

Economic Sociology of Innovation

International Workshop

When: 3-4 December 2021.

Where: Goethe University Frankfurt.

Deadline for Submission of Abstracts: 16 April 2021.

Deadline for Submission of Preliminary Drafts of Papers: 1 November 2021.

Organizers: Alexander Ebner and Filippo Reale

Call for Papers

Content

Technological innovation is a key characteristic of the economic and social dynamics of modern capitalism. Indeed, the drive for novelty under conditions of capitalist modernity has been a major theme already in the classical contributions of Marx and Schumpeter, among others, who defined modern capitalism as a historically unique economic system that persistently revolutionizes its technological structures and by doing so spreads instability and uncertainty. In view of the corresponding diagnosis of the ubiquity and reflexivity of innovation in its various shapes and forms, recent debates in sociology have approached the creation of novelty as a social process that reaches well beyond the economic sphere and in doing so affects all fields of society.¹ This assessment is shared by the most relevant neighbouring areas of the social sciences. Related lines of reasoning in the evolutionary economics of innovation deviate from neoclassical efficiency considerations as they take on the interplay of economic, social and political forces in the generation, selection and diffusion of innovations.² The discourse of science and technology studies likewise rejects efficiency concerns as it addresses the role of power and interests in the social construction of technology.³

Until recently, however, major strands of economic sociology have largely ignored the matter of innovation as a key component of capitalist market economies. Rather, they have predominantly investigated the social structures of firms, industries and markets by means of investigating their social logics, moral orders and institutional embeddedness. The analytical focus of these efforts

¹ Hutter, M., Knoblauch, H., Rammert, W., Windeler, A. (2018), *Innovation Society Today: The Reflexive Creation of Novelty*, in Rammert, W., Windeler, A., Knoblauch, H., Hutter, M. (eds.), *Innovation Society Today: Perspectives, Fields, and Cases*, Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 13-31.

² Dosi, G., Orsenigo, L. and Sylos Labini, M. (2005), *Technology and the Economy*, in Smelser, N. J and Swedberg, R. (eds.), *Handbook of Economic Sociology*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 678-703.

³ Pinch, T. (2008), *Technology and Institutions: Living in a Material World*, *Theory and Society*, 37 (3), 461-483.

was basically on the stabilization and maintenance of these social structures.⁴ Technological innovation emerged only recently as a more prominent issue. For instance, recent advances in economic sociology have highlighted the role of materiality in the analysis of the interplay of interests, ideas and social structures that shapes economic phenomena.⁵ These references to the ‘new materialism’ of science and technology studies address the matter of technological change from a sociological perspective, yet they tend to neglect the specifically economic mechanisms of innovation such as competitive incentives and rewards. Closer to these concerns is a related perspective that has studied the narratives and metrics underlying the formation and stabilization of expectations under conditions of radical uncertainty in turbulent market settings.⁶ The diverse means of coping with uncertainty provide insights on the dynamism of capitalist market economies, yet understanding the sources of radical uncertainty requires an analytical angle that goes well beyond the fluctuation of market prices. Instead, it requires a reconsideration of the causes and consequences of innovation.

Drawing on these viewpoints, further advances of the economic sociology of innovation require focused explorations into the social conditions and constellations of technological innovation in the context of capitalist market economies. Crucially, technological innovation implies the introduction of novelty in society, and this process drives most of the phenomena of instability, insecurity and uncertainty that characterize modern capitalism. In this context, novelty challenges pertinent structures of valuation and commensuration in that established relations of equivalence are necessarily questioned. Manifestations of novelty may differ by their degrees of newness with an immediate impact on variations in predictability, calculability, and governability. Yet the corresponding impulse for economic and social disruptions, despite variations in intensity, distinguishes technological innovation from merely adaptive technological change. Following Schumpeter, it is the socially conditioned and mediated quality of disruptive newness that persistently creates, recombines and destroys actors and structures in both the private and public sector.⁷

In line with this assessment, it is fair to suggest that the economic sociology of innovation is predominantly concerned with the socially embedded economic action of individuals and collectives in firms, industries, markets and territorial innovation systems, which is meant to generate, introduce and diffuse technological innovation in an established socio-economic setting. Decisively, this perspective, while open for historical viewpoints, is predominantly concerned with technological innovation under the institutional conditions of modern capitalism. Thus, while accounting for variation and diversity, it highlights the economic logic that is commonly underlying all processes of innovation under capitalist conditions, namely the logic of profit and competition that relates to the market mechanism. Also, non-profit constellations such as schemes of open innovation need to be assessed as specific segments in a socio-economic setting that is otherwise

⁴ Fligstein, N. (2002), *The Architecture of Markets: An Economic Sociology of Twenty-First Century Capitalist Societies*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; Portes, A. (2010), *Economic Sociology: A Systematic Inquiry*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

⁵ Swedberg, R. (2008), The Centrality of Materiality: Economic Theorizing from Xenophon to Home Economics and Beyond, in Pinch, T. and Swedberg, R. (eds.) (2008), *Living in a Material World: Economic Sociology Meets Science and Technology Studies*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 57-87.

⁶ Beckert, J. (2016), *Imagined Futures: Fictional Expectations and Capitalist Dynamics*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Beckert, J. and Bronk, R. (eds.) (2018), *Uncertain Futures: Imaginaries, Narratives, and Calculation in the Economy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁷ Ebner, A. (2006), Institutions, Entrepreneurship and the Rationale of Government: An Outline of the Schumpeterian Theory of the State, *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*, 59 (4), 497-515.

dominated by capitalist logics. This aspect is well illustrated by the ongoing marketization of science and research next to other previously non-market coordinated spheres of society.⁸

In view of this, it may be argued that a distinct economic sociology of innovation aims at exploring the motives and modes of novelty-generating and -diffusing economic action in the context of tensions between diverse market and non-market types of moral orders, which may arise in diverse institutional environments. A point of departure for these concerns may be provided by the diverse forms of knowledge and the degree to which they appear as property and commodities.⁹ In a similar vein, the contested logic of marketization may be explored when it comes to narratives, metrics and other means of coping with the effects of uncertainty that is associated with technological innovation.¹⁰ These mechanisms reflect the economic and social constellation of paradigmatic technological fields such as digital technologies, which are deeply engrained into the evolving routines and practices of firms, networks and markets.¹¹ Moreover, an economic sociological view on entrepreneurship may address reflexive actors, who develop distinct techno-economic goals and deploy social skills to achieve them, involving strategies for the legitimization of novelty. The mobilization of resources through networks is a key component of these efforts.¹² A corresponding view on the economic sociology of the innovation efforts of firms might explore how firms proceed with innovation based on organizational capabilities that form contested innovation routines and practices, as exemplified by the modes of R&D operations.¹³ As firms are set to compete within specific social structures, their embeddedness in socio-spatial networks emerges as key concern of the economic sociology of innovation.¹⁴ These inter-firm networks might extend to research institutes, universities, government agencies and other actors from the private and public sector who are active in the generation of new knowledge and thus become constitutive parts of regional or national innovation systems. An economic sociological perspective might look at the characteristics of these systems in terms of the structures of knowing, valuating, and

⁸ Ebner, A. (2015), Marketization: Theoretical Reflections Building on the Perspectives of Polanyi and Habermas, *Review of Political Economy*, 27 (3), 369-389.

⁹ Jessop, B. (2007), Knowledge as a Fictitious Commodity: Insights and Limits of a Polanyian Perspective, in A. Buğra and K. Ağartan (eds.), *Reading Karl Polanyi for the Twenty-First Century*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 115-133; Slaughter, S. and Leslie, L. L. (2004), *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy: Markets, States, and Higher Education*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press; Gibbons, M. et al. (1994), *The New Production of Knowledge: The Dynamics of Science and Research in Contemporary Societies*, London: Sage; Whitley, R. (2000), *The Intellectual and Social Organization of the Sciences*, Second Edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹⁰ Birch, K. (2017), Techno-economic Assumptions, *Science as Culture*, 26 (4), 433-444; Borup, M. et al. (2006), The Sociology of Expectations in Science and Technology, *Technology Analysis & Strategic Management*, 18 (3-4), 285-298; Brown, N., Rappert, B. and Webster, A. (eds.) ([2000] 2017), *Contested Futures: A Sociology of Prospective Techno-Science*, Abingdon: Routledge; Doganova, L. and Eyquem-Renault, M. (2009), What Do Business Models Do? Innovation Devices in Technology Entrepreneurship, *Research Policy*, 38 (10), 1559-1570; Garud, R., Gehman, J., and Giuliani A. P. (2014), Conceptualizing Entrepreneurial Innovation: A Narrative Perspective, *Research Policy*, 43 (7), 1177-1188.

¹¹ Castells, M. (2010), *The Rise of the Network Society*, 2nd edition, Oxford: Wiley Blackwell; Orlikowski, W. J. and Scott, S. V. (2015), The Algorithm and the Crowd: Considering the Materiality of Service Innovation, *MIS Quarterly*, 39 (1), 201-216; Morozov, E. (2013), *To Save Everything, Click Here: Technology, Solutionism and the Urge to Fix Problems that Don't Exist*, New York: Public Affairs.

¹² Granovetter, M. (1995), The Economic Sociology of Firms and Entrepreneurs, in Portes, A. (ed.), *The Economic Sociology of Immigration: Essays in Networks, Ethnicity, and Entrepreneurship*, New York: Sage, 128-165; Aldrich, H. E. and Martinez, M. A. (2010), Entrepreneurship as Social Construction: A Multilevel Evolutionary Approach, in Z. J. Acs and D. B. Audretsch (eds.), *Handbook of Entrepreneurship Research: An Interdisciplinary Survey and Introduction*, New York: Springer, 387-430.

¹³ Whitley, R. (2007), *Business Systems and Organizational Capabilities: The Institutional Structuring of Competitive Competences*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

¹⁴ Castilla, E. J., Hwang, H., Granovetter, E. and Granovetter, M. (2000), Social Networks in Silicon Valley, in C.-M. Lee, W. F. Miller and H. S. Rowen (eds.), *The Silicon Valley Edge: A Habitat for Innovation and Entrepreneurship*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 218-247.

legitimizing which sustain the reflexive interaction and learning efforts of the involved innovative actors.¹⁵ These and related social structures will reflect the prevailing market conditions with their distinct modes in the formation of prices and profits, which can be set in relation with the impact of power asymmetries in technological innovation.¹⁶ Corresponding variations in political and legal aspects of innovation inform the national and regional diversity of capitalism. They also shape the self-transformation of capitalist varieties into new paradigmatic types that have been labelled ‘hi-tech capitalism’, ‘techno-scientific capitalism’ and ‘platform capitalism’ among others.¹⁷

Questions

In exploring the issues outlined above, the workshop “Economic Sociology of Innovation” is set to discuss both theoretical and empirical studies that take on the following issues, among others:

- Technological and organizational innovation as major areas of theoretical and empirical research in the intellectual history of classical and modern economic sociology.
- Analytical distinctiveness of the economic sociology of innovation as compared with science and technology studies, economics of innovation, economic geography, and related disciplinary areas.
- Diverse modes of the social, cultural, institutional and political embeddedness of the generation and diffusion of new technologies, especially concerning entrepreneurial economic action.
- Narratives, metrics, and related institutional means of coping with ignorance and uncertainty in the organizational management of R&D and technological innovation.
- Social structures of industrial clusters, innovative milieux and territorial innovation systems, perceived, respectively, as social networks, organizational fields, and social systems.
- Social structures of market competition in the diffusion of technological innovation, especially concerning the valuation, valorisation, and commensuration of new technologies and goods.
- Interdependencies among the technological, institutional, cultural, social, and political dynamics of historical and contemporary capitalism as an innovation-driven economic system.

The workshop organizers invite researchers from all strands of economic sociology and other fields of the social sciences to investigate the above and related issues of the economic sociology of innovation. The workshop will proceed from 3 to 4 December 2021 at Goethe University Frankfurt in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. Participation in the workshop is free of charge. Also, pending on the availability of related financial means, workshop presenters may receive financial support for travel and accommodation.

¹⁵ Reale, F. (2019), Governing Innovation Systems: A Parsonian Social Systems Perspective, *Technology in Society*, 59, Article 101174.

¹⁶ Stehr, N. (ed.) (2017), *Governing Knowledge*, London: Routledge; Frickel, S. and Moore, K. (eds.) (2006), *The New Political Sociology of Science: Institutions, Networks, and Power*, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press; Olivera, J. and Clegg, S. (2015), Paradoxical Puzzles of Control and Circuits of Power, *Qualitative Research in Accounting & Management*, 12 (4), 425-451.

¹⁷ Sunder Rajan, K. (2006), *Biocapital: The Constitution of Postgenomic Life*, Durham: Duke University Press; Srnicek, N. (2017), *Platform Capitalism*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Confirmed keynote speakers on the economic sociology of innovation are going to be:

- Richard Swedberg (Cornell),
- Richard Whitley (Manchester).

Proposals of circa 500 words for theoretical or empirical papers should be sent to the official contact address: reale@soz.uni-frankfurt.de. The deadline for the submission of abstracts is set for 16 April 2021. Invitations for participation will be communicated by 30 April 2021. The deadline for the submission of preliminary drafts of workshop papers is 1 November 2021. The submitted workshop papers are expected to present substantially new and unpublished content in line with the research questions outlined in the call for papers. Workshop proceedings are going to be published in a volume edited by the workshop organizers with a renowned international publisher, accompanied by a special issue with a renowned international journal.

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