

Book Review

Melanie Panitch, Samantha Wehbi and Jessica Pimentel Machado, editors.

Interrupting Innovation: Centring the Social

Halifax and Winnipeg, Canada: Fernwood Publishing, 2025.

This review is rather critical of the approach taken in this study, focussing as it does on one program, written by those who managed it, with insufficient attention to the participants and their experience. While the book claims the participants benefited, it is asserted rather than demonstrated let alone proven.

Svetlana Alpers wrote, about Vermeer's picture *The Music Lesson*, that "This is how the world is known: incompletely, and in pieces" (Tallman, 2024). This is a statement from a scholarly art historian, definitely not a social scientist. There is some truth in what she says, and it reflects some individual experience with understanding the world. I would have expected more from a book on social innovation.

This book reminds me of the one I reviewed in the last issue of *The Innovation Journal*, *Wielding the Force: The Science of Social Justice*, by Zainab Amadahy, because both read like the text for courses rather than like scholarly works. Both also seem aimed at a progressive audience concerned with social justice. Although the blurb published by the publisher on *Interrupting Innovation* makes clear it is an edited book, it does not make clear that it is largely meant as a course text, with questions to review included with each chapter. I found the questions difficult to answer: many did not derive from the text and seemed to require buy-in to answer.

Interrupting Innovation: Centring the Social has a good theoretical chapter (chapter 2) but it does not define social innovation, its primary focus. While it states this is deliberate, I found this approach unsatisfying. I am relatively new to social innovation and did not find either *Wielding the Force* or *Interrupting Innovation* a good introduction to the field nor easily understood as an important contribution to it.

Most of the eight chapters in *Interrupting Innovation* are studies of elements of what appear to be small projects run by SHIFT, a program involving scholars, program officers and clients in need of support, run by Toronto Metropolitan University. The 18 authors are university-based scholars with one possible exception. The person to whom the book is dedicated was a well-known scholar at York University, Toronto, and appears to have been a relative of one of the editors and authors, as they have the same surname (Panitch). All of the case studies described use art as their medium and, judging from the chapters, of only one type—collage. The conclusion is not really a conclusion but reads like a description of the process.

The authors are much taken with the processes used in the projects, which were funded by the university through a Social Sciences and Humanities Research grant, a research funding program of the Canadian federal government. They assert and are convinced that what the projects did was innovative. They did not convince me.

Major claims are made of the broad benefits and social innovativeness of these programs. No empirical evidence is provided to support these pronouncements nor is much information provided on the numbers of people involved nor the size of the program budgets. The scope of the program and projects is thus unknowable from the book. I would not say much qualitative evidence is offered either. The chapters focus at the level of goals and objectives, then jump to the process with little information on the projects themselves and their outcomes. While the people they deserved help, I did not find this record of the projects targeting them satisfying. Moreover, the examples of collages that are published in chapter 6 are fine for what they are but they are not, in my opinion, particularly creative. For example, to claim that a collage that includes some political elements is innovative because it addresses the political is a stretch. Many other works of art have previously included the political, for example, Picasso's *Guernica* (1937).

Moreover, art has been used in therapeutic programs for some time. For example, the Royal Ottawa Hospital, the mental health hospital in Ottawa, Canada, programs art for its patients. Using art to engage and collaborate with people in need is not in and of itself innovative.

Chapters

The eight chapters are the following:

1. Framing Social Innovation as a Call for Social Transformation
2. Social Innovation Re-Loaded: The Social as Innovation
3. Pro-Tests and *Making with Place*: Arts Activisms and Innovations reCentring the Margins
4. Considering Networked Responses as Social Innovation: Case Examples of Incels and Amazon's Ring and Community Care
5. Power Sharing, Community Leadership and Dynamic Governance at The SHIFT Centre for Social Transformation
6. Life Imitates Art: Collage as Innovative Pedagogy
7. The Importance of Justice and Decolonization Questions in Science Education
8. Innovate for Impact: Unleashing Social Change Through Values-Driven Leadership and Visionary Action

I lived the idealistic 1960s and 1970s. We tried to adhere to many of the same goals, objectives and values the authors of this book promote. It was not easy to live the ideals and joint decision-making was difficult and sometimes generated conflict. The chapters in this book do not discuss difficulties. While the authors claim the goals, objectives and values were achieved, we need to take their word for it. How they were achieved and the difficulties overcome and not

overcome are not addressed. As a result, I find the claims hard to believe. Scholars who were not participant-observers but have an investment in a program's success face the challenge of viewing what was done with rose-tinted glasses. It is not clear to me that this test was met.

The values expressed are wanting to help those who suffer injustice, collaborate with them and share power. Having tried to do these things myself, I know this is not easy. The challenges, methods for addressing, successes and failures in doing so are not made clear by the authors. There are many values (Brown, 2023). Bringing them to bear is very challenging: ask the churches. Claiming success is not sufficient: it should have at minimum been demonstrated. One chapter, in particular, to my mind reads similarly to the jargon-filled writings of communists during the 1960s and 1970s.

The authors claim they are creating societal transformation. What it consists of is unexplained. To me, transformation is much more fundamental than what is implied and claimed to have been achieved here. The words in this book are big but the accomplishments are small, as far as I can see. I should add that I do not think there is anything wrong with small projects and programs as such, nor with projects that are not particularly innovative but possibly helpful to the participants. The program served a clientele that seems to have benefited from partaking in an art program. Such programs make good demonstration projects. The federal government and some provincial governments funded such projects in the 1960s and 1970s but no comparison is made with them, nothing is learned about the approach. The literature sourced is almost entirely from the last five years. This is the disadvantage of quoting only recent literature: much relevant literature and learning gets missed. The authors of *Interrupting Innovation* should have been more careful about what they claimed for the projects. Sloppy use of the term innovation does not help anybody and makes it hard to develop the field of innovation.

There are numerous references to social innovation literature in this book. I am glad to see them. They are not, however, an inclusive look at the literature. *The Innovation Journal*, for example, has published a number of articles on social innovation, including by a well-known Canadian scholar of social innovation, Frances Westley. None of *TIJ* articles is referenced. Some chapters (3, 4, 5) missed listing some of their references in their reference lists. As an editor I must admit I am suspicious that if authors are careless with their references, they may have been inattentive with other elements of their chapters

The publisher of this book, *Fernwood Publishing: Critical Books for Critical Thinkers* describes itself as being:

politically driven, not profit driven, which means we can take risks in publishing radical analysis and underheard voices. We make decisions about what we publish based on its political integrity and relevance.

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With this in mind, it is understandable that Fernwood published *Interrupting Innovation*. The criticisms the authors of *Interrupting Innovation* make of how innovation has been co-opted are valid, in my opinion. Business and science, for example, claim innovation as their own and ignore other work on innovation. Work such as this book do not lend the its field as social innovation credibility. Sadly.

The approach of generalizing from an unidentified but presumably small number of projects needs consideration. Medical journals publish articles on small and unique numbers of patients, sometimes only one unique case, so studying small numbers of cases is a known approach. Medical people do not generalize from this information, however. Rather, they make the unique cases known. This is acceptable and potentially helpful to other doctors.

Others targeting similar groups as this book might find the book useful. Promoting an approach without clear identification of the numbers of projects and clients, providing few details about the approach and no discussion of the challenges does not make it highly useful.. While it is important to work with its clientele, using one art form, presenting vague details and claiming success and impact is not.

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