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"Innovation without growth": alternatives to technological determinism



The sustainability and well-being of our societies are based on a model built on the paradigm of technological determinism; belief that technology in itself affects positive socioeconomic development. "Innovate or die" is the underlying ideology, the basis of all inequality and social injustice. But can another kind of paradigm be developed that were more just for everyone? In this article Mario Pansera and Mariano Fressoli analyze five specific cases, in the fields of Hardware and Open Software, in which innovation is based on caring for people and things, and they propose new lines of research for the creation of organizations that break with the established model.

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The paper is the result of a collaboration between Dr. Mario Pansera, Serra Hunter Lecturer at the Dept of Business of the UAB, and Dr. Mariano Fressoli, an expert in grassroots innovation at the CENIT in Buenos Aires. The article argues that the feasibility and desirability of endless economic growth is being increasingly questioned by scholars and activists. Whilst envisioning alternative economic models is key to assure the sustainability and wellbeing of present and future generations, few studies have analysed what might be the role of 'innovation' in a post-growth era. Innovating has become an imperative for the survival and expansion of any form of organisation. But this 'innovate or die mania' underpins assumptions – such as technological determinism and productivism – that neglect the socially constructed character of technological development, its politics and its capacity to

enable (or disable) just and equitable societies. In this paper, we posit that untangling innovation from growth is key to imagine a post-growth era. It shows how alternative bottom up initiatives, promoted by a variety of different organizational forms, have challenged mainstream ideas about innovation and growth.

In particular, the article describes 5 cases of organizations showing alternative innovation models. For example, the Appropriate Technologies movements that emerged in the 1970s and grassroots innovation and the Social Technology Networks very active in India and Latin America, but also in northern countries such as the United Kingdom. We also describe the social innovation process led by the social cooperatives movement in Italy in the field of recycling. Finally, we analyze the innovation patterns adopted by groups and collectives active in the field of Open Software and Hardware and peer-productions such as Linux, Wikipedia and Galaxy Zoo.

These experiments provide a glimpse into what 'innovation without growth' could mean in terms of technology and social organization. Above all, these cases reveal that it is possible to frame an innovation process based on an 'Ethic of Care' (caring for things and people) as opposed to an innovation based on the concept of 'creative destruction' as described by the Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter in the 40s of the last century. We conclude by proposing new paths in research aimed at exploring under which conditions post-growth-oriented organizations can flourish and diffuse.

Mario Pansera¹ and Mariano Fressoli²

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

¹Department of Business Organization (UAB).

²Research Center for Transformation (CENIT), Argentina.

mario.pansera@uab.cat

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