BOOK REVIEW

Culture, Communications, And Dependency: The Tradition of H.A. Innis

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eds. William Melody, Liora Salter and Paul Heyer

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In March 1978, Simon Fraser University hosted a symposium on the thought of Harold Adams Innis, the late great Canadian social scientist. I believe that even those who organized the meeting and many of the participants would agree that Innis would not have taken kindly to a project of this kind, where his own work might be in danger of overcommendation, or worse, of unthinking adulation. Nevertheless, the organizers were quite right when they assessed the need for such a conference; first, because they recognized the unfortunate loss to Canadian and international scholarship through the general neglect (except among a handful of enthusiastic specialists and followers) of Innis’ innovative and insightful concepts; and second, because it was time to examine Innis’ legacy as whole cloth, incorporating both streams of his thought — i.e., Canadian political economy and communication history and theory.

The book Culture, Communications and Dependency: The Tradition of H. A. Innis is the product of that symposium. It is a collection of essays which were delivered at the meeting, supplemented by a few important additions from notable scholars. The book is divided into three sections. The first focuses on Innis’ contribution to social science scholarship, the second centres on his work in the area of political economy, and the third is concerned with his latter-day output relating to communications technologies and their impact on societies and on social change.

Unfortunately, the reader will not find all three parts uniformly satisfactory, nor all the essays of equal merit, which is of course to be expected. However, it is puzzling, to say the least, that the editors chose to retain the accustomed division between political economy and communication theory since we are told that one of the objectives of the symposium was to do away with an approach to
Innis' work which treats it as a set of "artificially fragmented contributions."

On a section by section appraisal, the book seems to lose some steam as it goes along, with the second part perhaps proving the least effective. The first part—dealing with Innis' contributions to scholarship—has an excellent complement of essays, each of which builds upon the next to produce a strong outline of the man, his work, and their influence.

Here we find two essays by two of Canada's outstanding scholars—Donald Creighton and S. D. Clark. They were both colleagues of Innis', interacting with him in quite different ways; their essays therefore convey their own personal impressions and experiences with him from different perspectives. Donald Creighton introduces us to Innis as genius, Clark shows us his years in his role as teacher and builder of an academic department.

William Westfall wrote a very thoughtful essay about the shifts over time in Canadian historiography which, by and large, diminished the Innis inheritance, according to his reading of developments. His essay is an interesting examination of both the process to that end and his understanding of the causative elements which contributed to it. Also he suggests the opportunities still to be exploited by new generations using the Innis inheritance as a point of departure. Which leads up very nicely to Mel Watkins essay "The Staple Theory Revisited." We have seen this piece before (Journal of Canadian Studies, Winter, 1977) but it is well worth repeating in the context of the goals for this section of the book. Watkins assesses the Innis legacy, not in terms of its absorption in paradigmatic form into various disciplines, but rather as his ideas have influenced and shaped the work of numerous followers, and he emphasizes the distinctions between liberal and Marxist versions of the staple theory.

The last voice in this part of the book is that of James Carey, the distinguished American scholar of communications studies. There is no one writing on Harold Innis' thought currently who understands his meaning and intent better than Carey does; perhaps the advantages of an Innisian marginality is at play here. In this essay Carey elaborates on the Innis achievement in communication theory in contrast to the increasingly barren American scholarly scene during the same period. The gain however to section one is a loss to section three, where a commentary by James Carey directly on the subject of culture and communications would have been a welcome addition.

I have purposely refrained from mentioning the introductory essay by William Melody until this point because I have a bone to pick with him and I did not want to give a negative impression of the opening of the book. One should be quite satisfied with his achievement of the
task before him, which was to introduce the reader to the areas in which Innis achieved his prominence as well as to some of the innovative concepts which today bear his name and his stamp. However, one important blatant error is to be found in this piece. Melody writes that space-biased communication media “have an orientation toward the present and the future.” To include the “future” is to miss the whole point; it is because space-biased media produce societies obsessed with the immediate that they have no perspective, are characterized by limited vision, fail to address themselves to long-range problems on the whole, and are very poor conductors of culture which is a vital ingredient of stability. This point is not a trifling matter, even though it derives from a single sentence in one essay. It is important because it distorts and confuses, especially for the uninitiated. How is one to understand, for example, Innis’ argument in his essay “A Plea For Time,” using Melody’s perception? It cannot be done. There is no need to belabour this matter however; section one does what it sets out to do and does it well.

One cannot be quite as enthusiastic for the next part, that entitled “Institutions and Development: A Focus on Political Economy.” There are seven essays in this section. Here we find a familiar theme of Ian Parker’s—still trying to mix Innis and Marx which, to my way of thinking, produces almost the same murky results one gets when trying to mix oil and water. There is also a piece by Horace Gray who discusses the fate of institutionalism in the United States, presumably to imply by contrast the success of institutionalism in Canada as evidenced by the survival of Harold Innis. A closer look at economics departments in Canadian universities post Innis raises some doubts on that score. An essay by Dallas Smythe called “Communications: Blindspot of Economics” has its own very serious blindspot. Although his contribution in pointing out the deficiency of traditional economics with respect to communication is appreciated, he does not seem to notice that he has arrived at “conclusions” through the process of raising questions rather than providing evidence. A fourth essay, by Arlon Tussing, gives the reader an opportunity to learn about Alaska’s recent economic development and problems, but one is hard put at first to see why it is included in this collection since he does not use Innis’ “categories and concepts” as he hints he will. But as one proceeds to the next essay called “Staple Production and Ideology in Northern Canada” by Peter Usher, it occurs that the Alaskan case is provided for contrast to the Canadian northern situation. Unfortunately, the Usher essay reads more as a tirade against the metropolitan centre than as a careful piece of research, so the basis for contrast is rather weak. Robin Neill, in his essay, challenges the fundamental causative relationship between economics and politics in Innis’ staple theory;
an interesting effort that should lead to many counter-challenges. And finally, Irene Spry reviews and develops Innis’ concept of overhead costs, an extremely valuable addition to a critical subject which has been almost completely neglected since Innis’ time.

One can see that the topics addressed in section two are very wide-ranging. It can be argued that this is unavoidable given the nature of the subject matter. But somehow, in the process, the sense of what Innis was all about in connection with his work in the field of political economy is not effectively developed, nor are his seminal ideas given a proper airing, except in the pieces by Spry and Neill. In part this outcome is due to the varying quality of the essays, and in part it is the result of the editors’ overly ambitious program for this part of the book.

The final section, as the title suggests, focuses on communications and culture from an interdisciplinary perspective. In fact the six essays included here are very mixed in quality. Liora Salter tries to develop an intermingling of Innis’ ideas and to apply his concepts to examine what she calls the “dialectics in communications systems” when looking at the relationship between public broadcasting and mass media. One can find in her work a number of questionable interpretations of Innis. She has a bad habit of attaching meanings to Innis’ words which are hers not his. Gail Valaskakis’ essay may be said to undertake an expansion of Innis’ method by exploring the impact of communication technology from the perspective of a marginal culture (Inuit) upon which the dominant culture intrudes. It is an interesting beginning; I say beginning because Valaskakis’ study raises some urgent questions vis-a-vis some of Innis’ ideas. Does it mean, for example, that Innis’ confidence in marginal creativity depends upon technological balance between communications forms? In which case, can we still endorse Innis’ enthusiasm for the oral tradition as the generator of stability and cultural achievement when it can be so easily swamped?

Paul Heyer’s essay is by far the weakest piece in this section mainly because he attempts too much. He wants to tell the reader about almost any reference to communication by any social science writer who preceded Innis; inevitably therefore none are explored in any depth nor are there any links established. In the same essay he also tries to explore biases within Innis, as well as suggesting areas for further application of the Innis-like interdisciplinary method. None of these areas are handled satisfactorily.

The two remaining essays by Donald Theall and David Crowley exhibit two scholars who move freely and knowledgeably through Innis’ writings; in Theall’s case, in order to appraise Innis’ concept of culture, bringing to bear McLuhan’s approach and influence by contrast; and Crowley in the use of Innis’ contributions to thought to elaborate on three themes in contemporary communications,
(theories of history, society, and knowledge). These two essays are the best features of this section of the book.

Overall, despite its weakness, one can conclude that Harold Innis has been served well by the publication of a volume such as this because it brings to public attention the enormous gifts of the man and his ideas. But one would have wished that the contributions throughout would have been of a more uniform high quality. Nevertheless, students of Innis are happy to see this addition to the Innis library.