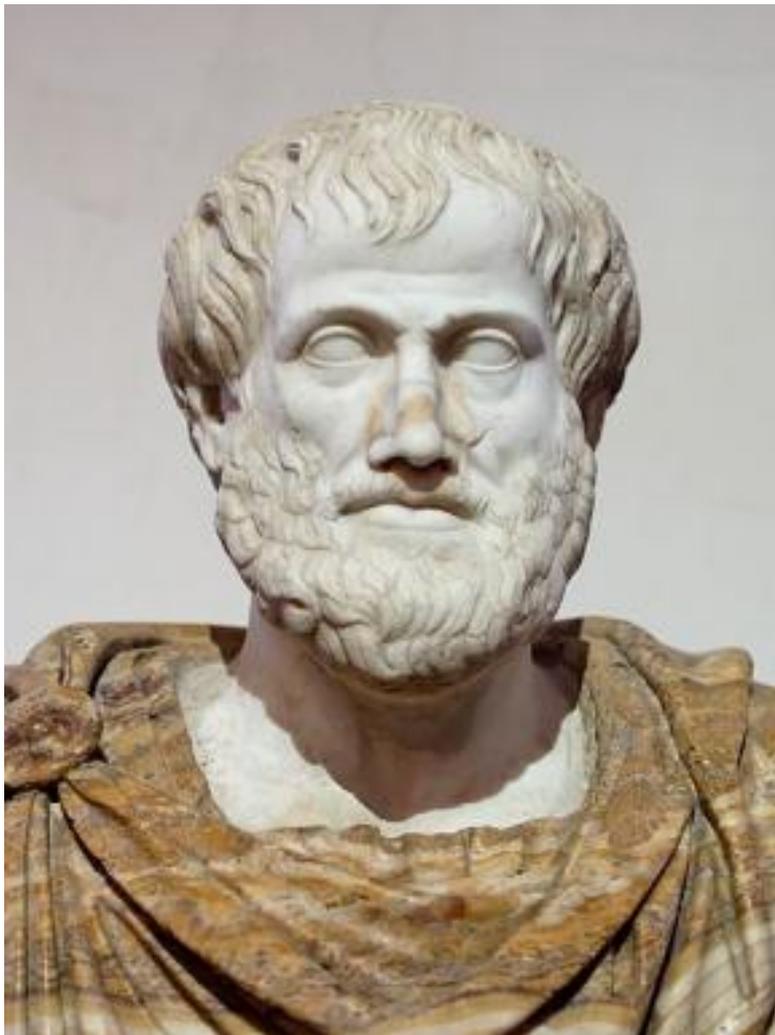


Innovation in Classical Greece

By [Armand D'Angour](#) | Published in [History Today Volume: 62 Issue: 2 2012](#)



Contemporary culture places a high premium on novelty. Armand D'Angour argues that we should consider the more balanced views about old and new found in classical Greece.



New media, new technology, new politics, new products and services, new fashions and designs, new, new, new. It seems as if the world is devoted to innovation and novelty. What is not new is the interest and excitement – as well as the worry and anxiety – aroused by novelty. A similar ambivalence about newness is evident in another era of intense novelty and creativity, classical Greece from the eighth to the fourth centuries bc, when the Greeks produced a series of

innovations that formed the basis for two millennia of western thought and achievement in literature, art, architecture, philosophy, politics, medicine and mathematics.

The Greeks could even lay claim to having discovered innovation, since they are the first known people to have written about the notion (the Greek for 'innovation', *kainotomia*, is first found in a comedy by Aristophanes of 422 bc).

The Greeks innovated in artistic and intellectual spheres, rather than in practical or technological areas, but the principles underlying their innovations parallel those found today. Is there, then, nothing new under the sun? (The expression itself, familiar from the biblical book of Ecclesiastes, derives from the ideas of early Greek philosophers such as Pythagoras.) Modern processes of innovation differ in significant respects, but if we look at novelty through the eyes of classical Greeks we can learn some pertinent lessons. So what are these principles? A starting point is suggested by Aristotle (384–322 bc), the most comprehensive thinker of the ancient world, whose surviving writings include works on logic, ethics, literature and biology. Aristotle observed that innovation means different things, depending on the area in which it is applied: political innovation, for instance, is different from technical innovation. Investigators of novelty need to consider at the outset such questions as: what does the new mean in this context? What sort of innovation is required here?

Numerous other principles stemming from the Greeks' experience of innovation can be compiled from the corpus of texts that have come down from the classical age. One important consideration is that innovation is dynamic: that is, it involves an active interchange between individual innovators and the public, tradition and change, old and new. Fifth-century Athenian musicians, for instance, composed new songs that struck contemporary listeners as a radical departure from tradition. Plato, a trenchant critic of the 'new music', would have banned it altogether, arguing that innovation should involve no more than a modest variation of familiar structures. (Respect for tradition is in fact an important basis for innovation: for novelty to succeed it must appeal to existing perceptions about what is valuable or effective.)

But the pluralistic environments that foster the pursuit of innovation also generate diverse responses. Although the avant-garde musicians of the ancient world have left no lasting mark on the western musical tradition they were hugely popular with large sections of the Athenian public. They not only achieved fame and financial success in their lifetimes, but the songs of the most radical of them all, Timotheus of Miletus, were ironically enough considered classics by later generations. One could draw an analogy with the Beatles – except that Timotheus’ songs and lyrics were still being performed in Greece 700 years after his death.

Ancient Greek physicians were also radical innovators in their time, the first to take a genuinely rational approach to human health and disease; but these Hippocratic doctors saw themselves as traditionalists who rejected ‘novel’ medical theorisation. Re-theorisation can be, nonetheless, a successful form of innovation: for over 2,000 years before the rise of modern medicine medical practice thrived (often at the expense of its patients) on the novel theory of the humours. This kind of innovation may seem to involve little more than words – a rhetoric of novelty. But rhetoric is a technique of presenting something persuasively and calling something ‘new’ is still often an effective rhetorical tool (think of New Persil, New Labour, New World Order). Just because something is called ‘new’ does not make it an innovation, though we might want to distinguish what is really new from what is simply called ‘new’. But in a world in which novelty attracts a premium, ‘new’ sells. Whether it’s an old product relaunched or an old idea recycled rhetoric can make all the difference, so we ignore it at our peril.

What kinds of individuals, organisations or cultures attract or generate innovation? Freedom, competition and incentive are widely recognised as keys to cultures of innovation. The ancient Greeks were no strangers to these notions: they invented the notions of democracy and freedom under the law, created the first large-scale monetary system in history and were notoriously competitive. But the new takes the place of the old and since this is sometimes bound to mean the loss of real value we must also learn when not to innovate. To retain their creativity, innovative individuals and societies need to acknowledge what is of lasting value. The ancient Greeks held on to valuable traditions and allowed space for mourning, institutionalising it in religious rituals and in public practices. The modern world has less time for

reflection about the destruction that innovation can bring. If today's ceaseless innovation brings anxiety and disaffection as well as excitement and wonder we might at least learn something and refresh our own perspective on innovation by reviewing the experience of the past.

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