

Book review

Critical studies of innovation - alternative approaches to the pro-innovation bias

By **Benoit Godin and Dominique Vinck** (Eds.). Cheltenham
Edward Elgar publishing
2013
352 p.
€90.00
ISBN:978 1 78536 696 3
Review DOI
10.1108/FS-12-2017-0075

The introduction indicates that the book is about to unroll an interesting and timely insight: that our beliefs, hopes and euphoria toward innovation are in fact preconceived and often arise in an absence of empirical evidence to support such enthusiasm. This inherent pro-innovation bias (Rogers, 1962, p. 5) is characterized by the believe that technology innovation is inherently attractive, is a planned process, builds essentially on rational decisions and is driven by R&D activities. The pro-innovation bias – the assumption that innovation is always good, and more is better than less – indeed requires scrutiny. To do so, the book sets its sight on innovation-related phenomena that are often not covered by the literature, such as imitation, resistance, discontinuance, disinnovation, failure, withdraw and de-adaption. A worthy cause, as most researchers in innovation studies in one point or the other asked themselves similar questions. The counter arguments though are often difficult to identify and not always easy to pin down. Hence, after reading the introduction, the reader's excitement levels are high!

The book starts its *Part I: Problematic frameworks and narratives of innovation*, with a discussion on the different meaning of innovation in a historical context and how modernity led to a reduction of the word to describe "firsts". Other meanings of the concept, like imitation, got lost.

Although insightful, the text sometimes feels too much removed from the actual context. Chapter 2 introduces an inquisitive and critical approach to study short-lived concepts based on the example of two books, namely, *Jugaad innovation – Think frugal, Be Flexible, Generate Breakthrough Growth* (2012), and *Reverse Innovation, Create Far from Home, Win Everywhere* (2012). Gerald Gaglio carefully searches for the weaknesses of such publications and discusses why such short-lived concepts are in fact successful. This theme continues in Chapter 3 in which Tiago Brandao and Carolina Bagattolli thematize the real value of the pursuit of best practices and study how innovation as private practice has become a mantra for policymakers. The following chapter argues for bringing back the state as an actor into the discussion on driving forces for innovation success. Sebastian M. Pfothenauer and Joakim Juhl take the reader back to the times when technology development was mainly led by grand government initiatives and built on achievements like the internet, or the space programs. The chapter includes a well-written timeline from the 1960s demand-pull models to today's entrepreneurial university, and it frames the question of the state as facilitator in the techno-economic process as interconnected with the whole complexity of political intent and collective decision-making.

Part II: What is left with the pro-innovation bias presents a collection of papers that look beyond the usual innovation enthusiasm. Chapter 1 considers the destructive effects of innovation and draws attention to the fact that many innovations actually withdraw something instead of

adding on, like food products not containing additives or artificial coloring. More capturing is the chapter on outlaw innovation: Johan Söderberg describes two episodes of user-innovation, file sharing and novel psychoactive substances, which emerged in the gray zones of legality. Especially, the description of how the substances emerged, spread, became illegal and ended up as innovations of firms is very interesting indeed. Chapter 7 discusses unattended consequences of innovation, like products and services that are harmful to their natural environment. Despite its catchy title, this part is slightly blurred as the spread of the topics is wide. Maybe a better heading for the chapter would have helped?

Part III: Reactions to innovation starts with an analysis of resistance behavior as a latent factor of innovation using the example of nuclear energy and genetic engineering. The author concludes that resistance is neither irrational nor a product of anxiety, but it is a vital aspect of the very nature of innovation. The next chapter follows suit and discusses the relationship between actors and technologies in this process of resistance. Interestingly, the authors present cases of resignification of

technologies as an outcome of resistance and collectively negotiated new development paths. Leitner in Chapter 10 frames innovation as one of the many strategies firms follow and sheds light on instances in which firms proudly opt for a slow progress or a total rejection of innovations all together.

In *Part IV: Alternative Frameworks*, Dominique Vinck discusses the learning opportunities that arise out of innovation failure. Such innovation failures are rarely covered by research, and if they are, these episodes often go unnoticed. Still, these stories of failure could greatly further our understanding of corporate innovation management. The next chapter discusses the refusal of innovation as a radical economic choice, followed by a chapter on the role of regulatory enforcement and a study on the innovation discourse in academic management literature.

In the final chapter titled *Conclusion: towards critical studies of innovation*, Benoit Godin and Dominique Vinck summarize again the importance of dissonance in innovation studies for the overall development of the field. Also, they stress another point of great importance in innovation studies: innovation is – and always has been – a political process. They carve out four

ways forward based on the chapters of the book: Going back to concepts of technological change, technology and innovation and search for a better understanding of common ideological roots; studying strategies of imitators, analyzing unintended consequences of innovation; and – finally – paying greater attention to the role that policy regulation plays.

None of these suggested avenues are really novice, nor will they propel innovation studies as a field forward. Instead, the real value of the book is the provision of a collection of different arguments against the pro-innovation bias. The chapters are necessarily eclectic, but the book provides an indispensable collection of insights into the world outside the nimbus of superiority that surrounds innovation to this day. The book is a treasure trove for any student and scholar and a must-have for any library!

Thomas Thurner

Thomas Thurner is Professor at Institute for Statistical Studies and Economics of Knowledge, National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia.

Reference

Rogers, E. (1962), *Diffusion of Innovation*, Free Press, New York, NY.