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Innovation and Inertia: Questioning Paradigms of Consumerist Object Fetishism

Summary

Consumer societies position innovation in a framework that essentializes the new. The assumed need for innovative technologies, life-styles and fashion is based on an internalized reversal of the relationship between 'needs' and 'motives'. Primary needs are replaced by the desire for the new. The implicit assumption about consumers' self-understanding relates to their interest in the new and their willingness to be informed about novelties. However, ethnographies of quotidian handling of innovation show the importance of reliable conduct. The readiness 'to learn new things' is limited. Innovation depends less on the degree of novelty than on the context in which it occurs.

Keywords: Needs and desires; technological innovation; consumerism; ethnography; appropriation; ignorance.

Konsumgesellschaften setzen Innovation in einen Rahmen, der das Neue essenzialisiert. Das angenommene Bedürfnis an innovativen Technologien, Lebensstilen und Mode basiert auf einer verinnerlichten Umkehrung des Verhältnisses zwischen ‚Bedürfnis‘ und ‚Verlangen‘. Primäre Bedürfnisse werden durch den Wunsch nach dem Neuen ersetzt. Implizite Annahmen über Verbraucherselbstverständnis beziehen sich auf ihr Interesse am Neuen und ihre Bereitschaft, über Neuheiten unterrichtet zu sein. Allerdings zeigen Ethnographien die Bedeutung des adäquaten Alltagsumgangs mit Innovationen. Die Bereitschaft, ‚neue Dinge zu lernen‘, ist begrenzt. Innovation hängt weniger vom Grad der Neuheit als vom Kontext ab, in dem sie auftritt.

Keywords: Bedürfnisse und Verlangen; technologische Innovation; Konsumismus; Ethnographie; Aneignung; Ignoranz.

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I Introduction

In the world of consumption and consumerism, the public presentation of new electronic gadgets, promoted through the media, as for example by Steve Jobs, figure among the top events for technology enthusiasts, but also for the wider public. Doubtlessly, it is legitimate to call Apple's electronic devices 'emblematic items' for the popular understanding of 'innovation' in our times. For many years and in regular intervals, engineers, product developers and marketing experts from Apple have defined the meaning of innovation and how innovations should change everyday life. The "iPhone", "iPad" and similar devices and terms are setting the standards of what should be the core of the most up-to-date technology in the respective sectors.

During his public presentations, Steve Jobs himself repeatedly used the terms "invention" or "re-invention"; he was speaking about this particular feature of Apple's products by using the imperative form: "Innovate!" Usually, within a short time after his presentation the competing producers of electronic devices started to imitate Apple's innovations and presented devices with similar properties. Tests provided differentiated information for consumers, whether this or that device may legitimately claim to be on the same level as the initial innovation from Apple. Obviously Apple's activities represent more than just the reference to innovation as a core feature of marketing. Regularly, popular computer journals discuss whether those devices, labelled "innovations" do constitute true and sustainable novelties or not.¹ Are these things real improvements or are they just something with an appeal of being fashionable, but in the long run condemned to be forgotten? As these questions make clear, Apple products are a good example for the questionable status of innovations. The questions also point to the central topic of this contribution, which can be expressed as follows: The ambiguous character is very often underestimated, and it is hardly ever the innovation itself that decides about its relevance but rather the context. As these assumptions apply very well for this initial example, I shall come back to it several times.

2 Innovation and the enforced backwardness of 'old things'

The fetishist appraisal of Steve Jobs' 'innovations' contains some important lessons about the logic of innovation. His claim about newness imbues an implicit statement about the 'backwardness' of other electronic stuff in possession of people and in current use. From the moment of the presentation, the users of electronics will consider those things

¹ These debates and product tests legitimately may be subsumed under the heading of "innovation management", as described extensively by Trott 2012.

differently. Independent from the question of whether they are already owners of innovative Apple devices, they will check whether the goods already in their possession do have the presumably highly desirable features. They will ask themselves whether they will be able to make it without these new features in the future, and how much they will suffer from the ‘emerging backwardness.’²

This shift of perspective, the experience that something becomes different in the presence of the innovation without changing materially is the first argument in my discussion of innovation. In the following paragraphs I will explain in more detail how the consideration of these things someone already owns changes due to the presence of an innovation. On a more general level, one of the aims of this contribution is to criticize the presumed objectivity of innovations.

In the perception of a consumer and user, innovations enforce a change in the way someone looks at material possessions of common usage, and which were serving well up to that moment. This is an argument already adopted by Theodor Adorno more than forty years ago, when he referred to the “authority of the new.”³ This assumed authority is not as much a question of the eventual advantages of the new, as merely a question of our sensibilities of perceptions of the changing evaluation of our possessions, as soon as something new appears on the horizon. Recently, the economists Güliz Ger and Russel Belk found more drastic words on the changing value of already existing possessions. They state: “One threat is the loss of confidence and pride in local goods and material culture.”⁴

There is another, much older study that already considered an argument similar to Adorno’s as a challenge for a proper understanding of innovations. The philosopher Christian Garve published a book about fashion in 1792.⁵ Reflecting about the nature of the emergence of new fashions, Garve was a forerunner of Veblen (1899). One of his key arguments refers to well preserved and highly useful things that may become an annoyance and a source of shame for their owners in the presence of an innovation. Lasting objects, acquired by their owner a long time ago, may change their meaning from the moment of the appearance of a novelty. The reason for this is that in the public they are compared with the new and fashionable object. Once an innovation is declared desirable, it creates disastrous effects on the material possessions in a wider sense. This

2 Ragnar Nurkse 1955, 58–59, also pointed to this phenomenon: “When people come into contact with superior goods or superior patterns of consumption, with new articles or new ways of meeting old wants, they are apt to feel after a while a certain restlessness and dissatisfaction. Their knowledge is extended, their imagination stimulated, new desires are aroused”.

3 “The authority of the new seems to take on the form of the historical inevitability. To that extent, the authority of the new is an objective criticism of the individual as the vehicle of the new” (Adorno 1984, 30). I suggested an interpretation of this observation highlighting the inherent process of alienation (Hahn 2008).

4 Ger and Belk 1996, 283.

5 Garve 1982.

argument directs the focus away from an innovation as such and rather addresses the question of shifting contexts due to innovations.

With this it becomes clear that the contextual side of innovation may carry reverse connotations to novelty or desirability. This contribution intends to shed more light on the contextual side of innovations and its eventual re-evaluation imbued by contextual factors. In order to substantiate this claim, I shall present two further arguments in the following sections. The next paragraphs will deal in a more critical manner with the underlying assumptions of the initial example and question the difference between needs and desires. As I shall explain, there is a historical evolution of the meaning of these terms.

In the subsequent section I will come back to the more general question of the term ‘innovation’. Stepping beyond the questionable public presentations of Apple and its implicit normative understanding of innovation as something totally new, a more appropriate definition will be presented in connection with a reference to the seminal work of Lucy Suchman. Much in line with Suchman, I argue that ‘innovation’ is never just the ‘emergence’ of a new form or a new technology, but rather a question of context. The conclusion combines the three arguments: First the shifting of context of all material possessions as mentioned above, second the changing perception of desires and needs, and third the reformulation of the definition of innovation. In this way, innovation can be conceptualized beyond the norms of consumerism.

The aim of the article is to contribute to the development of a broader notion of innovation that is appropriate for contexts beyond western societies.

3 Innovations and needs

Innovations can only be successful if they meet already existing needs. This is the reason why needs, desires and their historical evolution are useful starting points to reflect on the definition of innovations. Seventy years ago the psychologist Abraham Maslow presented an elaborate model of a hierarchy of needs that is nowadays widely accepted in economics as well as in the humanities.⁶ His definition of needs refers to the popular metaphor of the “pyramid of needs”, differentiating between needs and desires on different social levels. In its visualized form, the baseline is constituted by the so-called fundamental needs (Fig. 1). Fundamental needs refer to a concern for all people worldwide. The seemingly objective character of these needs is rooted in the idea that the physical needs are assumed to be the same for all humankind. Furthermore the supposed objectivity corresponds to the objective character of the material world as such.

⁶ Maslow 1943.

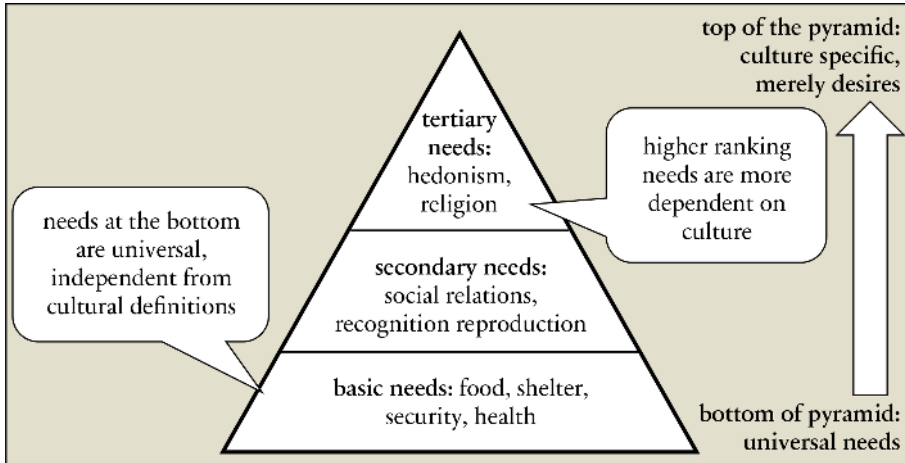


Fig. 1 The hierarchical 'model of needs,' following Abraham Maslow. This model is currently widely accepted as a standard, although it has serious shortcomings. A basic stratum of culture-independent needs cannot exist in the light of ethnographic evidence from non-European cultures.

The needs on the higher levels of the pyramid are only acquired during the lifetime of people, and they depend on the surrounding culture that the people live in. It is in particular these higher levels of needs that engender an interest toward new consumer goods. The need – or, more precisely: the desire – for all the items that define a particular culture, society or religion is located on the medium and top levels of the pyramid. These objects merely refer to what is desirable, but are not inevitably necessary to survive. The infinite expansion of material possessions in modern consumer societies happens only on the upper levels. It is only through social learning that these needs become a subjective reality. Provisionally I accept some authors' suggestion to call the needs of the upper levels "consuming motives"⁷

However, in the light of ethnographic evidence, the shortcomings of this model are obvious. The first problem concerns the hierarchies: it is not plausible to argue that people will always give food a priority over religion. In particular, specific food taboos may be stronger (more immediate) than hunger, and prevent people from eating particular things. The question of shelter is even more contradictory: is individual housing always more important than the building of a temple? There is simply no universal answer to this and therefore skepticism towards the idea of a universal Bottom-of-Pyramid-needs is in order.⁸ As Marilyn Strathern convincingly shows, any definition of health, and the question of what is needed to maintain a healthy status are culturally defined.⁹ Health

7 Müller 1971.

9 Strathern 2004.

8 Morgan and Trentmann 2007.

is not simply a physical status but the result of both physical and cultural norms. This model is Western-centric and biased by an image of consumerist egos as culture-free actors.

With this it has become clear that there are no universals with regard to food, religion or shelter. Ignoring this fact, the presumed universality of basic needs is widely acknowledged in the innovation debate, and it has led to a particular kind of innovation, called “BoP-Innovations”. The multinational enterprises producing such items claim that their new products are designed for the 90 % of the world’s population who live “at the bottom the pyramid”, which means in conditions of poverty.¹⁰ Aneel Karnani has rightfully pointed to the shortcomings of such innovations, because they are biased by assumptions about the existence of populations that are barren of culture and are reduced to creatures with only physical needs.¹¹ This cannot be true: every innovation is embedded in cultural settings and social conditions and the simple “fulfilment of basic needs” is never sufficient for the success of innovations. The so-called “BoP-Innovations”,¹² referring by definition to the presumed universal needs of the poorest, are a phantasmagoria of the multinational enterprises, and they hardly ever work.¹³

Innovations may contribute to a better life of many, on every stage of the pyramid of needs, if we provisionally accept the existence of such a pyramid. However, in a consumer society, innovations meet merely desires (unless one categorizes wireless communication as a basic need). In this perspective, the creation of new desires that may be perceived as important needs sometime after their appearance is a fundamental precondition of innovation.

The consequences for the consideration of the example – the Apple products mentioned at the outset of this article – are obvious. Innovations of this kind have one important precondition: the identification of new desires or needs. The “creation of desires (and needs)” and their diffusion through social learning is a prerequisite for successful innovations.¹⁴ This is a central aspect of many current theories about consumer culture, and also a substantial extension of Maslow’s model of the pyramid of needs.¹⁵ In a polemical manner, it is possible to say that the more recent theories about consumer culture reverse the pyramid, putting the broader level at the top, while narrowing the bottom. More precisely, it is not the pyramid which is reversed, but the modes of identifying needs and their relevance (Fig 2).¹⁶

10 Bloemink and Smith 2007.

11 Karnani 2009.

12 www.bopinc.org (visited on 17/01/2017).

13 For a more differentiated understanding of the role of Innovation in BoP-products, cf. Beers, Knorringa, and Leliveld 2012.

14 Ruprecht 2004.

15 Arnould and Thompson 2005.

16 In Jaron Lanier’s terms, consumer society has managed to “crash down” the Maslow pyramid (Lanier 2010, 78).

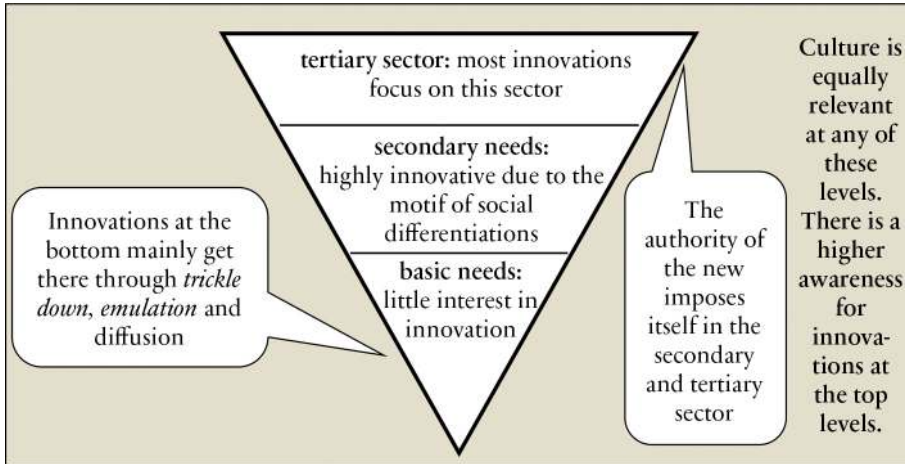


Fig. 2 The reversed model of Maslow’s pyramid. This model integrates the findings of social research, in particular social processes of adaptation and appropriation (Bringéus, Veblen, Tarde and Adorno). Most innovations are perceived at the top level, although they may occur at any of the three levels. The readiness to locate innovations at the top levels is related to the mechanisms of social learning.

4 Questionable innovations

Concepts of the adoption of innovation through changing consumer behavior include a wide range of terms like “emulation”¹⁷, “trickle down”¹⁸ and also “diffusion of innovation”¹⁹. Without going into the detail of these notions, it is worth pointing out a common element. These theories share the following assumptions (1) innovations do happen, and (2) consumers take them seriously. These assumptions imply objectivity of innovations, which is – as explained in the previous sections – highly questionable. In this context, the question emerges how the eventual rejection of consumption can be explained at all. The questionable objectivity of innovations is not taken into account in these theories. This section will give further examples for the mixed outcome of innovations, underlining their context-dependent character.

A poignant example for the fragmented information and the emerging contradictions during and after the adoption of an innovation is the history of the refrigerator. At a first glance, the diffusion of refrigerators may be considered a typical example for the trickle-down theory. The first electric refrigerators were part of the upper class lifestyle. Subsequently, the technology diffused to the middle class, only in order to become a ubiquitous appliance within a few decades.²⁰ However, forty years later, the more dan-

17 Veblen 1899.
18 Bringéus 1983.

19 Rogers 1995.
20 Giedion 1948; Hellmann 1990.

gerous character of some of its components attracted the awareness of many consumers. Millions of owners started to worry about the environmental threat from CFC (i.e., chlorofluorocarbons), which is contained in the cooling system. The sudden change in perception and the rise of ambivalence were definitely not the result of any kind of marketing but of more complex information policies. More detailed information about the inherent dangers of this technology led less to new forms of consumption than to a more critical perspective on existing household devices as such. Today, there is another issue in the public debate, and once again, theories of consumption have not been able to foresee it: the problem of energy consumption of refrigerators.²¹

What happened here is the rejection of a consumer good some decades after its introduction. In spite of the fact the new technology as such and context seem to fit perfectly, the discovery of new contradictions led to a partial rejection. I could also say, the fate of an innovation can change, even after its usage has achieved the status of an ubiquitous item.

Following mainstream consumer theories, consumption patterns, differences in taste and related differentiations of lifestyle are rooted in processes of identification and the constitution of the consumers' social identity.²² However, in some contexts, this does not apply. This is the case for the refrigerator, because its rejection is not so much a question of patterns, tastes or lifestyles, but rather a consequence of new information.

On the basis of this example, the model of the individual who improves his/her way of living by the acquisition of new and improved consumer goods should be questioned. This model falsely assumes that the consumer is an autonomous and well informed actor. As shown, both conditions are not always present. An appropriate interpretation has to take into account potential errors of the consumer, his/her ignorance, and also his/her doubts about the consequences of an innovation.²³

The outcome of these reflections is the deconstruction of the idea that innovations always represent a driver for new forms of consumption and contribute to an improved standard of life. Such assumptions may be true in the framework of a consumerist ideology, and most probably in Steve Job's self-understanding. But the opposite may also apply for innovations: in the consumers' perspective, its practical uses are not always what they are expected to be. The fact that sometimes the unforeseen consequences emerge

21 Stender 1993; Wölfel 2009.

22 Bourdieu 1979.

23 Amartya Sen distinguishes between the possession of consumer goods and their actual function for the owner. Particularly in contexts of poverty and innovations, great differences in functions may appear (Sen 1987). In many African countries, wealthier people are able to buy powdered milk and use it in similar ways as it is used in Western countries.

However, in the hands of the poorer the function is different. If they can afford this luxury good at all, it has a quite different role. Instead of serving as a healthy food, it becomes a threat of life for the babies. The reason for this change is not the milk powder as such, but rather the water used to reconstitute it (James 2000). Only if the quality of the water is according to western standards, can the food be used without harm to the child.

only some time after the innovation and its adoption does not counter this argument if for example the new context leads to the abandonment of the novelty. The value of an innovation and the plausibility of its adoption depend on factors that are sometimes beyond the producers' control.

5 Innovation and lethargy

These interpretations lead directly to the third argument of my contribution. Much in line with the first and second argument, it intends to focus on the consumer who is also the user. It is these men and women on the streets and in their apartments who decide about the acceptance and the future role of any innovation.

The starting point for this argument is a case study from Lucy Suchman who worked for many years as an anthropologist at the Palo Alto Research Centre (PARC) for the Xerox Company.²⁴ Her case study deals with a particular model of a copier. At the time of its designing and production, it was naturally one of the most up-to-date models. Meanwhile the company already prepared to change its product range, steering away from copiers and focusing on computers and printers. The idea of designing this copier was to provide all the possibilities and features of a complex, fully-featured copier at a more affordable price. The innovation of this device was the recombination of existing features and a new target group of users. Up to that moment only available for professional printing shops, offices and copy-shops, the new model aimed to bring the features to non-professional users.

Thus, a technology initially only provided for professional users should now become more popular and used by a wider range of non-experts. However, the expectation to sell this highly functional device in great numbers did not become reality. Contrary to the company's expectations, the feedback of the customers reported about malfunctioning and difficulties with regular and rather simple copying tasks. Even worse, this model seemed to have the dubious renown of breaking down regularly and being difficult to handle.

This was the moment when the management asked the Palo Alto Research Centre for help. The meetings there centered around the question: What had gone wrong? Why didn't the customers recognize the new model's wide range of features? After all, this model represented the sum of all experiences of the market leader in the sector of conventional copiers at that time. In the following meetings, the engineers of the computer department presented a simple explanation: the integration of the different features had failed because the underlying concept was out of date. Only a central processing unit

24 Suchman 2005.

and a professional operating system – which means, basically, a computer – would be able to manage the new copiers’ complexity and bring the extended range of options of modern copying within users’ reach.

Suchman rejected this explanation. As an anthropologist, she insisted on proceeding to ethnographic research in order to understand the deficits of the current copying machines. As she found out, the basic problem was not so much the complexity as such, but merely the new range of potential users, who found this copier at first sight highly appealing. These people, who had little or no experience with copying machines, were confronted with buttons and switches of a highly complex model. Not having any experience with similar devices, they were simply not in a position to feel competent about the new copier. It was not possible for these untrained users to establish a personal relationship with the new model. Most of the features had no relevance for them, but the everyday routines of copying had become too complicated to proceed without problems. Mistakes in dealing with the machine were the consequence, and, subsequently, its malfunction.

Following her research, Suchman suggested a particular solution for the problem that turned out to be an important innovation. She focused not so much on the technology as such, but on the perceived problems of communicating technologies. Her suggestion was the following: she recommended that the factory department give the most relevant buttons a green color. What does such a color code mean? This modification left the technology unchanged, only the communication of the technology changed. The first priority of this communication principle was to separate the most important functions from all other potential modes of copying. This new strategy of ‘self-explanatory’ user interfaces made it possible for non-professionals to perceive the device as something safely controllable.

6 How innovations become *affiliative objects*

There are three things to be learned from this case study: the first concerns the biased evaluation of the experts. Xerox had already made the decision to abandon the conventional copying technology, and the company trusted the experts’ opinion too much. The producer perspective dominated over any other way to look at the things and reached a dead end. The engineers stated that the immanent shortcomings of the old system were too fundamental to find a remedy for it. Today we know that this technological explanation was faulty. Even after that episode, conventional copiers were successful. We further know that the green button has widely diffused and is now a standard feature on most copiers.

Secondly, we can derive from this an argument about innovation more generally. The success of an innovation is not just a question of the creation, recombination and implementation of new technologies. Making plans and just applying them is hardly ever sufficient.²⁵ Innovation requires a successful communication of the novelty. Only by communication is it possible for users to perceive themselves as competent actors in dealing with technology. The simple presence of the innovation does not mean its acceptance, not even when consumers are willing to use these things.²⁶ This particular understanding is the key to the concept of *affiliative objects*, presented by Suchman a few years later.²⁷ With this term, she stresses the relevance of the users' capacity to create an affiliation through successful and repeated use as a prerequisite for adopting the innovation.

As explained in more detail in an earlier publication, Suchman considers "innovations" as "critical projects".²⁸ In this publication she also uses case studies to make her ideas clear. One of the case studies is the transformation of Xerox from producing conventional copiers to the marketing of computers and printers. The second case study concerns another company in the insurance sector that shifted from individual talk in customer support to internet-based information for clients.

In both studies, the innovation as such is not the problem. It is rather the perception of those men and women who reject the new technology or the new structure, and for whom the innovation was meant to provide an increase in efficiency and thereby an improvement of their work. The innovations in question only achieve the status of an *affiliative object* if the changed structures of work have been adopted, or in the second case, if the regular use of a computer interface for internet-based customer support has been accepted. The innovation is a "critical project" as long as there is no evidence that the users perceive the new structure and the new devices as an improvement.

Steve Jobs understood this very well when he insisted on presenting Apple's innovations himself. It may be banal to be on stage with jeans and a black jumper while holding a tiny screen in one's hand, but this precisely communicates the aura of a new object, of 'being controllable', which is important for the success of an innovation. It is of little matter how the engineers define the innovative character of any of Apple's new devices as long as Jobs manages to convince his clients of his innovation as an improvement.

I do not intend to present a plea in favor of Apple or the ideology of consumerism in general. And I do not believe that the quality of an innovation is a question of self-promotion of CEOs or of marketing. Instead, my argument critically addresses claims of the innovative character of a particular object. It has become clear that the claim of such properties is of quite little relevance. It is not so much the innovation as the capacity to

25 Suchman 1987.

26 Suchman and Bishop 2000.

27 Suchman 2005.

28 Suchman and Bishop 2000.

become an *affiliative object* that decides about the success of an innovation. Only if people become thoroughly acquainted with new things is innovation successful. Innovations do not occur as ‘ready-mades;’ they have to go through a process of familiarization or appropriation in order to be successful.²⁹ Appropriated objects very often are appreciated for their multipurpose character and not so much for one specific innovation.³⁰

The concept of the *affiliative object* refers to the necessity for any innovation to be manageable. The hesitating user has to be convinced and the ignorant customer needs to understand the new object’s properties. Otherwise the innovation will not succeed, it will not even be acknowledged as such. Ethnographic observation makes clear that many new objects have the quality of being ambivalent at first. It is only after some time of dealing with it that users may overcome the “trickiness of the improved object,” as Adolf Muschg has aptly formulated some thirty years ago.³¹ And, only after these initial steps does Adorno’s “authority of the new” become a reality.

7 Conclusion

The three arguments of this article shall be combined and interpreted: the first argument is about the intimidating character of the new and its authority, which may reach far beyond the evaluation of the single innovative object. It rather pertains to the material possessions as a whole. The second argument intends to deconstruct the link between innovation and needs or desires. In contrast to dominant discourse, many innovations require the generation of corresponding needs prior to their acceptance. In the terminology of the current understanding of needs and innovations, the creation of new desires happens through ‘social learning.’ However, the creation of desires is only one side of the process, as other information can lead to an ambivalent evaluation of innovations. The third argument is based on Suchman’s case studies and deals with reluctance and hesitation as factors against innovation. More precisely, it is not the inertia of the things themselves, but the preference of the user to continue dealing with things which are well known. Dealing with things and understanding new objects are matters of communication. Suchman’s notion of *affiliative objects* steps beyond the engineers’ claim of an objectivity of innovations and focuses on the interface between user and technology. The degree of novelty does not decide the fate of innovations, but the experiences of the user or owner.

The production of ideology and, following from it, the logic of consumer societies tend to overestimate the isolated ‘innovative technology’ and to focus on the identifi-

29 Suchman, Orr, and Trigg 1999.

30 Gronow and Warde 2001, 222.

31 Muschg 1981.

able newness of a particular object. In contrast to this dominant thinking, I claim that a closer look at material possessions as a whole can contribute substantially to understanding the impact of new things. Those things in inertia, sometimes devalued through the presence of the new, teach more about the impact of an innovation than the new object itself. Furthermore, it is a shortcoming to think that users of new objects have all relevant innovation available from the very beginning. As shown with the example of the refrigerator, information is fragmented. Very often, additional knowledge about the consequences comes up with considerable delay after the adoption.

Then it may lead to a more ambivalent evaluation. Finally, innovation depends on communication. The differing knowledge of the users may lead to the rejection of innovations.

In short, my three core arguments are the following:

1. The authority of the new is questionable. This is perceivable through the devaluation of existing material possessions and the changing of their contexts.
2. The ascribed properties of an innovation do not constitute full information. People need more time and experience to fully understand an innovation.
3. The perception and acceptance of innovations depend on communication. Not the objective properties, but the potential for a bonding between innovative object and humans decide about its adoption.

Production ideology and consumerist object fetishism constitute a powerful bias in current thinking, upholding the single object as a main criterion of innovation.³² Meanwhile, the roles of those things that remain inert, without changing, are underestimated.

On a global scale, Marshall Sahlins has pointed to this problem by speaking about “cosmologies of capitalism”.³³ Following his argument, it is a consequence of the capitalist worldview that Westerners, wherever they arrive, believe not only to be superior, but also to bring along desirable goods, i.e. innovations. The classical moment of the expansion of capitalism is the scene of Europeans arriving on a remote island. Inevitably it is followed by narratives about the natives’ appreciation of goods initially handed over as gifts.

The natives’ quasi-prescribed role is to admire the wondrous things from the West and subsequently their readiness to trade in order to acquire as many of the new goods as possible. Sahlins insists that this supposed overwhelming appreciation of new things, i.e. innovation, is just an ideologically biased image, influenced by the core feature of the cosmology of capitalism, which is the idea of the superiority of the new. The capitalists’

32 Attfield 1999.

33 Sahlins 1988.

cosmology denies the existence of alternative approaches to new things; it also denies the fact that all cultures have their own cosmology, and many of them resist the allure of innovations.³⁴ By assuming that all people will appreciate their products, the BoP-Innovations are a particular example for present-day denial of culture.

In conclusion, it is of particular relevance not to understand my thoughts about innovation as arguments relevant only for present times. On the contrary, I am dealing with questions that also matter for archaeologists. More specifically, in the context of the ‘diffusion of innovations’ it is important to ask how people perceive a novelty and how their evaluation of material possessions changes with the adoption or rejection of the new.

In a similar vein Joanna Sofaer-Derevenski and Marie Louise Stig Sorensen reflect about innovations at the end of the Neolithic age.³⁵ As these authors argue, the arrival of the first metals cannot be described just by looking at an innovation and new objects. Of equal importance is the investigation of changing social practices and also of resistance. Therefore it is not the male warrior alone who is adopting the new metal weapons: there are more complex issues of re-evaluation of objects and re-organization of social structures. The increasing number of different forms of weapons at that time is not just an outcome of innovation, but also an expression of social and political competence to negotiate the meaning of the new. Against the background of a considerable number of inert objects in everyone’s possession, particular forms of embodiment in the sphere of social meaning are the precondition for innovations.

There is no reality of social relationships in the world beyond the world of the material and beyond the things that people use, share, or deny to share. Things are relevant in order to make relations visible, and they are the key to the production of tradition.³⁶ Therefore new things are never just a question of innovation but merely an outcome of negotiations. The success of an innovation depends on the re-contextualization of the new object in the environment of the things already present, which are not always ready to change their meaning just because the new has arrived.

34 Sahlins gives some examples for the resistance against innovations. A case in point are the Chinese during the Manchu Era, where the Europeans hardly found a product that attracted the Chinese traders’ interest (Sahlins 1988, 6–11). A similar experience was made by British and American traders

in Hawaii, where they intended to buy sandalwood, but did not find anything to offer that attracted the interest of the local population (Sahlins 1988, 28–36).

35 Sofaer-Derevenski and Sorensen 2002.

36 Geismar and Horst 2004.

8 Summary

Consumer societies have a specific relationship to innovation. Novelties are positioned in an ideologically based framework that emphasizes the essential character of any new feature in the latest innovation. This essentialism of the novelties urges people to acknowledge an assumed 'need' for them and consequently praise them. The need for innovative technologies, life-styles and fashion is based on a widely internalized reversal of the relationship between 'needs' and 'motives'. The seemingly universal basic or primary needs are not of any relevance anymore; they are rather replaced by the perception the individual's desire for the new. Basic needs are marginalized, basic needs are relevant only in the context of other societies, which are the poor and the underdeveloped. Consumption in consumer societies is defined by the elevation of innovation and the contempt for the rest of the material world.

The implicit assumption about the consumers' self-understanding relates to his interest in the new and his willingness to be informed about innovations. Based on some examples, the shortcomings of such assumptions are clear. A careful ethnography of everyday dealings with technology and innovation shows that in high frequency routines the embedding of a technology and the expectation of reliable handling are the dominant factors for their appreciation. The readiness 'to learn new things' is limited, and often the users of new devices appear ignorant because they do not exploit the full range of their possibilities.

It can be concluded that innovation does not so much depend on the degree of novelty and of its technical advantages, but rather on the context in which it occurs. Innovation requires embedding, including the tendency of many users to critically evaluate subjective advantages and then consider a slow adaptation.

Following Marshall Sahlins, the disregard for the unchanging and the appraisal of the new is a specific expression of a capitalist cosmology. A comparative perspective sheds light on examples of societies in which the interest in innovations has been low in the moment of contact with Europeans. The disinterest in western innovations was particularly disappointing for the colonizers who believed they could convince the people on other continents of the superiority of the West by presenting innovative items or fashionable gadgets.

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