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August 25, 2013 10:45 pm

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Innovation needs 'shotgun' approach



From Mr William Thayer.

Sir, Let me agree with Professor Mariana Mazzucato (“[Why private innovation needs government help](#)”, Comment, August 22) that the government has an important role to play in innovation and research and development. The US has Nasa, Darpa,

Arpa-E, the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation and more. One of the problems with innovation in Europe is that it doesn't have a similar list of such agencies. However, let me disagree with the author that government should be the prime mechanism for innovation. The Soviets tried that. They put a lot of money into research and had some successes such as Sputnik and Tokamak (fusion research). But they completely missed the micro electronics and personal computer revolutions.



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This is the problem with top-down planning and is illustrated by East Germany versus West Germany and North Korea versus South Korea. Both West Germany and South Korea had strong government research, but they also had vibrant private sectors. Innovation can come from anywhere, and you want to have the most sources possible – government, universities, industrial laboratories and individual entrepreneurs.

In her book, Prof Mazzucato attributes the internet to the Arpanet. This was an electronic connection between certain universities and government installations using dedicated lines and very expensive, large computers. The private sector genius of Jim Clark and Marc Andreessen was to realise that this network could be transferred to ordinary telephone lines and millions of personal computers with the Netscape software that they developed. The government could have done this, but it didn't have the marketing, financial or organisational smarts to make it happen. It is just one illustration of why you want the shotgun (all possible sources) approach to innovation.

Recently, I noted to a European friend that Hewlett-Packard, Apple and Amazon were all started in garages while Dell Computer was started in a dorm room. My friend said that such developments couldn't happen in Europe because the EU would have a regulation on garages. Sigh. But let me return to the bailout problems

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of the eurozone for a moment and ask: just how much of the \$600bn dispensed thus far has been allocated to innovation?

William Thayer, San Diego, CA, US

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