

“RESPONSIBILITY BEYOND GROWTH:
A CASE FOR RESPONSIBLE STAGNATION”
BY S. DE SAILLE, F. MEDVECKY,
M. VAN OUDHEUSDEN, K. ALBERTSON,
E. AMANATIDOU, T. BIRABI, M. PANSERA

JONATHAN HANKINS
Giannino Bassetti Foundation
jonnybankins@hotmail.com

How would Responsible Innovation (RI) develop if it could be uncoupled from its aim to drive economic growth? Could such a conceptual development be conceived as Responsible Stagnation (RS)? The authors of *Responsibility Beyond Growth* (Bristol University Press, 2020) argue for the opening of such a conceptual space, not (only) as a critique of current RI developments, but in order to develop a complementary approach that they feel would lead to just and more efficient innovation, better equipped to achieve the goal of addressing environmental issues and collective quality of life. Such an aim is based upon another fundamental question found running through this book: What is the economy for if it doesn't work to the advantage of the general population or the innovation system itself? All of these questions appear linked, as the relationship between innovation and the economy can negatively affect what the authors see as the greater goal of responsible innovation – working towards a just and sustainable global economy.

This publication is meant as a starting point on such a path. In the preface, the ensuing collaborative work is compared to a form of jazz, sometimes “discordant” but always paying reference to standards, melody and underlying chord sequence. The conse-

ISSN 2283-7949
GLOCALISM: JOURNAL OF CULTURE, POLITICS AND INNOVATION
2021, 1, DOI: 10.12893/gjcpi.2021.1.3
Published online by "Globus et Locus" at <https://glocalismjournal.org>



Some rights reserved

quences laid out of the paradigm shift proposed, a move from responsibility framed in economic terms to one framed in values of economic and social justice, seem both politically as well as economically immense. But as Miles Davis noted, “Jazz is the big brother of Revolution. Revolution follows it around”.

Jazz can only be created if all of those involved share an understanding of, and a shared relationship to the standards upon which to build. The shared terminology and standards at play in this book come from the field of political economy, representing a dialogue between STS scholars and economists around the social shaping of technology that sees technology as neither economically nor socially neutral.

Part 1 opens with an exploration into the relationship between RI and economic growth (as measured by GDP), in relation to the EU promoting innovation as an economic driver through its own particular form of RI (RRI), with the RI model described and used throughout the text very much resembling that of RRI. The authors question RI’s positioning as an agent of economic growth by doing the following: showing which types of questions will or will not be asked in subsuming responsibility and innovation under the economy, arguing how responsibility and innovation are antithetical to one another in an economic growth framework, interrogating the efficacy, funding policies and choices of RI, as well as asking what constitutes innovation itself. Specifically, the authors raise the paradoxical question of whether an innovation can be responsible within this framework if it does not (at least) aim at growth creation.

The book calls for an investigation into which results the responsible innovation “project” might achieve if responsibility were framed through explicit values of social justice, rather than in economic terms. As any *afficionado* knows, jazz is based on innovation that moves in relation to the standard, and the same can be said of this book. The authors move to envisaging a model for a new perspective grounded in an ethics of care that could supplement and improve current RI approaches by reconstructing its aims and practices from a perspective that is growth agnostic (a-growth).

The authors then ask three fundamental questions: How do we innovate responsibly in secularly stagnant economies? Is it possible to take an a-growth approach to innovation? Under which circumstances might this constitute a crucial part of the RI matrix?

The matrix in question (described in Chapter 1) has innovation and stagnation in opposition on the vertical axis, and responsibility and irresponsibility on the horizontal. The matrix has four quadrants, two for innovation (responsible and irresponsible) and two for stagnation (responsible and irresponsible). The book addresses the fourth quadrant of responsible stagnation. The matrix demonstrates a fundamental argument for the book, that as long as innovation is framed positively in terms of growth, stagnation will always be seen as negative, but if innovation can be seen as bringing something novel into the social sphere – that is, rethinking innovation – stagnation will become “improbable”.

The schematic leads nicely into Part 2, and the question of “what is wrong with innovation and growth?”. The tension between improvisation and adherence to the core drives jazz. In this written composition, the authors build tension through their analysis of the interplay of innovation practices and growth – interplay that excludes voices within the creative process: the scientization of innovation excludes non-experts, while its coupling to free-market driven economic growth erodes equality and excludes a broad range of voices and considerations. The authors then move on to addressing issues of aim and purpose. Is the jazz musician’s aim to entertain, to make a living, to push the boundaries of the field, or can it be all three? Could we ask the same questions of businesses, innovators and funding bodies, regardless of scale and field?

Part 3 addresses such questions, and is dedicated to responsible stagnation and the real world. The lead-in proposes an investigation into the underlying values of RS, described as care-oriented and slower reasoning. The authors call for critical attention to be paid to the whys, whos and hows of participation and to negating the confrontation between innovation and responsibility inherent in the paradigm of economic growth. The progression to the broad topic of

innovation for social seeds is seamless, with the authors raising the criticism that some well-known forms of social-needs innovation (such as frugal innovation) are also framed within a profitmaking context that merely offers technical fixes rather than system change and does not address real political shortcomings, namely, poverty. Possible advantages and drawbacks of various forms of social innovation (including society in control innovation) are then described and discussed, before the authors move on to address the plurality of technology and innovation in the Global South, focusing on three main points for discussion: Innovation discourses and political relationalities between South and North; how exportable RRI is in its current form (shaped on Western history); the importance of highlighting the need to reformulate ideas of responsibility to incorporate cultural diversity. After focusing on small-scale businesses, Part 3 closes with a focus on challenges facing stakeholder dichotomy.

In music as in business there are always those who refuse to “sell out”. These players participate to create, or to experiment, not only to make a living. These are questions of purpose and goal which are fundamental to understanding the book and its message: can responsibility in innovation be framed in terms of social benefit rather than in economic terms? Which forms and mechanisms would be suitable for such an undertaking? The authors offer the legal framework that underpins the Benefit Corporation (BC) model as a starting point, with several examples offered of companies whose business models might show similarities to an RS approach, including Ben & Jerry’s ice cream and Patagonia.

The BC model and legal framework is built upon three pillars that are seen as reflecting the values of RS. *a)* Purpose: a sustainable commitment to create public benefit and value; *b)* accountability: a long-term commitment to considering the company’s impact on society and the environment; *c)* transparency: obligation to report their progress in these aims to shareholders and the wider public.

The book moves on to broader discussion highlighting practices that are growth-agnostic and responsible, some of which may lead to de-growth but others not. The authors then launch into Part

4 (the conclusion) which is dedicated to Responsibility in the fourth quadrant of the responsibility matrix described earlier (that of Responsible Stagnation).

The conclusion offers further discussion of the scope of RS with a succinct summary of the question that drives the book: “how can we balance a necessary reduction in material consumption with a world in which we can all afford to live and prosper?”.

The book is refreshing as it is very easy to read, and like all good jazz has a great feel and tight constructions. It is aimed at a broad audience base, is not overladen with references or jargon and does not require specialized knowledge to follow. It is very much a work-in-progress, a call for the opening of a discussion space and raises a lot more questions than offers answers, and whose aim was not to offer a pre-prepared framework for implementation but to invite the co-construction of one approach.

The political implications of the RS argument are not hidden, as to accept the proposal for a move towards RS as presented here implies acceptance that current innovation governance practices need to be overhauled if they are to move towards what we might describe as a broader understanding of responsibility to social needs, and away from GDP creation as their primary goal. According to the authors, the current (GDP based) aims run the risk of leading the entire system into a form of “moral overload” and self-conflict, while entire thought and innovation processes may be excluded.

Borrowing some critique, ideas and terms from feminist and care ethics scholars such as Donna Haraway and Lynn Randolf, the book leads me to question whether innovation should aim to be response-able rather than responsible. If we understand “response-able” as having the ability to respond, either to situations, others, or in the case of innovation to resolving grand challenges and improving lives, could a form of growth agnostic response-able innovation fulfil the European Commission’s RRI criteria if GDP growth aims were excluded? The de-coupling of innovation from economic terminology and processes may open up possibilities for different kinds of innovative responses, responses that emerge

within context and are neither predeterminable nor necessarily growth producing. A move towards the ideas and legal frameworks within the Benefit Corporation model might also make Open Science policies easier to implement and help in promoting open collaboration across and within fields.

The concept of RI has come to be dominated and guided by the EU promoted RRI model, systematized and standardized in aims and processes, and I sometimes had the impression that the authors were describing this conception as opposed to the broader interpretation of possibilities that seemed to prevail a decade ago (and which survive today in the form of bottom-up and de-facto RI, poiesis-intensive RI and others). Although I find this interpretation a little bit forced it does suit their argument.

If we take this widely accepted form of RRI and its promotion as an innovation policy as our starting point however, the book draws me into asking an uncomfortable question that recurs through the text like a refrain: could the RI model adopted by the European Union in its RRI form be seen as an attempted technical fix, based on standards that don't suit its style? And if so, could the benefit corporation ideas find their way into the model and influence, replace, or sit alongside the GDP growth model without also being a technical solution?

Bravi. Encore.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This review is an extended version of Jonathan Hankins (2021), *Responsibility beyond growth. A case for responsible stagnation*, in "Journal of Responsible Innovation" (doi: 10.1080/23299460.2021.1893121) distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License. The author is indebted to Monamie Bhadra Haines for her input and suggestions made during work on this extended review.