou faux; elle sert aussi à perfectionner ce qui est bon et vrai (...). Ce n’est qu’à force d’**innovations** que les premières productions du génie acquièrent de la consistance, une juste étendue, des proportions régulières” [**Innovation** doesn’t only destroy what is bad or false; it also perfects what is good and true...It is only by force of **innovations** that the first products of genius acquire consistency, a fair distribution, regular proportions] (Baston, 1810: 133).

Auguste Comte too uses innovation in a positive sense in several of his writings (*Cours de philosophie positive; Système de politique positive ou Traité de sociologie*). Comte contrasts “esprit de conservation” [the spirit of conservation] to “esprit d’**innovation**” [the spirit of innovation] as two fundamental instincts and explains social progress as the

²⁴ For an example of rehabilitation of innovation in religion, see Finney (1835). In a series of Friday sermons on his return from Europe, the American pastor Charles Finney found that “the spirit of revival had greatly declined in the United States”. Finney argues that for a revival of religion to occur there must be innovation. Over the centuries, states Finney, the Church has done nothing but innovate (a “succession of **innovations**”, “by degrees”). God has imposed no rules in matter of discipline and ceremony. It is left to men to innovate. Yet, “in the present generation, many things have been introduced which have proved useful, but have been opposed on the ground that they were **innovations**” (Finney, 1835: 242). Finney claims that “without new measures it is impossible that the church should succeed in gaining the attention of the world of religion ... Novelties should be introduced no faster than they are really called for ... But new measures we must have (Finney, 1835: 251-52).

result of the latter: “L’*évolution sociale eût été certes infiniment plus rapide que l’histoire ne nous l’indique, si son essor avait pu dépendre surtout des instincts les plus énergiques; au lieu d’avoir à lutter contre l’inertie politique qu’ils tendent spontanément à produire dans la plupart des cas*” [Social evolution would certainly have been infinitely more rapid than history shows us if its development had been able to rely principally on the most energetic instincts, rather than having to fight against the political inertia that they tend to produce spontaneously in most cases] (Comte, 1839: 559). Similarly, François Laurent, jurist, historian and professor at *Université de Gand* (Belgium), discusses the “idea of progress” over 80 pages in his *Études sur l’histoire de l’humanité*. Laurent compares religion (or rather the Church) to science, in which progress is the distinctive characteristic because of innovation. “Comment y aurait-il progrès sans changement, sans **innovation**” [How can there be progress without change, without **innovation**] (Laurent, 1866: 85). Laurent claims that the Church innovates too, but unconsciously. “Tout ce qui est nouveau est hérétique. C’est cette maxime que Bossuet oppose sans cesse aux protestants ... Il y a, quoi qu’on dise, **innovation** mais on la cache ... Si, malgré tout, le progrès se réalise, c’est en quelque sorte en cachette; on le nie au besoin” [Everything new is heretical. It is this maxim that Bossuet pronounces continuously to Protestants...there is, no matter what people say, **innovation**, but they hide it...If, despite everything, progress occurs, it is in a way on the sly; they deny it whenever necessary] (Laurent, 1866: 85).

Whether one writes on religion, politics, history, science or arts, in books or magazines, innovation gets rehabilitated in the name of progress and utility. In 1850, the *Académie des jeux floraux* launched a prize for an essay on *Caractériser la double influence de la force de l’habitude et de l’amour de la nouveauté, et expliquer leur action respective sur les moeurs, l’état social et la littérature*. The winner, Gabriel de Belcastel, compares Asia which is in “a state of petrification” to Europe and France, people “apôtre de la loi nouvelle ... et poussée sans cesse en avant” [advocates of the new law...and pushed continuously forward] by innovation. “L’esprit d’**innovation** ne doit pas être le dédain irréfléchi des coutumes, mais l’étude sérieuse et calme des progrès à réaliser” [The spirit

of **innovation** should not be heedless scorn for customs, but rather the calm and serious study of the progress to be achieved] (Belcastel, 1850: 19).

Let's take one more example, this time from politics. In 1866, J.-M. Dubeuf, *voyageur de commerce*, published a *Revue rétrospective des principaux faits et innovations et événements acquis depuis le règne de Napoléon III*. Because of the “règne glorieux” [glorious reign] of the Emperor, states Dubeuf, “le drapeau de la France représente partout la civilisation et le progrès” [the flag of France everywhere represents civilization and progress] (Dubeuf, 1866: 14). Dubeuf attributes six great innovations to Napoléon: universal suffrage, public services, free trade (“l'**innovation** la plus hardie et la plus radicale entre toutes de notre siècle” [the most audacious and radical **innovation** of all those in our century), secularization, civilization (wars “mettent à la raison des peuples à demi-sauvages” [bring a semi-savage people to their senses]) and European diplomacy. “Aveugles seraient ceux qui nieraient”, claims Dubeuf, “les bienfaits que tirera l'humanité de ces grandes phases politiques au profit de son émancipation sociale” [Blind are those who deny the benefits humanity will reap from these great political junctures to the benefit of its social emancipation] (Dubeuf, 1866: 16).

These are just a few examples, among many. Innovation is recognized as a fact of life; it is present in every sphere of society; it is praised for its radical or revolutionary effects. Innovation is revolution in a positive sense. “L'**innovation**, mais l'**innovation** en grand, l'**innovation** qui annonce qu'on est entré dans une ère nouvelle de la pensée, déborde de partout, dans les livres, dans les journaux, dans les chaires de philosophie, et jusque dans la Chambre des députés” [**Innovation**, but **innovation** in the large sense, **innovation** that announces that we have entered into a new era of thought, overflows from everywhere, in books, in newspapers, in chairs of philosophy, right up to the Parliament], claimed the *Revue encyclopédique, ou Analyse raisonnée des productions les plus remarquables dans les sciences, la politique, l'industrie et les beaux-arts*, published by H. Cornot and P. Leroux (1832).

The “spirit of innovation” is now one of praise. Both the Reformation and the Revolution are innovation because they are progressive, claimed Laurent.²⁵ “La réforme serait une **innovation** ... Voilà ce que Bossuet ne cesse de dire ... Sur ce terrain Bossuet est invincible ... Toute révolution est une **innovation** ... Il faut abandonner aux utopistes l’espoir d’un progrès régulier et sans entraves” [Reform would be an **innovation**... That is what Bossuet keeps saying... In this area Bossuet is invincible... Every revolution is an **innovation**... We must abandon to the Utopians the hope of regular progress without obstacles]. Innovation is pervasive, perhaps too pervasive (Laurent, 1879: 13-14):

L’humanité est en révolution permanente; l’**innovation** est une condition de son existence; du jour où elle serait immuable, elle périrait ... Le siècle dans lequel nous écrivons a été si fécond en révolutions, que le mot d’**innovation** qui effrayait tant Bossuet, est entré dans nos idées et nos sentiments habituels; nous avons plutôt à nous garder d’un autre écueil, c’est d’applaudir aux révolutions par cela seul qu’elles sont des **innovations**, ou de mal juger le passé, par amour pour les nouveautés [Humanity is in permanent revolution; **innovation** is a condition of his existence; on the day that it becomes immutable, it will perish... The century in which we write has been so rich in revolutions that the word **innovation**, which so frightened Bossuet, has entered into our normal ideas and feelings; we should rather beware another pitfall, that is, applauding revolutions for this only, that they are **innovations**, or judging the past badly out of love for novelties].

In the nineteenth century, innovation holds such an exalted place in a growing number of texts. Among the terms and expressions used to talk of innovation as a new epoch are: *âge d’innovation*, *siècle d’innovation*. Innovation becomes revolutionary in a positive sense: *révolution permanente*, *révolution totale*, *bouleversement*, *changement radical*, *innovation révolutionnaire*, *profonde et radicale*, *importante*, *grave et profonde*, *hardie*, *téméraire*, *Brusque*. The innovation is praised for its benefits: *grande et heureuse*, *intérêt public*, *utilité*, *incontestables avantages*, *progrès*.

²⁵ Interestingly for the time, Laurent defends an evolutionary view on innovation. Every revolution “a ses racines dans le passé” [has its roots in the past] (Laurent, 1879: 10). “Nous ne dirons pas que sans Luther il n’y aurait pas eu de réforme; tout était mûr pour une révolution” [We are not saying that without Luther there would have been no reform, everything was ripe for a revolution]. Men of genius are only “l’expression de l’état social dans lequel ils vivent” [the expression of the social condition in which they live] (Laurent, 1879: 17). “Les plus grands des révolutionnaires ne sont pas les **novateurs** proprement dits; ceux-ci se bordent d’ordinaire à formuler les vœux des peuples, souvent en les exagérant; les vrais **novateurs** sont ces hommes obscurs” [The greatest revolutionaries are not **innovators** strictly speaking; they stay in line with the usual in formulating the people’s wishes, often by exaggerating them; the real **innovators** are obscure men] (Laurent, 1879: 21). In social matters, the reformation “n’a pas innové, elle n’a fait que continuer le mouvement des idées qui s’étaient fait jour pendant le moyen-âge” [did not innovate, it did nothing but continue the movement of ideas that had evolved during the Middle Ages] (Laurent, 1879: 29).

Two usages or contributions to the new connotation should be mentioned. First, “social innovation”. In the 1830s, innovation got a social connotation. At a time when socialism was the “new spiritual power” (Gellman-Jones, 2010) – as a result of the ‘failures’ of the French revolution – schemes of social reform came to be called social innovation because of their revolutionary benefits to the people. To the disciples of the French utopian Charles Fourier, social innovation is most desired: “On sent que la société est mal à l’aise” [We feel that society is ill at ease], wrote Victor Considerant in a book whose purpose was to contribute to the diffusion of Fourier’s “grande conception” [grand idea]. “On admet que [la société] a besoin d’une organisation nouvelle. L’état des choses actuelles enfante désordre sur désordre, perturbation sur perturbation, et tout cela ne peut évidemment cesser que par une **innovation** sociale” [We admit that (society) needs a new form of organization. The current situation engenders turmoil upon turmoil, disturbance upon disturbance, and all of this can evidently never cease except through social **innovation**] (Considerant, 1834: 312).

The second contribution to the positive connotation of innovation is in science and arts. Innovation in science was as contested as in religion and politics until then. While most of the titles on innovation in the seventeenth and eighteenth century are concerned with religion and politics, many now deal with science, or rather *applied* science, namely the practical and useful, as contrasted to the speculative or theoretical, as the *Dictionnaire des sciences médicales* puts it in a long article (20 pages) titled **Innovation**, whose purpose was to “réfléchir sur le mot **innovation** appliqué à la médecine” [study the word **innovation** applied to medicine]. “Comment se fait-il”, asked the authors, “que l’art de guérir voit ses théories et ses méthodes changer tous les jours?” [How is it that the healing art sees its theories and its methods change every day?] (Dictionnaire, 1818: 237). The article sketches the history of medicine as progress from speculation to facts, distinguishes kinds of innovations ²⁶ and makes a plea for innovation of a practical kind

²⁶ “Les **innovations** produites par l’esprit de système” [**innovations** produced by the speculative mind], “les **innovations** qui sont le résultat d’une observation plus attentive et de faits mieux étudiés” [**innovations** that are the result of more attentive observation and of facts better studied] et les “**innovations** venues de procédés perfectionnés, de remèdes introduits, de pratiques adoptées”

(“traitement des maladies et méthodes cliniques” [treatment of disease and clinical methods]).

Like social innovation, such use of innovation in science and arts occurred a century before uses in industry. The connotation has nothing to do with what we now call “technological innovation” (Godin, 2013b). Yet both social innovation and innovation in science and arts – every type of innovation, in fact – remain contested over the nineteenth century (Godin, 2012a; 2013b). The positive uses share place with the negative and the accusatory. Innovation only developed a dominant positive connotation in the second half of the twentieth century.

Let’s conclude with what is, to the best of my knowledge, the first ‘theoretical’ thought on innovation: John Patterson’s *Innovation Entitled to a Full and Candid Hearing*. This is a long analysis (60 pages), of a psycho-social kind, in three parts, published in New York in 1850. To Patterson, innovation is progress or newly-discovered truths, and the innovator is a reformer, with a moral mind (a liberal). “The cry of ‘innovation’ and ‘infidelity’ arise, almost as loud ... as that of heresy in the darker ages of the world ... The effect of such a course of discipline is to put an effectual stop to all progress in the knowledge of truth” (Patterson, 1850: 19-20). Patterson begins his analysis with “examples of past resistance to novelty and change”, from Socrates to Christ, Luther and Calvin, from Columbus to Descartes, Galileo, Newton, Harvey, Fulton and many others. “No man who attacks the errors of his age, and proposes reform, can escape the ordeal of persecution. He is regarded by his contemporaries as a dangerous character, an overturner of society, philosophy, or religion, a fanatic, a heretic, a dreamer, a madman, a fool, and richly deserving, if not summary punishment, at least the unmeasured contempt of a wronged and insulted world” (Patterson, 1850: 37).

Then Patterson distinguishes the “reformer” and the “anti-reformer” – innovation is used mainly to discuss opposition to innovation by anti-innovators, while reform is used to

[**innovations** that arose from improved processes, new remedies, new practices] (Dictionnaire, 1818: 254-55).

discuss innovators. For each class, Patterson devotes a part of the work and develops an analysis of the character of the men (see Appendix 2). The anti-innovator is of two kinds: passive (neutral) and active. He “does not oppose what is novel, because it is right or wrong, but merely because it is new” (Patterson, 1850: 52). The anti-innovator has a bias against newly-discovered truths because of “fear of popular disgrace”, envy and “desire to please the multitude”. Patterson reduces all the causes of opposition to innovation to three: 1. Ignorance; 2. Prejudice or passion; 3. Policy or interest.

In contrast, the innovator is a man “of original genius” who advances “beyond the beaten paths of other days, and perceive[s] the dawn of light which ha[s] never arrested the attention of his fellow-man” (Patterson, 1850: 22). The innovator is open-minded and progressive: “He rejects nothing new because it is new ... and clings to nothing old because it is old” (Patterson, 1850: 41).

Patterson’s analysis includes (almost) every kind of innovation (except the political): religion, philosophy, science and arts (steam-engine, lighting) and travel. To be sure, Patterson’s study of innovation is loaded with moral values. Yet it remains an original work at a time when innovation was an under-studied concept. It was not until French sociologist Gabriel Tarde’s time that the next theoretical work on innovation appeared (Tarde, 1890).

Conclusion

Innovation emerged as a *descriptive* concept with diverse meanings. To ancient Greeks it referred to change in the established order, particularly political changes (Godin and Lucier, 2012). To Latin writers (IV-XVth century), it meant (spiritual) renewal (Godin and Lucier, 2012). Yet, from the Renaissance to the eighteenth century, the concept shifts to the *accusatory*. It then takes on different meanings, depending on the accuser. Innovation is rarely defined as such.²⁷ Most writers use it as a linguistic weapon against

²⁷ One exception is Baston. In his discourse before the Academy of Sciences of Rouen in 1809, Baston attempts to “fixer le sens du mot **innovation**” [determine the meaning of the word **innovation**] and

their enemy. Innovation is a word used to exploit emotions, to insult, to hurt and make, as do many other words, “the enemy odious or contemptible by asserting he was like somebody or something we already disliked or looked down on” (Lewis, 1960: 323). C. S. Lewis speaks of a “tendency to select our pejorative epithets with a view not to their accuracy but to their power of hurting ... not to inform ... but to annoy” (Lewis, 1960: 326). A “word is selected solely because the speaker thought it was the one that the enemy (if he could hear it) would most dislike”. The use of words is tactical – and emotional. It is an attempt to appropriate from one side (praise), and deny to the other (disapproval) a potent word.

Then, during the nineteenth century, innovation got rehabilitated gradually because it was *instrumental* to progress, and gave rise to a theoretical concept in the next century. The pejorative or dyslogistic use of pre-revolutionary France gave way to the superlative or eulogistic. Blame shifted to praise. The **word** innovation enlarges its meaning and becomes, to use Koselleck’s conception (Koselleck, 1972), a **concept** used to talk of experienced and expected changes, including those which were denied before.

Change in the meaning of innovation was a response to a new (linguistic) context.²⁸ Self-consciousness or creativity (man as maker of history), belief in progress (in the political, social and material conditions of men) and later, economic growth (through technology) led to a rehabilitation, then to a shared (or rather dominant) understanding of innovation.

distinguish innovation from other words like novelty, renewing, change and variation. “Il n’en est pas un seul qui lui ressemble exactement. La nouveauté n’est pas toujours de l’**innovation**; le renouvellement en approche davantage, mais n’y atteint pas; le changement n’en est que la moitié; la variation est plus mobile qu’elle” [There is not one that is exactly similar. Novelty is not always **innovation**; renewal comes closer but does not reach innovation; change is only the half of innovation; variation is more mobile than innovation] (Baston, 1810: 130). Baston concludes: “pour qu’il y ait **innovation**, il faut que la chose remplacée par une chose nouvelle, ait été, dès l’origine, ce qu’elle fut en finissant, ou qu’elle ait eu une si longue durée, que ce qui avait été avant elle, soit presque entièrement oubliée” [For there to be innovation, the things that is replaced by a new thing must have been, since the beginning, what it ended up being, or what it had been for such a long time that what had been before it is almost entirely forgotten] (Baston, 1810: 131).

²⁸ This paper has concentrated on discourse. I leave to the historians of innovation the study of facts behind the discourse.

In his study on the idea of happiness in the eighteenth century, Robert Mauzi suggests that some ideas belong “à la fois à la réflexion, à l’expérience et au rêve” [at the same time to thinking, to experience and to dreams] (Mauzi, 1979: 9). Before the nineteenth century, the idea of innovation belonged to experience, but very rarely to thoughts and dreams. The innovator himself makes no use of the word. Innovation is a word used by the critics. The innovation of the twentieth century is to enrich the idea of innovation with thought (theory), dreams and imagination, thanks to “technological innovation” (economics and public policy). Innovation takes on a positive meaning that had been missing until then, and becomes an obsession.

Yet there is danger here that a word, as a “rallying-cry”, becomes “semantically null” (Lewis, 1960: 86). “Terms of abuse cease to be language” (Lewis, 1960: 328). Some words, Lewis suggests again, have nothing but a halo, a “mystique by which a whole society lives” (Lewis, 1960: 282). The word seeps into almost every sentence. Over the twentieth century, innovation has become quite a valuable buzzword. People use the word for its prestige and selling-power. Innovation is a “magic” word, because it is an object of enthusiasm.

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Appendix 1.

On Methodology

For the student of innovation, there exist very few titles entirely devoted to innovation and no theoretical writings on innovation before the twentieth century. To some extent, the problem is not dissimilar to that of a student of antiquity. In his *Idea of Progress in Classical Antiquity*, Ludwig Edelstein mentions that no detailed discussion on ‘progress’ remains from classical antiquity, except fragments and brief sentences. Second, the evidence is widely dispersed (Edelstein, 1967). Nevertheless, Edelstein could produce evidence of ‘progressivism’ in antiquity from a non-negligible group “representative of a movement”.²⁹ The case is similar for innovation. For most of the period studied in the present paper, occurrences of the word innovation exist by the thousands. Every writer, from the anonymous to the most famous, makes use of innovation. However, there is no in-depth study. As this paper suggests, most of the time the word is used as a linguistic weapon or ideological arsenal for or against novelty.

A second factor complicates the analysis. Like Edelstein’s source material, the occurrences of the word innovation are scattered. The usage is frequent but dissipated. One has to study politics, religion, history, law, science, arts, economics and other disciplines to properly appreciate the extent and diversity of uses, above all in pamphlets. Yet taken together, the documents suggest what the representation of innovation is to those at that time. As Keith Baker suggests in his study of pre-revolutionary writings in France: “None of these (...) documents can properly be regarded as a classic work of political theory, as we tend to define that genre, though at many points they may bear the imprint of such works. Taken together, however, they clearly suggest the problems which French political thinkers faced on the accession of Louis XIV, the range of language in which such thinkers attempted to resolve those problems, and the tensions that this language often displayed” (Baker, 1990: 113).

²⁹ Gerhart B. Ladner pointed to the same issue in *The Idea of Reform*: “though slight in themselves, [the peculiarities of the terminology of reform] are of some weight if held together” (Ladner, 1959: 133).

The challenge to the student of innovation then, is the selection of source material. Since there is a limited amount of in-depth discussion on innovation before the twentieth century, one has to study a voluminous number of texts in order to get a sense of what innovation is. Over the last years, I have collected hundreds of documents on innovation, from c.1500 to 2000, trying to make sense of the uses of the concept. Given the voluminous source material, two options are available. First, one may (must) study those documents that use innovation only occasionally or casually (isolated occurrences). Studying isolated occurrences allows one to understand the broader context in which the word is used. Another option is to confine oneself to titles on innovation specifically. I have identified over 500 documents that contain titles with innovation in it, from the Renaissance to the late nineteenth century. Of such titles, controversies (a title followed by replies and counter-replies) are the ideal sources since they allow one to understand the diverse purposes of use of the concept. In this paper, I have used both types of documents: texts with a few or isolated occurrences of the word, and texts with titles on innovation.

Table.

A Typology of Usage of “Innovation”

Isolated occurrences. A document contains only a few uses of the word. Almost every author does so, from the anonymous to the most famous. Innovation is a word used to praise or disparage novelty.

Titles. A document has a title containing the word innovation, the purpose of which is to discuss some aspects of innovation (generally one aspect). The document does not necessarily make use of the word in the text. It may use another vocabulary to talk of novelty (change, reformation, revolution).

Discourses. A document develops a full-length rhetoric or argument for or against innovation (with or without the word in the title). Sermons are examples of such discourses. Most of the time, both titles and discourses are produced as replies either to a tract or pamphlet or to the ‘context’ of the time.

Theories. Theories include a study of what innovation is, how it occurs, with what effects, who innovates, etc. No theories exist until the late nineteenth century.

Appendix 2.

John Patterson's Characteristics of Innovators and Anti-Innovators

The Anti-Innovator.

1. Those who cannot appreciate the evidence. These men are “innocent in their opposition ... [and] in no respect culpable”.

2. Those who will not make themselves acquainted with the new doctrines”.
 - a. Those who are too dilatory to examine. “Light is of no use to them”; “new things are repulsive, and the “good old way” the best”.
 - b. Those who are merged in worldly cares. These are “the slaves of ambition, avarice, or necessity”; they are “the friends of nothing new, till it becomes popular”.
 - c. Those who are actuated by selfish interest, i.e. those “educated in a certain school”, the partisan, the orthodox.
 - d. Those whom envy actuates. He envies success or talents.
 - e. Those who want to lead in every thing.
 - f. Those who are naturally of an incredulous and wary disposition.
 - g. Many oppose reform just because some reputed great man does, or because it is fashionable to do so.
 - h. Such as have been deceived once, or have discovered deceptions on other occasions.
 - i. Those who fear to investigate lest they will be obliged to receive.
 - j. Those who inherit all true doctrines, i.e. biases in early life (education). These men “have furnished the world with nearly all the persecuting sectaries. They had recourse to the more effectual method of the sword, fire and faggot, the scaffold, the rack, the dungeon, and all the instruments of torture”.

3. Those who appreciate the claims of the new doctrine, but do not espouse it (conservatives).

a. Those subject to temporal necessities. “They would be abandoned by their patrons, lose their salaries, and, perhaps, unable to find other employment, become beggared”.

b. Those who are the slaves of habit.

c. Those who are bound to hoary error by the ties of friendship.

d. The votaries of false honor (“fear of losing the reputation they have won”).

e. Those who have predominant pride of opinion.

f. Timid spirits. They lose ease, they choose peace.

g. Those who apprehend danger from reformatory efforts.

h. Those who doubt the expediency of engaging in the work of reform themselves.

The Innovator.

1. Receives no doctrine or opinion upon the mere authority of others.

2. Condemns nothing unheard.

3. For the purpose of being able to deliberate with candour and impartiality, he studies himself (mental discipline: he studies his judgments and the prejudices of his education).

4. Is willing to be convinced. “He rejects nothing new because it is new ... and clings to nothing old because it is old”. He is open-minded.

5. Adopts his views regardless of praise or censure. “He chooses the right rather than the popular”.

6. Fearlessly proclaims his honest convictions.

7. The true reformer rather courts than shuns the censure of errorists. He is independent; he examines carefully; he stoops to artifice.

8. Adapts himself to progress (“an essential characteristic”).

9. Is not afraid of heresy. He is liberal.

10. Has no vulgar fears about stability of mind. He is changeable but yields to no influence. He investigates. His basis is evidence. His changes are advances.

11. Never condescends to vulgar abuse.

12. In matters of mere opinion he usurps no undue authority. He accepts differences of opinion and “wishes the kind of assistance of those who are better informed”.

13. Extends the hand of fellowship to all mankind. He tries to alter the sufferings of man.

14. In faith, as in other things, he is progressive, “regardless of consequences”.