

Time, innovations, and values: A perspective from the social sciences and the humanities

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Abstract

In the 21st century, innovations have become an unquestioned *sine qua non* of everyday life. Our living conditions change rapidly, often without predictability, security, or critical reflexion. These changes easily turn into a form of political and social control of innovation-induced ruptures, keeping people on constant alert and making them abandon recently acquired practices for new ones. It can be argued that they represent a form of psychological coercion. Moreover, the growing pace of life-as-innovation, together with misguided assumptions and conclusions about life itself in the diversity of its local variations, produces new forms of inequality and misery among many societies around the globe. In the present paper, I explore how time, innovation, and values relate to each other in both academic life and life in general. I argue for prioritising well-informed reflexive works in the social sciences and the humanities against the pressures of time and frequently unfounded innovations.

KEYWORDS: innovations, values, time, social sciences, humanities, positivism, interpretation

The so-called scientific revolution in Europe took place in the 16th and 17th centuries. It was, above all, a revolution of thought. “The break at the beginning of the modern age embodied a *principle* of innovation in itself which made its constant further occurrence mandatory” (Jonas, 2010 [1980], pp. 51). Invention and innovation became a duty, more so during times of crisis. Increasing use of the word *new* was unavoidable as an adjective of praise. It suggested an impatience with and distrust of historical authority. The urge to replace traditional wisdom accompanied a conviction that modern thinkers are better equipped to discover the truth about the cosmos, nature, and life in general (see Jonas, 2010, pp. 49–52). A significant feature of the scientific revolution was lengthy sea voyaging, notably the European “discoveries” of *Mundus Novus* or the New World in 1492 by the Spanish explorer Christopher Columbus; New Guinea in 1545, by the Spanish explorer Yñigo Ortiz de Retez; New Zealand in 1642, by the Dutch explorer Abel Tasman. Many other lands previously unknown to Europeans were also named using the adjective “new”. Novelty thus became of value in itself. “To try out new ways became natural” (Jonas, 2010, p. 52). Note, however, that the local populations of these newly seized lands were perceived and treated as inferior human remnants of the past. The time of the Other was implicit in the word “primitive”.

Since the times of great European discoveries of other peoples’ lands, global explorations continued throughout the age of the Enlightenment, while the pace of innovations, in general, has increased into the present. Innovations have become an unquestioned *sine qua non* of modern life. In the 21st century, we are forced to live faster, think faster, communicate faster, and act faster as our living conditions change rapidly, often without predictability and security. However, just as fast or so-called junk food does not provide the same nutritional, psychological or social benefits compared to slow food, so does fast or (as one might say) “junk life”, when thought, communication and action fail to provide the same rewards as slower versions do. Moreover, under the pressure of time, some facts become distorted, and others adjusted to the needs of different interest groups, economies and policies at large. Consider, for instance, all the arguments regarding open access in academic journals and the plurality of business models built around it. Nevertheless, many people living in the global South (women in particular) do not live under the external conditions which allow such innovations. We could even say that the growing pace of life-as-innovation produces new forms of inequality and misery.

In the global North, many academics would argue, fastness has become “detrimental to intellectual work, interfering with our ability to think critically and creatively” (Berg &

Seeber, 2016, p. 17). For the field of molecular biology and science in general, Cohen (2017) writes:

The increasing emphasis placed on novelty brings significant dangers. As it becomes more and more important for scientists to be “the first to demonstrate” some claim, the influence of the priority rule will increase and more scientists will feel pressure to sacrifice rigor for speed of publication. We are also likely to see an increase in distasteful disputes over priority. (p. 6)

Following the demands for the speed of innovation, there has been much short-term thinking in academia and research institutes to cope with greater competition, leading to interminable writing of grant applications, a decline in success rates, and demands for the rapid publication of results. For example, in US biomedical research, some have found that the “time for scientists to think and perform productive work” has diminished (Alberts et al., 2014). Short-term thinking has been encouraged by the impact of new technologies and new social media associated with the pressure for instantaneous applicability for fast and concise information. These increasing pressures have seriously affected not only scientific research in general but also the studies of undergraduate and postgraduate students in all fields of the sciences and humanities. I repeatedly hear of these problems from colleagues in Europe, Australia, and the USA.

As perpetual fast changes and innovations penetrate societies and cultures, the continuous ruptures—in time, space, ways of doing things, modes of thinking, feeling and of life in general—often become aims in themselves, and sight of what these ruptures are actually meant to create is lost (Telban, 2017). All these changes then easily turn into a kind of political and social control of innovation-induced-ruptures, keeping people on constant alert, making them abandon recently acquired practices for new ones, often without any time for adjustment and critical reflexion. It can be argued that they represent a form of psychological coercion. One is obliged to live a life of continuous innovation, discontinuity, disorientation and displacement. Some social scientists call this mode of living “liquid life” (Bauman, 2005); others see it as no longer being dominated by time but by uncontrollable speed (Virilio, 2006 [1977]).

Often those who work in the humanities profess a different approach. They say, “When we experience timelessness, we are creative, and creativity is experienced as timelessness” (Berg & Seeber, 2016, p. 27). Not speed but time—in the paradoxical form of time-

lessness—is the value here. Funding institutions, especially those involved in administrative control of different kinds of research processes and outputs, rarely address such questions. Even when they do, they lack the experience, knowledge, and all those approaches and insights characteristic of social sciences and humanities in fields such as literature, language, history and the arts. The latter are especially resistant to aggressive forms of positivism, promoting instead “meaning-making practices of the culture, focusing on interpretation and evaluation with an indispensable element of subjectivity” (Small, 2013, pp. 4, 23, 57). A former president of the American Anthropological Association, the late Roy Rappaport, once observed that sociocultural anthropology follows two traditions. One, “influenced by philosophy, linguistics, and the humanities, and open to more subjectively derived knowledge, attempts interpretation and seeks to elucidate meanings;” the second “is objective in its aspiration and inspired by biological sciences, seeks explanation and is concerned to discover causes, or even, in the view of the ambitious, laws” (Rappaport, 1994, p. 154; cited in Borofsky, 2019, pp. 49–50).

Two issues alluded to in the previous paragraph are important for the further elaboration of my argument: positivism vs subjective interpretation and evaluation. I am a scholar who has completed a B.Sc. in pharmacy, an M.Sc. in biology and a PhD in social and cultural anthropology. My research focus over the previous three decades has been a unique Papua New Guinean society in which I conducted numerous periods of long-term fieldwork. My education provided me with an understanding concerning what facts or so-called hard data are. I still remember how my PhD supervisor at The Australian National University in Canberra, well aware of the necessity of in-depth analysis in the attempt to understand a people’s life-world, often told me to “Just get the facts right!” I did. However, when dealing with people’s sufferings, everyday uncertainties and problems, I became personally involved and had to move beyond lifeless facts or, better, learn to appreciate different perspectives and value assessments. In other words, I realised that as well as external, colonial *facts* and values, there is another order of facts and values pertaining to the lives of local people, which I slowly began to internalise.

In the world of science, for those who are eager positivists, facts are objective and values subjective, and they keep them radically apart, or at least they think so. On the other hand, for someone adopting an approach characteristic of *Lebensphilosophie* (philosophy of life), facts and values are never separate but always intertwined: facts grow out of values; they are determined by values (Taylor, 2018, p. 85). However, there is also a middle path, sometimes called a neo-Kantian perspective. Following Max Weber, Gorski

wrote that most social scientists would acknowledge that values can and do “influence the research *process* in various ways, but not in ways that necessarily influence the research *findings*” (Gorski, 2013, p. 546, emphasis in original). For instance, values may influence our choice of research. We should also see the whole issue from a different angle: just as facts can be value laden so can values be fact laden (Gorski, 2013). This is especially so when scientific knowledge becomes public and exposed to a variety of judgments. Facts may or may not speak for themselves, and they are not understood and interpreted in the same way by different public audiences. Think of recent well-known issues, such as ageing populations, precarity, gender politics, new information and communication technologies, molecular biology and biopolitics, or climate change in the age of the Anthropocene and their influence on people’s ways of living, thinking and feeling.

Moreover, many of these issues seem unimportant in the face of starvation, misery and violence that trouble many peoples of the global South, frequently motivating mass migrations. These issues are often communicated in the form of images and stories that do not privilege objectivity and factual explanation but other less certain ways of knowing (see Stevenson, 2014, pp. 14–15). Therefore, Europe (the European Parliament and European Commission in particular) should also pay considerable attention to social research of these latter issues, that is, open their eyes and ears and be active beyond its borders. National interests are not situated in closed and isolated nations but in relationships between them. This also pertains to Europe as a whole. We nowadays know that the time of the Other is coeval (Fabian, 1983) and, from the perspective of globalism, it is also important to bear in mind that people from different parts of the world are not only contemporaries but consociates.

How do the people with whom I live and work in Papua New Guinea talk about and deal with novelties? To be new means to be raw, uncooked, fresh, and alive. It has the potential to become something. This pertains equally to new practices as it does to new beings and things. One can make a new house or a new canoe. A recently caught fish can be fresh or still alive. A woman gives birth to a new baby. There are also new LED lamps, video sets and mobile phones. What all these beings and things have in common is that their novelty is not sufficient for their immediate realisation. They are still in their raw state, still in the state of becoming. They need to be made into socially and culturally acceptable beings and things. A fish needs to be cooked and shared between people. A house and canoe need to be consecrated through a particular ceremony. A new-born baby needs to be cared for in a culturally specific way and then go through a series of

rituals in order to become a complete living being within a local environment. It is not only people who become modernised using mobile phones; the latter also need to be socialised and “culturalised”. So much so that those individuals, whom ritual experts provide with relevant phone numbers, regardless of the fact that there is no network, are able to use mobile phones to talk to their deceased relatives, children in particular (Telban & Vávrová, 2014). In short, in accordance with traditional techniques of communication with the spirits of the dead (such as post-mortem bamboo divination), people try the efficacy of mobile phones for the same purpose. I deliberately chose an extreme example, irrational as it may seem to an external observer, to point out that there are numerous less obvious situations throughout the world when people deal with innovations and novelties in socially and culturally specific ways.

Just as the first European explorers made many erroneous assumptions and reached many false conclusions—in terms of both facts and values—about the peoples they encountered on their voyages and who, because of these encounters, faced extermination, so are present-day innovation-driven “explorers” prone to making misguided assumptions and conclusions about life itself in the diversity of its local variations. If these are related to the lives not only of different peoples around the globe but also of other living creatures, and even to the environment at large, then we should rethink whether the excessive demand for novel hypotheses and continuous innovations in scientific research does not do more harm than good. Well-informed reflexive studies from the fields of social sciences and humanities represent a most welcome antidote to this kind of innovation-driven mode of thinking. It is not a truism to say that they should be taken seriously.

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Povzetek

V 21. stoletju so novosti postale nesporen *sine qua non* vsakdanjega življenja. Naši življenjski pogoji se hitro spreminjajo, pogosto brez napovedi, varnosti in kritične refleksije. Vse te spremembe se hitro spreobrnejo v določeno obliko politične in družbene kontrole nenadnih prekinitev določenega načina življenja, ki jih povzročijo novosti. Le-te ohranjajo ljudi v stalni čuječnosti in jih silijo, da opustijo nedavno priučene prakse in jih zamenjajo za nove. Lahko bi rekli, da predstavljajo obliko psihološkega nasilja. Naraščajoči tempo življenja-kot-novosti, skupaj s številnimi napačnimi domnevami in zaključki glede življenja samega in njegove raznolikosti v lokalnih okoljih, ustvarja nove oblike neenakosti in revščine v mnogih družbah po svetu. V pričujočem članku preučujem odnos med časom, novostjo in vrednotami tako v akademskem življenju kot življenju na splošno. Zavzemam se za prioriteto dobro obveščenih, poglobljenih in preiščenih del na področjih družbenih ved in humanistike, ki nasprotujejo časovnim pritiskom in pogosto neutemeljenim inovacijam.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: inovacije, vrednote, čas, družbene vede, humanistika, pozitivizem, interpretacija

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