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Towards a Political Concept of Innovation: A Response to the Call of Strong RI

Throughout recent years, the concept of Responsible Innovation (RI) has occupied a central place in the discourse on science and technology. In theory, RI prevails as an ongoing attempt to steer innovation processes towards societally desirable outcomes, particularly in response to normative objectives such as sustainable development (von Schomberg 2019). A common framework of RI proposes that to innovate responsibly requires a permanent commitment to be anticipatory, reflective, inclusively deliberative, and responsive (Owen et al. 2012). Other visions of RI focus on overlapping action points such as public engagement, open access, gender equality, science education, ethics, and governance (European Commission 2015).

In practice, however, RI is applied to a widely presupposed concept of technological innovation and commercialized innovation, thereby adhering to an intrinsic relation between technology and the market (von Schomberg & Blok 2019). RI in the form of such an application can also be considered as weak RI, because its societal purpose is summoned to the overarching pursuit of technological and economic progress. In this respect, RI primarily serves the private sphere and is frequently labeled as conservative, superficial, and a justification for doing business as usual. Conversely, strong RI articulates the political ambition to exceed the privatization wave and tackle global challenges concerning, for example, climate change and food security. In this respect, RI primarily aims to contribute to the public sphere and promises to be revolutionary, profound, and transformative.

In order to do justice to its promise, strong RI is in need of an alternative concept of innovation that reflects its ambition to address the public good. The political nature of this ambition, along with the political origins of the concept of innovation (Cf. Godin 2015), suggests that we should inquire into a political concept of innovation. Despite the longstanding call to democratize innovation processes (Cf. Owen et al 2012), questions about the politics in and of innovation are largely ignored (Van Oudheusden 2014). What does a political concept of innovation consist of? How does a political concept of innovation position itself in relation to the market? To what extent does a political concept of innovation alter the meaning of the dimensions of anticipation, reflection, inclusion, and responsiveness?

Against this background, this paper poses the following research question: What is a political concept of innovation and how does it genuinely contribute to the societal purpose of RI? We find particular inspiration in the work of Hannah Arendt, one of the most influential political philosophers of the twentieth century. Her account of the private sphere and the public sphere, along with her notion of natality, provides us with key insights to develop a political concept of innovation, ultimately responding to the call of strong RI.