What Business Are You In Mr. Barber?

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In a talk delivered before the American Institute of Instruction in 1835, Hubard Winslow told the audience that "Innovation seems to be the prevailing spirit of our age ... It is the reaction of an opposite extreme of the past".

> Innovation seems to be the prevailing spirit of our age .... A large portion of the political, civil, and religious world is partaking of it. Ancient dynasties are crumbling; political maxims are revoked; venerable authorities are laughed at; established principles are contested; civil institutions are overturned; organized systems and measures, which have survived centuries, are broken up; and the whole framework of society seems to be in a progress of revolution. It is the reaction of an opposite extreme of a past age. [The danger is to] cast away the good … By innovating upon doctrines and practices tested by long and wise experience, and by pushing out supposed principles to the extremes of altruism, instead of conducting the human mind steadily forward towards the goal, they [those who sympathize with innovation] will only send it round in a circle of revolution.

Winslow is complaining about the introduction of physical education to the detriment of intellectual education. In matters intellectual specifically, Winslow objects to the introduction of what he calls "devices to avoid severe study", namely "modern adaptation of books" which renders them "cut and dried", too easy to read and made for pleasure. Winslow also criticizes teaching methods – "visible signs, plates, figures, machines" – which neglect the work of the imagination.

Today, we live in an age of innovation too, but a different one. Innovation is a virtue, while to Winslow and most of his contemporaries, innovation was a vice. Governments, international organizations and consultants now produce dozens of reports on (technological) innovation every year, and academics publish hundreds of papers and books.

What have we learned from all this literature? That innovation is good, always good. That every organization must innovate. That everyone of us should be an innovator. Yet we also know now that innovation is a catchword for those who want to get a hearing, or be published or … obtain funding. As early as 1979, the scientific magazine *Nature* included an editorial titled "Innovation: What's in a Word". *Nature* compares innovation to a "packaging": it "provides a central theme around which otherwise disparate activities can be arranged". It "heighten[s] awareness ... of innovation" (*Nature*, 1979). Briefly stated, innovation is a trans-discursive term or organizing metaphor, to use Reijo Miettinen's terms to describe the concept of *National Innovation Systems* (Miettinen, 2002).

Oceans of Innovation is this kind of study. Michael Barber and his colleagues from Pearson, "the world's largest education company", so the authors claim, absorb innovation as another theme under which to sell their expertise – education. This is not unlike the US National Academy of Sciences' recent efforts to absorb innovation into the long term issue of STEM. STEM graduates are talked of now in terms of STEM innovators.

The Barber et al. report is very global in its thinking, some would say theoretical. I prefer to say rhetorical. The authors' main question is: "Whether we will see an 'Asian' or a 'Pacific' century ahead". Their answer: it depends on innovation, and education "is a key factor in our success". But "The philosophy of everyone as an entrepreneur and innovator is not what underpins education anywhere in the world right now" (p. 1). "An education revolution will be required" (p. 66).

The Barber et al. proposal adds up to a formula: E (K+T+L). Before going into this formula, the authors get into history, including contemporary history, and statistics, as evidence. I am afraid that no reader will find enlightening knowledge here.

What we get is pseudo-history. Impressionist and anecdotal evidence is offered on the "Spectacular growth of the Pacific Asian economy", particularly China's. The rise of the Pacific is explained as "a state managed by an expert elite was able to speed up development" (p. 13), and their culture ("people work hard"). To Barber and his colleagues, "it seems plain that the era of Atlantic economic leadership has already given way to the Pacific" (p. 17). "It seems inevitable that the Pacific will replace the Atlantic as the focal point for global leadership" (p. 26). Page after page we read such statements.

Barber's hi(S)tory is supported by a hodge-podge of clichés on contemporary innovation. Innovation is the panacea for everything. Innovation "will be required to solve the world's problems in the next half century … This challenge will require great cities, great universities, great new and established businesses and extensive interactions between them" (p. 21-22), as well as a "culture of openness" (p. 22) and "creativity" (p. 29). To this end, "No aspect is more central than education … in which the Pacific region has shown extraordinary achievement in recent decades" (p. 27). What, then, are the "conditions for innovation"? The report list skills, teams, cross-functional and fluid organizations, and culture – including interactions and networks and openness to the world (p. 31-38). We read such generalities time and again in the report.

The assessment of the situation ends with statistical evidence. Using benchmarking from the OECD and elsewhere, Barber et al. suggest that the ranking performances of the Pacific are explainable by the high value place on education at every level: family (committed to education), professional (the teaching profession) and organizational (long-term approaches to improving the education systems) (p. 44f).

Given the "strong connection between innovation and economic growth" (p. 54), E (K+T+L) is "the combination most likely to unleash in young people the qualities which will enable them to be innovative" (p. 52). "The 21st century … demands that everyone

achieve high standards in each E, K, T and L" (p. 53). To the authors, K (knowledge) stands for know-how, as well as, if not more than, know-what. This includes reading, writing and counting (mathematics), but also knowledge of history, science and information technology, including when and how to use Pythagoras' theorem (p. 49). T (thinking) involves mastering different ways of thinking: synthesis, reflection – alone and in teams – logic and creativity. L (leadership) is being able to influence those around you (p. 50). The inclusion of E (ethics) in the formula is justified by the following fact: "as traditional institutions, such as the family or church, break down, increasingly schools are the only institution we can rely on to inculcate in young people the values of ethical underpinning on which our collective future depends" (p. 51).

In sum, we need to "prepare children at an earliest age, set high standards, new forms of assessments (tests) and flexible systems. We need a "revolution". "System reform … will not be enough", we require the capacity to innovate (p. 61).

I leave to the experts in the field of education the task of evaluating in detail the lessons suggested by Barber and his team from Pearson (e.g.: is it realistic to ask the school to take the place of the family in ethical matters, and at what cost?). What I would say here concerns innovation. Innovation has become a panacea, with little substance in the argument. The limitation of most of the literature on innovation is that socio-economic problems are not studied at all. They are taken for granted, as if every solution to our problems was necessarily more innovation (Barber et al. repeat the idea that there is a link between innovation and economic productivity, but they ignore the fact that there is also a debate concerning the statistical evidence). As sociologist Edward Shils put it some time ago, "The mistake lay in regarding [the command to innovate] as the only goal to be pursued" (Shils, 1981: 328). In the end, *Oceans of Innovation* is old wine in a new bottle: a tapestry of (old) ideas synthesized (formalized) into a (new) equation (here lies the unique novelty or innovation of the report) – a formula too general to be useful for policy purposes – and served under a rhetoric of innovation.

References

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