**Review**


*Political Economy in the Modern State* is not one of Harold A. Innis’s most lauded books. Certainly, the economic historian and communication theorist, widely acclaimed for works such as *Empire and Communications* and *The Bias of Communication*, is often cited as one of Canada’s preeminent social scientists. Yet, many Canadian communication scholars will not have heard of the book that features in this review, let alone read it.

In this new edition, Robert E. Babe and Edward A. Comor, professors in the Faculty of Information and Media Studies at Western University, prove this neglect is unwarranted. In a general introduction, concise introductions to each of its fifteen chapters, and a meticulous index, the editors enhance Innis’s contribution and parse out what is, on its own, a difficult and dense read. (An early reviewer of the book, which was initially published in 1946, referred to its style as “even more atrocious than is normally to be expected of North American academics” [p. XXX].) Indeed, this recent publication meaningfully foregrounds Innis’s contextual and reflexive approach to understanding the social world.

One of the most evident contributions this edition offers is a delineation of the book’s four unifying themes: power and international peace; the underpinnings of bias; specialization and mechanized knowledge; and civilizational crisis. In their discussion of these reoccurring ideas, Babe and Comor help the reader see the connections between the chapters’ often seemingly disparate discussions and place them within Innis’ complex conception of political economy. One illustration is the returning notion of specialization and mechanization which Innis uses to explore topics ranging from technical advances in the publishing industry to the specialization of mathematical systems. What connects these examples? The idea that extensive mechanization and specialization risk limiting the capacity for critical thought and political economy,
which Innis views as “the highest exercise of the human mind” (as said by Cobden, p. 101). In the words of the editors, Innis “addressed the relationship between how knowledge is produced and a culture’s capacity to even ask questions regarding its complexities” (p. XXXIII).

Certainly, part of the challenge to making sense of Political Economy in the Modern State is its breadth. The first half of the book is dedicated to the study of media, communications and culture, while the latter half focuses more closely on ideas and topics characteristic of economics and political economy. It’s hard to imagine a contemporary academic text, or a mainstream one for that matter, successfully taking such an approach today. Yet, in their commentary and analysis, Babe and Comor illustrate how this scope is actually one of the book’s greatest strengths, particularly because it showcases Innis’s capacity to link together and draw meanings from comparisons across disciplines. The concept of bias, which the thinker famously used to understand the influence of institutions, organizations, media, systems, and technologies on human understanding, is one example. Indeed, while today the notion is most often applied to incontrovertible communication media (e.g., radio), Innis regularly used the concept to interrogate economic and other elements of society as media.

An instance of this application is Innis’ discussion of the price system, which features in Chapter eight of the reviewed text. A copy of the social scientist’s 1938 inaugural address as President of the Canadian Political Science Association, Babe and Comor suggest the speech signals Innis’ disciplinary shift from economics to communication studies. The chapter reflects the scholar’s rich understanding of the two fields by, amongst other contributions, positioning the price system as a powerful communication medium that exists within certain historical and political contexts. The price system is not objective, but a “snake” that entered modern economic thought under “the stimulus of treasure from the new world” (p. 145). As Babe and Comor write in the dedicated chapter introduction: “Thinking and policymaking based on or appealing to the purported efficiency and neutrality of the price system [will] cloak the presence and reproduction of power disparities” (p. LXXV). Here, and throughout the book, the editors guide the reader to a clear understanding of Innis’ criticism of the ways that power moves through and is maintained within societies.

Despite the worth of this work, perhaps where Babe and Comor might have gone further is in a more detailed discussion of the prescience of Political Economy in the Modern State. The existing section is undoubtedly thoughtful and coherently lays out comments on the relevance of the book’s contribution today. For one, the editors suggest, the power struggles outlined by Innis—“the quest for control and certainty, mechanistic methodologies, short-term conceptualizations, fanaticism and extremism, antiecological ways of living and thinking and much else” (p. XXXIV)—remain present in society. Moreover, the use of technology can exacerbate these issues and deepen real tensions and conflicts.

Yet, beyond noting the continued pertinence of Innis’ ideas, it seems possible that more words could have been spent overtly applying them to the contemporary international context and to Canada’s situation specifically. How might Innis’ conceptions be used to better understand a social world that seems infinitely more globalized and
connected than it was in 1946? How do these ideas map onto Canada’s contemporary political economy specifically? And finally, are there any solutions that can be drawn from Innis that may at least mitigate some of the challenges identified in this section? The editors largely leave the readers to answer these questions themselves.

In any case, this is a small suggestion and one that I hope will not take away from the value of this important revival. This book will be of interest to students and scholars working in the social sciences and interested in gaining an original perspective on one of the most important Canadian thinkers of the twentieth-century.

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