

Innovation in the ‘situationist’ perspective

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Abstract

Innovation is an ever-current topic in the managerial, political, social, and economic debate, and finds its natural place in the broader reflections on the theme of *change*. What are the processes through which it starts, develops, accelerates, or slows down? What are the links between innovation and those that precede/follow it? Research has proposed numerous hypotheses about the dynamics of innovative processes in an attempt to provide ‘understanding’ schemes – or ‘explaining’ models – of the emergence and spread of the new (Davies, 1979; Rogers, 1983; Hippel, 1990; Rosenberg, 1991). From the analysis of the literature emerges a prevailing vision, of enlightenment and neo-positivist matrix, which associates to the theme of innovation those of scientific discovery, of technical efficiency, and of social progress and reconnects these ‘values’ to ‘strong’ archetypes of individual and collective rationality.

This paper aims, far from exhaustively reviewing the extensive literature produced in the economic-business disciplines, to represent a synoptic framework functional to the understanding of some main issues, a useful premise for the presentation of a different interpretative framework. Among the different perspectives of investigation, the work focuses its attention on institutional analysis in organizational studies, with particular reference to the neo-institutional one, marking a clear epistemological distance from the settings of strong rationality, both individual and systemic, places at the center understanding of the institutional environment (norms, customs, organizations, institutions). Between the social atom – the individual, unicum of analysis in the micro perspective of methodological individualism – and society as a whole – object of the macro analysis of systemic-collectivist approaches – the institutional analysis interposes a meso-level filter, an intermediate lens through which to unravel the tangle of “material and symbolic conditioning that institutions exercise on human behavior” (Bonazzi, 2000, p. VII). Archetypes based on pure forms of rationality and on integrated and coherent visions of organizations give way to weaker visions, with fewer ‘claims of knowledge’ (Hayek, 1997), which focus its attention on the complex interactional dynamics between a multiplicity of actors operating in concrete fields of action. New elements – institutional processes and dynamics of power – contribute to stage a different epistemological option, identifiable as situationist, of innovation and of business (Mastroberardino, 2006, 2010).

The paper, contributing to the debate on innovation and organizational change processes, aims at proposing the ‘situationist’ view, an alternative to the prevailing view which considers these processes animated by systemic rationality aspiring to justify linearity that is, in practice, plentiful naive. This paper compares two paradigms of the enterprise providing a different view of the innovation: the political and neo-micro-institutional view. The idea is to revisit the concept of innovation that, from immanent and, too often, simplified, is attended by a number of actors that do not always link it to internal efficiency of effectiveness logic. On the contrary, it may be the result of decisions aiming at legitimizing the organization in relation to the institutions and other key players operating in an “organizational field”.

The situationist view can be seen as an element of originality since it suggests to be aware both of the political aspects (about power) and of the processes aiming at gaining legitimation. The lack of an empirical study – although this paper is focused on a theoretical conceptualization – can be

seen as the main limitations of the work. The different insight into innovation processes allows us to increase the number of managerial and decision-making patterns with schemes and models focused on negotiation-based strategies. Moreover, the acknowledgment of cognitive constructs, such as isomorphism and rationalizing myths, paves the way for a less naive approach to organizational dynamics that animate, in practice, the processes of innovation.

Keywords: innovation; power; institutional framework

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