



Innovation's evolution over the millennia

Professor Benoit Godin discusses his recent work 'The idea of innovation' – a project that aims to develop a deeper understanding of what innovation is and contribute to more enlightened discourses, theories and policies

How would you define innovation in today's world?

Today, innovation is a buzzword. It is used and abused and has come to mean everything and nothing. Any change is called an innovation. Any novelty is an innovation. Yet, at the same time, everyone shares a spontaneous and restricted representation too: innovation is technological.

It is almost impossible to define innovation from an objective point of view. Innovation depends upon the context, the user of the concept, the language and the eyes.

There are hundreds of papers and books published every year on innovation. Yet, no one on earth has ever looked at the concept of innovation, its origins and development over the centuries. What inspired you to be this person?

I got into the study of the concept of innovation when I realised that everyone uses the concept, but no one has ever studied where it comes from and how the different meanings may indicate something about a society.

I particularly wanted to offer a more scholarly view of innovation than that originating from the studies of the economics, management and policy of innovation, which leave aside many other dimensions of innovation (eg. the sociological dimension).

You are an advocate of examining history with the goal of enlightening thoughts and actions. Can you explain why you think that history is one of the best tools humanity has to make itself reflexive and critical?

Like historians Quentin Skinner and John Pocock, I do not think that history teaches lessons. Rather, history makes us understand better what we do, how we do it and why. In the case of innovation, history demonstrates that we are valuing something that has not always been valued and invites us to reflect on this, even criticise ourselves.

Can you introduce your relationship with the Conceptual Approaches to Science, Technology and Innovation (CASTI) Network? How has it informed your investigations?

During my research, I realised that a few people were beginning to conduct conceptual analyses of science and technology, like I did on innovation. Consequently, in 2014 with some colleagues from Germany, among others, I set up CASTI – a network that employs methods from a variety of disciplines to study the conceptual language of science, technology and innovation. The CASTI network is a place where we can exchange ideas and disseminate the results of our research, not only to the community of scholars, but also to the larger public.

How do you see the concept of innovation evolving in the future?

After having been restricted to technology in the last 60 years, there is now a plurality of new voices that are trying to enlarge the meaning of innovation. Examples include: social innovation, user innovation and grassroots innovation. Whether the enlargements correspond to a fashion or will have long-lasting effects remains to be seen.



The idea of innovation

There are hundreds of publications each year on innovation, but an inspired researcher from the **Institut National de la Recherche Scientifique**, Québec, Canada, has conducted the first in depth study of the concept of innovation, the term's origins and how the idea of innovation has evolved over time

TODAY, INNOVATION IS a word on the tips of everyone's tongues. The term is seemingly omnipresent in the news and may even appear on every page of a popular magazine. Many use the word with little thought about how they view the concept of innovation and how this may differ to others.

For many, the word innovation conjures images of great recent technological advances. Therefore, it may be surprising to learn that innovation has only had a technological connotation for barely 60 years, whereas, the concept originates as far back as antiquity.

Indeed, innovation has always been a political and contested concept. The way that innovation has been used has changed many times – it even had a long period as a strongly negative concept. However, an underlying definition connecting all these uses has remained the same – innovation: a deliberate human change to something new.

INNOVATION – THE GREAT SIN

History shows that the concept of innovation has its roots in ancient Greece. The term emerged from this era, where – although rarely – it was used to describe changes to laws and political constitutions.

The concept was then introduced to Latin (and by extension, English) vocabulary, eg. the Vulgate (the 4th Century Latin translation of the Bible). The Vulgate used the word in many of its books, and the term essentially had a positive meaning of 'spiritual renewal'.

However, after the Protestant Reformation in the 16th Century, innovation became a pejorative concept, as it was viewed as introducing change into the established order. "One of my main theses is that innovation is the secularised term for heresy. Both concepts are defined in similar terms and are used in the same ways," Godin elaborates. "No innovator – like the republican or the political revolutionary or the socialist – ever thought of calling his project an innovation or himself an innovator. Innovation was used as a linguistic weapon against an enemy, namely against an individual promoting changes in religion, politics and social life."

These negative connotations were widely accepted until the late 19th Century. In fact, it was not until after World War II and the

emergence of a trend in which people started using innovation to describe technological advances that term again became a positive concept. This is a major reason why the popular view of innovation today is restricted to technological innovation. However, as Godin explains: "Another important rehabilitation of innovation is that it is a tool or instrument to progress (eg. political, social or material) and, after World War II, a source of economic growth and productivity".

Humanity is facing many great problems and it seems that innovation is at the forefront of many people's minds for the solutions. However, is it justified to claim that innovation can always be a solution?

INNOVATION TODAY – THE ANSWER TO EVERYTHING?

The prevalent modern concept of innovation – a celebrated ideal that all should strive for – is a stark contrast to its dark, relatively recent past. Humanity is facing many great problems and it seems that innovation is at the forefront of many people's minds for the solutions. However, is it justified to claim that innovation can always be a solution?

Questions such as this were one of the goals of Godin's study – a reflexive and critical understanding of what innovation is and to decentre people's thoughts on the concept. "Innovation has become a panacea to all social and economic problems. We need to go back and look critically at our theories and policies and ask not 'Is innovation the solution?' but instead 'What problems does society face and what is the spectrum of solutions available or imaginable?'" Godin explains. "Many have shown that innovation fails most of the time. Others have shown that imitation is often a better solution. In the end, it may reasonably appear that innovation is only a small part of the solution – or not even the solution at all."



Godin, Benoit. *Innovation Contested: The Idea of Innovation Over the Centuries*. (New York: Routledge, 2015).

INNOVATION

OBJECTIVE

To develop a larger understanding of what innovation is, and contribute to more enlightened discourses, theories and policies.

FUNDING

Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)

CONTACT

Professor Benoit Godin

Centre Urbanisation Culture Société
385 Rue Sherbrooke Est Montréal
Québec H2X 1E3
Canada

T +1 438 396 3242

E benoit.godin@ucs.inrs.ca

www.csiic.ca

www.casti.org



BOENIT GODIN is a professor at Institut National de la recherche Scientifique (INRS), Montréal, Canada. He conducts research on the intellectual and conceptual history of science, statistics, research and innovation. He is author of *The Measurement of Science and technology: 1920 to the Present* (London: Routledge, 2005) and *Innovation Contested: The Idea of Innovation over the Centuries* (London: Routledge, 2015).

CASTI Network

Conceptual Approaches to Science, Technology, and Innovation:
An Interdisciplinary Research Network

INRS
Université d'avant-garde