

---

## THE POST-INNISIAN SIGNIFICANCE OF INNIS

*Andrew Wernick*

To be Canadian, not British or American or French, is not necessarily to be parochial. We must rely on our own efforts and remember that cultural strength comes from Europe.

H.A.L. Innis, *The Strategy for Culture*

### 1. Invitation to a Re-reading

Recent efforts to re-examine the work of Harold Innis<sup>1</sup> are to be welcomed not just as belated recognition for a forgotten major figure but for the clarification in our own thinking that a reflection on his mutant synthesis might serve to bring about. At a time of dizzying metatheoretical reflexivity, this at least will serve as my excuse for suggesting that the contemporary significance of Innis is to be found above all through an engagement with his thought at a second-order level: in terms, that is, of its meaning and character as a paradigmatic event within the evolving Western episteme.

In English-Canada, it should be said at once, a meditation along these lines is prompted by local as well as universalistic considerations. The Innisian *oeuvre*, which links such otherwise disparate figures as Urwick, Cochrane and Havelock on the one side to Clark, Watkins, McLuhan and Grant on the other, occupies a pivotal position within what there has been, this century, of an indigenous intellectual tradition. Attention to its conceptual formation, then, can be expected to shed light on key distinguishing features of that tradition as a whole.

But a reading of Innis against the wider background of what contemporary thought more generally experiences as mounting epistemic difficulties cannot fail to be struck by the sense in which Innis himself, increasingly pre-occupied with cultural breakdown, also announces the arrival of just such

## RE-READING INNIS

difficulties; indeed, with a force and clarity that give even his limitations a certain illustrative value. Both in his ambition to grasp the culture of a technologically transformed civilisation from the perspective of a rationality being displaced by that very process, and in the progression of his thought from an objectivising political economy to the reflexive investigation of communicative bias, Innis perfectly encapsulates, in fact, the whole problematic climax of 'late Enlightenment'<sup>2</sup> reason: still clinging to practical human interests as it passed, ever more disabused of illusion, from a search for the determinants of consciousness to an encounter with language/communication, and thence to the edge of the (post-)modern vortex.

Of course, as a Canadian representative of the Chicago School, Innis expressed this adventure in the tones and idioms of the New World. That, indeed, is precisely what makes him so interesting as a variant/analyst of incipient logocentric dissolution. His North American emphasis on the material aspect of technology and its environing power gave him a perspective on the crisis of modernity that was at once neither culturalist nor Marxist. More importantly, it corresponds to a real gap in those parallel discourses from Europe that tend to monopolise such debate. As one substantive mark of this difference, whereas German critique has problematised the fate of Enlightenment in terms of distorted communication, and new French theory has pondered the epistemic problems posed by the aporias of language per se, Innis was troubled about the impact on reason of language's changing technological form. Despite McLuhan, the full import of this thematic, at every level, for the theorised (self)-understanding of late capitalist society has scarcely begun to be taken in; in which regard, a European encounter with 'Inniscence'<sup>3</sup> might even facilitate a larger paradigmatic correction.

But before we can begin to assess the appropriative value of Innis's reflections, either in themselves or as a mirror for the crisis he sought to depass, we must first disengage the matrix of categories within whose terms these reflections were actually conducted. That matrix, however, is neither transparently available in the text nor easy to assimilate in terms of regnant codes. And so, right at the outset, we are confronted with a second-order problem: the puzzle (or so it might reasonably be called) of Innis's paradigmatic identity.

### 2. The Hidden Paradigm

In a particularly acerbic address to an assembly of the United Church in 1947 Innis noted the constant pressure he was under as an economist to veil his public speech. "If in the course of an article", he told his audience, "I

## RE-READING INNIS

However, if Innis submitted to the empiricist regimen, he also had his wild side and in significant ways obeyed more the letter than the spirit of its law. In the first place, the empiricist authority he liked to cite was Hume,<sup>8</sup> a decidedly ambiguous figure in this regard. In Britain itself, Humeian skepticism, riding the coat-tails of a victorious bourgeois reaction to scholasticism and Roman Law, has reinforced a conservative reflex against all 'grandiose' theorising and the extremism to which it allegedly leads. In Europe, however, the reception of Hume engendered what Kant called a 'Copernican revolution in philosophy'<sup>9</sup> which subjectivised the problem of knowledge, dissolved the pretensions of perceptualism, factuality and science, and ushered in precisely the kind of totalistic schematising against which pre-Kantian empiricism had reared its ultra-skeptical head.

Innis himself, openly in favour of speculative generalisation, scornful of quantitative technique and ever mindful of the gap between reality and its biased reconstruction as a concept, was implicitly oriented more towards these continental vicissitudes than towards the self-insulating ideology that Hume's thought turned into in Britain. It is certainly suggestive, in this respect, that among the very few philosophical writings to which he made specific reference was an essay by the young Veblen on Kant's *Critique of Judgment*;<sup>10</sup> and that *The Owl of Minerva*, composed near the end of his life, retraced the story of communications as an extended comment on the famous metaphor of Hegel. More generally, Leslie Armour<sup>11</sup> has drawn attention to the classic neo-Kantian question posed in the preface to *The Bias of Communication* — why do we attend to the things to which we attend? — and suggested that Innis's whole project, concerned as it was with the economic, political, geographic and technological determinants of cultural bias, can be read as a developing attempt to provide a satisfactory response.

The same ambiguity can be detected in Innis's approach to historiography, indeed in his very choice of history as the medium in which to develop his thought. In the humanities, from an empiricist perspective, history in an important sense occupies pride of place: a privileged zone for the application of evidential reasoning to human affairs and an endless occasion for emphasising, against all the temptations of Theory, the absolute contingency of human affairs. The social sciences themselves, in Britain, have always been suspect from this point of view; hence their relatively lagged development, particularly sociology which until recently was not even recognised by Oxford and Cambridge as an official degree subject. At the same time, historiography can never be more than an empiricism at one remove, for its facticity rests on a hermeneutics of documentation and its inevitable selectivity always implies the need for a point of view. In conventional British thinking these problems have typically been silenced by

referring them to the netherworlds of relativism and common sense. But they are harder to avoid when historical study is driven by the need to understand some pressing current issue, and precisely in reaction to some mystifyingly abstract outgrowth of social science.

This was indeed the situation at Toronto during Innis's formative years when the search for a homespun theory of Canada's peculiarly unbalanced and debt-ridden process of economic development led to open criticism of the received marginalist orthodoxy and a revival of the pre-Marshallian macro/historical approach. Besides the methodological perturbations this provoked, the resurgence of classical economy, particularly as derived from Adam Smith, also stimulated interest in that tradition's late 19th century derivatives ('evolutionist', 'institutional', 'national' economy, etc.); which in turn opened up the possibility of a wider transgression.

At the limit, and goaded by a philosophical conscience, the study of history can subsume the issue of its own subjectivity within the study of history itself. Buoyed up by idealism's Copernican turn, a full blown historicism of this kind became especially prominent in nineteenth-century Germany, laying the groundwork for a general critique of nomothetic positivism and establishing a counter-matrix within which at least the human sciences might develop along lines sensitive to the historical, intentional and interpretive character of their object. Economics, grappling with the problems posed by Germany's delayed and turbulent industrialisation, was among the disciplines so affected; hence the emergence in that domain of several historicist/interpretive tendencies, ranging from Marxism on the radical side to the *katheder-sozialistische* cross-overs of Smith and organicism which more appealed to the economic historians of early twentieth-century Canada.

And here precisely came a point of rupture. For when the Toronto school of political economy, imbued with a historicising spirit, became conjuncturally open to the ideas of Schmoller, List, Sombart, Weber and so on, it simultaneously opened itself up to the influence of the alien, i.e. non-empiricist, universe of discourse to which they belonged. With Innis himself, steadfastly ideographic, totalising, and historically self-aware, this disruptive borrowing effected something of a real break. The major mediating influence (from Innis's days at Chicago) was Veblen: the senior North American representative of the German economic school, and a neo-Kantian, whom Innis went so far as to eulogise (in 1929) as the Adam Smith of capitalism's mature industrial phase.<sup>12</sup>

If, then, Innis gives the impression of having pressed an empirically based approach to economic history beyond its familiar and even permissible bounds, this is for good reason. For the influence of Veblen and, more diffusely, of late 19th century culture-critique, made him into a major

## RE-READING INNIS

(perhaps in English Canada the major) conduit for the admission via economic history of Germanic epistemic themes into derivatively British intellectual forms. Lewis Mumford coined the phrase cultural pseudomorph to describe such phenomena as the 'horseless carriage' wherein the early automobile was misleadingly assimilated to the cultural terms of a technology it had surpassed. Similarly one might say that Innis was an epistemic pseudomorph: a Germanic thinker in English-Canadian disguise.

### 3. The Greek Connection

Now the Germanic inflection of Innis's approach to socio-historical analysis was neither an arbitrary borrowing nor, yet, the simple outcome of a disinterested desire to understand Canada and the world in better terms than prevailing categories allowed. As a methodological bias it also expressed a value-choice which fundamentally called into question mechanical and technicist forms of thought and in turn formed the basis of a substantive civilisational critique. Thus when Innis, echoing Marx on fetishism and Weber on rationalisation, denounced statistics as "the snake" that had "entered the paradise of academic interests in political economy"<sup>13</sup> he was bemoaning the Fall at the level of the referent as well as at the level of the representamen.

So intimate a link between social and epistemological attitude could hardly have been avoided, of course, for an anti-positivist position of the kind he adopted stresses the interpenetration of subject and object and argues the impossibility of value-neutrality even in principle. While Innis himself spoke little of such matters, scattered references to Nietzsche, Burkhardt, Weber and Spengler<sup>14</sup> make clear that he well understood, and was indeed prepared to buy into, the wider *kritische* programme which his historicist critique of quantitative economics implied. What attracted him, evidently, to these "authors of great repute" was not just the frankness with which their methodological postulates were associated with ideological ones but the actual content of the latter.

Put baldly, the ideological element linking Innis's methodological presuppositions to his substantive critique, and linking both to this neo-romantic current of German thought, was modern Hellenism: that complex (taken to be prototypically Greek) of revived cultural ideals, indeed of culture as the ideal, that was counterposed to the puritanism and levelling instrumentalism of the machine age, and promoted as the basis for a corrective civilisational renewal. Once more, but this time on the ideological plane, Innis is liable to be misunderstood; and once more problems created by the elliptical character of his writing are compounded by those of interpretive resistance to its intent.

Despite his scholarly eminence, Innis was always a lonely and embattled figure, none more so, in fact, than when playing just that role of academic standard-bearer that his Hellenism enjoined. "I am under no illusions in appearing before this gathering", he told Conservative Party workers at a summer school in 1933. "I do not expect to exert any influence ... and I do not expect that many of you will understand any economic exposition advanced in this paper."<sup>15</sup> Introducing a talk fifteen years later on the social impact of technological change he was moved to ask "why Western civilisation has reached the point that a conference composed largely of university administrators should unconsciously assume division in points of view in the field of learning ... and forget the problem of unity ... or, to put it in a different way, why all of us here seem to be what is wrong with Western civilisation."<sup>16</sup> Within the university itself he certainly had allies, but after his death the Hellenist impulse withered with its technocratic transformation, while in the community at large it had never gained much of a foothold, even as a pole of opposition.

Today, in the ultra-commercial and ultra-administered spaces of post-industrial capitalism, an emphasis on such classical values as self-realising leisure (*schole*), education for practical wisdom (*paideia*) and excellence as the criterion of virtue (*arete*) has no resonance at all. Indeed, it runs positively against the grain, particularly when the aristocratic pathos of these values is pointedly unconcealed. Innis's stance is particularly troublesome for those who would approach him from the direction of his materialist political economy and thence appropriate him for the Left. A sheep and goats approach — retaining the economically based historiography but casting aside the objectionable Greek elements — has been the most obvious appropriative temptation. But a premature refusal to take seriously the "elitist"<sup>17</sup> cultural perspective that surfaces so explicitly in his later writings precludes attention, at the same time, to the perspective underlying his earlier ones and invites a simplifying misrecognition: Innis as a quasi-Marxist under the skin.

On the one hand, certainly, Innis's views on such matters as economic dependency, staples production and the Depression mark him out as broadly in tune with the programme of moderate Thirties socialism. Beyond defending a measure of public ownership and planning, moreover, he clearly had a visceral dislike for capitalism as such, objecting on every level to its ever-expanding commerce, and viewing its liberal legitimization (in terms of consumer sovereignty and free speech) as a hypocritical mask for the rise of new monopolies to power. More analytically, Innis's account of Canada's distorted socio-economic development, though idiosyncratically formulated, was similar to the Lenin/Trotsky thesis about combined and uneven development, and in its own right came to influence subsequent

## RE-READING INNIS

Third Worldist analyses of capitalist imperialism. Closer to home, that same model showed how Canada itself had moved from "colony to nation to colony"<sup>18</sup> and expressed a state-oriented concern for economic independence which foreshadowed the left-nationalism that has dominated oppositional thinking in English-Canada ever since.

But despite these points of contact, the fit is still imperfect. Innis may have used terms like monopoly, force and imperialism, but he had no category for economic class, ignored the problem of distributive justice, and invoked no version of the collective subject, proletarian or otherwise, with which to identify the ethical or strategic fortunes of progressive praxis. Towards Marxism itself, moreover, and despite a parallel emphasis on economic determinations and historical dialectics, Innis maintained a position of studied ambivalence. "Much of this" he observes in a 1948 survey paper "will smack of Marxian interpretation, but I have tried to use the Marxian interpretation to interpret Marx. There will be no systematic pushing of the Marxian conclusion to its ultimate limit, and in pushing it to its limit, showing its limitations."<sup>19</sup> Elsewhere, he includes among these limitations Marxism's blindness to the supplemental logic of its own credal form. "The class struggle itself has been made a monopoly of language" he notes, and "when the Communist manifesto proclaimed 'Workers of the world unite' in those words it forged new chains."<sup>20</sup>

Looked at more carefully, indeed, when Innis defends government ownership and argues for more attention to long-range development it is less socialism *per se* that is being advocated than enhanced self-understanding and a corrective balance. Thus, on the railways issue, he defended the privately owned character of the CPR no less than the publicly owned character of the CN, so that the power of the one would balance that of the other. Similarly, his support for planning was checked by his distaste for bureaucracy, and was related to the need to counter-balance the market's chronic confinement of attention to the short-range. Nor was this mere reformist temporising, for exactly the same regulative principles for institutional development reveal themselves in Innis's more outspoken writings on culture and communications as well.

For all the critical harangues, stability is his over-riding concern, and the socio-economic crisis of Canada no less than the civilisational crisis of the West is defined ultimately in terms of its determinate absence. "I have attempted to show elsewhere" he notes at the beginning of *A Plea For Time*, that in Western civilisation a stable society is dependent on an appreciation of a proper balance between the concepts of space and time."<sup>21</sup> Everywhere, then, the same formula about bias, counter-bias, and dialectical balance, and everywhere the same emphasis on historical vision and reflexivity as the pre-requisites for axial re-adjustment and civilisational health.

ANDREW WERNICK

The actual provenance of these all-embracing programmatic principles becomes clear when we recall the two sayings that were inscribed at the entrance to the temple of Appollo at Delphi: "Know yourself" and "Nothing in excess".

His attachment to the world of values that fell with Periclean Athens becomes quite explicit in his later work — "My bias is with the oral tradition, particularly as reflected in Greek civilisation"<sup>22</sup> — but even here the emphasis on media can distract attention from the pervasive effects of this attachment on the whole framework of categories he deployed. At that larger level, his ambiguous suggestion that radio as an oral medium might restore a sense of continuity to a chronically space-biased society was all of a piece with his attitude to economic planning and, on the methodological plane, with his insistence on comparative techno-economic history as the basis for a wise and serviceable social science.

Contextually, the centrality of Hellenic ideals to the formation of Innis's thought linked him to a wider revival of Hellenism within the early twentieth-century academy. At Toronto, echoes of this movement not only inspired direct attempts to restore the place of Classics within the curriculum, but stimulated a minor scholarly renaissance that saw the emergence of a powerful group of inter-disciplinarians — from Havelock and Cochrane in the twenties to Carpenter and McLuhan in the fifties — focussed like Innis himself on the critical examination of modernity through the looking-glass of Greece. The efflorescent quality of this development was facilitated by a favourable institutional conjuncture: as a young-old university, well-endowed and relatively autonomous because of its national role, the University of Toronto was lucky enough to come to intellectual maturity at a time of great ferment, before the modern divisions within the human sciences had had a chance to congeal, and just before its post-war expansion shattered the potential for further organic development altogether.

Less flatteringly, the strength of Hellenism in inter-war Toronto also reflected the relative susceptibility of Anglo-Canadian thought to metropolitan influences from without. There were, in fact, two external sources that bore the Hellenic impulse to him. Besides the impact of its Germanic incarnation (both directly and via Chicago), revived Greek values also entered into his milieu by way of a British source: English Literature, a discipline self-consciously imbued during its early days with the spirit not just of Anglophilia, but of Matthew Arnold and Victorian educational reform.

Ideologically, these two tendencies evidently complemented and reinforced one another. Whether assimilated via English criticism or political economy their appeal for academic humanists was the same: a romantic



## RE-READING INNIS

privileging of culture (in the qualitative sense of the term) and linkage of culture's missionary role to the charter functions of higher education.

That Innis himself should have so strongly identified with these principles is easily explained. As a native of a small town being rapidly drawn into the whirlpool of industrialisation, his formative experience was more than ordinarily imprinted by the 'great transformation' whose delayed and seemingly imposed character in Canada made the culture/civilisation problematic already plausible as the basis for historical critique. As for the institutional side of Innis's value-commitment — and here he drew from Arnold as much as from Burkhardt and Nietzsche — it is sufficient to recall that he had been raised to follow his father into the Baptist ministry; and when he chose instead to embrace the University, like so many other ideologues of the secular clerisy before and since, he transferred to it and to its role in the cultivation of reflective social intelligence all the pent-up sense of faith and mission originally intended for investment in the Church.

But however similar German and English strains of Hellenism were in these respects, their asymmetries should also be noted, both in terms of the epistemic and disciplinary fields with which they were associated and in relation to the categorical formation of Innis himself. Disentangling this knot of differences brings to light, in fact, two further respects in which Innis's heterodoxy makes him liable to be misunderstood.

The empiricist cast of British thought has inhibited Hellenist outbreaks more completely in the social sciences than in the realm of literary theory and aesthetics; and even here, with New Criticism, a (formalist) idealism about art has been tempered by an atomised individualism of the work. In an academic milieu that formed largely as a colonial offshoot of Britain, Innis's peculiarity was that he pursued Hellenistic themes in disciplines like economics where they were normally most repressed. At the same time, as a nationalist (a stance with affinities for democratic not to say populist values) his peculiarity was also to have explored such themes at all. Overall, this double transgression has precluded Innis's easy assimilation into any of the dominant intellectual camps; whence, in Canada, both his marginalisation and his continuing significance as an impossible hybrid who has at least made thinkable a de-dogmatising re-arrangement of the local intellectual field.

Innis's blend of economic historiography and classically-inspired culture-critique would seem less strange, of course, in a German context. In conjoining just such elements, indeed, his project bears a striking resemblance to the more familiar critical social science venture launched during his lifetime at Frankfurt. But here, too, and beyond its empiricised diction, Innis's paradigmatic operation has elements of originality which both set it apart

and from which the traditions that descend from Critical Theory themselves might have something to learn. Substantively, this second dimension of his heterodoxy is expressed in the relative centrality his thought accords to the moment of technology; and genealogically, once more, it registers the formative effects of his early encounter with Veblen.

#### 4. The Technological Mediation

The Frankfurt thinkers, following a groove already established by Lukacs,<sup>23</sup> tended to etherealise technology by absorbing its consideration within a critique of bureaucratic instrumentalism on the one hand, and of capitalist production relations on the other. While Innis was similarly suspicious of industrial capitalism's religion of progress and technique, the substitution in his socio-economic categories of Veblen for Marx (with all the theoretical simplifications this also entailed) to a large degree shielded him from the corresponding anti-technicist metaphysics to which such an ellipsis left Critical Theory itself always vulnerable.

This is not to say that Innis swallowed Veblen whole. He certainly rejected the latter's ethicised productivism<sup>24</sup> stressing (no less than Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse) the more leisurely ideals for praxis memorialised by the Greeks. As a Canadian, besides, he was bound to be less enthusiastic about the progressive potential of industry, having experienced its costs and benefits at the margin not the centre of modern empire. But his filiation with Veblen did alert him to differences between industry as such and capitalism; which more generally encouraged him to conceptualise the technological aspect of production as a mediation in its own right, with its own historically diverse forms of being and its own, sometimes contradictory, social effects.

Of all the Frankfurt thinkers, Innis's thought was perhaps closest in this respect to that of Benjamin.<sup>25</sup> Benjamin's interest in technology, too, addressed specifically its impact on communication; and while Benjamin was concerned mainly about the rise of the simulacrum, and Innis mainly about the rise of industrialised writing, both sensed in the advent of new media a fact of ruptural significance, both for the bourgeois cultural tradition and for critiques which appealed to its rationalist/artisanal aesthetic. That said, however, Innis's interest in communication was tied to a quite different socio-economic problematic, with respect to which (in a sense to be explained) the technological theme loomed larger overall.

Veblen's reflections on the travails of modern capitalism,<sup>26</sup> had essentially revolved around five points: (1) that business and industry, as modal practices as well as institutional sites, are the twin pillars of capitalist civilisation; (2) that the gathering Twentieth Century storm (he died in

## RE-READING INNIS

1929) is to be accounted for in terms of their inherent conflict, exacerbated by the disequilibrium resulting from the structural dominance of the former; (3) that in production the unbridled market creates speculative disturbances, precludes planning and leads to irresponsible (because absentee) patterns of ownership; while (4) in the private sphere the market's fusion with status competition substitutes consumerism for the 'instinct of workmanship', and thereby undermines industrialism's motivational base. From which he concluded (5) that the historical options for transcending the crisis were Bolshevism, whose levelling spirit would be disastrous for entrepreneurship, or a technocratic takeover by an industrial alliance of workers, managers, planners and engineers.

Innis's relation to Veblen, in these terms, can be simply put: he accepted points 1, 3 and 4 but not points 2 and 5. Thus he similarly stressed inter-institutional (rather than class) contradictions, was similarly pre-occupied with the impact of commercial and industrial practices on collective psychology and 'habit' and likewise deplored the disastrous effects of the market in monopolising attention for short-range needs. But, in tune with his greater Hellenism, Innis rejected Veblen's advocacy of a liberated industrialism, seeing it and the 'price-system' as not just inter-linked but parallel forces, with instabilities in society and culture arising from the conjoint impact of ('space-binding') biases common to both. Less sanguine, therefore, that counter-tendencies lay historically to hand, he scanned the horizons for evidence that such forces might yet emerge, pinning his evaporating hopes on a revived oral tradition or on modal changes to sensibility that might occur as the unintended result of present or future technological change.

The particularities of Innis's thematisation are embedded in his actual work, a far-ranging set of enquiries into first the political economy of Canada<sup>27</sup> and then the global history of communication.<sup>28</sup> But here, in this very bifurcation, we are faced with yet another interpretive difficulty. What, we must ask, is the relation between the two halves of his project? And what light does that relation throw on the way his thematisation of technology coheres overall?

The political economy phase of Innis's enquiry was guided by the insight that Canada's episodic and unbalanced development derived from its marginal relation to industrialising centres (first England and then the United States) for whom Canada had served as the provider of a succession of staple inputs. What caught his attention was both the relative economic turbulence which this arrangement produced, and the association of different staple industries with different transportation systems, each more capital intensive than the last, and each having a profound effect on the character of social life as a whole.

Synchronically, each successive configuration of staple and transport entailed its own relation between people and land, with attendant implications for habitation patterns, commerce and the distribution of power. "Lumber tended to emphasise the efficiency of downstream traffic on the large rivers, whereas fur tended to emphasise the efficiency of upstream traffic in smaller rivers".<sup>29</sup> "We can trace in direct descent from the introduction of steam on the St. Lawrence waterways, the Act of Union, the completion of the St. Lawrence canals, the Grand Trunk ... Confederation, the Inter-colonial, the National Policy, the CPR ... and the drift to protection."<sup>30</sup>

Diachronically, the capital intensiveness of staples-related transportation systems (besides upping the ante on technical or economic obsolescence) implied the need for centralised finance and growing involvement by the state. With canals came Responsible Government; with railways, Confederation. However (pace Veblen) the corresponding need for long-range planning to deal with growing government debt and the social costs of moving from one staple/transport system to another was continually thwarted by the short-sightedness of private capital which was in any case hostile towards any such 'socialist' trend.

Taking these two dimensions together, Innis traced the whole discontinuous history of staples and transport systems that had marked Canada's stormy passage from paleo- to neo-technics. For all its economic complexion and local reference, then, his account even at this stage addressed a very general issue: the impact of techno-economic development on human ecology in relation to space and time, and the prospects through public policy for achieving between these dimensions some kind of adaptive balance.

At that thematic level, the communications phase of Innis's enquiry, while certainly switching terrain, was exactly continuous with the first. Each medium, like each staple, had its own bias, its own "influence on the dissemination of knowledge over space and time."<sup>31</sup> And for each period he "attempted to trace the implications of the media of communication for the character of knowledge and to suggest that a monopoly or oligopoly of knowledge is built up to the point that equilibrium is disturbed."<sup>32</sup>

But what these formulations also reveal is that between his concept of staples/transport and knowledge/communications there are relations of analogy as well. In effect, the framework he developed for analysing the former became a model for analysing the latter. Thus, the history of communication, as of the Canadian economy, is presented as a succession of technologies for transporting things (physically, prior to the telegraph), together with a matching series of things being moved. In the case of communication, these latter are also seen as binaries, bringing together a

## RE-READING INNIS

form of inscription with a form of medium, each of which both embody technique and have their own sensuous impact. At every level, in fact, Innis's concern was with the mediating impact of what one might call distributional technology; with respect to which, in turning to the study of communication, his attention simply shifted from the (market-driven) conveyance of commodities to the (culturally and politically driven) conveyance of signs.

The empirical pivot on which Innis's enquiry changed direction was the lumber industry, a Canadian staple which had slumped with the coming of steamships but gained a new lease on life with the burgeoning demand for pulp and paper. Here, then, was a primary commodity forwardly linked not to food, clothing, or capital goods, but to information and culture. Moreover, the linked product in greatest demand was newsprint, and the rise of a mass press itself betokened industrial producers' growing need to advertise. Thus, this staple also subserved the spreading promotionalism that Veblen (qua 'conspicuous consumption') had seen as capitalism's coming cultural dominant. Attentive to this dual significance, Innis turned from pulp and paper to the publishing industry itself, and thence, on the one hand, to the more general analysis of industrialised communication and, on the other, to the place of publishing within the history of communication as such.<sup>33</sup>

In terms of his wider thematic, these new areas of study also brought to the surface two issues previously implied but not directly posed. The first concerned the causal relation between distributional technology and cultural bias, both in general and with reference to what he called with increasing gloom "the crisis of Western civilisation". The second concerned the socio-historical grounding of his own bias, particularly the Greek-derived problematic of cultural health to which it made appeal. In so far as this latter was itself conceived as a corrective, the questions were evidently linked, and he found a clue to both in his notion that communicative technologies could be distinguished on the basis of their relative capacity to communicate through space or across time.

His starting-point was Havelock's reworking of Plato's ideas<sup>34</sup> concerning the threat posed to Greek culture by the rise of writing. "The impact of writing and printing" he noted "... increases the difficulties of understanding a civilisation based on the oral tradition."<sup>35</sup> But if the vitality of Greek culture rested on its oral character, its finest flowering came as the outcome of an encounter with the Phoenician alphabet, wherein, for an instant, the biases of the oral mode were in balance with those of the written. This example for him was paradigmatic:

The character of the medium of communication tends to create a bias in civilisation favourable to an over-emphasis on the time

## ANDREW WERNICK

concept or on the space concept and only at rare intervals are the biases offset by the influence of another medium and stability achieved.<sup>36</sup>

In institutional terms, he suggested, an emphasis on space-binding communication facilitated centralised political control, time-binding communication favored the maintenance of religion and cultural tradition, and the most successful civilisations (Byzantium as the classic case<sup>37</sup>) were those in which the two counter-balancing tendencies were able to co-exist. In this respect, the Greek example was paradigmatic for him in a second respect: the tension between the oral tradition and writing was taken to be a tension between two different modes of cultural storage, memory versus inscription, and as such to incarnate the distinction between time- and space-biased media themselves.

Innis's perception that "inventions in commercialism"<sup>38</sup> had dangerously disturbed the modern cultural balance immediately followed from this. With the industrial revolution and its extension to communications, the speeded-up market had accelerated writing to the point that centralist political tendencies had no cultural check and collective memory had virtually dissolved. In an age of war, depression and tyranny (to which we must now add: environmental ruin) the resulting prevalence of present-mindedness was not just a matter for regret, but cause and symptom of a profound contradiction: the sensitivity to long-run consequences that industrialism made urgent was at the same time precluded by the forms of communication that industrialism installed. "Each civilisation" he observes "has its own method of suicide."<sup>39</sup>

While he held out little prospect of solution, two possible counter-tendencies presented themselves: new media and a revitalised oral tradition. Concerning the first, Innis noted the ambivalent significance of "a competitive type of communication based on the ear, in the radio and in the linking of sound to the cinema and to television."<sup>40</sup> On the one hand, with its emphasis on "the necessity of a concern for continuity" radio might offset the visual bias of paper and print; but it was also inherently centralising, and in commercial form exacerbated the effects of the press in accentuating "the importance of the superficial and the ephemeral."<sup>41</sup> As for oral culture, besides championing the losing cause of academia, its last institutional bastion, Innis proffered his own work; not, that is, just for its contents but for its form: writing, certainly, but writing crossed with speech.

### 5. Counter-bias and the future of reason

On both counts, Innis's programmatic opens up issues that go to the heart of technological modernity and the problems of its critique. But his darken-

## RE-READING INNIS

ing mood suggests also that his thought got into an impasse; as a result of which (or so the optimist might argue) he was led to over-read the impasse that he took Western civilisation itself to be in. Without pre-judging that question, the paradigmatic operation I have been describing certainly produced its own gaps and reductions; and these will have to be not just milked for their symptomatic value but positively corrected if the Innisian project is to be revived in the context of contemporary debate. In that spirit I would conclude by highlighting, in particular, three respects in which Innis's analysis both opened up strategic issues and at the same time was inherently restricted by its tacit categorical scheme.

Consider, first, Innis's focus on distributional technology and his use, in that context, of staples/transportation as a model for understanding the technological dimension of communication. On the positive side, one may say that this very stress on how goods and information are distributed, while in some respects pre-marxist, offers a useful corrective to Marxism's own fixation on the moment of production. It is a corrective, moreover, which complements the increased attention to consumption and exchange that advanced capitalism's vastly expanded selling apparatus has also quite properly evinced. However, while Innis evidently recognised the strategic importance that the non-production side of the capitalist economy had come to assume, his reluctance to theorise this point left the interplay between distribution, circulation and exchange unexamined and, more importantly, left the limitations of the distributional model itself as an analogue for communication wholly in the shade.

In view of his ambiguous remarks about radio, it is particularly worth emphasizing in this regard the weakness of his transportation analogy when applied to electronic media: first, because communication by wire and broadcast is instantaneous and freed from reliance on physical transport; and secondly because radio, records, t.v. etc. require reception equipment — a new (and for Innis wholly unnoticed) intervention of technology in the communication process which likewise has its own specific mediating cultural effects. Among these effects, Innis never analysed for example the privatising dimension of the new media, their destruction, relative to the older print media, of a horizontally interacting public. More generally, while he tacitly incorporated instantaneity (but not recording) in his thesis concerning modern space-bias, the second new feature involved a further aspect of communication, reception, which his focus on distribution and his analogy of communication with transport never really allowed him to see.

Secondly, there is the question of Innis's treatment of technological bias itself, and specifically his central insight concerning the difference between time and space-binding media. This was perhaps Innis's strongest point, and continues to provide a powerful heuristic not only for the comparative study of civilisations but also for the critical investigation of our own. Above

all, it placed the traditionalist lament about the destruction of continuity (in his terms, time-binding communication) on a material foundation and moved such critique beyond nostalgia both by a stress on time/space balance and by focussing not just on industrialism's incapacity to recall the past but on its even more disturbing inability to communicate with the future.

However, Innis's axial distinction between time- and space-binding communication was elliptically mapped onto the opposition between speech and writing, partly as a result of his identification with the tensions of Greek culture and partly as a further consequence of his transport model, in terms of which speech/writing were rendered in effect as polar forms of conveyance. Again, as a result, we have an over-condensed system of binaries, and again conceptual problems arise when we try to apply his ideas to the new technological constellation represented by electronic media. Modern communicative forms are in a pure sense neither speech nor writing, constituting in effect the emergence of a hybrid third. Problematising this latter in terms of Innis's own dichotomy between speech and writing reveals, in addition, a further lacuna: Innis's treatment of new media failed to differentiate between broadcasting and recording, a weakness shared in equal measure by Benjamin who confounded them both with the again quite different phenomenon of mechanical reproduction.

The conceptual problem here is not just that Innis's typology is too restrictive, but that in his haste to grasp the relation between media forms and time/space bias he conflated distinctions between forms of (linguistic) expression with those between forms of storage and collective memory. The example of graffiti, however, shows that inscription is by no means identical with external storage, just as every teacher knows that oral communication does not necessarily presuppose memory. The actual relation between medium and storage depends, one might say, on which medium is dominant: but then what are we to make of a culture — our own — where a multiplicity of media forms co-exist? In the *Phaedrus*, Plato had worried about the effects of writing on speech, and Rousseau later characterised the former as a 'dangerous supplement' (like masturbation: a figure that Derrida made great play of in *Of Grammatology*).<sup>42</sup> From that perspective, the decisive question concerning radio, film records and t.v. is not whether their expressive and storage implications are most analogous to those of speech or writing but how the latter, as such, have been affected in their functioning by the arrival of new media.

Baudrillard's observations concerning recording and the stock-piling of time<sup>43</sup> are seminal in this regard, although his focus is more on the deadness of the time stored than on the implications of prodigiously enhanced storage capacity for collective memory as such. Still, Innis's argument could well be elaborated on this ground: in effect, the more technologically



## RE-READING INNIS

advanced (with simulacra and their electro-magnetic recording) cultural storage has become, the more collective memory, whose contents increase exponentially, resembles a Tower of Babel in reverse. This amnesia through confusion has been further exacerbated by the effects on commercialised culture of fashion; itself linked to an accelerating process of competitive exchange which (as Innis himself noted in his study of publishing) extends to the immaterial commodities of communication just as much as to other goods.

Overall, then, while Innis posed a fundamental issue by spelling out the material under-pinnings of industrial capitalism's 'space-bias', his media grammar was defective. McLuhan's own modification of Innis begins, indeed, precisely with this point, although he only compounded the problem by mapping Innis's distinctions between time/space and speech/writing onto yet a third distinction based on sense: "After many historical demonstrations of the space-binding power of the eye and the time-binding power of the ear" he notes "Innis refrains from applying these structural principles to the action of radio. Suddenly he shifts the ear world of radio into the visual orbit, attributing to radio all the centralising powers of the eye and of visual culture."<sup>44</sup>

From this angle, Innis's own suggestion that radio, as the return of the oral/aural, had been associated with a growing "concern with the problems of time"<sup>45</sup> was not just unsatisfactory but paved the way, on his own terrain, for the abandonment of its critical underpinnings altogether. By downplaying the mediation of commerce and excluding the problem of memory, McLuhan was led to discern in the impact of the electronic media, *tout court*, tendencies towards synesthesia and re-tribalisation which he welcomed as betokening the return of more integral cognitive modes.<sup>46</sup> Correspondingly more convinced than Innis that technological modernity was itself producing a paradigm shift, McLuhan saw in the new media's oral reversal of print not the final victory of spatialisation, but the adaptive correlate, if only we would recognise it, of our now wholly outered technology: the collective brain that is outside and over us, and whose sleep-walking servo-mechanism we have, in shocked response, unfortunately become.

Underlying McLuhan's revision of Innis, evidently, is not just a different evaluation of radio, film t.v. etc. but a different, that is sensuous and primitivist, conception of the oral. And this brings us to the final point: Innis's espousal of the oral mode itself as a counter-bias against advanced industrialism's all-pervasive time-denying trend. At the analytic level, I have already suggested that the strengths and weaknesses of Innis's conceptualisation of oral culture hinge on his model of time/space bias on the one hand and his grammar of media on the other. But Innis, committed to reflexivity, also aimed to ground his own position and, finally, to practice the

counter-bias that he preached. What remains to be considered, then, is the adequacy of the two respects in which his attachment to the oral was manifest in his own praxis.

The first was in his partisanship for the academy, which combined externally championing the university's autonomy and charter ideals with a coruscating critique of its seemingly inexorable drift along the road of industrialisation and commercialism.<sup>47</sup> That this drift could lead to massive institutional upheavals as well as to the industrial terminus he feared was beyond his historical horizon, and signals on one level his individualistic reluctance to seek out, still less endorse, the transformist potential of mass discontent. On another level, it also suggests an unreflected fetishisation of oral culture's institutionalised forms. There are, however, both extra and infra-institutional networks and traditions of face-to-face talk that have always been crucial to the development of intellectual culture, and which have presumably become strategic in the face of the institutional trends Innis himself presents. Here, as elsewhere, while Innis's critique is persuasive in its general outline, the dichotomies (in this case, individual/institution) in which it was couched need to be deconstructed so as to yield a real politics.

The second way in which Innis practically expressed his oral bias was in his own mode of communicating, and more particularly in the paradoxes of his style. In that context not the least paradox is that his chosen medium was print. Professional pressures aside, it is hard to see how else in a space-biased techno-economic environment he could have effectively reached an audience, but such exigencies clearly presented a practical dilemma.<sup>48</sup> One resolution would have been to acknowledge that post-print media have so impoverished face-to-face talk that writing itself, despite the publishing industry, has in any case become the most durable mode of communication. To have taken this tack, however, would have forced him to de-couple the issue of cultural continuity from that of media form, and thus jettison his model.

Instead, Innis tried to replicate in his own authorial practice the same tense solution arrived at (in their heyday) by the Greeks: the cultivation of a form of writing in which the medium's innate tendencies to linearity and centralism were held in check by the time-biased vitality of speech. His preference for the essay form, penchant for aphorism and story and joking references to his own suppressed proclivity for sermonising (his texts were as frequently Winnie the Pooh as the Bible), all testify to this effort, which in turn meshed with both his anti-formulaic emphasis on particularity and his empiricist reluctance to theorise. But however methodologically consistent his stylistic solution, when judged in terms of his larger objectives, also contained problems.

## RE-READING INNIS

First, while his stories, appositions, and aphorisms were designed at once to awaken and lodge themselves in the collective memory, the conceptual operation he was performing as an analyst of civilisation could not so easily be sustained. Indeed, the very qualities by which he strove to make his work orally memorable placed obstacles in the way of its subsequent appropriation as a theoretical construct. Given its elliptical expression, in fact, to pick up on his project now requires a prior interpretive effort which the condition of modern readership, precisely because of the time problem, renders very difficult.

But this difficulty in turn betokens another. As McLuhan and Theall<sup>49</sup> have suggested, Innis's refusal to be closed, logical and Cartesian represented a decisive shift from the intellectual modes of print sensibility; one which, while self-defined as conservative (back to the Greeks), no doubt also corresponded to that wider cultural trend towards discontinuous holism which these commentators generally associated with technological modernity and the rise of electronic media themselves. At the same time, however, Innis wrote as a social scientist, an attachment that for all its historicist and anti-specialist bent signified a continuing commitment to the intellectual values of the Enlightenment itself. Neither poet nor mystic his analyses always addressed practical issues; and in every case, whether the issue was railway finance, the future of federal cultural policy or the merits of part-time education, he strove to present a coherent socio-historical argument, universalisable in its principles and able to ground a reasonable social response.

There was, then, a conflict between the stylistic effects of his oral bias and the analytic requirements of his commitment to reconstructive rationality. That the claims of the latter never won out can be explained in terms of his commitment to the former. In part, though, this also reflects his pessimistic assessment that the conditions for substantive rationality were unlikely to be restored.<sup>50</sup> Ideologically, as a result, his thought oscillated between a praxis-based search for strategy and a prophetic embrace of fate, an ambiguity that was textually expressed, above all, by a pervasive irony.

As agreeable a literary effect as this may have sometimes produced, by not safeguarding his perspective in replicable categories Innis risked surrendering his thought to mythicisation; which is precisely what happened at the hands of McLuhan, through whom a simplified (and pro-modernist) version of his media themes passed later on, for example, into France.<sup>51</sup> The corresponding risk of schematism and space-bias needs also to be avoided. But, analytically, if we are to develop a form of historically operative reflexive wisdom along the lines Innis desired, we must engage both sides of an investigative dialectic of which Innis himself could only see one. Certainly we need a broad-scale socio-historical approach, but on the other

## ANDREW WERNICK

hand we also need metatheoretical reflection both to clarify grounds and to situate the concepts employed. In turn, at the price of accessibility (but not necessarily of duration) this would imply a form of writing which, though still narrative, was conceptually fuller than Innis's and more self-consciously inter-textual.

To continue Innis's project, then, we have to do precisely what Innis himself was not prepared to entertain: systematise his categories and reflect on their inter-connected logic. We will, at the same time, want to relax their reductions and compare his thematisation of culture, economy and technology with others so as to generate a more multi-dimensional and, at once, consistent account. After such an oecumenical appropriation no doubt Innis's own contribution will still seem immense. But in the end his greatest value may lie in what his unresolved contradictions themselves most strikingly reveal: that in the face of a changed communications environment the challenge facing contemporary social theory is how to develop new styles of conceptual expression which take those changes into account without succumbing to 'post-modern' ideologies which celebrate the culture of late capitalism as the (playful) return of chaos and myth.

Cultural Studies  
Trent University

### Notes

1. The list is long and lengthening. Here, I would especially mention: R. Neill, *A New Theory of Value: the Canadian Economics of Harold Innis* (Toronto: U. of Toronto Press, 1972); D. Drache, 'Rediscovering Canadian Political Economy', *Journal of Canadian Studies*, Aug. 1976; *Journal of Canadian Studies* and *Queen's Quarterly*, Winter 1977, special issues; W. Melody, L. Salter, P. Heyer (eds), *Culture, Communication, and Dependency: the Tradition of H.A. Innis* (New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Company, 1981); and A. Kroker, *Innis/McLuhan/Grant: Technology and the Canadian Mind* (Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1984).
2. See S. Hughes, *Consciousness and Society* (Octagon Press, 1976).
3. A term coined by Marshall McLuhan.
4. H. Innis, *Essays in Canadian Economic History* (Toronto: U. of Toronto Press, 1979), p. 387.
5. See for example 'The Military Implications of the American Constitution' read at the Salmagundi Club on Dec. 6th, 1951, reprinted with 'The Strategy of Culture: with Special Reference to Canadian Literature — a Footnote to the Massey Report' (Toronto: U. of Toronto Press, 1952).
6. *Essays in Canadian Economic History*, pp. 252-262.
7. For a discussion of British, French and German 'national' epistemes see L. Goldmann, *Immanuel Kant* (London: New Left Books, 1971) Ch. 1, and A. Wernick, 'Structuralism and the Dislocation of the French Rationalist Project' in J. Fekete (ed), *The Structural Allegory: Reconstructive Encounters with the New French Thought* (Minneapolis: Minnesota U. Press, 1984).
8. In the index to *The Bias of Communication* (Toronto: U. of Toronto Press, 1964), there are six references to Hume, two each to Locke and Hobbes, and none to Bacon.
9. *Q. v. Kant's Preface to Critique of Pure Practical Reason*.

## RE-READING INNIS

10. Mentioned in Innis's 1929 essay on Veblen. See *Essays*, p. 18.
11. In remarks at a symposium on Innis organised by the Association for Canadian Studies, U. of Montreal, June 6th 1985.
12. "He has been the first to attempt a general stock-taking of general tendencies in a dynamic society saddled with machine industry, just as Adam Smith was the first to present a general stock-taking before machine industry came in." *Essays*, p. 25.
13. *Essays*, p. 252.
14. See especially 'A Plea for Time', in *The Bias of Communication*, 'The Strategy of Culture' and the notes collected under the title *The Idea File of Harold Adams Innis*, W. Christian (ed) (Toronto: U. of Toronto Press, 1980).
15. *Essays*, p. 190.
16. *The Bias of Communication*, p. 191.
17. See for example P. Heyer, 'Innis and the History of Communication: Antecedents, Parallels, and Unsuspected Biases' in Melody *et al.* (eds) *Culture, Communication and Dependency*, p. 253.
18. *Essays*, p. 405.
19. *The Bias of Communication*, p. 190.
20. *The Idea File*, p. 45.
21. *The Bias of Communication*, p. 64.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 190.
23. See particularly his essay on 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat' in *History and Class Consciousness*.
24. For which see especially T. Veblen, *The Instinct of Workmanship* (New York: Viking, 1914).
25. The key text in this regard is 'The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction'.
26. See especially: *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Viking, 1899), *The Theory of Business Enterprise* (New York: Viking, 1904), *The Vested Interests and The State of the Industrial Arts* (New York: Viking, 1919), *The Engineers and the Price System* (New York: Viking, 1921) and *Absentee Ownership* (New York: Viking, 1924).
27. Q. v. *A History of the Canadian Pacific Railway* (Toronto: U. of Toronto Press, 1971); *The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History*, revised ed., (Toronto: U. of Toronto Press, 1956); *The Cod Fisheries: a History of an International Economy* (New Haven, Mass., and London: Yale U. Press and Oxford U. Press, 1940); and the essays on staples and transport in *Essays in Canadian Economic History*.
28. Key texts here are the essays in *The Bias of Communication* and *Empire and Communications* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), and the posthumously edited *Idea File*. The essays of the late Thirties, following Althusser, we can call 'the works of the break'.
29. *Problems of Staples Production in Canada* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1933), p. 19.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
31. *The Bias of Communication*, p. 33.
32. *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.
33. For a summary of Innis's work on pulp-and-paper see his article in *The Encyclopedia of Canada*, W.S. Stewart (ed), (Toronto: University Associates of Canada Limited, 1935-49), pp. 176-185 and the useful footnote (5) in I. Spry's 'Overhead Costs, Rigidities of Productive Capacity, and the Price-system' in Melody *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 165. Innis's work on publishing is similarly dispersed, but see especially Innis's essays on 'The English Publishing Trade in the Eighteenth Century' and

## ANDREW WERNICK

- 'Technology and Public Opinion in the United States' in *The Bias of Communication*, 'The Strategy of Culture', and *The Idea File*, *passim*.
34. E. Havelock, *The Crucifixion of Intellectual Man*.
  35. *The Bias of Communication*, p. 41.
  36. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
  37. *Empire and Communications*, p. 139.
  38. *The Bias of Communication*, p. 86.
  39. *Ibid.*, p. 141.
  40. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
  41. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
  42. J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976). Part two elaborates his antiphonocentric critiques of Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Languages*; for a discussion of writing's supplemental relation to speech see pp. 141-157.
  43. An idea extensively developed in J. Baudrillard, *L'Échange Symbolique et la Mort*.
  44. From McLuhan's Introduction to the 1964 edition of *The Bias of Communication*, p. xii.
  45. *The Bias of Communication*, p. 87.
  46. The best critique of McLuhan's reconciliationism is to be found in part three of J. Fekete's *The Critical Twilight* (London: Routledge, and Kegan Paul, 1977).
  47. See for example *The Bias of Communication*, pp. 90-91 and 195.
  48. That Innis himself was aware of the problem is clear from his prefatory remarks to *Empire and Communications*: "The twentieth century has been conspicuous for extended publications on civilisation which in themselves reflect a type of civilisation. It is suggested that all written works, including this one, have dangerous implications to the vitality of an oral tradition and to the health of a civilisation ..."
  49. For McLuhan's comments, see again his Introduction to *The Bias of Communication*. For Theall's view, see D. Theall 'Explorations in Communications Since Innis', in Melody *et al.* (eds), *op. cit.*, especially pp. 225-227.
  50. "Printers' ink threatens to submerge even the literary arts in Canada and it may seem futile to raise the question of cultural possibilities ... But we can at least point to the conditions which seem fatal to cultural interests." 'The Strategy of Culture', p. 1.
  51. Among current French cultural theorists, one notes for example the influence of McLuhan on Baudrillard and, in with respect to the problematisation of modern music, J. Attali's *Bruits: Essai sur l'Economie Politique de la Musique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1977).