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'Poster Meets Innis: Poststructuralism and the Possibility of Political Economy'

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Cultural Studies and Political Economy Column

Poster Meets Innis: Poststructuralism and the Possibility of Political Economy

This is the fifth and final column in the *Topia* series exploring intersections between political economy and cultural studies. The column in *Topia* 15 (Babe 2006: 91-101) documents the tendency on the part of mainstream American communication/media scholars—from John Dewey in the first decades of the 20th century to postmodernist writers of today—to obscure to the vanishing point concerns and methods of political economy. The earlier column suggests that "readers should scrutinize carefully the writings of contemporary poststructuralist/postmodernist authoritative figures to determine just where they stand on issues of political economy" (98). That is precisely what we do here: we focus on the American poststructuralist Mark Poster and compare his writings to the media analysis of Canadian political economist Harold Innis.

About seven years ago, a doctoral student in England suggested to one of us that an interest in Innis would make an interest in Poster something of a "natural fit," as their theories are, from the student's perspective, so similar. From the surface-level similarities between them one could conclude that the two approaches are easily integrated. Our contention here is that this veneer of similarity masks deep-seated differences and revealing contradictions. As Poster is one of the more "materialist" of the poststructuralists, the incompatibility of his framework with political economy has broader applicability. Interestingly, Poster claims that poststructuralism "is a uniquely American practice." The writings of seminal French theorists, such as Derrida, Baudrillard, Lyotard and Foucault, he explains, "have far greater currency in the United States than in France" (Poster 1989: 6). If this is correct, then the fundamental contradiction between poststructuralism and political economy we posit in this comparison gives added support to the evidence presented in the previous

column concerning the penchant of mainstream American theorists to dismiss or rule out considerations of political economy (Babe 2006).

Mark Poster

At the core of Mark Poster's work are the concepts of the mode of information, language and poststructuralism. We begin by looking at, and commenting upon, these three concepts.

Language and the mode of information

For Mark Poster, every medium of communication, from cave paintings and clay tablets to computer databases and communications satellites, "profoundly *intervenes* in the network of relations that constitute a society" (1990: 7, emphasis added). As the means of communication change, "the relation of language and society, idea and action, self and other" change also (1990: 6). Poster coined the term, the mode of information, to designate the consequences of these "interventions," particularly with regard to language (1989: 82).

He proposes three general stages in the mode of information, each corresponding to a particular manner of transmitting messages. In the first stage, occurring in oral societies, face-to-face exchanges entail symbolical correspondences because communicators are conversing about objects in their immediate environs, or as he puts it, "the self is constituted as a position of enunciation through its embeddedness in a totality of face-to-face relations" (1990: 6). In the second stage, where exchanges are predominantly mediated by print, the representational property of language comes to the fore and the "self is constructed as an agent in rational/imaginary autonomy" (ibid.). This is presumably a consequence of the private nature of reading/writing and the concern for depicting through language objects not present in the immediate environs and events scattered through time and over space.

The third stage is that of electronics. He affords so much of his attention to this stage that he often uses the term, mode of information, to refer solely to it. He declares, for example, "The mode of information designates social relations mediated by electronic communication systems, which constitute new patterns of language" (1989: 126).

Language, although important in all stages in structuring human relations and configuring individual identities,[1] is for Poster of particular significance in the era of electronics. Electronics brings about such fundamental linguistic change that theorizing language is even more essential than hitherto. Whereas in the ages of writing and of face-to-face communication, analysts (the "grand theorists") could with equanimity focus on actions or activities and neglect language, in our electronics era, he contends, social theorists *must* turn from action to language.[2] It is this focus on language that defines Poster as a poststructuralist.[3]

In this third stage, the era of electronics, by Poster's account, words (or signs more generally) cease to represent the outside/non-linguistic world. They instead refer chiefly to themselves (self-referentiality of language). Electronic media, according to Poster—drawing particularly on Jean Baudrillard—allow or cause signifiers to float

in relation to referents, transforming language; that is, the linguistic context within which people function:

> In TV ads, where the new mode of signification is most clearly seen, floating signifiers are attached to commodities.… Each TV ad replicates in its structure the ultimate facility of language: language is remade, new connections are established in the TV ad through which new meanings emerge.… Floating signifiers, which have no relation to the product, are set in play; images and words that convey desirable or undesirable states of being are portrayed in a manner that optimizes the viewer's attention without arousing critical awareness. (Poster 1990: 62-63)

And citing a specific example:

> The [television] ad takes a signifier, a word that has no traditional relation with the object being promoted, and attaches it to that object.… Johnson's floor wax now equals romantic rescue. The commodity has been given a semiotic value that is distinct from, indeed out of phase with, its use value and its exchange value.… The ad shapes a new language, a new set of meanings (floor wax/romance) which everyone speaks or better which speaks everyone. Baudrillard calls the collective language of commodity ads "the code." [T]he code may be understood as a language or sign system unique to the mode of information, to electronically mediated communication systems. (1990: 58)

We will return to Poster's analysis of the floor wax commercial. For now, the main point is that for Poster "representation comes to grief when words lose their connection with things and come to stand in the place of things, in short, when language represents itself" (1989: 13). This linguistic transformation brings about new patterns of human relations, new processes of establishing self-identities and a transformed conception of truth and the real.

Let us consider Poster's position on these three consequences of linguistic change in the electronics era. First, Poster, like Innis, proposes that electronics change the time and space relations among communicators: he writes, "the exchange of symbols between human beings is now far less subject to constraints of space and time" (1990: 2). Electronics are giving rise to "vast, massive, and profound upheavals" because the social world has now "become constituted in part by … a simultaneity of event and record of the event, by an instantaneity of act and observation, by an immediacy and copresence of electronically mediated meanings to a large extent self-referentially" (1989: 9). While the distancing between message senders and message receivers began in earnest in the age of print, Poster claims that electronics magnifies that phenomenon to such a degree as to bring about qualitative changes in the nature of human relations (1989: 128). For instance, in computer chat rooms, communicators retain anonymity and can assume and change identities at a whim.

Second, linguistic change in the electronics era affects processes of constructing self-identities. For Poster, "the self is decentered, dispersed, and multiplied in continuous instability" (1990: 6). "In this world," he continues, "the subject has no anchor, no fixed place, no point of perspective, no discreet centre, no clear boundary" (1990: 11). In part this is an outcome of the exaggerated separation in time and/or space between message receivers and senders. But television advertisements are also of con-

sequence in this regard as they fashion viewers into consumer-subjects "with floating signifiers attached to commodities not by any intrinsic relation to them but by the logic of unfulfilled desire, which is at once imprinted in the subject's fantasy" (1989: 79-80).

Third, as language loses its property of representation, "'reality' comes to be constituted in the 'unreal' dimension of the media" (1989: 85). Indeed, "it becomes increasingly difficult, or even pointless, for the subject to distinguish a 'real' existing 'behind' the flow of signifiers" (1990: 15). Poster writes: "The tendency in poststructuralism is therefore to regard truth as a multiplicity, to exult in the play of diverse meanings, in the continual process of reinterpretation, in the contention of opposing claims" (1989: 15); "social life in part becomes a practice of positioning subjects to receive and interpret messages" (1990: 15).

For Poster there is a distinct advantage to assuming the poststructuralist stance in the electronic era: poststructuralism undermines power centres. Every discourse ("grand narrative"), and all knowledge systems including scientific knowledge systems, he believes, buttress structures of power (1989: 26). The contention, then, is that to reduce domination, discrimination and repression of ethnic, linguistic, sexual and other marginalized groups, discourses (or what others might term knowledge or knowledge systems) must and can be de-authenticated; it is here that Poster links up most clearly with Derrida and other deconstructionists.

According to Poster, poststructuralism is just what is needed for de-authenticating discourse/knowledge because it asserts that *all* discourses are inherently self-referential, and hence bear little or no descriptive accuracy regarding the material world, even though they undoubtedly affect mindsets or belief systems concerning that world. By denying the possibility of representation, poststructuralists believe they countervail power on the part of those who exert power by claiming universal truth. Like Nietzsche, Poster insists that "truth is not a transcendent unity" (1989: 15). Furthermore, he views the fissure between language and reality as an opportunity to be seized in the struggle to subvert centres of power based on claims of universal truth.

It is apparent how Poster could be thought of as covering the same ground as Innis. First, both are concerned about the reflexivity of scholarship, about the impact of context on the truth claims of theorists. Second, Poster's "mode of information" would seem to conform to Innis's "biases of communication." Innis, after all, investigated the time-space biases of orality, various modes of writing and electronics (primarily radio) and speculated on their implications for structuring consciousness. For both thinkers, these various modes of communication help establish different "time and space relation[s] of communicators." Like Innis, Poster refers to the flight of Minerva's owl as a metaphor for civilizational change in eras characterized by new media of communication (Poster 1990: 81). Third, Innis wrote about "monopolies of knowledge" and the related power to control of the predominant media of communication. Poster expresses concern with those marginalized in society and connects such marginalization to the mode of information, media, knowledge and control of discourses—in brief, to the "representations" through which the marginalized are depicted, thought about, interpreted, characterized, discussed.[4]

Despite such commonalities, important distinctions and cleavages between Poster and Innis are manifest. Poster is far more interested than Innis in the "constitution" or the "structuring" of *individuals* through various modes of information. Innis's interest is in the role of various media in constituting the organization of *societies*. Furthermore, Poster contrasts language and action, and maintains that linguistic change is key to comprehending our present, electronically mediated era. For Poster, the only "reality" we now know is of the order of language. Innis would never reduce reality to language, although he certainly emphasizes the bidirectional impact between language practices and material conditions. Poster proposes that the major consequence of media evolution is to transform language—from symbolic correspondence to representation and, finally, to self-referentiality. For Innis, by contrast, the major consequence of media evolution is to alter the balance or tension between continuity and change, between control through time vs. control over space, between diachronic and synchronic linkages (Wernick 1999: 265).

Linguistic transformation?

Undoubtedly Poster is correct that some communication in oral cultures corresponds to the immediate circumstances of the communicators. But it is also true that much of oral communication in tribal societies is/was devoted to recounting histories and myths which set the ontological framework for everyday life. Homer's poetry depicting the intervention in human affairs of the gods of Mount Olympus did not correspond (we now think) directly to the material circumstances of daily life in ancient Greece. The Old and New Testaments, likewise, were inscribed from oral transmissions, but their mysticism did not always correspond to the warp and woof of everyday existence. In animistic societies, each blade of grass is deemed to be host to a spirit or deity, again making dubious the validity of Poster's assertion that "symbolic correspondence" characterizes oral society. One might even suggest that, due to the importance of legends, myths, superstitions and sacred stories, the self-referential ("floating signifiers") property of language was *greater* in tribal (oral) society than it is today in our largely secularized society.

In *Anatomy of Criticism*, literary critic Northrop Frye insists that *writing* is predominantly self-referential, that it is largely independent of outside factors (Frye 1957: 17). "Nothing is prior in significance to literature itself," he declares (1960: 44). For Frye, works of literature reflect and refer to one another through their conventions, genres, images, archetypes and so forth. Literature is an "order of words," a seamless structure: "The new poem, like the new baby, is born into an already existing order and is typical of the structure of poetry, which is ready to receive it" (ibid.). For Frye, science is first and foremost a *literature* and like all literatures refers primarily to itself, as opposed to the material phenomena that purportedly constitute its subject matters. In *The Great Code,* published decades after *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye argues that all contemporary western literature can be traced to the template set by the Old and New Testaments (Frye 1982; 1990). Science philosopher Thomas Kuhn also denies the representational aspect of scientific literature, arguing that science is primarily a socio-cultural activity practised by like-minded investigators who observe phenomena through the lens of the presuppositions and prior expectations set by their discipline—i.e., their literature (Kuhn 1962).

Contentions like these undermine Poster's assertion that electronics ushered in a radically new era. Poster writes:

> The representational function of language has been placed in question by different communicational patterns each of which shift to the forefront the self-referential aspect of language.… Language [is now] constituted as an intelligible field … whose power derives not so much from representing something else but from its internal linguistic structure. *While this feature of language is always present in its use,* today increasingly meaning is sustained through mechanisms of self-referentiality and the non-linguistic thing, the referent, fades into obscurity, playing less and less of a role in the delicate process of sustaining cultural meanings. (Poster 1990: 13, emphases added)

Here Poster agrees that the self-referentiality of language "is always present in its use." The question is whether "self-referentiality" is of monumentally greater significance today, compared to the age of print or of tribal cultures, so as to constitute an entirely new era. Frye's answer would be no.

A related question concerns whether there may be other factors ignored or downplayed by Poster, such as Innis's historicist concept of time-space bias, that distinguish clearly the electronics era from what preceded it. And the biggest question: What difference does it make if we accede to Poster's position rather than Innis's?

Poststructuralism as a discourse

An obvious criticism is that poststructuralism is itself "a discourse," and hence it, too, is implicated in structuring/concentrating power. As a riposte Poster proposes that by introducing the concept of the "mode of information" into poststructuralist discourse, he has lessened the "totalizing" tendency of poststructuralism, rendering it now merely a "nontotalizing totalization" (1989: 7). Despite important commonalties, he claims, each of the electronic media (telegraph, telephone, radio, television, computers, satellites) requires its own detailed, unique exposition. "There is a multiplicity of discourses within the mode of information" (1989: 139). The electronic mode of information, by covering variegated phenomena, obviates the charge of "grand narrative." But do not the commonalities Poster proposes for the various electronic modes of communication (decentring subjects; destroying truth, "reality," authenticity and the efficacy of reason; transforming language into a system of self-reference) far outweigh their differences, thereby rendering the mode of information itself a totalizing discourse?

Since an important feature of poststructuralism is "to consider the context in which one is theorizing," the theorist becomes aware of and reflects upon "the relative importance of the topic one is choosing to treat" (1989: 7-8). In other words, poststructuralists endeavour to adopt a position of theoretical relativism rather than the absolutism of the "grand narrators." By "connecting one's theoretical domain to one's sociocultural world or to some aspect of it," he explains, "one ensures in advance that one's discourse does not emanate from a transcendental ego" (ibid.). Just how successful is Poster, and other poststructuralists, in avoiding totalizations emanating from a "transcendental ego"? The following extracts from Poster's work speak for themselves:

> The intellectual's will to power is stashed in his or her text in the form of universal reason. The art of appropriating the universal was the main business of the Enlightenment. The philosophes were master impressionists whose collective textual voice ventriloquized that of humanity but spoke for a particular social class. (1989: 31)
>
> As we bid farewell to the proletariat we must close the books on a whole epoch of politics, the era of the dialectic and the class struggle (1990: 130).
>
> Truth is not a transcendent unity (1989: 15).

It is surprising that Poster makes truth claims for his position on the mode of information in the electronic age given his main argument that language is now self-referential and has lost its capacity for representation. Poster also proposes that logic and reason have no place in our era, which indicates his position is not debatable: it is merely a matter of rhetoric, persuasion, presentation. We pursue this point in the next section.

Poststructuralism and political economy

Poster notes that Habermas regards poststructuralism as an essentially conservative, or right wing philosophy (Poster 1989: 28, 62). Habermas contends that poststructuralism abandons the Enlightenment, which for our present purpose implies that poststructuralism undermines the very possibility of political economy. Poster himself states: "Linearity and causality are the spatial and temporal orderings of the now-bypassed modern era" (Poster 1989: 90). How can one do political economy if language is no longer representational, merely self-referential, and if causality is anachronous?

Poster's riposte is interesting. He asserts, first, that since all discourses, all knowledge systems, including scientific knowledge systems, are implicated in power (1989: 26), to redress domination and repression, discourses themselves (including scientific discourses) must be de-authenticated. Thus poststructuralism is the latest advance in critical theory. He characterizes critical theory as an approach seeking "to assist the movement of revolution by providing a counter-ideology that delegitimizes the ruling class" (1989: 107). Of course critical theory existed long before the arrival of postmodernism and poststructuralism; Marx's writings, for example, were counter-hegemonic in the industrial age, just as Enlightenment writings were counter-hegemonic in the age of faith. For our era, Poster maintains, there needs to be a new critical theory accountable to the changed mode of information; poststructuralism contributes to critical theory today by "raising the question of language" (Poster 1989: 116).

Poster concedes that in the industrial age, Marxist theory, centring on ownership of the means of production, was perhaps adequate to highlight patterns of domination. But with electronics, discourse has superceded property as the primary site of domination. In the postmodern era, the task of critical theorists must be to reveal these language-based patterns of domination, and subvert them. Hence, the mode of information must replace the mode of production as the fulcrum for contemporary critical thought and strategy (1989: 106).[5]

This position also deserves critical scrutiny. Is ownership and control of media relatively unimportant compared to the linguistic consequences purported to be inherent

in new media? (One recalls here the dictum of the anti-political economist, Marshall McLuhan, that "the medium is the message" (Babe 2000: 305-06). Poster's position hinges on an affirmative answer, but his evidence is unconvincing. For example, he makes much of television advertising's imputation of nonsensical properties to products as an instance in which language loses referentiality in the electronic age. There is nothing inherent in the technology of television that requires it to be used for advertising or that, if so used, its ads take on the characteristics outlined by Poster. Surely those issues are better understood by drawing on analyses concerning ownership, control and commodification.

Regarding the Johnson's floor wax commercial, Poster argues that linking floor wax and romance means that "the commodity has been given a semiotic value that is distinct from and indeed out of phase with its use value and its exchange value." He continues: "The social effect of the ad (floor wax/romance) is not economic or psychological, but linguistic: the TV viewer participates in a communication, is part of a new language system. *That is all*" (Poster 1990: 59, emphasis added). From a political economy perspective, Poster's analysis is naive in the extreme. Floor wax is linked to romance in the commercial for the purpose of increasing the product's exchange value; the purveyor of floor wax does this on account of the economic/media environment in which it operates. Viewers participate in a language system that is rife with political economic causes and consequences.

Similar questions can be raised pertaining to Poster's discourse on surveillance and other aspects of his "mode of information" in the electronics age. Following the lead provided by Walter Lippmann's analyses of pseudoenvironments (Lippmann 1921), the phenomena of self-referentiality, simulations, hyper-realities and simulacra addressed by Poster all point to the *increasing* relevance of political economy in the electronics age. *Who* is enabled to construct media simulations, why and how are they so enabled? What is the nature of these simulations, and whose interests do they promote? What aspects of material reality are obfuscated through this approach to simulation? Of course Poster claims that we cannot fruitfully address material reality at all. But once we, in effect (and ironically, given Poster's professed promotion of reflexivity and his ostensible concern for the marginalized), *close debate* within poststructuralist frameworks through the presumption that hyper-reality is "all there is" (to paraphrase the old Peggy Lee song), advertisers, PR professionals, propagandists and others with communicatory power will have won the day. Lippmann claimed that political/economic power accrues to those who can construct believable "pseudoenvironments." Poster's poststructuralism negates the very possibility of critique; pseudoenvironments are as real as we can get:

> In the [electronic] mode of information it becomes increasingly difficult, or even pointless, for the subject to distinguish a "real" existing "behind" the flow of signifiers and as a consequence social life in part becomes a practice of positioning subjects to receive and interpret messages. (Poster 1990: 15)

> This self-referentiality of signs upsets the representational model of language, the assurance of reason to contain meaning, and the confidence in the ability of logical argument to determine the truth…. The electronic mediation of communication in the postmodern lifeworld brings to the fore the rhetorical, figurative, performative, and self-reflexive features of language. (1990: 10)

In statements like these, Poster's poststructuralism, despite its concern for the marginalized, buttresses existing power and further marginalizes dissent. Who is best situated to perform or concoct pseudoenvironments, to use figurative and performative ploys to persuade? Professional communicators, of course. Who is better able to hire the services of media professionals than the wealthy? Marginalized groups such as environmentalists may draw on reason, logic, data, evidence and a quest for truth as their best defences. Poster relegates these to the dung heap of anachronous curiosities. Wide acceptance of poststructuralism would be a boon for professional persuaders and propagandists.

In Milton's *Paradise Lost,* Satan declares: "The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n." For Poster, it is discourse, rhetoric and performance in the electronic mode of information that have this awesome power.

Harold Innis

Poster and Innis are both dedicated to the goal of developing reflexive capacities. For both, in the words of Poster, "the problem of communication theory begins with a recognition of necessary self-reflexivity, on the dependence of knowledge on its context" (1995: 74). For both, a method is needed to critically assess "the authorial position of the theorist and the categories he or she develops" (1995: 75). For Poster, modernist social science, including political economy, is anathema to this project, because the author invariably assumes a position of omniscience, a totalitarian ("totalizing") posture. Innis, on the other hand, never gives up on the Enlightenment project and, ironically perhaps, came to view classicism as the starting point for developing a self-reflexive mindset.[6] Intellectually, the university, said Innis, constitutes "a small and dwindling island surrounded by the flood of totalitarianism" (Innis 1946: 73). In this context Innis's communications studies constitute an attempt to forge an inherently reflexive social science by developing a political economic approach in which the concept of bias is prominent.

Bias

Following his classical studies contemporaries, Innis sought to investigate history by placing those interpreting it *and their biases* at the centre of his analysis (Watson 2006: 291). Innis's concept of bias first appears in a pre-communications-studies paper called "The Role of Intelligence" (Innis 1935). It was prepared in response to an article by E. J. Urwick who argued that the natural science paradigm was not suitable for the social scientist because, unlike the natural world, the social world is inherently unpredictable and ever-changing. This state of affairs, said Urwick, is largely the result of the inherent unpredictability of the thoughts and actions of basically free-willed human beings. The social scientist is infused with subjectivist tendencies. Hence, no human being could truly be objective while examining and interpreting the unpredictable subject of social behaviour. "Life," according to Urwick, "...moves by its own immanent force, into an unknowable future" (Urwick 1935: 76). Innis challenged both the belief that human behaviour is ultimately unpredictable and Urwick's rejection of the scientific project. While agreeing that much behaviour is spontaneous and that human beings (including social scientists) often act on the basis of ingrained behavioural patterns involving unreflexive thought, Innis responded to Urwick by recognizing that these thoughts and practices are themselves structurally conditioned. He called these thoughts and practices "biases." Innis made an impor-

tant assertion: while objectivity is impossible, the social scientist can develop the analytical tools needed to become aware of his/her own subjectivities, how they are constructed and how and why they are unconsciously expressed again and again.[7]

Here the framework is established for the development of Innis's bias of communication. By examining how day-to-day lives are mediated by organizations and institutions—how key nodal points of social-economic power affect thoughts and practices—Innis understood that the social scientist can develop a needed self-awareness. By identifying these key mediators, Innis thought that the social scientist could take preliminary steps in the task of redressing the influences of his/her own biases and their subsequent implications for the state of knowledge.

Alarmed by the rapid growth of specialization in social science in the 1930s, Innis was concerned that the university was becoming the arbiter of instant solutions rather than an essential source of critical questions. This viewpoint compelled him to pursue the question posed by philosopher James Ten Broeke—why do we attend to the things to which we attend?—and bias was the primary heuristic tool Innis developed in response.

Biases are organizational and conceptual orientations most generally expressed in terms of two fundamental indices of human existence: time and space. Bias does not stem directly or solely from the medium itself but, rather, it is the outcome of how a given medium or complex of media is structured and used by already-biased agents. In the context of capitalist modernity, a given medium—an institution, organization or technology—may facilitate control over space or territory, but generally their strategic application tends to weaken inter-related capacities concerning time (involving duration and sustainability). Radio, television, and now the Internet, can be assessed as technologies that, for the most part, have been structured to serve the spatial (i.e., "market share") interests of corporations and, in some cases, states. As such, for Innis, contemporary political economic relations are largely sustained through the widening and deepening of historically-structured relations involving, in the case of commercial applications, the immediate gratification and individualist biases normalized through various media. Because bias can never be assessed in isolation from the historical, dialectical whole, the deleterious implications for the temporal conditions of life—for collective memory, for sustainable practices, for long-term considerations—constituted Innis's primary political concern.

For Innis, holistic, historical and dialectical ruminations produced a pessimistic outlook when assessing the age of electronic communications. Efforts to control space, as both centring *and* decentring uses of the Internet later demonstrated, could lead to a general and systemically replicating neglect of time. Rather than assessing a given medium as itself enabling or disabling some ways of thinking and acting relative to others (as with Poster's affiliation of decentred cultures and liberated identities), Innis focused on the balance or imbalance of a given society's constituent biases. In a way, Poster's political hopes relative to the Internet and related electronic media ironically reflect the progressive sentiments of the modernist social scientist as opposed to Innis's pre-modern emphasis on tension and balance. While Innis emphasized the dialectics of human action and its limits in ecological and holistic contexts, Poster's modernist bias asserts itself through his focus on individuals and marginalized communities.

For Innis, time/space biases facilitated by media always emerge or decline in the context of historically-structured power relations. Poster's poststructuralist faith in discourse is, in comparison, relatively *un*reflexive. Poster neglects to mention that the capacity to understand biases (including one's own) entails an assessment of how, in any particular place and time, human relationships have been structured. Poster focuses on language-related meanings and opportunities in the context of generalizations concerning modes of information. Innis, in contrast, is more concerned with how intellectual capabilities are historically structured. In an interview conducted in 2003, Poster argues that consciousness in the emerging postmodern world is becoming "especially fluid," in part as a result of "sites or nodes of resistance [that are] decentralized, multicultural, and increasingly globalized…" (Poster 2003: 2). Although Poster says he is not an optimist (2001: 144; 2003: 13), compared to Innis and other political economists, his work is relatively idealist, in terms of both his general sanguinity and his emphasis on ideas rather than of material relations. For Poster, information is directly related to knowledge. What one knows of identity and meaning is transcribed through experience or autonomously constructed. A print-based mode of information imposes a dominant discourse on readers while an electronics-based mode opens up prospectively independent interpretations. From print enabling "the liberal humanist subject" to electronic media's facilitation of a prospectively self-reflexive subject (Poster 2003: 4), the historical, structural, power-laden conditions (and for Innis media) maintaining shared truths or, to borrow from Gramsci, common sense (and sometimes hegemonic) realities are under-theorized or ignored.

Information and Knowledge

Although Innis affirms the efficacy of material reality, at least in terms of historically structured relationships mediated by constructed but changing institutions, organizations and technologies, his work is more significantly delineated from classical empiricism and contemporary positivism through his application of bias. Poster takes his critique of Enlightenment thought well beyond Innis by arguing that realities (through the structural pervasiveness of ICTs) are being liberated through subjective rather than inter-subjective interpretations. In Poster's back-and-forth methodological individualism, informing the mode of information, and implicit technological determinism informing the cognitive processes used to make sense of information and experiences in his writings are remarkably under theorized. He neglects to address the forces, structures and processes involved in determining what information and experiences are available and influential. Innis, in contrast, assessed these directly, as aspects of the monopolization of knowledge.

Structurally, a monopoly of knowledge implies powerful forces at work in the production, distribution and uses of information. In a capitalist market system, in which the public service model has been placed at the policy periphery and access to wealth is a primary determinant of who gets what information, those with financial resources tend to dominate. Such political economic dimensions are not, of course, limited to mass media activities; among other nodal points of power they encompass scholarship also.[8]

Culturally, a monopoly of knowledge refers to *how* information is processed. Ideas about what is realistic and unrealistic, imaginable and unimaginable are generated

through structured and mediated cultural norms. Such norms are rife with political economic influences and implications. The paucity of dialectical thinking in mainstream Western thought constitutes one important instance of culture shaping acceptable/unacceptable ways of thinking. Poster is naive in his claim that communication mediated electronically negates socially constructed modes of processing information. He overlooks, for instance, the educational system and the requirements of employers in supporting particular ways of thinking and acting. To use Marx's phrase, "the dull compulsion of the quotidian" cannot be theorized into oblivion.

The same electronic technologies that Poster views to be prospectively liberating, Innis would have considered apocalyptic.

> Intellectual man of the nineteenth century was the first to estimate absolute nullity in time. The present—real, insistent, complex, and treated as an independent system, the foreshortening of practical prevision in the field of human action—has penetrated the most vulnerable areas of public policy. (Innis 1952: vi.)

Following the myth of Prometheus, the application of prospectively freeing technologies, for Innis, tends to produce tragic results. Addressing the bias enacted through the contemporary mechanization of knowledge[9] and modernity's pernicious neglect of time, Innis would argue that the Internet accelerates the peripheralization of reflexive thought. For Innis, an exponential growth of information and the individual's ability to manipulate it (as in Poster's emerging "humachine"[10]) was not the formula for a self-reflexive civilization—quite the opposite: "Enormous improvements in communication," observed Innis, "have made understanding [i.e., reflexivity] more difficult" (Innis 1951: 31).

Media Determinism

Both Poster and Innis have been accused of technological or media determinism. Ironically, Poster's emphasis on technological context has been a response to accusations of "linguistic reductionism." "My effort," he writes, "in theorizing the mode of information, has been to counteract the textualist tendency by linking poststructuralist theory with social change, by connecting it with electronic communications…" (Poster 1995: 75). Technologies of information exchange and production were introduced to provide his work with the kind of historical (and dare we say "materialist"?) contingency needed to avoid the swamp of idealism. Electronic communication, in Poster, gives integrity to the poststructuralist vision of "the self as multiple, changeable, fragmented" (77). Yet the tendency toward totalization through language, although buffered by references to technological capacity, remains. The Internet, says Poster, "resists" technological determinist questions because

> it installs a new regime of relations between human and matter and between matter and non-matter, reconfiguring the relation of technology to culture and thereby undermining the standpoint from within which, in the past, a discourse developed—one that appeared to be natural—about the effects of technology. (2001: 100)

Poster, like Innis, understands a medium as a kind of environment in which some capabilities are facilitated while others are retarded. But unlike Innis, Poster neglects

to flesh out the power-laden structures shaping a medium's ongoing history, including the biases of its participants.

But wait. Perhaps, for Poster, the Internet environment itself enables human thought and action—enables liberation among self-constituting, decentred "cyborgs"? According to Poster:

> While there is no doubt that the Internet folds into existing social functions and extends them in new ways … what are far more cogent as possible long-term political effects … are the ways in which it institutes new social functions, ones that do not fit easily within those of characteristically modern organizations. The problem is that *these new functions can only become intelligible if a framework is adopted that does not from the outset limit the discussion to modern patterns of determination*…. To ask then about the relation of the Internet to democracy is to challenge or to risk challenging our existing theoretical approaches and concepts as they concern these questions. (2001: 96-97, emphases added)

In other words, only by redressing the Western scientific/modernist narrative through the auspices of poststructuralism can Internet technologies be used to generate postmodern politics. The Internet is assumed to be a decentring communications system ideally suited for those escaping pre-constituted (modernist) notions of subjectivity. As Poster explains, "because it changes the space/time configuration of communicating individuals, it changes the social traits of individuals … making different hierarchies out of human potentials" (2001: 147). Because the problem with the contemporary order centres around meaning and identity, the Internet's use in decentralizing "the apparatuses of cultural production" opens up the possibility of a more just, heterogeneous and thus, it is assumed, less oppressive world (2001: 108). But, importantly, the political step toward this end is not just getting everyone "online"; instead, the assumed self-reflexivity of postructuralist thought itself is the key. The "ping" of discourse and the "pong" of technology go back and forth, back and forth, as one determinant supposedly counters the other.

For Innis, accusations of determinism are also inaccurate, but as a result of his reflexive political economy, a complex of structured, biased human relationships drive history, not the ping-pong of discourse and technology.

A typical reading of Innis on the role of communication technology or media goes something like this: because they are characteristically durable and difficult to transport, time-binding media include the spoken language, clay, parchment and stone. Space-biased media, on the other hand, are light and fragile, permitting wide-scale distribution but limiting in their duration over time. These include paper, celluloid and electronic signals. For many, Innis's writings convey a deterministic pattern. Time-biased media foster hierarchy, decentralization, provinciality and tradition, whereas space-biased media promote centralization, bureaucracy, secularism, imperialism and the use of force.

As implied earlier, such references to societies being temporally or spatially biased constitute generalizations only. More accurately and importantly, all biases are historically constructed and they are structured into daily social interaction and thinking as a result of complex and sometimes conflicting dynamics. For Innis, civilizations face annihilation when they are overwhelmed by the unchecked and

ongoing predominance of either time or space biases by vested (or class) interests who are themselves biased by the very media of their dominance and, tragically, their prospective liberation.

As with Poster's emphasis on poststructuralism as a method of reflexive thought, Innis's often suggestive mode of presentation arguably involves an effort to engage the reader in a kind of dialogue. Innis always took pains to use words such as "emphasize" and "implies" when making references to bias. In what might be read as a poststructuralist assault on modernist master narratives from the 1930s, Innis feared that "the conditions of freedom of thought are in danger of being destroyed by science, technology and the mechanization of knowledge and, with them, western civilization" (Innis 1951: 190). The social scientist/critical theorist must overcome this institutionalized bias through the re-balancing of scholarly concerns—away from the search for concrete facts and toward an elaboration of abstract ideas; away from answering questions and toward the task of framing them.

While Innis died more than fifty years ago, we can speculate on how he might have assessed the Internet. Surely he would have seen its development holistically and in relation to other mediating institutions, organizations and technologies. For Innis, the Internet would have been just one of many structurally-biased mediators shaping how time and space are organized and conceptualized. In its annihilation of time and space, its role in the distribution and exchange of electronic forms of information, and its importance in the context of the systemic pressure on capitalists, political leaders and citizens to make decisions, buy commodities and take part in consumption activities more efficiently and quickly, Innis would have viewed the biases promoted through ICTs and complementary structures as disturbing developments.

We use the word "disturbing" for two reasons. First, the historically and technologically facilitated bias of the Internet to annihilate both time and space—its tendency to impel people to do much more in less time and with little regard for spatial barriers—challenges a broad range of vested interests and other media that tend to favour relatively long-term memory or decision-making and/or various modes of spatial segmentation. For Innis (as for contemporary Marxists like David Harvey), the Internet enables the powerful to extend their reach and control over space and perpetuates a cultural and personal neglect of time. A political or strategic outcome of this has been a deepening emphasis on controlling space: corporate control over markets extending to "relationships" with individual consumers; anti-status quo mobilizations in the form of the so-called global multitude contributing to the neglect of ongoing systemic nodal points of power such as labour and the nation-state; an intensification of state-mediated acts of violence in a sporadic and sensational war on terror that is spatially everywhere. Vested interests such as the labour movement or some domestic corporations, and media such as the book, paper currency or the nation-state, will continue to influence the temporal and spatial activities and orientations of people. But, clearly, the Internet and related technologies are disturbing at least some established ways of thinking and acting.

The second reason for our choice of the word "disturbing" directs us to Innis's larger concern with how new communication media can simultaneously redress and stimulate political economic crises. In its implicit promotion of the short term—itself stimulated by the annihilation of spatial barriers such as nation-state borders, which

could be used to "buy time" for a culture, an economy, or a government—we already appear to be experiencing crisis-deepening trends. These involve the rapid erosion of the time to make decisions. Whether such decisions involve the bombing of an enemy, the immediate need to satisfy one's desires through consumerism, or public policies concerning social services, the Internet and the general commoditization of culture and the value placed on speed and efficiency have set the stage for deepening political economic crises. Transnational investors respond to market "signals" with spasmodic acts of panic selling, consumers fail to keep up with the demands of sellers to buy more commodities more often, and the environmental crisis reaches a point of no return while cultures around the world become increasingly concerned with the here-and-now.

Innis would not only examine new electronic technologies in relation to a complex of mediating dynamics, he would view the poststructuralist preoccupation with identity and meaning as itself a kind of medium—an academic discourse whose structure perpetuates the modernist myth of progress and the ascendant neoliberal meta-narrative. For Innis, electronic technologies and poststructuralist discourses, far from "opening a path of critique and possibly new politics" (Poster 2001: 103), would probably appear to centralize power by fetishizing the individual and universalizing the short-term as the predominant way of organizing and conceptualizing time.

Cultural Studies and/or Political Economy?

From the outset, these columns have investigated intersections between political economy and cultural studies. At this juncture we would seem to have arrived at an impasse: despite surface similarities, there are fundamental inconsistencies between political economy (as practised by Innis, for example) and poststructuralist cultural studies, as exemplified by Poster. The inconsistencies between political economy and poststructuralism are attributable, at one level, to Poster's insistence on moving from action to language, and to his persistent claim that the link between language and material reality is severed.

Fortunately, this column series need not conclude on a dour note. We would affirm with all possible emphasis that there are ample opportunities to integrate political economy and cultural studies, some of which have been explored in this series. One fecund way of pursuing this integration would be to pursue the question of technology and knowledge in the works of theorists explicitly dismissed by Poster for being "totalizing"—Habermas, Schiller and Adorno, for example—and others seldom if ever referred to by Poster, such as Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall and other members of the Birmingham School, Armand Mattelart, Pierre Bourdieu and, of course, Harold Innis.

Notes

Many thanks to *Topia's* editor, Jody Berland, for inviting these contributions, and to colleagues for their comments. We trust we will soon meet again in the pages of *Topia*.

1. He writes: "Language is not simply a tool for expression; it is also a structure that defines the limits of communication and shapes the subjects who speak" (Poster 1989: 128).

2. The habits of social analysis run deep. It is difficult to escape from old conceptual patterns, from the long-held assumption that in the field of society action has priority over language. The theorists who established the contours of the study of society—Marx, Weber, and more ambiguously Emile Durkheim—all gave precedence to action over language. (Poster 1989: 126)

3. "Poststructuralists point to various ways in which language materially affects the relation of the theorist to his or her discourse and the ways in which the social field is composed of linguistic phenomena" (Poster 1989: 4).

4. Jody Berland, although not addressing Poster specifically, argues that Innis differs from postmodernist positions in two major respects: first, Innis does not focus on representations as do postmodernists, and second, he employs a more materialist approach (Berland 1999). As noted above, Poster is more "materialist" than most postructuralists, and hence contradictions between Innis and Poster apply to poststructuralism generally.

5. The focuses of protest in the 1970s were feminism, gay liberation, antipsychiatry, prison reform—the groups addressed by Foucault's writings—as well as other challenges to capitalism which were equally at the margins of the theory of the mode of production (racial, ethnic, and regional protest; antinuclear movements; ecologists; and so forth). Thus poststructuralism argues for a plurality of radical critiques, placing in question the centering of critical theory in its proletarian site. (Poster 1989: 106)

6. Innis preferred Plato to Aristotle. The former, by transcribing dialogues, preserved the oral dialectic in the written form and thereby "opposed the establishment of a finished system of dogma"—what Poster would term a "totalization." Innis added that Plato "would not surrender his freedom to his own books and refused to be bound by what he had written" (Innis 1972: 57). By contrast, according to Innis, "in Aristotle the power of the spoken word declined sharply and became a source of confusion…. The dead hand of the written tradition threatened to destroy the spirit of Western man" (Innis 1971: 57; cf. Charron 1999).

7. "[T]he sediment of experience," writes Innis, "provides the basis for scientific investigation" and "the habits or biases of individuals which permit prediction are reinforced in the cumulative bias of institutions and constitute [or should constitute] the chief interest of the social scientist" (Innis 1935: 284).

8. The previous *Topia* column directly explores political economic dimensions of mainstream media/communication research in the United States (Babe 2006).

9. Innis generally used "the mechanization of knowledge" as shorthand for the growth of information ("useful facts") and the concomitant normalization of acritical, unreflexive intellectual pursuits ("useless," unreflexive "knowledge") driven forward by mostly commercial and administrative interests.

10. Interviewer Stuart J. Murray summarizes Poster's concept of the "humachine" as follows:

> You have made efforts to redefine human subjectivity in the current context by the somewhat awkward locution "network digital information humachines." You characterize such "humachines" in a threefold manner: (1) as evolving and unavoidable; (2) as dangerous to yet at the same time resources for power; and (3) as sites or nodes of resistance…. (Poster 2003: 2)

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