

# The Paradoxical Innovation Concept

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**INNOVATION. INNOVATE. INNOVATIVE.** Before you continue reading, may I ask you to stop for a moment to reflect about the words? What are the associations and emotions they evoke? Are they positive, negative or neutral?

I sometimes ask this question during a lecture. The result is always the same: An overwhelming majority thinks that the word innovation evokes positive associations. Ten years ago, also I belonged to the majority, but I have come to change my mind to a more neutral position. The change of standpoint is a result of my research into the effects and consequences of innovation, because they are not always 'good'. There are many reasons to consider the human activities, we refer to as innovation, to be beneficial. However, an unreflected positive bias about any concept limits one's intellectual capacity and that may have serious consequences in working life.

The argument in this chapter is that it is high time to problematize the concept of innovation if it continues to be used in the crucially important public sector. I venture to say that if you are working in the health -and social service sector, or in regulatory agencies such as an environmental protection agency, or a chemicals regulation agency, or a financial securities commission, your work is probably about preventing or healing the dark sides of innovation; their damages on our bodies and our psyches, on our institutions and natural environments.

If we were to account for the resources that go into sorting out the dark sides, the net beneficial effects for society are definitely lower than what public opinion is currently led to believe. As I aim to show, an unreflected pro-innovation biased stance brings few advantages and comes with an added risk to fall into unexpected traps.

The interest in innovation has grown enormously in society during the 2000's. It shows in the output of publications. The number of published scientific articles annually has increased by some 1600 percent in the last 25 years and Amazon.com has 78 692 books with innovation in the title on offer in July 2017. A person, who accepts the unlikely task to read these enormous text volumes will find proffered solutions to all the problems in the world including promises of a bright future. Almost without exception, the innovation concept is portrayed as the equivalent of hope, success and progress; features that define who we are; our identities as individuals living in the Western world. In the aftermath of the global financial crash in 2008, innovation has even become the panacea that will heal the Western economies from the dystopian sorrows, although it was financial innovations

### **Three Common Myths about Innovation**

#### **Myth 1: 'Innovation is good – its effects are beneficial'.**

Innovation is good for some; primarily for those, who initiate it. The changes that an innovation incurs are not necessarily good for others.

#### **Myth 2: 'We have to increase the pace of innovation to survive'.**

To accelerate innovation increases the risk of mistakes and unintended consequences. At some point these will materialise. This means that the net benefit of acceleration can be negative.

#### **Myth 3: 'Innovation will solve the problem'.**

The problem is often the unintended consequence of previous innovations. Is then more innovation the solution?

that caused a ‘normal’ financial crisis to spin out of control into a near-death-experience for the global financial system.

This chapter discusses the concept of innovation and its application during change projects in the public sector. It summarises what is relevant for the public sector of what we have learned in the research project, *The Future of Innovation*<sup>1</sup>, about the ‘dark sides’ of the change initiating activities termed ‘innovations’. The dark side refers to both the non-positive aspects of innovations and the fact that they are rarely highlighted in research or when innovation is on decision makers’ agendas. The chapter brings to light some of the paradoxes generated by this situation.

And just to make sure where I come from: I am not anti-innovation. *The purpose of our research project is to increase the net-benefits of innovation for society at large.*

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<sup>1</sup> *The Future of Innovation* project started 2009 by the Swedish School of Economics in Helsinki. It has received funding from a.o. Liikesivisysrahasto and the Academy of Finland and produced one book, *Challenging the Innovation Paradigm*, och some thirty articles book chapters and conference papers. In addition, numerous papers have been produced by colleagues in our internaionl network.