

The Spirit of Innovation:

Benoît Godin

INRS

June 2018

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 la vérité*, 1782).

A spirit of innovation is generally the result of a selfish temper and confined views (Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 1790).

Today, innovation is an injunction. Everyone should innovate. As Jack Morton, engineer at Bell Laboratories, put it in 1971: "Innovation is certainly a 'buzz-word' today. Everyone likes the idea; everyone is trying to 'innovate'; and everyone wants to do better at it tomorrow" (Morton, 1971: 73). Innovation is also a panacea. It is discussed *ad nauseam* in utilitarian terms: innovation is an instrument for solving society's problems, particularly economic problems.

The keywords used to talk of innovation are based on a series of concepts that can be grouped under three headings. On the input side, to use the standard vocabulary, is *research* or R&D as creative work. Another but more action-related concept is *entrepreneur* as the agent of change, the one who puts the results of research into practice. A second group of concepts concerns the output side of innovation. The outcome of innovation is *progress*, *development*, *growth* and *change*. These outcomes remain largely uncontested. Third, in between these two groups of concepts, is *technology*. Technology is a good or commodity that embodies knowledge, so it is said. Over the twentieth century, technology gave rise to the term *technological innovation*, a spontaneous view of innovation that became the dominant representation.

Many factors explain this representation. First, technology is said to be the most easily measurable type of innovation. Second, governments legitimize this representation through discourses and policies. Third, the representation is both the cause and the result of a market ideology that guides our thinking and our actions.

The historiography of innovation, although no writing really deserve that name, attributes the scholarly origin and study of the concept to the economist Joseph Schumpeter. This is mythic history or rationalization. Schumpeter simply used a concept that was becoming popular, as many others did in the first half of the twentieth century (Schumpeter, 1934). Moreover, there is no theory of innovation in Schumpeter's works – Schumpeter does not concern himself with explaining the generation of innovation and its diffusion in space and time (Schumpeter, 1939). Where does the concept come from then, and what does it mean?

Like every concept, innovation changed meaning over time (Godin, 2015). To the ancient Greeks, innovation (*kainotomia*) meant change to the established order. Innovation was political. The concept entered the Latin vocabulary at around the third to fourth century (*innovo*) with a totally different meaning. Innovation is renewing, in line with many terms beginning with "re". For example, a spiritual connotation of innovation as renewing is a return to original or pure soul (before sin). The seventeenth century changed this meaning

again. Innovation came to be discussed as unorthodoxy and associated with popery on the one hand, and with new sects on the other (e.g. Anabaptists, Quakers). Still again, in the nineteenth century, innovation acquired a new meaning as something totally new and instrumental to political, social and economic reform.

The Reformation is a key moment in this genealogy. It was at that time that innovation entered our everyday vocabulary (English and French). The concept served to support or enforce the Reformation. Kings and Churches forbade innovation; bishops supported these instructions with sermons, and followers (pamphleteers) developed arguments to this end – normative, legal and cultural.

What is the “spirit” of innovation, a key term of the time, that was so feared? Between the mid-sixteenth century and the nineteenth century, innovation is talked of in terms of five key concepts. One is *heresy*. In fact, order and orthodoxy is the context out of which the concept of innovation developed. The same vocabulary used against heresy is used to discuss innovation.¹ Later, with the decline of persecutions, and of the Inquisition in the Christian world (for political rather than humanist purposes or individual freedom), innovation became a secular concept used to discuss what was previously called heresy. Innovation included political deviance as well as religious heresy.

A key dimension and concept of innovation is *novelty*, as the etymology of the word innovation suggests (*novus*). But novelty (something new) itself is not the issue. Novelty as invention and imagination is mere fantasy or fancy, in a pejorative sense. Again, the etymology must be taken seriously (in+). Innovation is action: “introducing” something new into the world, new ideas (doctrine) or activities (worship) into practice.² In this sense, innovation is a deliberate and conscious business. One concept that serves this discourse is *liberty*, not in the modern sense (autonomy) but in the sense of excessive and arbitrary liberty, namely license. “Private opinion” and “private men” were key terms used at the time to discuss such a liberty. A related concept is *scheme*, together with *design*, plot and machination – and later, project and to some extent reform (social reform). The innovator has a purpose, a scheme or design to “overthrow” the social order. He is never alone. He creates a whole “sect” that follows him.

A second dimension of innovation is its consequences. Innovation is “sudden” and “violent” and, particularly after the French Revolution, it is often talked of in terms of *revolution*. Innovation is destructive of the social order. This is why innovation is to be feared. The innovator foments a plan to “subvert” things, at his own discretion. Innovation may be private as to origin, but it is public with regard to its consequences. Innovation may start as a small or indifferent thing (*adiaphora*) but with time it leads to a chain reaction. It creeps imperceptibly, “little by little”, into the whole world.

The Reformation’s representation of innovation endured for more than three centuries. In turn, the modern representation began to take shape with social reformers in the nineteenth century, who started to reconceptualize innovation as an instrument for “progress”. Until then, the instruments of progress (civilization) were “knowledge” (including moral), “education”

¹ For some official texts on heresy, see Peters, 1980; Hughes and Larkin, 1964: 57-60; 181-86.

² An innovator performs an act often through language, as intellectual historians Quentin Skinner and John Pocock suggest (Skinner, 1969; Pocock, 2009); an opinion publicly stated, a new doctrine preached is considered an incitement to subversion, as it would later be considered a crime.

(including religion), law and “commerce”. The social reformer added “innovation” to this list. However, this was neither easy nor self-evident. To make his case the social reformer had to develop arguments against the then-common discourse of innovation, namely the religious discourse. He did so in linguistic (Jeremy Bentham), cultural (making use of history) and utilitarian terms.

To these beginnings, *philosophes* of the twentieth century added a future perspective.³ Innovation became a programmatic concept. Previous uses of the concept of innovation were made in the present form (accusing someone of innovating) or the past form (the “Happy Innovations” of previous ages). And there was no theory of innovation, in contrast to the field of politics, where theories have abounded for centuries. Using a future point of view, a philosophe imagines and prescribes a new political (economic) order. Innovation creates new means for a better future.

The same concepts that served to define innovation in the past define innovation today. But the concepts of the previous centuries have acquired new meanings. To many, innovation is *novelty*, novelty of any kind: new ideas, things, behaviors and practices. Innovation is a synonym for novelty. If so, what distinguished innovation from invention, to take just one example?

To most scholars, innovation excludes some types of novelty: the mental or speculative. Innovation is contrasted to contemplation (or science). Innovation is *action*, as was understood in the past centuries. A discovery or an invention becomes an innovation only when it is introduced, applied, adopted, commercialized, that is, if it is used and useful. Among the scholars of the twentieth century, innovation as action was often talked about in terms of “energy”, including by Schumpeter. Then innovation was discussed in terms of “initiative”. An innovator initiates something for the “first” time. Thereafter, “process” came to define what innovation is: a series of activities, from initiation (generation, creation) to widespread diffusion.

Second, innovation is *effects*, again as was understood in the past. The more an invention differs from predecessor inventions, the more it has transformational effects (structural or generic), called “revolutionary”. The effect dimension of innovation explains why scholars study successful innovations and not failures. An invention without effects is not an innovation.

In sum, one observes a shift in the vocabulary over time, from the negative to the positive. But at the same time, clear residues of past connotations inhere in our current meaning. Heresy changed to “difference” and “originality”; liberty is talked in terms of “initiative” and “entrepreneurship”; scheme and design became directed or “planned changed”, firm “strategy” and “policy”, thus giving a programmatic character to innovation (organizing for the future); and revolution gave “radical” and “major” innovation. To be sure, revolution remains in the vocabulary – “revolutionary” innovation is contrasted to “minor”, “incremental” or “gradual” innovation –, but as an attribute of innovation rather than an

³ I include in this category every writer who produces thoughts on innovation: scholars, engineers, managers, policy-makers. At the time of the Enlightenment, the French call such men *philosophes* (as distinct from professional philosophers). The philosophes included men of letters, men of science, statesmen, government administrators, journalists and scholars.

effect, although the semantic reference is to effects (an innovation is revolutionary because of its important effects on society).

These are the terms Schumpeter used: innovation is “doing things differently”; the innovations of the “first order” are “discontinuous” or “revolutionary” innovations. To these terms Schumpeter, among others it must be said, added the concept of creativity – “creative response” and “creative destruction” –, a concept that had nothing to do with innovation prior to the twentieth century. ⁴ Again, it is a matter of redescribing precursor terms used in the negative before: invention, imagination. The most important impact of the concept of creativity in the decades following Schumpeter is, perhaps, a definition of innovation as originality, in the sense of origin: the “first” adoption of a new behavior or practice or the “first” commercialization of a new idea or thing.

Conclusion

The “spirit” of innovation, what we would call today the culture of innovation, acquired new meaning and changed to become essentially positive in the last century and a half – although the tension between order and change, tradition and innovation remains in discourse, as theoretical dichotomies attest. ⁵ A totally new representation of innovation developed, far different from the previous centuries. Innovation is no longer seen as subversive to the social order, but simply as opposed to traditional ways of doing things. The innovator is not a heretic. He is simply different from the masses or from his fellows. He may be a deviant, but in a sociological sense: an original, a marginal, a nonconformist, an unorthodox. He is also ingenious and creative. He is an experimenter, an entrepreneur, a leader; he is the agent of change.

History teaches us that innovation is more than novelty. Innovation is action with effects on society: the introduction of something new into the world. If one uses innovation as a synonym to novelty, as many of us do, he understands innovation in one and only one of its meanings, sometimes unconsciously, at other times for ideological purposes. Such is the case of historical revisionism ⁶ and intellectual or academic ideology. ⁷

I suggest that religion is the source of our modern concept of innovation, a not dissimilar thesis to that of Max Weber on the spirit of capitalism (Weber, 1930). Innovation is a loaded term that helped enforce the Reformation. It then became an inclusive term that covers both religion and politics, then the social, giving rise to a secular term for heresy. In the nineteenth century, innovation was reconceptualized to serve modern society. This was a task to which social reformers including Christians devoted some energies, and they did so in the light of, or in reaction to, the religious discourse.

Religion is not the whole story of course. Technology is a major source of the concepts that define the semantic field of innovation and the discourses in the twentieth

⁴ Creativity is often discussed in terms of “combination”, another key concept of the vocabulary of innovation.

⁵ Radical/conservative, innovator/laggard, innovator/imitator.

⁶ In the light of the available records of new ideas and novel things over time, some argue that the previous centuries were more innovative than the scholarship let us believe. These authors embrace a view of innovation in the sense of novelty (e.g. Angour, 2011; Ingham, 2015).

⁷ Some place curiosity for the new (“a cognitive ability”) at the heart of the contemporary quest for innovation (Nowotny, 2010).

century, through economics and the market ideology (Godin, Forthcoming). At the same time, the discourse on technological innovation espouses a semantic that has deep roots in history. Fundamental residues from the religious connotation of the concept remain in our modern language.⁸

⁸ As do residues of nineteenth-century socialism in the discourses of “social innovation” (Godin, 2015).

References

- Angour, Armand d' (2011), *The Greeks and the New: Novelty in Ancient Greek Imagination and Experience*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Godin, Benoît (2015), *Innovation Contested: The Idea of Innovation over the Centuries*, London: Routledge.
- Godin, Benoît (Forthcoming), *Innovation Languages, Discourses and Ideology: A Historical Perspective*.
- Hughes, Paul L. and James P. Larkin (1964), *Tudor Royal Proclamations*, Volume I, New Haven-London: Yale University Press.
- Ingham, Patricia Clare (2015), *The Medieval New: Ambivalence in an Age of Innovation*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Morton, Jack A. (1971), *Organizing for Innovation: A Systems Approach to Technical Management*, New York: McGraw Hill.
- Nowotny, Helga (2010), *Insatiable Curiosity: Innovation in a Fragile Future*, Boston: MIT Press.
- Peters, Edward (1980) (ed.), *Heresy and Authority in Medieval Europe*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Pocock, John G. A. (2009), *Political Thought and History: Essays on Theory and Method*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schumpeter, Joseph A. (1934), *The Theory of Economic Development: An Inquiry into Profits, Capital, Credit, Interest, and the Business Cycle*, New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers [2007].
- Schumpeter, Joseph A. (1939), *Business Cycles: A Theoretical, Historical, and Statistical Analysis of the Capitalist Process*, New York: McGraw-Hill [2005].
- Skinner, Quentin (1969), Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas, *History and Theory*, 8 (1): 3-53.
- Weber, Max (1930), *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, London: Allen and Unwin.