

De Saille Stevienna, Medvecky Fabien, van Oudheusden Michiel, Albertson Kevin, Amanatidou Effie, Birabi Timothy and Pansera Mario (2020) Responsibility Beyond Growth: A Case for Responsible Stagnation. Bristol: Bristol University Press. 184 Pages. ISBN: 978-1529208177

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Is it possible to innovate in a socially and environmentally responsible manner within an innovation-for-economic-growth paradigm? This question – which, probably unsurprisingly, the authors at least partially answer with ‘no’ – sits at the heart of the book by Stevienna de Saille and her colleagues from the *Fourth Quadrant Research Network on Responsible Stagnation*. At a time when has it seemed long impossible to ignore our pressing environmental crises, and when the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated global socio-economic inequalities even further, the book represents a highly topical intervention in discussions surrounding Responsible (Research and) Innovation. Questioning the growth paradigm in which these notions are embedded, the book calls for a more fundamental engagement with what it means to innovate responsibly, beyond only enhancing processes of public participation.

The central notion around which the book evolves is that of Responsible Stagnation (RS) – representing the Fourth Quadrant of the Matrix of Responsible Innovation (Guston, 2015), which respectively pairs ‘responsibility’ and ‘irresponsibility’ with ‘innovation’ and ‘stagnation’. As the authors highlight, RS should however not be understood as an antithesis to innovation, novelty, or creativity. Instead, the book encourages to re-think limited notions of for-market-innovation and to adopt a broader concept of innovation as circulation-of-novelty.

As outlined in the introduction by Stevienna de Saille, the authors see RS as characterised by five main principles: (1) being a “pool of great ideas” and (2) a “particular configuration for change” in which (3) “ethics matters”. Moreover, they describe RS as advocating an approach of (4) “restraint” and of (5) “living gently” – with the earth as well as those that inhabit it. As is already apparent from this characterisation, and something the authors themselves note, the concept of RS is at times not entirely clearly circumscribed and it represents less of a policy framework or a distinct set of propositions but should be understood as an “intellectual space” that initiates conversation in a certain direction.

This intellectual space is laid out in the book as an amalgam of perspectives, reflecting the authors’ various disciplinary backgrounds. The second part of the book asks “What is wrong with innovation and growth?”. In Chapter 2, Michiel van Oudheusden describes the background to the introduction of the RRI concept in EU policy discourse. He outlines how RRI has emerged in continuation of attempts to include publics in processes of decision making about research and innovation trajectories. As he notes, such an approach is certainly welcome since it does to some extent challenge simplistic linear innovation models; yet, being embedded in an innovation-for-growth paradigm, he sees it as unlikely that RRI will “re-orient STI towards meeting pressing

societal challenges and towards engaging with the real needs of broader segments of society" (p.33).

In Chapter 3 Kevin Albertson describes why the authors see for-market-innovation within a growth paradigm as unfit to address social and ecological challenges. Albertson first refutes the assumption that in a free market economy the fruits of innovation will equally benefit everybody, and he illustrates how markets tend to re-inforce socio-economic inequalities and create negative externalities, e.g. in environmental terms. Second, he provides a critique of GDP as the major indicator of economic well-being, highlighting how it is in many ways an inadequate measure for capturing actual prosperity. Albertson however also notes that RS does not aim to do away with markets, for-market-innovation and even economic growth altogether. Rather, RS advocates an a-growth approach that is agnostic towards growth but aims to overcome the sole focus on for-market-innovation and economic growth as measured by GDP.

The book continues by laying out how their alternative, RS, could play out "in the real world" (p.55). In chapter 4 Fabien Medvecky sketches what it would mean to put responsibility instead of growth centre stage in thinking about innovation. Adopting an ethics of care perspective, Medvecky highlights that RS would entail slowing down processes of deliberation to allow all voices to be heard, but also to adopt a more relational perspective focusing on interdependency, embeddedness, and plurality.

In Chapter 5, Effie Amanatidou and George Gritzas turn to the question of how innovation for social needs, instead of innovation primarily aimed at growth, could take shape in practice. After critically reviewing several alternative innovation models such as "frugal, reverse, Jugaad and so on" (p.77), the authors suggest a "Society in Control" notion of innovation and sketch how ethically responsible social innovation could look like both within as well as outside of markets.

Subsequently, Mario Pansera, Keren Naa Abeka Arthus, Andrea Jiminez and Poonam Pandey explore what RS would imply in a global perspective, for different communities in the Global South and the Global North. The authors sketch

how innovation has historically been entangled with post-colonial development discourses in highly problematic ways. As they emphasise, also R(R)I and RS are concepts that stem from the Global North and carry distinct notions of participation and responsibility that might not necessarily be feasible in different local contexts. The authors thus caution against a universalistic framing of RS, arguing that it must necessarily mean different things in different contexts and provide a space in which a plurality of ways of knowing and innovating can thrive.

Timothy Birabi, in chapter 7, deals with "challenges facing willing firms" (p.111) – laying out the mechanisms that currently often uphold a dichotomy between the interests of share- and stakeholders and thus make it structurally difficult for firms to innovate in ways that are actually responsible towards society and environment, if this does not maximise investment returns. He then sketches alternatives to this model and presents examples of firms that the authors see as instances of responsible for-market-innovation. Finally, Stevienna de Saille, Fabien Medvecky, and Michiel van Oudheusden conclude the book by recapitulating the contribution of RS to discussions about R(R)I.

Through this amalgam of perspectives, the book offers a multifaceted encouragement to fundamentally reconsider what it means to innovate responsibly. The overall program of the book is thus very valuable. However, it seems that the notion of RS might at times not be an ideal descriptor for the authors' suggestions. The authors see RS as attaching the "fourth wheel" (p.19) back to the cart of innovation – yet, one may ask whether the program is not actually better described as widening and re-thinking the scope of responsible innovation altogether, also since the notion of RS is throughout the book used in a multitude of ways that often depart quite a lot from what one may associate with the term stagnation.

Furthermore, in providing such a broad program, the book leaves several questions to the reader, such as how to rethink the role of the state in a novel innovation paradigm, how to determine a fruitful balance and interaction between innovation for and outside of markets,

and, most importantly, what sort of macroeconomic paradigm would be required to sustain all this. While it is explicitly not the authors' aim to provide a comprehensive discussion of such questions, it is nevertheless surprising that an engagement with adjacent currents of thought in which such questions are debated, such as post-or degrowth, is mostly absent from the book. This leads to the volume being more interesting for an audience not yet too familiar with growth-critical discussions. The book, though, will be highly relevant to scholars of STS and critical innovation studies, especially those concerned with R(R)I and interested in fresh perspectives on the subject of socially and environmentally just innovation. It may also be appealing to a wider audience interested in such questions since it introduces concepts and ideas from various fields in an accessible manner.

Lastly, I am left wondering whether the a-growth perspective the authors adopt, though

being potentially attractive because it is more acceptable to a wider audience, is not partially inconsistent. As the authors themselves note, living and innovating responsibly within planetary boundaries will require a "necessary reduction in material consumption" (p.134). As highlighted elsewhere (see e.g. Hickel and Kallis, 2020; van den Bergh and Kallis, 2012), if one does not believe that a decoupling of economic growth from environmental pressures is possible, it follows that some sort of economic downscaling will be required, thus necessitating more than simply an agnostic approach to economic growth.

While this is a discussion that, I believe, will stay with us in the future, I do see the book a very useful and relevant starting point for making growth-critical debates more prominent within STS and adjacent fields, where such voices seem to have been until now rather silent.

References

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