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What's New Under the Sun?

The Pursuit of Novelty Past and Present

The pressure for innovation is all-pervasive nowadays. But how does innovation happen? One perspective is to consider how it was done in ancient Greece, which was conspicuous for its innovative accomplishments – the Greeks invented the alphabet, theatre, logic, democracy, science and more. In this article Armand D'Angour describes how his personal experiences of the pressure to innovate (in the worlds of music of business) eventually led to his book, *The Greeks and the New*, which offers useful lessons to today's innovators.

New media, new technology, new politics, new products and services, new fashions and designs – new, new, new. It seems as if the world is devoted to innovation and novelty. But what does 'innovation' really mean? And how does one set about innovating if one wishes to? Such questions can arouse a sense of perplexity. Innovation is something that often seems to happen around us rather than being something to which ordinary people can make a contribution. Nowadays, more than ever, innovation seems to require the use or cooption of increasingly sophisticated technologies. We are destined, apparently, to be the grateful or grumbling recipients of new smartphones, apps, and operating systems, new political movements, new digital wonders, new artistic events, new household amenities – novelty in every guise and form. And if we are academics, businessmen, managers, technicians, artists, the pressure to innovate – to produce something new in order to achieve success in our field – is ever-present.

But innovation is not only technological. In my personal experience, the pressure to innovate has been ever-present in the various different spheres of activity in which I have engaged over the past thirty years. As a professional

cellist in the 1980s, I was caught up in the new wave of innovative, supposedly more 'authentic', music-making led by instrumentalists including my brilliant teacher, the Dutch cellist Anner Bylsma.¹ Subsequently, as a businessman producing decorative tin packaging in a family company for a few years, I was startled by the constant demand from customers for 'new' products and designs, when existing products had not even been given time to reach the market. Finally, as an academic, I am surrounded by demands for new research strategies and funding initiatives, new course structures and administrative requirements, new evaluation methods and new terminologies. The pressure of the new seems to be a fact of life.

When I left business in 1994 to return to academic research into ancient Greek culture, I wanted to ask if one could make useful connections between the way in which 'novelty' has an impact on us today and the way it worked in the pre-technological ancient world. The period for investigation seemed to choose itself – Athens in the late fifth and early fourth centuries BCE, when much was perceived as being new and original in areas ranging from music and performance to law and religion. Equally importantly, there was more ample written evidence than for any other period for attitudes towards novelty in all these areas, largely thanks to large tracts of surviving Athenian comic drama, whose key author, Aristophanes, regularly reflects on contemporary changes and fashions. This well-documented fifty-year period (430-380 BCE) served for my doctoral dissertation. However, pressure to extend the investigation into new, less well-charted territory eventually led to the period under scrutiny being expanded to Archaic and Classical Greece as a whole, a period stretching from roughly the eighth to the fourth century BCE, which became the subject area of my book *The Greeks and the New* published in 2011.²

The Greeks and the New

The archaic and classical ages of Greece were centuries of remarkable and intense novelty and change, which must have impinged on many who lived through them. In the course of these few hundred years, Greeks found themselves faced by intellectual and cultural novelties of enormous and (though they were not to know it) lasting consequence. These novelties included the use and spread of the first true alphabet, the vehicle of Greek writings and (in adapted form) of Roman and subsequently all Western

thought; and the first democratic constitution founded by Kleisthenes in 507 BCE, which, short-lived as it was, exercised an enormous influence on political imagination in later centuries. In addition to these, the Greeks introduced to the world the first widespread monetized economy, the first truly lifelike statues, the first notions of mathematical proof, the first theatrical drama, the first attempts at empirical medicine, and new waves of thinking and experimentation in art and architecture, music and science, warfare and religion. Much of the time, contemporary responses to these have to be inferred through close readings of texts, both literary and material. The evidence is uneven, so in my book I chose to present a largely thematic rather than chronological account of ancient attitudes to and experiences of novelty and innovation. Thus I consider ancient responses to innovation in relation to such notions as multiplicity, radiance, artificiality, competition, youthfulness, and play – all still ideas connected to novelty and creativity.

The Greeks' accomplishments are sometimes spoken of by historians as 'the Greek miracle' and attributed to 'the Greek genius'. But the Greeks did not achieve their innovations by accident. They understood what innovation involved, and might even lay claim to having discovered it. They are the first ancient people known to have coined a word for it and to have written explicitly about the notion.³ So can ancient history help us to understand innovation in general? Can we apply the lessons and principles of the distant past to our own projects and feelings? One cannot make simple equivalences between the modern world and the ancient world, which operated on different lines and from very different perspectives. It would be unwise to suggest that ancient Greek ideas of innovation can be mapped straightforwardly on to ours. But what is not new is the interest and excitement, as well as the worry and anxiety, aroused by novelty; it is abundantly evident from ancient texts that ambivalence about newness existed in ancient times no less than it does today. To a large extent, in fact, when the term appears in ancient texts, the implication is that to innovate – something that means a challenge to or reversal of hallowed tradition – is a dangerous and disreputable activity: the terms *neōterismos* and *neōtera pragmata*, literally 'innovationism' and 'newer transactions', are the ancient Greek terms for political revolution (with negative connotations). Greece was a traditional society, and most of our evidence comes from the pens of elite observers of change, so it is not surprising that innovation is so often frowned upon. To innovate is to challenge the status quo, and that will be

uncomfortable for those who generally approve the status quo and stand to benefit from it.

The Promotion of the New: Music

Disapproval of the new is not universally found in ancient texts. When we read in the surviving lyrics of the hugely popular musician and performer Timotheus of Miletus, active towards the end of the fifth century BCE, 'I don't sing old music, my new songs are better!'⁴ we hear the voice of an authentic and defiant innovator in the field of music. Timotheus was said to have been a friend and associate of Euripides, the most avant-garde tragic dramatist of the day. Both seem to have made a point of trumpeting the advantages of doing very new and original things in the sphere of music and poetry.⁵ It is an important aspect of innovation that those who engage in it must do so with at least some positive intent; and it may be easier to promote innovation in an area such as music, where arguably there is less at stake in innovating than there is in, say, politics and religion. In the particular sphere of music, moreover, the notion that one needs to produce new songs – or even new kinds of music – goes back a long way in Greek culture, so that it might even be said that music inspired a continuous 'tradition of innovation' in ancient Greece. There is a clear indication of a positive attitude to musical innovation as far back as Homer's *Odyssey*, an epic song created in the eighth century BCE.

The *Odyssey* begins with a scene in the palace of Ithaca, and depicts a bard, Phemius, singing to the assembled nobles about the aftermath of the Trojan War. The subject of his song-within-the-song is the adventures undergone by the Greek warriors returning from Troy to their homes in Greece – such things as the shipwrecks and disasters, the dangers and setbacks that Odysseus himself was said to have encountered. However, at this early point in the story, Odysseus himself has not returned to his home in Ithaca, but has been absent for some twenty years. His faithful wife Penelope intervenes to stop the bard singing the song of the heroes' return because, she says, 'it always tears my heart', given that she has no idea whether her beloved husband is already long dead or whether she is entitled to hope that he will return. At this juncture, Telemachus, the twenty-year old son of Penelope and Odysseus, brusquely intervenes. 'Leave the bard to sing as he wishes', he countermands her. 'The song that attracts most praise is always the newest one that the audience hears!'⁶

Such was Homer's authority in Greek culture that the implications of this line became the topic of regular debate and discussion in subsequent centuries. It was a rallying cry for musicians such as Timotheus, who sought to present their own work as attracting the implicit approval of a bard no less than Homer, the greatest poet-composer of the Greeks. The philosopher Plato was alarmed at the way the musicians of his day laid claim to Homer's authority. They had in his view perverted the traditional nature of music; they had expanded its range of melody and rhythm, added in all sorts of disreputable sounds and ideas, and appealed to the lowest sensationalist and sexual urges of their listeners. They had, in effect, created an ancient counterpart to pop music. While their songs broke free of classical canons of form and expression, they were popular at all levels of society. Plato argued in his *Republic* that Telemachus' words in Homer's *Odyssey* should be taken to refer only to 'new songs', not to new *types* of song. New types of music, the philosopher warned (anticipating similar criticisms levelled at popular music, some millennia later, by the German sociologist Theodor Adorno),⁷ must be handled with great care, as they risked disrupting social stability.

New and Old

One key principle that emerges from the study of ancient innovation is that the new builds on the old. Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as 'radical innovation' i.e. novelty that has no roots in or connections to the past: all innovation is an adaptation of something that already exists. As the Greek philosopher Parmenides (fifth century BCE) argued, 'Nothing comes from nothing', logically, we cannot have any understanding or connection to something that is wholly detached from our prior experience.⁸ The corollary is that, if one wishes to innovate, one must inquire into the background against which one seeks to produce something new – a clear endorsement of the importance of education. It is not surprising that the period of the Greeks' most notable attempts at innovation, the fifth century BCE, coincided with the rise of schools, reading, and forms of secondary education. An educated populace is better placed to know what already exists against which they might seek to innovate. But if all novelty depends on the past, does that mean that 'there's nothing new under the sun'? No. This evocative expression, made famous by the biblical book of *Ecclesiastes*, derives from the thoughts of early Greek philosophers such as Pythagoras, who believed that the world followed recurrent great cycles of destruction and rebirth.

But even these thinkers did not rule out the possibility that within each 'great cycle' (said by some to number 10,800 years), all kinds of perceived innovation might take place. Since we would have no way of knowing what existed in a previous cycle, we should suppose that there are indeed 'new' things under the sun.

This consideration reminds us, however, that innovation may be as much a matter of human psychology as of external reality. 'O brave new world that has such people in't', exclaims Miranda in Shakespeare's *Tempest*, on seeing young men for the first time on her magical island. 'Tis new to thee', her father Prospero replies.⁹ For the young woman the novelty is an objective attribute of the world. For her father it is simply a function of his daughter's youth and ignorance. Many innovators do not attempt something radically new, but simply transfer an idea or product from one context to another. If the recipients of their idea are not familiar with what they present, however tried and tested in other circumstances, it has the effect and appearance of an innovation. An example of this might be the adoption of a political system such as democracy by a group that has not hitherto enjoyed democratic rights. That might certainly feel like an innovation to the people of such a society, no less than other ways of introducing innovative laws and regulations would be.

Aristotle, the most comprehensive thinker of the ancient world, discussed the question in his *Politics* (written in the mid fourth century BCE), mainly in relation to the idea of innovating in legal and constitutional arenas. Is political change a good thing? Can one invent new laws or ways of running a state, as if one were inventing a new product or work of art? Might it be a good idea for a state to offer rewards for inventors of good new laws? Aristotle importantly concluded that innovation must mean different things depending on the area in which it is applied. Political innovation should be considered as a different category from technical innovation. Following Aristotle's lead, innovators and investigators of novelty might be well advised to analyze the particular context in which they are operating, and to consider at the outset such questions as: What does 'new' mean in this context? What sort of innovation is required here?

In relation to Aristotle's distinction between spheres of innovation, we are bound to observe that ancient Greek innovation is more conspicuous in artistic and intellectual spheres rather than in the practical or technological areas to which we more readily apply the term (though there is some, frustratingly slight, evidence that their practical technologies were more

sophisticated than is usually assumed).¹⁰ However, many of the general principles underlying Greek innovations parallel those of today. While modern processes and areas of innovation differ from ancient ones, by examining novelty through the eyes of classical Greeks we can bid to compile principles stemming from the Greeks' experience. One recurring consideration is the fact that innovation is a dynamic process. It involves an active interchange between individual innovators and the public, tradition and change, old and new. The pluralistic environments which foster the pursuit of innovation generate diverse responses: thus avant-garde Athenian musicians such as I described above, who composed new songs that struck contemporary listeners as a radical departure from tradition, filled theatres with cheering crowds of admirers. Scholars today understand better why the new music was as effective in its day as pop music in the twentieth century; it departed from the strict canons of earlier forms of music, but relied on many traditional musical tropes and elements that allowed listeners to accept it as a pleasurable and familiar musical idiom.¹¹ Like the songs of the Beatles, Timotheus' innovative songs and lyrics even became 'classics,' and were still being reperformed in Greece hundreds of years after his death (whether the Beatles achieve similar longevity remains to be seen).

Understanding of tradition, then, is an important basis for innovation: for novelty to succeed, it must appeal to existing perceptions about what is valuable or effective. Ancient Greek doctors were also radical innovators in their time, being the first physicians we know of to take a genuinely and consistently rational approach to human health and disease. Nonetheless, these 'Hippocratic' doctors saw themselves as traditionalists who rejected novel medical theorization. Surviving treatises from the fifth century BCE criticize the arbitrary methods and theories of physicians who state that the health of the body is dependent on a balance of 'humors' – elements such as hot, cold, wet and dry, or secretions such as blood, bile, choler and phlegm. However, re-theorization of this kind can be a successful form of innovation, even if it is ultimately proved incorrect. For over two thousand years before the rise of modern medicine, medical practice largely abandoned the empirical approach and thrived, often at the expense of its patients, on the once novel theory of the humors. This kind of innovation may involve little more than words – a rhetoric of novelty. But rhetoric is a technique of presenting something persuasively: simply calling something 'new' can be an effective advertising or marketing tool. While calling something 'new' does not make it a 'real' innovation – many will seek to distinguish what is

really new from what is simply called 'new' – in a world in which novelty attracts a premium, 'new' sells. Whether it's an old product relaunched or an old idea recycled, the rhetoric of innovation can make all the difference.

What kinds of cultures attract or generate innovation? Freedom, competition and incentive are widely recognized as key conditions of innovation. The ancient Greeks were no strangers to these notions. They invented the notions of democracy and freedom under the law; they created the first large-scale monetary system in history; and they were notoriously competitive – so much so, that constant warfare led to the eventual dissolution of Greek pluralism as the city-states were subsumed into Alexander's empire, and were then conquered by even harder fighters, the Romans. The new takes the place of the old, and since this is sometimes bound to mean the loss of real value, societies must also learn when *not* to innovate. To retain their creativity, innovative individuals and societies need to acknowledge what is of lasting value, and to work through loss. The ancient Greeks held on to valuable traditions, and allowed space for mourning, institutionalizing it in religious rituals and in public practices. The modern world has less time for reflection about the destruction that innovation can entail. But if today's ceaseless innovation – from new technology and political movements to new art and music – brings anxiety as well as excitement, we can acknowledge that in this respect at least there is nothing new under the sun.

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1. On Anner Bylisma's style and approach see Margaret Campbell's *The Great Cellists* (London, 2004), 208-209.
2. Armand D'Angour, *The Greeks and the New: Novelty in Ancient Greek Imagination and experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
3. The Greek word for 'to innovate' (*kainotomein*) is first attested in a Greek comic play, *Wasps* by Aristophanes, produced in 422 BCE.
4. Timotheus, fragment 796, *Poetae Melici Graeci*, ed. D.L. Page (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).
5. For Timotheus see e.g. the fragment cited in previous footnote. Euripides' self-referential claims to innovation are compiled by Emily A. McDermott in 'Double Meaning and Mythic Novelty in Euripides' Plays, *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, Vol. 121 (1991), pp. 123-132.
6. Homer, *Odyssey* Book 1, lines 351-352.
7. See R.W. Witkin, *Adorno on Popular Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 2003).
8. Parmenides *On Nature*, fragment 8: W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy: The Presocratic tradition from Parmenides to Democritus* (Cambridge: Cambridge

University Press, 1979).

9. Shakespeare, *Tempest* Act 5, Scene 1.
10. A case in point is the so-called Antikythera Mechanism, an extraordinarily complex calendrical mechanism discovered in an ancient shipwreck and dating to ancient Greek times. For this and other ancient technological wonders, see Kostas Kotsanas, *The Inventions of the Ancient Greeks* (Athens, 2011).
11. Pauline LeVen, *The Many-Headed Muse. Tradition and Innovation in Late Classical Greek Lyric Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); LeVen has produced a thorough analysis of the lyrics of Timotheus, showing how they both rely on and depart from earlier song.