

# 1 SLOW INNOVATION IN EUROPE'S PERIPHERAL REGIONS: INNOVATION BEYOND ACCELERATION

*Heike MAYER, Institute of Geography & Center for Regional Economic  
Development, University of Bern, Switzerland*

## CONTENT

1.1 Introduction.....	10
1.2 The concept of ‘slow innovation’.....	12
1.3 Empirical insights: Some initial, exploratory notes.....	15
1.4 Conclusion .....	18
References.....	20

*Innovation processes are often conceptualized with an urban bias and are therefore theorized solely considering the perspective of the urban environment (e.g. close face-to-face contacts, dense urban milieus, fast interactions between a multitude and diverse actors, etc.). As a result, innovation theories do not sufficiently consider the context of the periphery and how this context may foster or hinder the development of innovative products, technologies and services. In the meantime, economic geographers started to conceptualize innovation processes in peripheral locations as ‘slow innovation’ (SHEARMUR 2015, 2017; SHEARMUR & DOLOREUX, 2016) and they have emphasized the need to consider innovative processes as more isolated, less dependent on frequent interactions with partners and more strategic in terms of seeking information and knowledge. Another stream of research that recently emerged, considers the periphery as a space in which creativity can more freely unfold because innovators are positioned at the fringes and are more free to experiment with unconventional ideas (GRABHER 2018). Less emphasis has been placed on the notion that peripheral spaces can also offer opportunities for experimentation because they afford innovative actors the opportunity*

*to reflect, search, experiment and advance in undisturbed, more 'slow' ways, perhaps because they by choice are shielded from accelerating economic pressures. In this sense, the relative emptiness or thinness of the periphery can be considered not only as an asset for innovation, but also as an empowering characteristic for innovative behavior. This exploratory essay examines these processes through exploratory case studies of slow innovators in peripheral regions in the European Alps (Italy and Austria).<sup>1</sup>*

## 1.1 Introduction

There is a growing interest in economic geography in the ways in which peripheral regions can indeed be innovative, yet the research on innovation in the periphery is still in its infancy and in need for in-depth empirical work and theorization. The emerging attention however helps us to develop a more nuanced picture about how innovation works in regions that are not characterized by an urban, munificent environment and that are generally thought of as peripheries (for a comprehensive review, please see EDER 2018). What we now know is that innovative firms in the periphery compensate for locational disadvantages, for example, through the acquisition of external knowledge (RODRÍGUEZ-POSE & FITJAR 2013) or through being engaged in more formal collaborations (EDER & TRIPPL 2019; GRILLITSCH & NILSSON 2015). While this line of research mainly highlights compensation mechanisms, less is known about how innovative actors benefit from peripheral areas. Recent work highlights the fact that innovative firms that are located in peripheral regions do indeed benefit from the periphery in various ways such as e.g. utilizing the benefits of peripheral environment against labor poaching, exploiting institutional leeway, benefitting from lower cost locations, etc. (EDER & TRIPPL 2019). Others have talked about the 'paradox of the periphery' and highlighted the ways in which peripheral regions that are often seen as poor environments do indeed have benefits that rural entrepreneurs can capitalize (ANDERSON 2000). While the perspective on compensation and exploitation strategies of innovative firms in the periphery is valuable because it gives us insights into the ways in which innovative actors manage to overcome peripheral disadvantages and how they leverage the periphery's advantages, it does not tell us much about the specific behavior, motivations, personal drivers, and moreover the character of innovative work done by innovative actors in the periphery and specifically, why they choose to be located in relative isolation.

To fill this research gap, we can utilize two concepts that on the one hand address innovative behavior in the periphery and how it may differ from innovative behavior in

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more urban, core locations. Here we utilize SHEARMUR's concept of 'slow innovation' (SHEARMUR 2015; SHEARMUR & DOLOREUX 2016). While slow innovation requires less frequent interaction and for which knowledge can be transmitted over longer distances, fast innovation requires the opposite and is therefore more dependent on core locations. The concept of slow innovation helps to focus on the absence of the need to act fast in terms of innovative behavior and redirects our attention to alternative forms of being innovative in a peripheral context. Our empirical work points to practices that follow the 'slow innovation' approach outlined by Shearmur. Yet, the data also hints at exploring questions related to 'slowness' as a response to the increasing acceleration of the modern society. To interpret these findings, we utilize Rosa's concept of dynamic stabilization and social acceleration (ROSA 2013, 2017; ROSA, DÖRRE & LESSENICH 2017). We therefore not only embed this research in the economic geography literature on innovation in peripheral regions, but also in the literature on the sociology of speed and social acceleration (WAJCMAN & DODD 2017).

Why is the focus on innovative actors in peripheral regions particularly regarding their 'slow' behavior and motivation important and relevant? Our perspective on peripheral places is too often influenced by negative associations related to the term periphery, and peripheral places are often thought of as lagging, structurally disadvantaged regions. Often they are referred to as "places that don't matter" (RODRÍGUEZ-POSE 2018) and the dominant narrative is linked "to a feeling that there is no future and no hope [...]. The lack of faith in the future is giving way to the impression that these places matter less than hitherto. [...] Overall, the fear of being left behind and of having no future is leading to a re-action which is starting to have serious political, social and economic consequences" (RODRÍGUEZ-POSE 2018, p. 196). RODRÍGUEZ-POSE (2018) notes that the population in places that are faced with social and economic decline reacts in political ways through for example populist sentiments. Indeed recent work links industrial and economic decline to an anti-EU sentiment in recent elections in EU member states (DIJKSTRA, POELMAN & RODRÍGUEZ-POSE 2019). These developments indicate that the capitalist logic is increasingly fragile and prone to instability. Socioeconomic crises – and among them we would count increasing regional inequalities and hopelessness in peripheral regions – appear to increase despite overall growth and acceleration in modern economies in general (ROSA 2017). Given these instabilities and the need for a more place-sensitive perspective, we acknowledge that peripheral regions can indeed be innovative albeit in various ways (ALDERMAN 1998; DAVIES, MICHIE & VIRONEN 2012; LEE & RODRÍGUEZ-POSE 2013; TÖDTLING & TRIPPL 2005) and that these places may give us insights into how peripheral regions may benefit from 'slow' development.

For this paper, we draw on empirical insights from an exploratory study of innovative actors located in peripheral regions in the European Alps. The European Alps are a peculiar region in Europe. While the region is overall growing particularly in terms of population (the Alpine region grew by 7,8% between 2001 and 2015), regional disparities are increasing particularly between core and peripheral parts of the Alps (CHILLA & HEUGEL 2019). The more urbanized regions are developing quite positively while the

peripheral regions that are typically located in higher altitudes experience significant economic decline, demographic change and a loss of services of general interest. This has been taken up by various countries in reports and strategies that address the fate of these peripheral mountain regions as so-called inner peripheral areas (EUROPEAN UNION 2018; SERVILLO, RUSSO, BARBERA & CARROSIO 2016). Over the past decades, the Alpine region has experienced significant change due to industrialization and the decline in traditional industries (BÄTZING 2015). However, today, traditional industries and sectors are still present and exist in parallel to modern industries.

The empirical focus of this paper is on peripheral regions in the Alps. Qualitative data were collected in two valleys in the Italian Piemont region and in the Austrian region of Osttirol (two peripheral regions in Switzerland are still planned for inclusion in the study, most likely interviews there will take place in early 2020). These regions are considered peripheral as they experience great distance (both geographic, but also cultural and institutional) to their respective core regions (e.g. Torino and Rom, but also Innsbruck and Vienna). The regions have experienced significant demographic decline due to out-migration and face structural challenges such as an aging population, securing the provision of public services, retaining and attracting economic activities, etc. (ARGE VORDENKEN FÜR OSTTIROL 2019; PETTENATI 2013). Yet, both peripheries also experience selective in-migration and return migration of so-called new highlanders (BENDER & KANITSCHIEDER 2012). Among the new highlanders are practicing entrepreneurs and innovative actors who see the potential and the assets of the peripheral regions (MAYER, HABERSETZER & MEILI 2016; MAYER & MEILI 2016).

The data was collected through a total of 20 semi-structured interviews with firm owners and entrepreneurs who are located in these regions. The interview partners were selected through snowball sampling that was based on a first cursory analysis of regional data (desktop research and engagement with collaboration partners). Collecting firm-level data in such a context is not easy and needs to rely on various sources including regional development agencies, corporate websites, newspaper articles, etc. In some cases, we were able to rely on listings created by regional development agencies or advocacy groups (CIPRA, etc.). In many other cases, however, firms and innovative actors were identified during fieldwork through referrals by interview partners and regional experts. The interviews were held in German or English and they were recorded, transcribed and analyzed.

## 1.2 The concept of ‘slow innovation’

The concept of ‘slow innovation’ refers to the unique characteristics of innovation processes in peripheral regions. It is rather new and was first developed by Richard SHEARMUR (SHEARMUR 2015, 2017; SHEARMUR & DOLOREUX 2016). It specifically

refers to ideas regarding innovation processes that take place in a context characterized by peripherality. Innovators in peripheral locations may not have immediate access to information sources as it would be the case for their more urban counterparts. Slow innovation – according to SHEARMUR (2015) and others – is characterized by the following aspects:

- Information and knowledge necessary for innovation is not time-dependent and tends to be of more technical, scientific nature. It does not lose value rapidly, hence the term “slow”.
- Slow innovators tend to have a lower frequency of interaction with external actors (e.g. suppliers, partners, etc.).
- Slow innovators tend to strategically search for information and knowledge. As a result, they do not rely on informal contacts and serendipity.
- Innovators in peripheral locations may rely on physical proximity and they thereby cross social and cultural boundaries. Peripheral contexts would need to be reconsidered regarding their ability to offer “diverse diversity” (MELLI & SHEARMUR 2018).
- Some innovations in the peripheral context may depend on unique local knowledge, know how and/or problem identification. Scholars have looked at the various endowments and assets the periphery offers to entrepreneurs and how entrepreneurial valorization may take place of these aspects. Anderson refers to this as “paradox in the periphery” (ANDERSON 2000).
- Innovators in the periphery tend to be more introverted and more reliant on internal capacities (MALECKI & POEHLING 1999).

It is important to note that the concept of slow innovation was developed primarily to categorize innovation processes in the peripheral context and to illustrate how innovators who locate in relative isolation are still able to be innovative and compete in the market economy. It therefore is a concept that is based in traditional innovation studies and traditional notions of economic geography, in which aspects of quantitative growth, market economy, etc. dominate (DONALD & GRAY 2019; SCHULZ 2012). Slow innovation does therefore not relate in any way to the discussions around, for example, the anti-globalization movement such as the network of Slow Cities (MAYER & KNOX 2006, 2010a, 2010b; PINK 2008). While SHEARMUR discusses innovation processes in the periphery and refers to them as ‘slow’, he does not pay attention to the more sociological aspect of ‘slowness’ such as the increasing acceleration and homogenization of everyday life and socioeconomic practices. However, in the context of peripheral regions, this additional dimension of ‘slowness’ needs to be considered and I propose an extension of SHEARMUR’s concept.

To do this we can take Hartmut Rosa's work on social acceleration as a starting point. Although Rosa is not explicitly addressing the role of innovation in peripheral regions, his conceptualization of social acceleration will help us elucidate the socio-economic practices and motivation of innovative actors and entrepreneurs in the periphery that go beyond mere market-/capitalist objectives. Rosa's conceptualization should be understood as a social critique of modern – e.g. capitalist – societies, which as he writes operate “in a mode of dynamic stabilization” and “systematically requires growth, innovation and acceleration in order to maintain its socio-economic and institutional status quo” (ROSA 2017, p. 437). Without acceleration, he argues, modern capitalist societies would lose their economic competitiveness and social stability. Not only is quantitative increase seen as immanent to this logic, but also the social aspects of increasing acceleration, which Rosa and his co-authors note is the “setting-in-motion of the material, the social and the cultural world at an ever increasing speed” (ROSA et al. 2017, p. 58). He observes that many aspects of our lives today are subject to increasing speed. In particular, the role of knowledge has changed. This aspect is especially important for studying innovation processes. According to Rosa, modern conceptions of knowledge rest on a logic of novelty and quantitative increases as well as “systematically pushing the borders, increasing the volume of the known, transgressing into the yet unknown” (ROSA 2017, p. 441). This stands in contrast to traditional notions of knowledge in non-modern societies that value for example knowledge as a treasure and where knowledge is handed down from one generation to another. Here learning by doing or performing, but also schooling is important. All these aspects of non-modern knowledge creation take time and innovative actors need to pause to reflect and to learn from others. Yet, modern work places but also entrepreneurial and innovative behavior is characterized by increasing speed and speed is incorporated or even embodied in work and innovation practices through for example modern technologies (GREGG 2017).

The emphasis on the role of knowledge as a market-driven asset that allows modern/capitalist societies to innovate and grow implies that in order to be innovative, one has to be in the midst, at the center of an innovation hotspot. These hotspots are the large, growing cities of the Western developed world. Indeed, such an “urban bias” is present in various writings ranging from Edward GLAESER (2011) to Richard FLORIDA (FLORIDA, ADLER & MELLANDER 2017). It is argued that “the city with its greater levels of density and diversity is the more eternally conducive environment for generating the human creativity that underpins innovation, entrepreneurship and economic growth” (FLORIDA et al. 2017, p. 93). Milan, New York, Silicon Valley, Vienna, etc. – the city offers the opportunity for fast exchange of ideas, fast reaction of market trends and changes, fast implementation of commercialized products, etc. Because of this perspective, peripheral regions loose out as they cannot produce fast knowledge and innovation. Instead, young people leave the periphery and move to cities. Peripheral regions empty out and emptiness is seen as negative. Yet, slowing down in the sense of valuing different types of knowledge and innovation processes (among these, those that are “slow”), but also utilizing emptiness to afford experimentation, to follow holistically

one's own ideas and project can also be seen as an asset (BOCK 2016; VIAZZO & ZANINI 2014), particularly for innovation. Such a perspective is different and values the benefits and assets the periphery may offer to innovative actors. This is especially important in order to find new visions for the development of smaller urban places and peripheries (HARRISON et al. 2019).

### **1.3 Empirical insights: Some initial, exploratory notes**

The exploratory interviews in Italy and Austria highlight that innovative actors in these peripheral regions indeed exhibit specific behaviors that can be associated with Shearmur's concept of slow innovation. Yet, the empirical data suggests that if we only focus on the ways slow innovators gain information and knowledge, how often they interact with innovation interlocutors and how open they are, we may miss another important aspect of innovation in peripheral regions, which has more to do with opportunities for experimentation and how these afford innovative actors the possibility to reflect, search, experiment and advance in undisturbed, more 'slow' ways, perhaps because they by choice are shielded from accelerating economic pressures. In the following I will discuss these two aspects of slow innovation by utilizing examples.

Shearmur's concept of slow innovation strongly emphasizes the aspect that innovation in the periphery is less time dependent. This implies that slow innovators in the periphery rely more on information and knowledge that does not lose its value rapidly and that "sticks" around. In other words, in contrast to urban innovators who seem to be more reliant on rapidly developing market sourced information (think fashion designer in Milan who needs to be at the center of design at the right time and act fast on designing a new line of clothing), peripheral innovators seem to rely more on knowledge and information that is more technical, perhaps scientific or even more traditional and does not lose its value quickly. This aspect is reflected in the qualitative data. The interviewed innovators in the periphery also reported a lower frequency of interaction with external actors such as supplier, partners, universities. In one case for example (a world-leading manufacturer of essential oils) the CEO reported that the firm visits its customers once a year and that in addition it is represented at the industry's major convention once a year. Because the firm does not need to be in touch with its partners more often, it also does not see the location in the periphery as a disadvantage. In another case, the CEO reported that following one visit with a customer in the United States, the firm developed the prototype relying solely on infrequent video conferencing to finalize and eventually convince the customer about the project. Such infrequent interaction with suppliers and customers were mentioned by a number of interview partners and most likely this has to do with the fact that the companies on the one hand offered very customized solutions to specific customers and that on the other hand they operate in

rather slow-moving markets, in which changes occur rather slowly or are based on long-standing technical and scientific knowledge that does not change quickly.

Change and progress in the sense of developing innovation is, however, important to the interviewed slow innovators. But coming up with new ideas and innovative products was rather associated with incremental or process improvements to the product itself but also to the process of developing and manufacturing the products. In one case (a manufacturer of hand-made brushes and brooms) described in great detail how he himself experimented and developed machines that helped him improve his products, find sources of defects and eliminate them. In developing these solutions, he relied mostly on his own technical competencies, which he augmented with learning by doing but also with upgrading his own technical knowledge base using knowledge gained on the Internet. This also points to another interesting aspect that was revealed by the interviews: Slow innovators in the periphery strategically search for knowledge and information they need for their advancement. In contrast to their urban counterparts, which may rely more on serendipitous contacts and accidental encounters that a dense urban environment may offer them, slow innovators in the periphery strategically search and reach out to those who they think will help them the most. As a result of this specific behavior, in most cases innovation was characterized by incremental improvements and the innovative actors are rather innovative followers than leaders.

The literature on slow innovation emphasizes the interesting role social and cultural diversity may play in the peripheral context. It is argued that innovators in the periphery rely more on physical proximity when interacting with others and that they thereby tend to cross social and cultural boundaries. Some have argued that this interesting situation leads us to consider the periphery as a context in which diversity is rather diverse and not specific (MEILI & SHEARMUR 2018) and that this allows innovators in the periphery to also draw on the local context. The local context in this view is not characterized by “thinness” (TÖDTLING & TRIPPL 2005), but rather by a wealth of options, contacts, people of different background, etc. There is one example from the interviews that illustrates a special situation, in which diversity led to innovation. It is the case of a strategic collaboration between two companies to develop an automation system, which in turn helped the manufacturer to re-integrate manufacturing operations that were formerly located in Eastern Europe. Through personal connection in the local tennis club, the CEO of the manufacturing firm got in touch with the CEO of a firm that develops highly specialized automation systems. This contact, which eventually led to a significant improvement in the manufacturing process and subsequent process innovations, came about because the two firm representatives stepped outside their realms and crossed sectoral boundaries.

While time to market, the strategic search for useful information and knowledge, strategic partnership and outreach with customers and suppliers seem to be common to the cases we researched, there is another side to “slow innovation” in the periphery that emerges from our data. Our examples and empirical insights reflect the ways in



which “slow innovation” processes, behaviors but also motivations might represent a more critical aspect of the capitalist society’s urge to speed up and accelerate. In this perspective, “slow innovation” may help us question social acceleration processes. The following examples highlight this aspect.

The majority of interviewees noted that experimentation played a crucial role in the development of their entrepreneurial ideas and innovation. Experimentation was seen as a way to try out new techniques and new ways of implementing ideas. Often this was done in undisturbed ways and the interviewees noted that the periphery afforded them the opportunity to try and experiment without pressure (e.g. from the market, time, etc.). Describing the experimentation process, one interviewee – an organic farmer who grows different kinds of vegetables at an altitude of around 1,400 m – noted that «I think it is the better part, because you can try one thing or strange vegetables such as colored carrots or lots of kinds of potatoes. But trying a lot of different vegetables needs also a lot of energy, because there are a lot of different things to do. So it is really never boring. I’m trying to understand which plant have the better results and try to concentrate on six or seven different kinds.» (Interview 7). Another slow innovator highlighted that the process of experimentation is not easy and said that “the production was not so perfect, it is normal, but we remembered all the things we studied at school and tried it again and again and we became better and better.” (Interview 8). While interviewees acknowledge that it is not easy to develop new ideas in the periphery (“But it’s not easy to have a good idea for a living here.” Interview 8), it seems that slow innovators do indeed enjoy this experimentation process and draw a lot of meaning for work but also life in general from it – despite difficult situations and circumstances the periphery may hold for them.

Slow innovators do not experiment in a vacuum. Many of the interviewees noted that they learn critical aspects of their trades from elders or from locals. A restaurateur who turned to cheesemaking, for example, took formal classes but then complemented this with learning from locals and adapting their learned skills to local traditions. Another slow innovator appreciated the assistance from a local cook who helped her in the beginning. This relationship then turned into mutual learning as the local cook learned how to make new types of vegetarian dishes (Interview 3). Slow innovators not only learn from locals or elders, but also teach others, especially younger workers. One noted that they employ a young woman and that she studied agriculture “but she did not know how to do cheese, so we taught her” (Interview 8).

Meaningfulness and in particular the opportunity to work on projects holistically from the beginning to the end was highlighted by interviewees. One said that “I came here because, you can realize a lot of projects if you want. You need to have ideas, methods, but you can do it. [...] What I wanted to do, maybe to give a better reason to my life, I don’t know. A meaning. To realize things. In the city, even if you, I’m a scientist, I couldn’t have access to social projects, even if I had some skills, but here you have the possibilities to do that. It is not because I’m the best.” (Interview 2). This

person realized the difference to her prior life in the city, in which her work was much more divided and compartmentalized.

Many interviewees also noted that if their business had been located in a city, it would have grown much more and become larger. At the same time they emphasized that growth was not their goal and that they are quite happy with the firm's size, its market, etc. This seems to be in line with the literature on post-growth corporations. Empirical work has shown that there are a number of SMEs that do not have the goal of growing (GEBAUER & SAGEBIEL 2015). Thus, slowness seems to also apply in terms of its connotation and relationship with post-growth aspects of contemporary economies.

## 1.4 Conclusion

In this exploratory essay, I highlight two dimensions of slow innovation that seems to be important when talking about innovation in the periphery. Innovation processes in peripheral regions differ from those in urban contexts, particularly regarding the type of knowledge involved, the relationship to time and time sensitivity of new ideas, the lower frequency of interaction with innovation interlocutors, but also the effort to draw on internal capacities and utilize strategic search processes. The interviews in peripheral Alpine regions in Italy and Austria highlight these aspects of slow innovation. Yet, the data also hint at a second dimension of slow innovation that challenges the predominant market logic that underlines innovation studies in general, but also those studies that focus on the periphery and its deficiency when it comes to translating innovative ideas into marketable products and services and hence when it comes to describing economic progress in peripheral regions. This second dimension emphasizes practices, motivations and behaviors that elude the dominant market logic. Experimentation, learning from elders and locals, but also teaching others (especially those who are younger) reflect aspects of economic practices that highlight that an undisturbed search (EDER 2018) for an experimentation with novel solutions seems to be especially possible in the periphery, in a space that is empty and where one can afford to take the time for these processes. Slow innovators take advantage of emptiness (VIAZZO & ZANINI 2014) and particularly the space and time this emptiness affords them to try out new things. The research also shows another aspect that we would need to consider in innovation studies and particularly in studies of the periphery. This aspect addresses the meaningfulness of work and why slow innovators choose to move or stay in the periphery and develop and implement their innovations there. Connecting meaningfulness and passion to the notions of working on projects holistically but also to the notion that many innovators noted that they were quite happy and content with the size, market reach etc. of their firm, inspires us to think about the meaning of (innovative) work and in the context of slow innovation. Interviewees do not see their innovative work as a

means to and end or even as a means to achieve status, growth and economic advancement in a traditional sense, but they see their work as something that is not an end to itself but something that helps them and their communities. This aspect is important for the emerging debate about the role of (paid) work in a post-growth society (SEIDL & ZÄHRNT 2019) and questions about work's meaningfulness (GEROLD 2019). A third aspect that seems important is that the interviews highlight the fact that slow innovators do not aim to grow their corporate efforts infinitely. While Shearmur critically asks why peripheral regions do not develop and argues that when firms want to grow or scale up, they have to move to the urban environment, this work highlight another aspect, which is rooted in the deliberate post-growth choice of slow innovators. Slow innovation, hence, cannot be reduced to considerations about time to market, but also have to take post-growth aspects such as deceleration into account. As a result, the periphery should be thought of as a space where economic actors can be innovative without pressures from the modern, accelerated market economy.

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