

GEOINNO

Special Session Proposal

Session Title: The dark side of innovation in times of shifting technological paradigm

Session Organisers:

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Session Format: 120 minutes session. The chair will introduce the session explaining shortly its multidisciplinary perspective, structure and aim (10 minutes). Each speaker will have 10 minutes (PPoint) presentation to address the topic (overall 50 minutes with 5 speakers) from the perspective of their own research area. The following 30 minutes will be open to comments and questions from the floor. A session rapporteur will wrap up the session (10 minutes), with short final reflection from the chair and the panellists (2 minutes each) closing it, all giving priority to implications for diversified policy approaches to counterbalance the impact of innovation on inequality of individuals and places.

Description:

For long, one of the key preoccupations of economic geographers has been to study innovation as the main driver of regional economic growth, as growth has been considered key to achieve greater wellbeing and prosperity, stronger institutions and more peaceful societies. The opening of regional economic systems and the strengthening of their technological and innovative capabilities have largely been the mantras of most such research and related policy recommendations. Over the past two or three decades, a gigantic wave of research has literally vivisected the topic of economic growth, focusing on what we need more: first and above all, more innovation, but also more spin offs, more venture capitalists, more openness and connections to external knowledge, skills and markets, more talents and training, more

multinational firms (MNEs), more technological networks, more related or unrelated variety, etc.

Yet this agenda is showing two fundamental drawbacks: first, it has generally left undisputed the idea that innovation, and therefore economic growth, is the ultimate goal to be pursued; second, it bears no consideration to what is lost as business companies and other organizations allegedly contribute to growth by innovating. Indeed, the gradual technological paradigm shift from ICTs and electronics (Industry 3.0) to Industry 4.0 – the industrial revolution based on automation and data exchange in manufacturing technologies – together with the connected modularity and separability of production stages in GPNs and GVCs led by high-tech MNEs, are apparently strengthening inequality between the Global North and the Global South, across countries and regions in both, and even within cities and industrial clusters. Additionally, most research consider innovation in terms of proximity to the technological frontier and as being related to the capacity of firms to patent new discoveries, assuming that such discoveries are a good thing to have. Extant research rarely considers the negative impacts that the use and spread of innovations can have on society and the environment, and more broadly on human rights. However, the history of capitalism is punctuated with examples of innovations that have been harmful to human beings and the natural environment – examples include e.g. DDT, asbestos, leaded petrol, and more recently glyphosate. These and other cases open up a set of urgent questions about the legitimacy of the way most economic geographers look at innovations. We contend that such drawbacks are not minor issues and call for a novel research agenda that forcefully takes them into account along with economic goals.

In this Special Session we seek to stimulate a lively debate and set the basis for an ongoing conversation on the future relationship between innovation, economic development and social justice. To be sure, we do not mean to build a “silo”-type conversation where social, environmental and human rights issues are seen as hyper-specialized side topics of no interest to innovation studies, economics, international business or economic geography. Rather, we want to promote a discussion where considerations about economic development (and growth) are balanced with innovation-related side effects or harmful impacts.

In particular, we have selected contributions as follows:

- *The dark side of innovation and other business-related aberrations: Why it matters for economic geography* (Elisa Giuliani, Chair):

- *Technological change, BIG Tech and resource exploitation across geographies: the case of conflict minerals* (Simona Iammarino)
- *Green employment, innovation and income distribution* (Davide Consoli)
- *New forms of inequality: what policies to redistribute the gains of digital ownership?* (Maria Savona)
- *The complex economic geography of AI, and its risks* (Juan Mateos-Garcia and Chantale Tippett)

Additional speakers will be announced at a later stage if the proposal is accepted.

Rapporteurs will also be confirmed at a later stage.