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Book review: Wilbur Schramm and Noam Chomsky meet Harold Innis: media, power and democracy: review essay

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Wilbur Schramm and Noam Chomsky Meet Harold Innis: Media, Power and Democracy: Review Essay
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This book is organized around two questions - whether Harold A. Innis's work deserves acclaim in Canada, and why his work does not receive widespread recognition in the United States and beyond. The answers are presented in the form of an extended narrative interpretation, richly interspersed with quotes, of the works of Innis, Noam Chomsky, and Wilbur Schramm. The book is organized in three parts – an introduction to Innis's staples thesis and his writings on what later would be designated as medium theory. Part two compares the works of Schramm and Innis; Part Three offers a similar comparison with Chomsky's work on media, propaganda and democracy. Robert Babe concludes that 'Innis remains relevant in warning us always to remain cognizant and to be critical of trends, pressures, and trajectories' (p. 247).

Babe explains that Innis's perspective on the biases of communication emerging with technological change showed that technologies are employed in different cultural contexts and appropriated in diverse ways, provoking misunderstanding. Bias, for Innis, refers not so much to the meaning of media content but to the problems resulting from historical and contemporary power asymmetries. The analysis of power imbalances was at odds with scholarship in mainstream of media and communication studies, particularly but not exclusively, in the United States which privileged the (inconclusive) study of media message effects. Wilbur Schramm was the leading exponent of that tradition in the United States, while Innis, and later Chomsky, would be ignored or criticized for their critical perspectives on the role of the media and their contribution to political economies.

There is a long running debate about the ascendency of instrumental or 'administrative' over 'critical' research in media and communications studies. Working in the 'administrative' tradition, Schramm suggested that the technologies of communication are neutral, that is, they are or should be value free. Seeking evidence of scientifically verifiable media effects, and finding ambiguous evidence, he argued that effects are weak at best and that the role of mass media in American democracy bore no similarity to their role in propaganda in totalitarian regimes. In stark contrast, Innis argued that 'the best minds' in the academy were focusing on answers to instrumental questions when they ought to be aiming to uncover how communication technologies and the media favour dominant interests in commerce and the military and manipulate public opinion. Similarly, in his work on the media and propaganda, Chomsky aimed 'to speak the truth and to expose lies' (Babe citing Chomsky, p. 181); hence, Babe's alignment of both Innis and Chomsky with a critical research agenda.

Babe's discussion of Innis's work discusses the staples thesis and medium theory, the concepts of space and time, the political economy tradition, epistemological questions, the media and public opinion, and the role of the scholarship in society – introducing interesting, sometimes counterintuitive, insights and providing an excellent resource of citations. The discussion of Schramm's work in relation to Innis draws out the contradictions in Schramm's work, particularly around his treatment of media effects, and discusses the political or normative positioning of his work. Similarly, the comparison of Innis with Chomsky brings to light the struggles of scholars whose work challenges authority.

An especially interesting feature of this volume is what it tells us about what counts as 'critical' scholarship in academic studies of the media and communication. In what senses are Innis and Chomsky, respectively, to be regarded as critical scholars? Babe explains how Innis's 'staples thesis' is linked to his study of bias, empire and communication, and monopolies of knowledge. Innis employed his historical method to reveal factors that give rise to power asymmetries and he challenged the tenets of theories resting on methodological individualism. Innis was critical inasmuch as he located the individual and her or his capacity for action within the constraining context of technology, institutions, and legislation. Thus he argued, 'obsession with present-mindedness precludes speculation in terms of time and duration . . . This contemporary attitude leads to the

discouragement of all exercise of the will or the belief in human power' (Babe citing Innis, p. 71). Innis aimed to find commonalities, consistencies, and recurrent patterns to infer prevailing tendencies. He lamented the disempowering consequences of specific configurations of technologies and institutions for individuals. As Babe points out, however, Innis proposed rebalancing and countervailing power as a response to monopolies of knowledge of all kinds.

As Babe shows us, Innis, the trained economist, offers us a critique of power asymmetries with the achievement of balance as the ultimate goal, for instance, between orality and the written word, or between communication technologies and media favouring space or time. This perspective is 'critical' within a scholarly framework that seeks to redress to power imbalances through institutional reform. The emphasis on countervailing forces is reminiscent of the 'old' institutional economics tradition in the American academy, a point also made by Tremblay (2012). Striving for balance (even if it is unattainable) suggests an implicit theory of an out-of-equilibrium system. This indeed represents a critique of the assumptions of mainstream economics, but not, I suggest, a radical a departure as Babe sometimes seems to imply. Babe does point out that there are few mentions of class or, indeed, of ideology, in Innis's work. Innis's work is located in an evolutionary theory of change that arguably is consistent with the institutional economics tradition of his time. It certainly provided a critique of mainstream economists' fascination with analysis of systems in an equilibrium state. Babe notes that Innis was against political activism on the part of scholars and that he looked, albeit pessimistically, to the reform of law and policy and to 'honest' academicians to provide the insight for fostering the conditions for individual freedom and democracy.

Another 'critical' tradition of scholarship then and now seeks to uncover the disruptive conditions that give rise to the exploitative circuit of capital and to understand how the media and communication technologies are produced in ways that oppress human beings. Chomsky's work, with its invitation to consider a marxian dialectic of power relations that gives rise to ideology that obscures unequal material power, fits more comfortably in this critical tradition. As Babe points out, Chomsky opposes 'ideological uniformity' inculcated through media propaganda. But as Babe also stresses, while Chomsky has characterized his own work on linguistics as science, he has depicted his work on the media as 'common sense'. This makes it hard to position him within the second 'critical' tradition of media scholarship, though many do position him here.

Babe appears to attribute these distinctive 'critical' approaches to differences in Innis's and Chomsky's views of human nature. This may be so, but it is fruitful to consider how these differences are articulated in their implicit theories of change. Chomsky is shown to offer us an implicitly marxian account of the dialectic of power relations. Innis, in contrast, is shown to offer us insight into a dialectic of change that maneuvers, and is influenced by, the character of the medium of communication. It is arguably divorced from the materiality of life and seems to offer an implicit theory which is missing a materialist component at least as that term is understood in a Marxian context. Marginal notes in Dallas Smythe's copy of *The Bias of Communication* which he gave me when he was a member of my doctoral Committee at Simon Fraser University lend support to this observation and to the importance of distinguishing between different 'critical' scholarships. For example, in the 'Minerva's Owl' essay, Innis says 'I have attempted … to suggest that a monopoly or an oligopoly of knowledge is built up to the point that *equilibrium* is disturbed' (emphasis added, p. 3-4). Commenting on the idea of equilibrium, Smythe scribbles 'from his mind, not from reality with its ceaseless struggles'. Other marginal notes suggest that Smythe thought that Innis did not enter sufficiently into a critique of the materialist power of capitalist markets as a principal force shaping the mediated world. Critical scholars who uncover the exploitative dynamics of mediated (or mediatized) capitalism are often unconcerned with institutional reform as a means of redressing injustices. For these critical scholars, however ideology is theorized, injustice is inescapable without a revolution. In this respect and for them, Innis's work seems liberal and even instrumental, rather than 'critical' in the sense that it is not derived a Marxist oeuvre.

Babe concludes overall that 'Innis and Chomsky both discerned a strong alignment between the press system and the military, important victims of this unholy alliance being freedom of expression—and peace' (p. 215). What Babe does not bring out as fully as he might have is Innis's underlying theory of change. What I miss is an explicit discussion of the kind of dialectic that is understood to be at work; that is, a deeper consideration of the theory of change in the works of the scholars who are compared in this book. In the case of Schramm, it is clear – a market-led view of technological innovation and information effects. In Chomsky's work on media, the theory of change is consistent with an asymmetrical view of structural institutional power, driven by the

dynamics of ideology and capital. But in Innis's work, Babe does not really give us a clear picture of the underpinning theory of change. If the reader's preference is for institutional reform within the capitalist system, then Innis's conceptual framework has much to offer to contemporary media and communication scholarship. If, instead, a reader's preference is for a theory of change which provides an understanding of how contemporary media and digital technologies sustain capitalism, they are likely to find Innis's work wanting. Babe might have explained, for instance, why Innis's insights into the mechanization of knowledge and its relationship to monopoly and unequal power go only part of the way towards explaining power asymmetries because he sees media systems as always either tending away from or towards a balanced position. Despite Babe's occasional invocations of Michel Foucault and Norman Fairclough, he does not seem to acknowledge fully that their 'critical' understandings of power derive from theories of change that differ considerably from implicit theories in Innis's work. Their work suggests a rather different understanding of the dialectic of change and, generally, does not imply a reformist stance when it comes to normative policy prescription.

Babe says that Innis 'placed his finger on the pulse of modernity, and found modernity to be frail. … Innis was repudiating mainstay tenets of governments, media organizations, scholars, and indeed virtually all proponents of the contemporary zeitgeist—namely, the equating of technological progress with human betterment!' (p. 51). If Innis had fully articulated what his underlying theory of change was, his work might be more central for critical scholars of media and communication who explore the values embedded in digital architectures or the reform of practices and institutions that might help to greater equality or justice. This is simply to say that the critical thinking and analysis that Innis provides for contemporary scholars fits within a particular part of 'critical' scholarship. To understand why work persists, or should persist, through time, it is important to look *within* the critical tradition to uncover normative commitments to material change that can shed light on contemporary struggles.

Insofar as Innis did not particularly elaborate a theory of change, it seems to me that this is the key to why his work has received relatively less attention than the work of others. It has received some attention, however. For readers looking for additional guides to Innis's work by Babe, they can turn to Comor (2011), and by others, to Buxton (2013), Heyer (2003), Melody et al. (1981) and a special issue of *The Canadian Journal of Communication* dedicated to Innis in 2004 (29(2)). Babe cites many sources in the introductory chapter to his book. Is Innis as neglected as Babe seems to suggest? In some ways yes, but, for example, Durham Peters and Simonson (2004) include a text from *The Bias of Communication* in their key texts 1919-1968 on mass communication and American social thought, positioning Innis alongside Lewes Mumford. Canadian scholars cite his work in connection with contemporary debates about the media and public policy (Raboy 2006) and the structure of the Canadian (mineral) economy (McAllister 2007). Contemporary discussions about 'mediatization theory' in Europe, although they conflate the work of Innis and McLuhan, acknowledge Innis's enduring contribution to scholarship in the media and communication field (Krotz and Hepp 2011).

In the final chapter, Babe considers contemporary mediated experience of the 'war on terror', the power of companies such as Facebook to control information, the increasing mechanization of information and other topics through an Innisian lens, but he leaves the question of a theory of change and power open. He asks whether power invariably corrupts and whether it can be used for good. I wanted him to make his own theory of power more explicit, that is, to tell us something in a self-reflexive way about how his own theory of change biases what he chooses to privilege as an interpreter of these scholarly texts. There are some hints, but I look forward to Babe's next work. I hope he will develop his observation that 'we always live, and must live, in the dialectic of opposing forces' (p. 247). No matter their theoretical stance, most 'critical' researchers are likely to agree with this. The normative question remains, however. How do Innis's contributions help us to understand the mediated world *and also* to change it? Babe presents us with fascinating juxtapositions of three very different scholars. The work is a *tour de force*. Readers will be well-rewarded by being provoked and stimulated by Babe's comparisons of theories, methods and uses of empirical evidence.

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