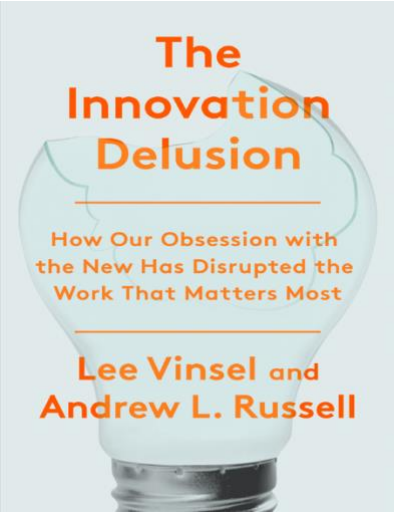

Critical Review of *The Innovation Delusion: How Our Obsession with the New Has Disrupted the Work That Matters Most* (Vinsel & Russell, 2020).

The Innovation Delusion: How Our Obsession with the New Has Disrupted the Work That Matters Most (2020), by Lee Vinsel and Andrew L. Russell, presents a blistering critique of the contemporary ideology of innovation, exposing what the authors call «innovation-speak» – a hegemonic discourse that glorifies disruptive change and marginalises the essential work of maintenance.

The Innovation Delusion, by Lee Vinsel and Andrew L. Russell, published not many years ago (2020), is among the scholar books one must read, especially for younger generations and policymakers around the world. Many years ago, Steven Shapin (1989) unearthed the role of the technician in modern science. *Innovation Delusion* does the same for hidden activities in innovation — i.e., activities related to technology and engineering. Maintenance, upkeep and care is the motto behind Vinsel and Russell's book.

Lee Vinsel and Andrew L. Russell's *The Innovation Delusion* (2020) offers a forceful and timely critique of the contemporary fetishisation of innovation in public discourse, corporate management, and policy frameworks. Drawing on a broad range of historical examples, infrastructure case studies, and interdisciplinary influences—from historians of science like Steve Shapin to critics of neoliberalism such as Adam Tooze—the authors advance a compelling case for what they term a «maintenance mindset». This alternative paradigm challenges the dominance of what they call «innovation-speak», a vacuous yet pervasive rhetoric that privileges novelty and disruption while marginalising the essential, ongoing work of maintenance, repair, and care.

The opening chapters dissect the cultural and rhetorical logic of «innovation-speak», saturated with terms such as «disruptive», «design thinking», «lean startup», and «fail fast» (p. 19-36, p. 81-99). According to Vinsel and Russell, this discourse legitimises managerial and policy decisions that neglect long-term systemic functionality, framing innovation as inherently good and inevitable, often detached from measurable social benefit or sustained impact. Innovation, they argue, has become more a ritualistic invocation rather than a substantive goal, distracting decision-makers from investments and policies that genuinely benefit society. «Innovation» thus becomes a marketing tool rather than a meaningful commitment to technological or social progress.

The authors argue that this obsession with the new has led to catastrophic underinvestment in maintenance. Examples include a near-explosion in Saint John, Canada, which was averted by janitors regularly pouring water into sewer traps (p. 5-6); the 2018 collapse of the Morandi Bridge in Genoa, which killed 43 people due to deferred inspection and structural upkeep (p. 171); and the failure of a «fast-tracked» pedestrian bridge in Miami during load testing (p. 9). These events illustrate a wider systemic neglect of vital maintenance work. The maintenance

backlog in public infrastructure, illustrated by the *Metropolitan Transportation Authority* (MTA) subway system in New York, with repair costs estimated between $19 billion and $43 billion over 15 years, shows how deferred maintenance translates into degraded public services and escalating disaster risks. The American Society of Civil Engineers' Infrastructure Report Cards further corroborate these systemic deficiencies, emphasizing a national pattern of deferred investment.

We could also add other incidents of the same kind in other parts of the globe: that is, due to public or private negligence towards infrastructure maintenance. For instance, the case of the dam collapse in Brumadinho on January 25, 2019, was the biggest accident in Brazil in terms of loss of human life and the second biggest industrial disaster of the century. It was one of the country's biggest environmental mining disasters, following the Mariana dam collapse in 2015. These examples show that neglect of maintenance is not a local phenomenon but a global structural problem with devastating consequences.

Moreover, the discussion on the ideological framing of innovation in *The Innovation Delusion* resonates with critiques emerging from the Brazilian academic context. Authors such as Oliveira (2011, 2013) have coined the term «innovationism» to describe a trend with clear implications for public policy, notably the commodification of science itself. This approach unveils how discourses of innovation are deeply linked to the political project of neoliberalism, a phenomenon increasingly recognised by Brazilian scholars. Moreover, there are many critiques of the precarious effects of innovation rhetoric on working conditions. As Filgueiras (2021) aptly puts it, we live under the mantra «everything's new again», where the rhetoric of the «new» is deployed to promote the «old» privileges of labour exploitation, echoing Antunes's (2018) analysis of new labour reforms that merely reproduce conditions of servitude. Empirical studies, such as those by Hiessl *et al.* (2024), confirm that innovation discourses have largely failed to create more and better jobs, often exacerbating precarious employment instead.

On his side, Vinsel and Russell critically examine the seductive promise of disruptive innovation. Cases such as Theranos, the Juicero juicer, and the Samsung Galaxy Note 7 battery fires (p. 9) show how premature scaling and marketing hype often lead to technological failure and public harm. The Silicon Valley ethos of «move fast and break things», while perhaps tolerable (if not entirely convincing) in software development, proves disastrous when applied to sectors such as health, transport, or energy. They show how companies spend millions hiring Chief Innovation Officers while neglecting the core businesses and infrastructures that support them. Moreover, the «start-up» mentality imported into public education, healthcare and local governament has often lead to ineffective programmes and misallocation of resources.

The influence of «The Maintainers» network (https://themaintainers.org/), founded by Vinsel, Russell and Jessica Meyerson, permeates the book, providing a window into wider academic and policy discussions about how to valorise care, repair, and stewardship. Their call resonates with contemporary concerns about climate change, urban resilience, social equity, and sustainable economies.

Maintenance and repair not only sustain infrastructure but also provide a necessary corrective to the destabilising effects of unchecked innovation cycles.

Indeed, central to the book's argument is the call to recognise and support the work of «maintainers»: those who operate, repair, and maintain the infrastructure and systems of modern life. This includes help desk workers, janitors, IT support teams, nurses, and software maintainers, such as the company Corgibytes (p. 15), which specialises in updating legacy code (p. 144). Maintenance and care work, they argue, is the foundation of prosperity and safety, yet it remains socially invisible and systematically underpaid. Deferred costs continue to rise as corporations and politicians prioritise flashy new infrastructure projects while existing systems decay. The COVID-19 pandemic, while not central to the book, has retrospectively strengthened their arguments by revealing the essential nature of maintenance and care labour in all societies.

Through historical and fiscal analysis, the authors link the cultural neglect of maintenance to macroeconomic policy. They cite data showing that while U.S. operating and maintenance costs rose from $21.6 billion in 1960 to $56.5 billion in 1984, public investment in infrastructure fell from 3.6% to 2.6% of GDP (p. 66-67). By 2014, federal funding covered 40% of new infrastructure but only 12% of maintenance costs (p. 70, revealing a preference for visible capital projects over the less glamorous, ongoing costs of upkeep). In Louisiana, for example, the state's $32 billion in infrastructure maintenance needs compared with a tax base of only $16 billion reveals a structural fiscal deficit. (p. 163) This illustrates how the fetishisation of «newness» produces hidden structural vulnerabilities with long-term societal costs.

Vinsel and Russell's arguments are historically grounded and theoretically informed—although this clarification of their theoretical and methodological influences is not made explicit by the authors. Their attention to invisible labour echoes Steve Shapin's *The Invisible Technician* (1989), which critiqued how scientific authority has historically marginalised the contributions of technical workers. Shapin's insights into epistemic hierarchies, directly or indirectly, inform Vinsel and Russell's broader sociological reading of «innovation» as an ideology that marginalises care and continuity. David Edgerton's *The Shock of the Old* (2006) provides a historiographical grounding that emphasises technologies-in-use over headline-grabbing innovations, demonstrating how societies often depend more on stable, mature technologies than on cutting-edge inventions. Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock* (1970) and *The Third Wave* (1980) anticipated the psychosocial effects of accelerating change, showing how social institutions and human psychological capacities are overwhelmed. Adam Tooze's critique of neoliberalism and technocratic depoliticisation, particularly in *Crashed* (2018) and *Shutdown* (2021), enriches the book's critical perspective on how innovation discourse aligns with financialised capitalism's preference for spectacle over substance.

Shapin's central thesis demonstrated the historical and epistemological invisibility of technicians in scientific production. For Vinsel and Russell (2020), the contemporary obsession with innovation undermines the value of maintenance and care work. If Shapin's invisible subjects are technicians, instrument operators, lab assistants, in Vinsel and Russell's are the «maintainers», i.e. workers, maintenance technicians, civil engineers, carers, administrators. If Shapin had a

number of implications that are still relevant today, in terms of the democratisation of science and the revision of the criteria of scientific authority. With the contribution of *The Innovation Delusion*, we have serious implications for the reformulation of public and institutional policies that promote durability, care, and equity. The «maintenance mindset» should teach us to value care and repair work socially, economically, and politically. Just as the epistemic recognition of technicians and the need to rethink authorial practices in science were on Shapin's horizon, Vinsel and Russell's contribution updates the debate, especially with regard to the Schumpeterian entrepreneurial subject, applying similar principles to the technological, infrastructural, and entrepreneurial domains. In short, if Shapin exposed the social construction of scientific authority as a process of exclusion, Vinsel and Russell show how this logic has been recycled in the 21st century under the «cult of innovation» and, above all, the idolisation of the entrepreneurial subject, a cult that we observe has spread from business discourse to public policy. Both approaches point to the urgency of recovering subjects and practices that sustain collective life but are erased from hegemonic discourses.

Another central influence shaping the critical perspective developed by Vinsel and Russell in *The Innovation Delusion* is the work of David Edgerton, particularly his seminal book *The Shock of the Old: Technology and Global History since 1900* (2006). Edgerton offers a scathing critique of dominant historical narratives that equate technological progress with invention and novelty, proposing instead a historiographical turn towards technologies-in-use and the mundane realities of maintenance and persistence. His influence on Vinsel and Russell is both profound and structural: both projects seek to displace the centrality of the «new» and the «disruptive» in favour of the «durable» and the «functional» – i.e., the user perspective. Edgerton's insistence on the distinction between «invention» and «technology-in-use» is taken up and extended by Vinsel and Russell into the realm of public policy, organisational culture, and everyday life. The authors draw directly from Edgerton's argument that innovation is often overestimated, while the continuing relevance of older and seemingly mundane technologies—such as plumbing, electricity, paper, or cement—is systematically ignored. These «invisible» technologies, foundational to twentieth-century society, form the material substrate for Vinsel and Russell's call for a «maintenance mindset». In this sense, Edgerton not only prepares the conceptual terrain for their critique but also provides the historical vocabulary and empirical depth necessary to dismantle the mythology of innovation as unidirectional progress. His «history of use» converges methodologically and politically with the «delusion» identified by Vinsel and Russell, challenging the ideological exaltation of novelty while re-centering the work, knowledge, and infrastructures that make societies livable. Their joint project shows that what truly sustains technological societies is not the spectacle of invention, but the quiet, continuous work of care, maintenance, and adaptation.

The combined influence of scholars such as Steve Shapin, David Edgerton, or even Benoît Godin, points to the gradual consolidation of a critical field of innovation studies—one that interrogates the historical, political, and epistemological assumptions underlying mainstream discourses of technological change. Shapin's seminal essay *The Invisible Technician* (1989) laid the epistemological groundwork by revealing how scientific authority systematically obscures the labor of

technicians, operators, and support staff. This insight is central to Vinsel and Russell's own efforts to recover the figure of the «maintainer» and to challenge the enduring hierarchy between «thinking» and «doing» in both science and engineering. Edgerton, for his part, provides the historiographical foundation with *The Shock of the Old* (2006), which vigorously challenges the dominant «innovation-centric» history of technology. His focus on technologies-in-use and on the often-ignored importance of maintenance, repair, and banal infrastructure directly informs Vinsel and Russell's advocacy of a «maintenance mindset». Importantly, Benoît Godin's *Innovation Contested: The Idea of Innovation Over the Centuries* (2015), in addition, further complements and deepens this perspective by tracing the genealogy of «innovation» as a modern ideology. Godin demonstrates how the term evolved from a marginal and even heretical concept into a central pillar of economic and political discourse (Godin, 2017, 2019), closely aligned with the agendas of neoliberal governance, competitiveness, and market-oriented reform. Rather than treating innovation as a neutral or self-evident good, these scholars collectively reframe it as a contested and ideologically charged construct. Together, their work marks the emergence of a critical research programme that seeks to decentre the fetish of innovation and instead foreground the politics of care, infrastructural sustainability, and the recognition of invisible labour as essential components of technological and social progress.

Together, these works provide a robust alternative to the fetishisation of innovation, offering a more grounded, historically informed, and socially engaged vision of technology's role in society. *The Innovation Delusion*, in particular, succeeds in providing a compelling account of the real, material, and practical implications of the so-called «innovation-speak» for public policy and everyday life. By promoting a culture that glorifies novelty while neglecting the maintenance of existing infrastructures, this discourse ultimately disrupts what matters most: the upkeep, care, and stewardship of the common good.

Indeed, the book's welcoming reviews so far have underlined this urgency. Readers praise its focus on undervalued work and its challenge to dominant narratives of progress. The book is widely recognised as a *manifesto* rather than a comprehensive policy study. The critique of «innovation-speak» is powerful, and even if, as some critics suggest, the rhetorical focus on American case studies occasionally limits the global relevance of its analysis, there is no lack of correlation with what we are observing in the Global South.

The Innovation Delusion succeeds as an urgent call to rethink and reimagine technological culture and policy around the values of care, longevity, and collective responsibility. In an era marked by crumbling infrastructure, environmental precarity, systemic inequality, and extractive economic models, Vinsel and Russell's proposal to shift from an obsession with innovation to a «maintenance mindset» (p. 141) is both timely and necessary. Their work invites readers—especially policymakers, engineers, educators, and organisational leaders—to ask not what is new, but what is sustainable. In doing so, they offer a corrective vision that is as pragmatic as it is profound, challenging contemporary society to rethink the very foundations of its notions of progress, success, and social value. This is indeed a very important book that should be read by everyone, and in particular, should be read first and foremost by every policymaker and government leader.

The Innovation Delusion is a provocative and, five years later, still a timely intervention that urges us to rethink our collective obsession with novelty. By refocusing attention on the essential—yet undervalued—work of maintenance, the book challenges dominant narratives of progress and invites a deeper conversation about what sustains society. Although focused on the North American context, its insights resonate widely, especially in countries where infrastructure and care work are routinely undervalued in the name of modernisation and growth.

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