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## COMMENT: Don't imitate: Innovate!

James Campbell

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RECENTLY Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak was quoted in the New Straits Times that, the, “adoption of an innovative mindset will provide impetus for new wealth creation, employment and societal advancement” (see: “Keep up push for innovation” at <http://www.nst.com.my/nst/articles/2najimid/Article/#ixzz1LSYd2f79>).

Prime Minister Najib went on to point out that “the nation was able to stay competitive, resilient and dynamic” because “we have kept on tweaking processes and systems, and enhancing services and products to be ahead of the pack” (see: “Keep up push for innovation” at <http://www.nst.com.my/nst/articles/2najimid/Article/#ixzz1LSk3drhJ>).

When we think about innovation and creativity, we usually don't think that it can be found in people who simply imitate or copy from others.

Simple imitation without critical appraisal is as the late Syed Hussein Alatas argues a sign of a captive mind. According to Alatas:

- “A captive mind is the product of higher institutions, of learning, either at home or abroad, whose way of thinking is dominated by Western thought in an imitative and uncritical manner.”
- “A captive mind is uncreative and incapable of raising original problems.”
- “It is incapable of devising an analytical method independent of current stereotypes.”
- “It is incapable of separating the particular from the universal in science and thereby properly adapting the universally valid corpus of scientific knowledge to the particular local situations.”
- “It is fragmented in outlook.”
- “It is alienated from the major issues of society.”
- “It is alienated from its own national tradition, if it exists, in the field of its intellectual pursuit.”
- “It is unconscious of: its own captivity and the, conditioning factors making it what it is.”
- “It is not amenable to an adequate quantitative analysis but it can be studied by empirical observation.”
- “It is a result of the Western dominance over the rest of the world.” (S. H. Alatas. Continuing Debate: The Captive Mind and Creative Development, International Social Sciences Journal, XXVI: 691-700, 1974)

I have discussed the seminal work of Syed Hussein Alatas in several previous columns and the seminal and foundational relevance of his work in challenging mental captivity seems to me to be obvious in relationship to discussions of creativity and innovation. I will return to his relevance to the argument in this column later.

However, what I want to focus on in this column is the observation that innovation and creativity can be found in “tweaking” and “enhancing”, and not only in creating something totally new from scratch.

Not all innovation is necessarily radically new or novel. Innovation It can also be incremental.

Understanding the diverse types of innovation and grasping how these different forms of innovation relate to institutional, cultural, political and social practices can help us avoid accepting a one size fits all idea of innovation which may, in fact, be representative of a particular set of practices and attributes from a particular cultural and historical setting.

One issue that policy makers and scholars need to consider is the extent to which innovation is depleted in situations where there are institutional conflicts and disincentives. These may stem from uneven and, at times, contradictory pressures and directions of differing institutions within a society.

Understanding the ways that institutions generate different incentives and disincentives for innovation may help us to avoid simply blaming individuals. We need a fuller and less “fragmented” view that oversimplifies or reduces the problems of lack of innovation always to the individual.

Institutional and social arrangements, habits and practices generate diverse and conflictive forms of incentives for innovation. Understanding the ways that institutions generate offer different and, at times, conflicting incentives and disincentives for innovation may help us to avoid simply blaming individuals

without recourse to a fuller and less “fragmented” view that oversimplifies or reduces the problems of lack of innovation to the individual.

Discussions about innovation should take account of history and the nature of institutions, and the habits and practices formed within them.

Innovation understood in reference to real institutions and the actually existing social relationships, habits and mores of its denizens represents an approach that challenges the “fragmented”, “stereotyped” and “alienated” approach that characterises a narrow individualistic and “market” driven approach to innovationcreativity.

This, actuarial, fragmented and deeply alienated and alienating approach to innovation is rooted in the individualism of neo-liberal economics.

Such an approach to understanding innovation which posits the creative individual entrepreneur as the key exemplar and locus classicus of innovation fails to grasp the diverse, specific and culturally important ways that innovation is formulated and generated in social, cultural and institutional contexts. Innovation is socially, culturally and institutionally embedded.

So what to make of the discussion above? The key idea seems to be that any discussion of creativity and innovation must be informed by an effort to challenge mimicry, to engage and understand the major issues and nature of the society under analysis. We need to develop a deep sense of the cultural and social nature of the complexity before us. In other words, basing an approach to analysis that is informed by an engagement with the arguments of Syed Hussein Alatas quoted above is as I have argued before provides an excellent start to tackling the problems of innovation. and creativity.

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