

Comments on “Social Science and Educational Innovation”

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Professor Schrag raises some very intriguing issues about the resistance to social innovations. I agree with the general thrust of the paper and many of the details, but, to use his own terms, will be contesting his "construal of the problem." I should note that my examples are taken not simply from education but more broadly, from "practical enterprises."

Schrag asserts that a key obstacle to the ability of social scientific inventions to revolutionize practice is their rejection by the communities of users for which the inventions are intended. Midway through the paper, he states that the resistance to Friedman's and Papert's inventions is to be understood in terms of the fact that they are "devices generated by, and tied to, distinctive normative visions and ideologies." I would say that it is not so much the *source* of these ideas that is crucial, but the nature of their impact on institutions and on competing normative visions of how these should be structured that is key. Of course, their generation is a good clue as to their potential impact.

Thus, it seems to me that certain social science innovations are more likely to face little resistance and be quickly assimilated if they are in consonance with a prevailing ideology. For example, the founders of the American Republic saw themselves as structuring the United States Government in terms of "the new science of politics." Alexander Hamilton makes this explicit in the ninth of *The Federalist Papers*. A second example is the rise and increasing reliance on public opinion polling for politics, marketing research, and much else. My third, and last example of a social innovation that has partial roots in social science, is the rise of "small groups," a rise that Robert Wuthnow analyzes in his recent *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community*. Wuthnow projects that "40 percent of the adult population of the United States claims to be involved in 'a small group that meets regularly and provides caring and support for those who participate in it.'"¹ He asserts that the

current strength of this movement is thus a function of the fact that it arises from two prevailing characteristics of American society. The fragmented lives that many of us lead provide an *incentive* to seek support in support groups. But the religious traditions...of American culture *legitimate* this quest by telling us that community is important, and...the way to find spirituality and transcendence.²

Perhaps social *science* inventions are more likely than natural science to meet with resistance. But these examples suggest to me that a broader canvas of proposed changes in American education is necessary. I would restate Schrag's insight about the key role of normative visions to be that, whether or not there is significant resistance is dependent on their degree of consonance with prevailing ideologies. This, I suspect, is true of any social innovation, from natural or social science.

I would blur the contrast between natural and social sciences suggested in the beginning of the paper in two ways: First, Schrag says that in interesting ways for *all* sciences, "the normative vision of the inventor is connected to the way they [sic] understand the world through their discipline." But in the case of the natural sciences the "battles" were fought by people like Galileo and Darwin; since then there has developed a general consonance between the visions of science held by many natural scientists and ideals of Western culture. Schrag makes a similar point in his conclusions concerning the acceptance of the normative view of medical research. Thus, today, particular inventions or technologies from the natural sciences are much less likely to encounter resistance than they once were. Of course, the disputes over creationism in the schools and alternative technologies such as acupuncture in medicine show, I believe, that this is only a relative, contingent dominance. Indeed, I would go beyond Schrag's point about it being "possible to *imagine* some people resisting the innovation" concerning fetal tissue; there is current, actual, serious resistance to fetal tissue research.³

Second, I would stress that much of natural science, like social science, relies on what Schrag calls "the ability of the inventor to construe a familiar problem in an unfamiliar way." But, for example, the Darwinian theory of natural selection and the geological theory of plate tectonics do not rely, as I see them, on a "reductionist strategy" of using an understanding of micro structures to alter our thinking. This strategy may be more likely to produce what we think of as technological devices, such as new AIDS treatments. But we can find previously unnoticed causal mechanisms without the reductionist strategy. The institution of division of powers in government in *The Federalist Papers* can be analyzed in such a fashion.

I want to close by stressing Schrag's closing point of the importance of not being locked into "a single normative vision," and add that we also need to develop better social means of dealing with technological changes, something better than either unthinking acceptance or uncritical resistance.

1. Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community*. (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 45.

2. Ibid., 31, (his emphasis).

3. See *The Hastings Center Report* 24, no. 6 (Nov.-Dec. 1994), (emphasis added).

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