Making Better Innovators, but for Which America?

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Does America Need More Innovators?
Edited by Matthew Wisnioski, Eric S. Hintz and Marie Stettler Kleine
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410 pp.

To the question "does American need more innovators?", the recent volume edited by Matthew Wisnioski, Eric Hintz and Marie Stettler Kleine that bears this interrogative title answers a cautious "yet, but". The book brings together scholars and practitioners who, either "champions", "critics" and "reformers" of innovation, contribute to a stimulating dialogue through a rich array of case studies of how innovators are and should be made. The editors eventually propose a perspective of "critical participation". Introduced in the concluding section of the book, this middle-ground position consists in recognizing the need for innovation, while addressing the shortcomings of the current "innovator imperative" by engaging in training programs, public debates, and academic discussions.

One can attempt to study innovation from a scholarly distance, for instance by producing historical analysis, such as in Benoît Godin's fascinating chapter about the history of the term "innovation". But the editors of the book are skeptical of the ability of critics to maintain a distanced position, if only because of their situation in the heart of the global university. Some of the contributions in the "critics" section of the book could indeed be described as "reformers", if not "champions" of more inclusive, reflexive, or less novelty-focused innovation discourses and practices. Thus, Wisnoski, Hintz and Stettler Kleine use their analytical focus on innovators and how they are created to rephrase their title question. American may well need more innovators, but these innovators need to be of a different kind, and should answer the call of a renewed imperative that would integrate concerns about exclusion effects and possible negative consequences.

On the Making of Innovators

The focus of the making of innovators as human subjects not naturally endowed with special abilities, but actively manufactured in conscious ways, is then part of the theory and practice of the critical participation Wisnoski and his colleagues advocate. This original and fruitful focus is evident in the book's many stories of individuals who are or could be successfully turned into innovators, possibly under the guise of the creative entrepreneur, the citizen scientist, the responsible scientist, or the female high school student. To the European reader, these stories have a distinctive American ring, already heard in the opening sentence of the book—"our nation knows what it takes to innovate", the American Academy of Art and Science is quoted as saying, and the volume proposes to help "the nation" innovate in better ways.

The American dimension of the book is well visible, but what the innovator imperative and its potential re-definition imply for America is not discussed as such. One chapter however provides important resources to initiate this reflection. In his analysis of the global circulation of the MIT model and its re-invention as it is adopted in Russia, the Middle East and Singapore, Sebastian Pfotenhauer shows that the devices meant to manufacture

innovators are tied to the principles that underpin how societies are expected to function. How these devices are used, why they are considered important, how they are expected to contribute to the common good cannot be understood without taking into account the institutionalized mechanisms through which political legitimacy is gained.

Pfotenhauer's approach to the study of innovation is important, because it helps us to take the American dimension of the book seriously. For the cases, examples and stories analyzed in the book are not just about making innovators who happen to live in the United States. They are also about making innovators and imagining the desirable America at the same time. Thus, Eric Hintz's study of the Franklin Institute's century long history of making innovators and the recent failure of a start-up called Qwirky which provided a platform for would-be inventors to turn their ideas into innovative products demonstrates the persistence of the myth of the individual entrepreneur in need for institutional support to contribute to the common good—a pervasive American dream if any.

Lisa Cook's, and Lucinda Sanders' and Catherine Ashcraft's crucial chapters about the constraints faced by women and African Americans in participating in innovation can be situated within contemporary American debates about the institutionalized processes of exclusion in work environments and public debates. The final chapter about "responsible innovation" as experimented at Arizona State University's Center for Nanotechnology in Society suggests an interesting comparison with the European science policy programs, where "responsibility" is tied to an idea of defining collective priorities. By contrast, the examples provided in the chapter are about transforming individual scientists, as part of an experimental endeavor funded by the National Science Foundation and expected to demonstrate the need to make these scientists reflect on the implications of laboratory work.

Innovators Beyond America

That the book might have been written differently if the innovators were not American is not just an amusing curiosity, but an indication that additional resources for an impactful critique of innovation are available. If innovation cannot be understood without analyzing the political and economic institutions that stabilize the principles defining what is legitimate and what is not, what the desirable common good is and how it should be pursued, then it follows than re-phrasing the terms of innovation also means re-imagining the political nature of the collectives in which innovation is expected to take place. If America needs a different kind of innovators, then one can wonder about the American institutions, and the elements that make them "American", which would ensure that this new type could come to life.

This question is not explicitly addressed in the book, but there is one moment where the reader can vividly feel its relevance, in Jenn Gustetic's chapter about the innovation programs of the Obama administration. A former assistant director of Open Innovation at the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP), Gustetic describes Obama's federal policies driven by an "inclusive innovation philosophy". One could easily see how this inclusive innovation philosophy could dialogue with other propositions in the book, from the "ethics of care" advocated by Andrew Russell and Lee Vinsel in connection with maintenance, to responsible innovation or the integration of more women and African Americans in innovation processes.

Gustetic ends with a hopeful note, as she briefly signals that the Trump administration has continued to support open innovation approaches. But this last remark points to a fundamental issue: will the "inclusive innovation philosophy" be appealing to Trump's supporters? What if, for all the good will and possible ways of making better innovators, a large share of the American public persists in supporting a Trumpist agenda of denying existing federal institutions any ability to tell what the common good is? These questions show that the work needed to create other innovators also needs to be complemented by a reflection about the public in the name of whom these innovators are expected to act. Making better innovators also supposes crafting better institutions able to speak for people's concerns. Wisnioski', Hintz' and Stettler Kleine's critical participation in the making of innovators will also require a complementary reflection about the America to which these innovators are expected to contribute.