
This is an ambitious collection. Its chapters—initially presented at a conference organized for the 1994 centenary of Innis' birth—assess Harold Innis' work in the context of the contemporary “era of globalization, resurgent nationalism, identity politics, and new technologies of communications” (p. 14).

Editors Charles R. Acland and William J. Buxton have organized it into three sections. The first is called “Reflections of Innis.” It contains eight chapters addressing aspects of Innis' work and legacy. The second section, consisting of four chapters, is called “Gaps and Silences.” The final section is titled “Innis and Critical Theory.” It contains eight more chapters.

I begin this review with a relatively impressionistic observation: a divide exists among the authors of these papers. It is a divide marked, I think, by the impact that Innis' work has had on their respective intellectual biographies. From my “Innisian” point of view, the most thoughtful and provocative of the papers—those that successfully convey Innis' dialectical, holistic, and reflexive thinking in depth and with clarity—are men and women who convey a passion for his writings. The contributions of others (a minority), who apparently do not share these sentiments, are relatively pedestrian.

Nevertheless, and to repeat, the latter are very much in the minority. In their “Introduction,” the editors write that the theme that conjoins the chapters is “the spirit of reading Innis in a fresh and creative way and resituating his thought and practice through an exploration of novel links and comparisons” (p. 25). On the whole, this has been achieved.

Among the most impressive of these contributions is the chapter by Judith Stamps called “Innis in the Canadian Dialectical Tradition.” In it, Stamps provides an explanation for Innis' non-Marxist dialectical materialism through a thoughtfully crafted assessment of his educational background and the roles played by Scottish Common Sense and Hegelian philosophy. Stamps also places great emphasis on Innis' Baptist upbringing. Through these and other influences (including Veblen), Stamps provides one of the most succinct and insightful intellectual-biographical sketches of Innis, his focus on communication, and his idealization of the oral tradition that I have encountered.

Charles Acland's paper, “Histories of Place and Power,” relates Innis to contemporary developments in the field of cultural studies. Although Acland generally conceptualizes “culture” more narrowly than did Innis, his focus on Innis' concern with reflexivity in the context of twentieth century technologies and related economic and cultural developments is well done. In keeping with the mandate of the collection, Acland, among other things, elaborates on the complementarities of Innis' writings with those of Antonio Gramsci. Building on the latter's observations of Fordism (involving the process of “becoming American”), Acland points out that Innis' concern with the relationship between the industrialization of culture and American-based influences involving the institutionalization of new techniques and their implications on “ways of thinking and living” clearly are of some use in efforts to elaborate aspects of the Gramscian approach (p. 255). Furthermore, both Gramsci and Innis understood the power implications of such mediated processes in terms of core–periphery relations. In elaborating on these connections, however, Acland stumbles in his observation that Innis had little “notion of people struggling in the world they inhabit” (p. 257)—a longstanding assumption that is demonstrably false.

Andrew Wernick's “No Future: Innis, Time Sense, and Postmodernity” elaborates, in brilliant detail, Innis' concerns with the contemporary annihilation of time and the role of media in the related and often contradictory ascendency of spatial control. Beyond this, Wernick provides the clearest explanation that I have read on what Innis was in fact
pleading for in his essay “A Plea for Time” (1982). For Wernick, Innis was concerned with the growing predominance of “linear time” and the decline of varieties of “social time.” In Wernick’s words, Innis recognized that “the obsession with time masked the fact that no one had any, and the radical discontinuity experienced between one moment and the next made it impossible to develop a monumentalizing perspective that could rise, and create, above the pressures and fashions of the moment” (p. 274).

Building on this analysis and, again, directly in keeping with the book’s focus on Innis’ relevance in the twenty-first century is Heather Menzies’ “The Bias of Space Revisited.” The empirical focus of this chapter is the power implications of the Internet and related technological developments. More specifically, Innis’ concern with the role of media in the commoditization of culture and its implications in struggles to control time and space are addressed. Through several examples, Menzies explains the relevance of Innis’ concern with how monopolies of knowledge are constructed, disseminated, and challenged for women, workers, and communities struggling to counter some of the more stultifying aspects of globalization. Rather than promoting some kind of McLuhanesque global village, Menzies uses Innisian concepts to challenge the current tendency (among many academics, at least) to ignore the power and more qualitative implications of transnational technology applications in relation to identities, local relationships, and reflexive thinking capacities.

Yet another standout contribution is “Space at the Margins” by Jody Berland. As with Wernick’s elaboration of Innis’ concern with time, Berland provides a succinct rendition of Innis’ related concern with “the triumph of space” (p. 289). It is Berland’s emphasis on the contingent and power-laden character of control over space (and, of course, time) that makes this chapter so very valuable, particularly for those still reading Innis to be some sort of technological or media determinist. The strategic message that emerges from this in relation to core–periphery relations stands as yet another corrective to much of the current academic literature. According to Berland, “By defending the material foundations for reflection, dialogue, and difference, we lay the foundation for resistance to all monopolies of knowledge and power. Such resistance is located not in particular identities, or modes of representation either, national or otherwise, but in reclaiming communication as a practice of dialogue and emplacement that shapes and is shaped by the exigencies of power” (p. 306).

Although a stronger editorial hand would have benefited some of the chapters (those by James Carey and Wernick, for example, could have used some careful “pruning”), the thoughtful work that went into this collection is apparent. Nonetheless, two of the less successful chapters are in the second section of the book on “Gaps and Silences.” Its opening contribution, “From Silence to Communication?” Jane Jenson’s assessment of the relevance of Innis for analyses involving gender, constitutes a largely descriptive critique. Also, in relation to this part of the book, it is curious that no chapter-length treatment is given to race, nation, or even class. The latter omission from this “shopping list” is most remarkable given the many publications and lively debates over Innis’ compatibility with Marx. Immediately following Jenson’s piece is Daniel Salée’s chapter “Innis and Quebec.” In it, Salée tells the reader that Innis “said very little about Quebec” (p. 197) and, like Jenson, proceeds to explain “why” in what are largely descriptive terms.

Other subjects, such as Innis’ economics, politics, philosophical leanings, his role as a public intellectual, and many others, are given chapter-length treatments by well-known authors, including Irene M. Spry, Alain-G. Gagnon, and James Bickerton. As I have tried to convey through the selection of chapter summaries above, most of the papers in Harold Innis in the New Century illuminate the important if not seminal position of Innis in the academy. The various subjects and varying levels of sophistication found in this book
underline both the complexity of Innisian thought and its relevancy for a broad spectrum of analysts.

Increasingly, over the course of Innis’ shortened career, he focused less on empirical detail and more on the conceptual and political challenges facing civilizations, cultures, and individuals (especially intellectuals). Particularly in the context of these later concerns, Acland and Buxton have provided students of Canadian Studies and many others with a thoughtful and provocative collection that will be a most useful addition to any Innisian library in the twenty-first century.

Note

References


Edward Comor
American University