Foreword

The editors have assembled this book around the topic of innovation, which they define very broadly. As a happy result of this broad definition, the book comingles the themes of technological innovation, entrepreneurship, and organizing. Usually, scholars have discussed these themes separately, and this separation has probably concealed opportunities for fruitful interdependence among the themes.

These are vital themes in economies and in societies more generally, and the themes intertwine. Technological innovation fosters the emergence of new ways of organizing. Advances in Information Technology, for instance, have transformed hierarchical, co-located business organizations into geographically distributed virtual networks. Yesterday’s organizations are turning into “dense spots in networks of contracts between sovereign individuals” (Davis & Marquis, 2005). People can break supply chains apart and distribute work to the most efficient producers wherever they are, and can assemble components wherever customers happen to be located today.

The three themes of technological innovation, entrepreneurship, and organizing share a concern with the emergence of new things – new concepts, new forms, new viewpoints. Emergence remains one of the persistent mysteries of science. An irony of Darwinian evolutionary theory is that despite the title of his book, Darwin did not attempt to explain “the origin of species.” His analyses began with established populations, and examined how differential survival led to gradual adaptation within these populations. Contemporary scientists – physicists, chemists, biologists, and social scientists alike – have generally followed Darwin’s example. Scientists avoid studying or even thinking about emergent processes, consigning them to the realms of philosophy and spirituality along with other phenomena evoking faith and magic. However, innovation, entrepreneurship, and organizing are inherently emergent, so scholars who study these topics find it hard to ignore emergence and the interactions that foster emergence.

The book itself emerged through an evolutionary process that broke through national and disciplinary boundaries, and drew energy from entrepreneurial editorial activities that extended around the world. The editors and reviewers subjected manuscripts to careful selection processes and the successful manuscripts reflect repeated revisions that improved their clarity and relevance.

The editors’ efforts to enlist diverse authors enhance the book’s usefulness. The authors come from many countries. People in different parts of the world see different issues and participate in different discussions, so distinct research topics and findings emerge all around the globe. A book that embraces a wide range of societies and perceptions helps readers to distinguish between observations that are more general and those that are more idiosyncratic. New technologies and organizational forms develop differently, and with experimental adventures over time, so their characteristics are disorderly. Efforts to understand very new technologies and organizational forms have to confront both the heterogeneity of the systems themselves and the researchers’ lack of effective filters for distinguishing important stimuli.
Observations that are more general are possible because some social trends have been widespread. For instance, throughout the 20th century, the so-called developed countries evolved from agriculture and manufacture toward services, and the latter part of the 20th century brought mounting emphasis on services requiring higher education. A large amount of global dispersion of expert services has been occurring. Companies have not only placed call centers for technical support around the world, they have located research laboratories and engineering design centers around the world. Knowledge-based activities have been at least as mobile as physical work. In the short run, this geographic dispersion increases the relative advantage of social skills over technical expertise. In the longer run, such dispersion undercuts the competitive advantage of knowledge-based activities by making expertise less esoteric.

In addition to intermingling technological innovation, entrepreneurship, and organizing, Professors Nobre, Walker and Harris have introduced another more contemporary theme – sustainability. In the book’s Preface, Nobre makes an important distinction between “competitive advantage” and “sustainable development”. “Competitive advantage” is a concept based in economic theories about competitive markets; it stresses the value to individual business firms of distinguishing themselves from their competitors by offering valuable and unusual products or services. However, economists and business scholars have defined competitive advantages solely in terms of the benefits to individual business firms and without concern for effects on consumers, communities, nations, societies, or humanity in general.

Nobre introduces the term “sustainable development” to describe a kind of business development that maintains a balance between economic and societal goals and between short-run and long-run goals. This is a timely distinction, since the modern global corporation, a brilliant social innovation that extended benefits of commerce around the globe, has become the world’s dominant social institution – and is helping to drive every living system on the earth into decline. We live in a time when humans are at the very peak of our technological power. We are making changes in the earth that will echo through the centuries. Sustainable development would seek to benefit not only individual firms but also their societies and the future of humanity.

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