
INNOVATION - THE VOCABULARY OF GOOD SOCIAL LIFE/12

GRATUITOUSNESS CREATES NEW THINGS (BUT WHERE ARE THE PROPHETS?)

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Innovation is becoming the new watchword of the 21st century. But, as it often happens, the most interesting and really relevant things begin with the predicates, verbs and adjectives, because if the ability to articulate a good speech about innovation is missing, this charming noun will soon share in the destiny of so many big words we are wearing out and thus trivializing (merit, efficiency, and, soon, democracy).

The father of the theory of innovation is **Joseph A. Schumpeter**. It was little more than a century ago (*The Theory of Economic Development*, 1911) that he presented us with a vision of the dynamic historical market that is able to explain what was really happening to the capitalism of his time. The classics are important, we know, not so much for the answers they had given (they were referring to their own historical period, and therefore have a temporary relevance), but for the questions they posed. Some questions of Schumpeter are among the fundamental ones: what is the nature of profit and of the entrepreneur? Where is economic development generated? What is the function of credit and banks? The logical core of these questions is precisely the category of innovation, because if there were no businessmen and bankers who are innovators but only routine institutions and seekers of annuities, there would be no real economic development.

There are many other things to say, however, on the **semantics of innovation**.

More than 26 million unemployed in Europe, including just too many young people and the increasing vulnerability and sadness of too many people are unmistakable signs that our time would need great innovations of the 'ridge' type. Not the ones that are taught in business schools, nor those that our poor youth invent in order to participate in challenging European tenders (written more and more often by officials who have never seen or smelled or touched true innovation outside their offices), nor those told in boring books or websites of innovative good practices.

Great innovations are not learnt at school. They need vocations, and therefore they need an increasingly scarce resource consumed by our capitalism that wants innovation: **gratuitousness**.

It often happens in science but also in economy and in civil life **that the greatest innovation is found while looking for something else**. This is what happened and is happening still in some important scientific discoveries (e.g. penicillin), many times in mathematical research, but also, in a simpler way, when I enter a bookshop to look for a book, and my eye wanders to the next book opening up a new world to me (another reason why bookshops and libraries are indispensable). **It is a version of the so-called serendipity**, which takes its name from the story *The Pilgrimage of the Three Young Sons of the King of Serendippo* by **Christoforo Armeno**, a traveller originally from Tabriz (Venice, 1557). **At other times, great innovations arrive as 'recycling' for a different use of something which was originally meant to perform other functions**. It is the phenomenon that evolutionary biologists call *exaptation*. It explains, among other things, the evolutionary history of wings: they originally developed to regulate body temperature, and then were 'recycled' for flying. Something similar has happened with the Internet, and in some other cases, too (from the tape recorder to the CD).

Serendipity and *exaptation* are also important because they **incorporate something similar to gratuitousness**. Gratuitousness is not free (at zero price) but its infinite value does not lie in a lack of interest but in the interest of all and for all. When you act with this gratuitousness you do not follow the logic of instrumental calculation of means-and-ends, instead, you love that particular person or activity for him/itself and before they bring any results,

which leads to an ethical, anthropological, spiritual surplus. If the scientist is not immersed in his research and is guided solely by the intrinsic law of science, if the artist does not like the work he is creating for itself, if the entrepreneur is not passionate about his business, if the future saint does not forget the reward of holiness and loves with agape, it is very difficult for great discoveries, business, art and holiness to come. It may perhaps generate good people, small works, and 'mass' innovations like those born every day in the departments of research and development or marketing. But it is not in research and development departments that the Divine Comedy, the Sixth Symphony of Tchaicovsky are born, and it is not there that Nelson Mandela becomes the Madiba. For these innovations gratuitousness is needed, a freely given overflow that can create infinite value.

This gratuitousness is also needed for the great economic and social innovations. Above all, 'ridge' innovations have an essential need for it because, unlike the 'mass' innovations, they originate from those who are on the ridges of the mountains by vocation, and from there they can see and open new horizons. It was the overflow of freely giving by Saint Benedict that redeemed work from slavery, and that of the Franciscans and many pastors and co-workers that gave birth to the great innovations of the banks for the poor. It was the overflow of gratuitousness by Francis de Sales or Camillus of Lellis that allowed for the inventing of the "social state" for those who were the rejected ones in their time. The same urged many of the foundresses of schools for poor girls that began with the alphabet and took on the long journey of women towards equality of rights and opportunities, a long journey that still continues with Malala Yousafzai and her many sisters. It was the overflow of gratuitousness in Gandhi to free India and fight the caste system, thus giving rise to one of the greatest civil and economic miracles in history. For these innovations manifestations of charisma are needed, in religious and lay people who - from the ridges of agape - are capable of seeing differently the stones the builder rejected and to make them become the cornerstone.

The earth is full of free and innovative surplus. Perhaps no one could save themselves from mediocrity if they did not do at least one deed of the overflow of gratuitousness during their lifetime. But today we would also need great new 'ridge' innovations that would give a twist to our history. What is needed for these innovations, however, is the almost infinite energy of gratuitousness. 'Ridge' innovations are always mixed, promiscuous, contaminated and intertwined; especially the economic ones, they do not come from the laboratories, but are the result of the generativity of peoples, generations and cultures. When these innovations flourish in the soil of the economy, those who will create them will know how to look higher and farther than economy alone, and in that 'elsewhere' they will also find new economic resources. In our history we have had civil and economic 'ridge' innovations when we knew how to look - thanks to political and economic charisma, too - in the areas where no one was looking, or where those who looked saw only problems.

We will come back to do good economy if we are able to look elsewhere and notice new opportunities, to include what seems rejected by this system, now called immigrants, young people, the elderly, and all the poor of yesterday and today. The church of Pope Francis is creating an environment that is suitable for possible new, large social and economic 'ridge' innovations. But for this environment to be populated with new work, rights and life it would take the force of Isaiah and Jeremiah, or the force of the charismas. Today, a Catherine of Siena, a Don Bosco, a Martin Luther King would look at our cities from their ridges. They would notice the hunger for work and real life in the crowds, and the fear of the present and the future of their children. They would be moved to compassion, they would love us by their different and higher gaze, and they would start work immediately, that of true innovation. But where are the prophets today?

Translated by Eszter Kató