Review Essay

We are Still Looking: Alexander Watson, Marginal Man, and the Continuing Search for the Hidden Innis

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Each and every time a new contribution devoted to the communication writings of Harold Innis emerges, it faces a central question: is it telling us something new? More to the point, is it telling us something of the “hidden Innis”? It is a truism in the literature that Innis, a political economist at the University of Toronto from 1920 to 1952, was an awful writer. It is also a truism, however, that Innis’ writings on media and communication technology contain more than they apparently let on.

In Empire and Communications (1950) and The Bias of Communication (1951), Innis forwarded three important propositions about media: that their material properties engender a bias in cultures either toward the dimension of space or toward time; that communication technologies, over time, will lock communicants into one bias or another, a state that Innis referred to as the Monopoly of Knowledge; and that cultures, through default or design, can thwart the debilitating effects of media by actively constructing knowledge and continually querying formulations already in circulation, an ethic Innis referred to as the Oral Tradition (Innis, 1950, 1951).

These theories, in their turn, have provoked both admiration and upset. Critics have faulted Innis, particularly in his formulations on media, with forwarding simplistic notions that do violence to history. Defenders, in response, have set for themselves the task of refuting that charge. Their work has been guided by the premise that if Innis was capable of discerning new and important
relationships in history, he was further capable of discerning that history is comprised of relationships that extend beyond the causal impact of communication media. The proper task of Innis scholarship, therefore, is to abstract Innis’ philosophy of history, the historical dynamics he believed governed Canadian and imperial history.

Enter Alexander John Watson. With the publication of his 2006 book *Marginal Man: The Dark Vision of Harold Innis*, he emerges as the latest in a long line of interpreters who have attempted to wrest some order from the chaos of Innis’ prose. His work has been highly anticipated, and, given that it is an adaptation of his 1981 PhD dissertation of the same name, it is no exaggeration to state that it has been a long time in coming. In its current incarnation, *Marginal Man* makes three important contributions to the Innis literature:

• First, it provides the most complete forensic analysis we have or are ever likely to have of Innis’ interaction with the intellectual context of his time. This is no small contribution. Here, we learn of Innis’ use—and abuse—of the source material for his communication studies. At times, he ascribed meanings to passages that ran directly counter to the author’s original meaning. At other times, he would use text from other works without providing proper attribution.

• Second, *Marginal Man* provides the first major biographical treatment of Innis’ life since Donald Creighton’s biography published in 1957. Through Watson, we learn how the personal, political, professional, and even psychological streams of Innis’ life converged. And through Watson, we see how significant events—World War I, his collaboration with Irene Biss, his debates with colleagues on the validity of Keynesian economics—impinged on the trajectory of his career, often in ways that left Innis deeply unhappy.

• And finally, it provides a characterization of Innis’ thought, an account of its trajectory, and an identification of its provenance. It is here where Watson attempts to explicate Innis’ writings, and it is here primarily where scholars will render their verdict on *Marginal Man*. If a close reading of Innis’ writings and personal correspondence provides the basis for that assessment, then the work will not fare well.

If there is a central theme to Watson’ treatment of Innis, it is the theme of an unfinished life. The grand project of Innis’ life was to create a general theory of imperial history through induction, through case studies showing the operation of empire in Canada and then abroad. Once these case studies were assembled, Innis’ purpose was to abstract an account of the dynamics governing empires. Unfortunately, Innis died before he was able to complete his theory. For Watson, the implication of this is that there is no “hidden Innis” to be recovered, the “Innisian puzzle will never be definitively solved because Innis himself failed to complete the final assembly of the great intellectual synthesis he was attempting” (p. 4).

Due to Innis’ premature demise, Watson argues that his corpus can and should be viewed as two distinct parts. In the first part, comprised of his economic histories, Innis concerned himself with the dynamics of empire at the
periphery, and there he focused on the concept of “supersession,” the boom-and-bust dynamic that characterized economies defined by a succession of single staples. In the second part, devoted to the history of communication, Innis’ concern was the imperial centre. There, through empirical observation and analogical reasoning, Innis came to the conclusion that “balance” was the dynamic governing the centre. Imperial economies were stable and comprised of multiple staples. A boom in one staple market mitigated—or balanced—the damage effected by decline in another. Innis believed, by extension, that the principle of balance could be fruitfully applied to other domains of empire, particularly politics, society, and culture, and had been applied to create stable entities.

But he did not stop there. According to Watson, the discipline of economics did not possess the conceptual tools required to illuminate what “balance” meant in realms such as politics. For this reason, Innis turned to classical scholarship, particularly as it was practised at the University of Toronto by colleagues such as Eric Havelock, C.N. Cochrane, and E.T. Owen. Due to their influence, Innis proposed a definition of balance consistent with understandings reached in the ancient world, as a transhistorical dialectic between institutions charged with the expenditure of force and institutions responsible for the creation of knowledge. In every other respect, including his famous formulations on media, Innis was an historicist. Sometimes the arguments held; at other times, not. If there is any hidden philosophy to be retrieved from Innis’ writings, Watson argues, the ancient formulation of “balance” is it.

Watson’s argument is a complex and provocative one. But when it is read in conjunction with Innis’ writings, it is not a convincing one. We might begin with the author’s characterization of “balance.” In its essence, Watson’s reading suggests a definition of “balance” that is tied to the notion of distribution of function or division of labour (p. 311). For societies to thrive, some institutions must specialize in the application of force, others in the generation of ideas. The problem with this interpretation is that it is too narrow. Although Innis, to be sure, did point to instances in history where agents of knowledge contested those in power, he also pointed to other oppositions in history: force and ethics, freedom and constraint, church and state, commerce and nationalism, and so on. Innis’ conception of balance rested on a much broader definition that could encapsulate these oppositions and others. Balance, in his mind, was the proper distribution between centralized and decentralized forms of control.

This distinction is important because it has a bearing on how you, I, or anyone else is likely to conceive the trajectory of Innis’ career. If you rest your interpretation on a narrow reading of balance, you are likely to conclude, as does Watson, that the early work in conception and in substance is fundamentally different from Innis’ later work. If, by contrast, you base your interpretation on a broader definition, you are likely to see continuity. In the end, it is the latter interpretation that is the more compelling.

From first work to last, a common conception of balance played a central role in Innis’ analyses. In his disparate histories of the fur trade, for example, Innis emphasized the method the French deployed to adapt to changing circumstances on the North American continent. Their strategy was to distribute control over the
trade between company and independent trader: “The decentralized organization of the fishery was adapted with difficulty to the centralized organization of the fur trade” (Innis, 1930, p. 302). The import of distributed control was similarly emphasized in Empire and Communications. There, Innis argued that a central challenge for political philosophy and the social sciences was defining the conditions to create stable, robust political units, including empires. And there, Innis argued that much of the problem could be reduced to “the successful operation of ‘centrifugal and centripetal forces’” (Innis, 1950, p. 7). There may be other grounds to distinguish Innis’ early work from his late work, but the concept of balance is not one of them.

The final difficulty with Marginal Man is Watson’s account of the provenance for Innis’ ideas on balance. The author lays heavy stress on Innis’ intellectual debt to colleagues at the University of Toronto classics department, such as Eric Havelock. While the idea from a Canadian nationalist point of view presents a certain appeal, the truth is that Watson provides precious little evidence to support his position. The flow of transmission, he argues, occurred in informal gatherings, such as lunches at Hart House, summer outings to Muskoka, and elsewhere. If the ideas and writings of Havelock and others were the only potential sources to account for Innis’ ideas on balance, then Watson’s argument would be plausible. The problem is that they are not.

For all their opacity, Innis’ writings and personal correspondence were usually quite clear in identifying the schools, scholars, and scholarly initiatives that he deemed to be important and influential. In his earliest communication essays, contained in Political Economy in the Modern State (1946), Innis lays great stress on the concept of balance. There, and in personal correspondence to colleagues such as Arthur Cole and W.T. Easterbrook, you will find little reference to or mention of classical scholarship, from Havelock or any other contemporary. From the standpoint of Watson’s argument, that is a significant omission. What you will find is extensive dependence on the writings of 19th century British liberal philosophers such as Lord Acton and contemporary sociologists such as Nicholas Timasheff to support his writings on balance. While Innis certainly used material from ancient history to support his thinking, it is likely that classical scholarship played a confirming rather than constituting role in shaping his construction of the term “balance.” His thoughts on balance, in the end, stemmed from intellectual traditions other than the ones identified by Watson.

References