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Harold Innis and the Greek Tradition: an essay concerning his ontological transformation

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Abstract: The transition of Harold Innis' work from staples research to communications studies commonly is understood to have been an extension of his earlier research rather than a dramatic break from it. While in agreement, we argue that a significant transformation in Innis's ontology (but not his epistemology) also took place. This can be understood by referencing his concerns about the fate of civilization and his views on the prospectively strategic role of what he called the Greek tradition. To explain this, herein we concentrate on Innis' largely forgotten book *Political Economy in the Modern State*, initiated in 1943 and published in 1946, as a window into his intellectual processes. By the latter year, Innis had come to believe that a second Greek-inspired renaissance was needed. Vestiges of the Greek tradition, Innis thought, had to be recalled through the university and the humanities in order to provide society with the reflective universal perspective needed for survival. This transitional *and* transformational period involving his embrace of the Greek tradition as a kind of ideal type constitutes an important but under assessed aspect of Innis's intellectual development.

Keywords: Harold Innis, Greece, classicism, civilization, humanities

It has long been recognized that the latter period of Harold Innis' work (on communications) emerged directly from his earlier staples studies (Easterbrook). In the 1930s Innis extended his research to examine pulp and paper in Canada and, with it, the development of hydro-electricity and the complex role played by the price system. Through this work he came to recognize how these were interrelated with the rise of mass market newspapers, urbanization, retailing, and a complex of developments involving democracy and culture. But in recalling this, what remains underassessed is what followed: a rupture involving his ontology. From the relativism of his staples research – detailing how theories established in core countries did not explain developments in peripheries such as Canada – Innis turned his attention to the importance of universal principles as means of counter-balancing the fragmenting and time-annihilating biases of his day (and of our own). This transformation took place as a result of his profound concerns that began during the Depression years about the fate of Western civilization. From about 1940 he initiated his never completed 1400-page manuscript "A History of Communications" – a grand project that he pursued alongside his burgeoning interest in classical studies and the Greeks.

By ontology, we refer to Innis's understanding of the form and nature of the social world. Innis's staples research tended to focus on a multitude of context-specific but interrelated conditions, whereas his communications work came to stress certain shared realities. According to Robert Babe,

> There are two ways (at least) of specifying Innis's [later writings]… One…is to portray his objective as illuminating limitations (or 'biases') of contemporary understanding by making comparisons with previous civilizations… Comparisons are required, Innis believed, as otherwise the pronounced tendency is to accept uncritically and as 'normal' current practices and understandings… Through juxtaposition and contrast, he suggested, the limitations of contemporary culture might come into relief. … The second formulation, equally accurate, … is to suggest that, in keeping with Innis's avowed affinity for the Greeks and the oral tradition…he sought eternal, universal truths. His method for uncovering these was to scour previous civilizations in order to detect commonalities, consistencies, and recurrent patterns – thereby enabling him to infer truths for his/our own times (*Wilbur Schramm* 28).

In order to focus our analysis as to why the Greeks and classical studies resonated as powerfully as they did and to more fully comprehend why he undertook his ontological shift, herein Innis' neglected book *Political Economy in the Modern State* (*PEMS*) is referenced as a central text. Initiated in 1943 and completed in 1946, it constituted, arguably, his first volume on media and communication and, significantly, its chapters were framed in light of his fears regarding a civilizational apocalypse. The book also is replete with references to the Greeks and the importance of the humanities. As for its status as a neglected text, when compared to his earlier or later books, to many it appeared to be little more than a collection of papers. In subsequent years its transitional position – neither a work elaborating his staples thesis nor one explicitly on communications – appears to have confused readers. Indeed, assessments by

reviewers ranged from respectful confusion (e.g., Mallory) to open hostility (e.g., *The Economist*). One review, however, captured what Innis was doing better than others. According to B. S. Keirstead,

> Dr. Innis is not interested in the obvious. … The essays [in *PEMS*] are … for the exceptional student, anxious to pursue the sometimes obscure progress of a brilliant and original mind in the difficult task of breaking new ground and reaching new approximations of fresh truths. … Dr. Innis is grappling repeatedly in these essays with the basic intellectual problems of our era, and he is teaching, by example rather than by precept, the attitudes of mind and the techniques of objective inquiry which will be essential to any solution of these problems. The essays, then, are a guide to Dr. Innis's intellectual processes… (600).

Seven months after Innis completed the manuscript for *PEMS*, he articulated his communications thesis for the first time publicly in a paper titled "Minerva's Owl." Both in *PEMS* and in that paper, Innis was applying the Greek tradition as a (loosely conceived) Weberian ideal type. This would become a primary tool for the comparative historical analyses he pursued going forward.[1]

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[1] Weberian ideal types are simplified representations that model the essential elements of the realities being examining. As conceptual tools they facilitate our distancing from reality (as it is 'known') and, as such, they enable the analyst to comprehend such realities more clearly. References to Weber are found in Innis's *Idea File* 125 n.18. Tom Easterbrook, who knew Innis'

By the end of the Second World War Innis thought that the West's *in*ability to perceive and interpret was at odds with the demands of modern democracy as well as the pursuit of peace and stability. What was urgently needed was a 'new' way forward. By 1946, the writings of

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work as well as any of his contemporaries, wrote that Innis applied "the oral tradition of Greece" as "an ideal type method" (301 n.42). During the final months of Innis' life in the summer of 1952, Easterbrook regularly visited Innis to discuss a range of topics, including Innis' conceptualization of history. By September, it was apparent that Innis would not be able to teach his fourth-year economics seminar and Easterbrook agreed to take on the course (widely known as "Innis 4b"). In his notes for the class held on September 30, Easterbrook told students that there is "[o]ne matter to clear up – [I'm] *not* taking over this course – [it's] still very much Innis's" and that the course's "[c]oncern will be much more with Innis'[s] approach and methodology than with the actual content or detail on his work…" Then, in a class held October 28, Easterbrook explained to students that Greece constitutes "his [Innis's] ideal type" (Lecture Notes). Innis died just twelve days later. Given how close Easterbrook was to Innis during these final months and that Innis almost certainly advised Easterbrook on how to teach his course (especially regarding his "approach and methodology"), it is hard to fathom that the junior colleague Easterbrook would have explicitly framed Greece as Innis' comparative "ideal type" without knowing this as a result of their almost contemporaneous conversations. We might add that while ideal types enabled Innis to better *conceptualize* a particular 'objective' social reality, his concept of bias went further, providing him with a means of assessing orientations and inter-subjectivities in terms of what mediates and structures a society's knowledge or *understanding* of reality.

classicists and the example of Greece (especially Plato) had come to profoundly influence his approach, at least as much as classical political economy, or enlightenment philosophers, or heterodox economists. This is *not* to say that Innis' transition and ontological transformation should be read in this way only but that this period should be assessed more carefully, especially with the Greek tradition in mind.[2]

We proceed as follows: In the first section below, we identify some of the concerns, people, and sources shaping Innis's turn to Greek thought and classicist themes, especially from 1943. This includes some recognition that Innis was responding not just to historical circumstances but also the views and activities of others. The second section elaborates his critique of contemporary culture and politics and relates aspects of his earlier research on Canada to his interest in the Greeks, classicism, and the humanities. In the third section, we address his analysis of the then emerging Cold War asking, more specifically, why the East-West conflict deepened his interest in the Greek tradition and classical studies. Here we also address Innis's assessment of Plato and the Platonic state in light of his treatment of the Greek tradition as an ideal type and relate this to what we identify to be an ontological transformation in his work. Finally, we argue that during his preparation of *PEMS* Innis appears to have been addressing a

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[2] The most comprehensive treatment of the influence of the Greeks and classicism on Innis is found in the work of Alexander John Watson. Watson, however, does not directly assess the ontological transformation that accompanied it, nor does he focus on *PEMS* as Innis' key transitional text. Babe and Comor address the question of Innis's ontological shift but are limited when relating it to classicism, Greece, and the humanities. See also Babe's insightful discussion regarding Innis's ontology (in *Wilbur Schramm*).

methodological problem: how might his materialist approach to history (and, of course, the contemporary world also) be dialectically counterpoised by some of the reflective and universalist concepts derived (originally) from the ancients?[3]

Civilization and balance

During the inter-war period, the fate of Western civilization was the subject of widespread concern. "Perhaps the most significant development in the social sciences in the past quarter century," Innis observed, "has been the interest in the study of civilization" (*PEMS* xv-xvi). By the mid-1940s, however, the attention being paid to it had waned. Why, Innis wondered, at the very time that intellectuals needed to address humanity's capacity for survival were they becoming less able to even recognize the crisis?

In November 1943, Innis presented a paper titled "Political Economy in the Modern State" to the American Philosophical Society. He then sent a published version to the editor of Ryerson Press, Lorne Pierce, and by late-1944 the two agreed to proceed with a collection bearing its title. The target date for publication was the spring of 1945 but, after several modifications, in May of that year (the day that Nazi Germany surrendered) Innis asked Pierce to delay the project. That summer, Innis made what was to be a revelatory trip to Russia and, in late

[3] Before proceeding, we should point out that in assessing Innis's interest in the Greeks and classical studies as manifested during this period we concentrate on sources he consulted for *PEMS* and on works by classicists with whom he conversed up to the date of the book's completion.

autumn, he insisted that a new chapter on East-West relations be added (it would become the book's conclusion). One year later, *PEMS* appeared in print.

His 1943 paper was his first and only presentation to a gathering of philosophers. It was an ambitious (if not courageous) assessment of the conditions and dynamics that had generated a vast centralization of power involving economists and other social scientists. We surmise that Innis felt impelled to write and present it due to his fear of an irreversible civilizational collapse and was encouraged to engage with this particular group of scholars due in part to the support of his classicist colleagues at Toronto (perhaps Innis thought that an audience of philosophers would be receptive). Whatever the reasons, the paper itself reveals a degree of insecurity about what he was addressing as indicated by its peculiar mode of presentation; not so much a clearly argued conference paper using his own voice but, instead, an extended work frequently dominated by a series of lengthy quotations. In it he traced the rise and fall of political economy as the cornerstone discipline of social science, addressing the conditions for its brief fluorescence dating from the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth. In so doing he aimed to identify "the circumstances…favourable to the growth of freedom and the spread of learning" (*PEMS* 139). Indeed, Innis was comparing the intellectual and cultural capacities of this time and place (Scotland) to contemporary society. But, as he elaborated his position, he also harkened back to much earlier conditions and, to repeat, his approach demonstrated some familiarity with ideal type analyses with Greece as his focal point.

In *PEMS* more generally, explicit and implicit comparisons with Greek thought and culture are made. For example, in relation to the modern state and the state of democracy, Innis reiterated aspects of Plato's attack on poetry. In pre-literate Greece, like the literate culture that Innis lived in, appetitive and sensual instincts dominated reason. The autonomous person (one

empowered by exercising his/her capacity to pursue reflective and reasoned forms of knowledge), according to Plato, could emerge from this state only through a conscious effort to find balance between desire and intellect. The capacity for this to be conceptualized (let alone pursued) in mid-twentieth century Canada, as Innis addressed repeatedly in the book, was almost entirely absent. Innis wrote that "States are destroyed by ignorance of the most important things in human life, by a profound lack of culture – which, following Plato, is the inability to secure a proper agreement between desire and intellect" (x).

Innis believed that with modernity the ancient pre-literate neglect of reflection and reason had re-emerged. Mechanization, specialization, and sensationalism – all pursued through the use of increasingly 'perfect' technologies and techniques (developments involving the press, motion pictures, statistics, etc.) – had undermined even a semblance of balance between desire (or pleasure) and intellect (or reflective forms of knowledge). The Great War, dogmatic and short-term responses to the Depression, the Second World War, and an emerging Cold War (and other developments) were evidence of the age-old recurrence of knowledge being subordinated to the pursuit of short-term proclivities. As Innis wrote in his Preface, "the impact of industrialism on knowledge particularly with the development of electrical transmission has weakened the possibility of a sustained philosophical approach… The revolution in communication has favoured a return to rhetoric and force" (xvi).

Prior to 1943 Innis addressed such concerns in ways that were, relatively speaking, fleeting or narrowly cast. Chapter 1 of *PEMS*, "The Newspaper in Economic Development" (originally published in 1942), for example, critiqued journalism, advertising, commerce, mechanized thinking, and the ascent of short-term timeframes. In chapter 2 (first published in

1946 in *University of Toronto Quarterly*[4]) Innis broadened this analysis to examine the history of English publishing and, more abstractly, the relationship between democracy, public opinion, and irrationalism. Here the Greek influence was clearly discernable as, to give a direct example, Plato's opposition to those who manipulated the public (as if it was some kind of beast) is revived. Werner Jaeger – a contemporary classicist whose writings Innis cited in *PEMS* and subsequent works – wrote that in Greece agitators trained by sophists sought to become "intimately acquainted with the noises it [the beast or the mob] makes to signify pleasure or anger. Their art consists of handling it correctly, and managing it just as they wish" (*Paideia* II 263-64). The ascent of manipulative personalities into positions of power was one result, and in this light Innis understood that democracy in Athens enabled more of a quantitative than qualitative equality among citizens. The result was a malleable and exploitable public opinion – the very characteristics that Innis identified in modern society.

Before proceeding, we should point out that for Innis the example of Athens resonated with what he and others critically observed in contemporary politics and intellectual circles. In the context of the pressing need for change heralded by the Depression, Innis' skepticism towards state orchestrated technocratic solutions seemed to reflect little more than conservative values or his implicit support of status quo relations. Frank Underhill,[5] for one, chided Innis and

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[4] In addition to this article (published almost simultaneously with *PEMS*) Innis wrote six reviews for *UTQ* dating from 1934 to the year of his death, 1952.

[5] Underhill was a history professor at the University of Toronto. With Frank Scott (law professor at McGill), he led the establishment of the Fabian society-modelled League for Social Reconstruction in 1931-32 (the precursor to the establishment of the CCF). For the progressive

others for not directly recognizing the essential source of the crisis: the capitalist system. In 1934, Innis had responded as follows:

> We are faced with the far-reaching results of the technological drift of modern industrialism. The success of measures designed to solve the problems of the depression is necessarily determined by their relation to problems of the secular trend… An analysis of the factors peculiar to a long run development is essential to an understanding of immediate difficulties ("Introduction to Canadian Economics" 3).

This allusion to the "long run development" of "the secular trend" was antithetical to the immediate problem solving priorities of many colleagues. The turn to short term and quantifiable calculations through the use of neoclassical economics and statistical analyses, for example, constituted contemporary expressions of this very secularism. Innis believed that what had led to the crisis (or, rather, the structural conditions and policies that preceded it) was the eradication of institutions that could facilitate some kind of long term, non-instrumentalist perspective. The turn to experts, or to socialism, or to continentalism (and so forth), in his mind, were all symptoms of the same cultural and intellectual incapacities. The modern secularism that Innis rejected thus had nothing directly to do with a faith in Christian or conservative values (Massolin 13). Instead, it constituted more directly a strategic position that Innis framed in response to the unreflective norms that characterized the debates all around him. In response to his unwillingness to engage

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intellectuals involved in it, the role of the state should be greatly expanded to deal with Canada's economic crisis and social inequalities.

directly in these, Underhill denounced Innis (indirectly) as one of "the intellectual garage-mechanics of Canadian capitalism" (in Dewar 89). Innis found this to be more than outrageous, it was symptomatic of what had become an overwhelmingly politicized academy. As he counter-argued in *PEMS*,

> The extreme tendencies of modern civilization shown in the rise of the modern state and in the tyranny of opinion compel universities to resist them. The trend of the social sciences in response to the demands of the new bureaucracy has been toward increasing specialization. And in this it has threatened the influence of universities. The university must deny the finality of any of the conclusions of the social sciences. It must steadfastly resist the tendency to acclaim any single solution of the world's problems at the risk of failing to play its role as a balancing factor in the growth of civilization. The Marxist solution, the Keynesian solution, or any solution, cannot be accepted as final… (141).

Unlike conservatives who responded to modernity, the Depression, and then the war by lauding values and beliefs of the past,[6] although components of his work entailed similar gestures, Innis was much more interested in identifying the material (including cultural)

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[6] According to Massolin, the coming of the Second World War "furnished the shock that galvanized the [conservative] critics of modernity. First, it laid bare the deplorable conditions and decadent value system of western society… Social scientists discovered that the war had resulted in the sundering of value and belief systems. They also understood that it had become their duty to articulate and defend these embattled principles" (9-10).

conditions, dynamics, and mediations that had produced the underpinnings of the crisis and why intellectuals (particularly social scientists) were responding to it in the ways in which they were. Radical progressives like Underhill and others in the League of Social Reconstruction (LSR) promulgated their own versions of secularism but with little awareness of their own biases, especially in light of the particularities of the Canadian situation. Yet, for Innis, this did not mean that intellectuals should reject new or imported approaches *tout court* and instead simply embrace Canadian nationalism or a return to British traditions.

In his 1938 paper titled "The Passing of Political Economy" Innis assessed the demand for social scientists to serve the interests of publishers, governments, and political parties. Some, he wrote (likely with members of the LSR in mind), "scorn cash, and take promissory notes on the revolution, or take both notes and cash; and still others, having found truth, have their own rewards" (*Staples, Markets, and Cultural Change* 441). "The rise of literacy and improved communication," Innis continued, "promoted the rapid growth of groups, associations, and nations and reduced social scientists to a position as defenders with the zeal of proselytes of this or that particular cause" (442). Indeed, social scientists had become some of the most respected or in demand sophists of modern society. The implications for democracy, peace, and the individual creativity and thoughtfulness needed to make both possible, Innis concluded, were dire.

Innis implicitly contrasted the ideals of individualism in Athens with Plato's critique of its development which, Plato argued, failed to facilitate the Good in people (the Good entailing the ability to exercise intellect over desire). As Innis also recognized, the neglect of cultural and intellectual capabilities was, according to Plato, a fundamental reason for democracy's many failures. In the absence of such capacities, democracy tends to mediate liberties that are

excessive. Innis reiterated this view, arguing that "Democracy demands simplicity" (*PEMS* 142 n.101) and that, quoting Guizot, it "sacrifices the past and the future to what is supposed to be the interest in the present" (95). Innis thus echoed Plato in light of developments in the twentieth century in his observation that democracy tends to facilitate conditions that lead to its demise. As such, according to Innis, "a century of peace [the nineteenth century] gave way to a century of war" (55).

At Toronto, Innis was particularly close to classicist Charles Cochrane. George Grant commented that they often took long walks together on campus, adding that "[t]he person who educated Innis in his later life was Cochrane … He helped Innis move beyond the fur trade, etc., into deeper subjects" (*George Grant in Process* 61).[7] Like Cochrane, Innis thought that the academy bore great responsibility for the tragic state of contemporary affairs given its mandate to perceive and interpret civilizational developments. Those who write history, Cochrane stressed, directly contribute to its making (Cochrane, "The Mind of Edward Gibbon" 162-66).

In the obituary that Innis wrote for Cochrane, published in early-1946, he stated that the importance of Cochrane's *Christianity and Classical Culture* for social scientists lay "in its philosophical approach" ("Charles Norris Cochrane" 96). Innis also referenced the role that classicism might play in contemporary life due to its "emphasis on cyclical change and the tendency to equilibrium"; an approach that constituted a "philosophy of order" – a philosophy that provided relief from what he called the "philosophy of progress." Furthermore (likely referencing unreflective applications of science and technology), Innis wrote that "[t]he sweep of the Platonic state in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the spread of science has been

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[7] For more on Cochrane's influence, see Watson 290-295 and 415-416.

followed by the horrors of the Platonic state. The social scientist is asked to check his course and to indicate his role in western civilization" (97). Just weeks later, while he completed the manuscript for *PEMS*, Innis elaborated his concerns (concerns Cochrane had shared) about the imbalanced relationship between state-mediated power and philosophical knowledge. Given that power was being applied in the absence of self-reflection (the "philosophical approach"), he argued that

> Our first duty is to conserve and strengthen our heavily depleted intellectual and spiritual resources. The time has at last arrived when the Platonic problem of the state in contrast with the problem of the individual must be solved or rather the problem which Plato left unsolved must be met. Attempts to solve it in the Platonic fashion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been all but fatal to western civilization (*PEMS* 266).

We will return to Innis's assessment of Plato's state below. For now, we quote Innis on this to again underline Cochrane's influence and his then burgeoning interest in classicism. It is likely that Innis' thinking also was influenced by another colleague, Eric Havelock, who studied history (at least in part) in order to pursue the perspective needed to counterbalance some of the more myopic aspects of modern thought ("Harold Innis" 51).[8] Beyond Plato's concerns about the

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[8] The nature and extent of Innis' relationship with Havelock has been much debated. Although Innis did not cite Havelock in these transitional years and Havelock later professed his ignorance of his influence on Innis' work, Cameron McEwen has catalogued evidence that Innis was well aware of Havelock's interests and thinking dating from the 1930s (McEwen 2017, 44, 62, 71, 73-

chasm separating philosophers and statesmen (the division between knowledge and power), Innis, along with Havelock and Cochrane, feared the eradication of reflective thinking altogether.[9] In *PEMS*, this is implied where Innis referenced Plato's *Phaedrus* in which Socrates engaged sophists on the question of virtue. Harmful acts, said Socrates, emerge when people make decisions in terms of short-term outcomes. Socrates went on to argue that if people are taught how to properly measure they would act better (the "art of measurement" being more qualitative than empirical, employing one's understanding of the Good rather than what is relatively pleasurable). He concluded that virtues of all kinds are based on the knowledge of *true* values and that people can be taught how to think (rather than what to think) for their own good and that of society by, in effect, moulding the true areté – the spirit or excellence that lies within humanity.[10]

74, 86). Innis's early exposure to Havelock's work almost certainly included the latter's arguments regarding the implications of writing and literacy on the Greeks.

[9] Like Plato, Innis almost certainly associated the term 'philosopher' with a person "who is prepared to challenge the hold of the concrete over consciousness, and to substitute the abstract" (Havelock, *Preface to Plato* 281). Plato contrasted philosophical thinking to the common penchant to let the senses (i.e., empiricism) dominate thought and, therefore, opinions also. Through education (broadly defined), both for Plato and Innis, a person might rise "from the life of the senses towards the life of the reasoned intelligence" (205).

[10] As Massolin documents, "concern over the decline of the 'Greek approach' was not peculiar to Innis's world-view" (104). His general position was shared by contemporaries (who might be called educational traditionalists) such as Hilda Neatby, Watson Kirkconnell, A.S.P.

In sum, Innis understood Greece to have been the pinnacle of cultural florescence and that Greek thought had played an irreplaceable role in the Renaissance. Among other things, the Greeks had enabled science (then appealing to the "natural" as opposed to a mechanized order) to become a countervailing force to religion. For Innis, the Greek tradition constituted an ideal type through which certain crucial cultural and intellectual capacities could be discerned.

Social science, the humanities, and capacity

During the Second World War Innis demonstrated his support for a more reflective and holistic approach and this involved his embrace of the humanities. In this period, the federal government had acted on its wartime authority to influence directly the occupations of Canadians. At Toronto and other universities, one consequence was that academic programs deemed to be in the national interest were favoured over others. For example, students pursuing degrees in science, engineering, and other fields were exempted from conscription, while those engaged in 'inessential' studies such as the humanities were not. At the conclusion of 1943 (recall, the time

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Woodhouse, George Grant, Northrup Frye and, at the time, Marshall McLuhan. It would be a mistake to assume that by 'educational traditionalist' we are implying that Innis was an elitist, however. Innis's insistence that the university should be the place in which Canada developed its 'best brains' must be assessed in the context of a university system that favoured the children of the already well off rather than those of the working class or farmers (such as Innis himself). Innis justified academic freedoms and privileges for strategic reasons. Canadian society should funnel resources into the university so that its most intellectually capable young people might counterbalance the mechanized thought and dogmatism of the day.

of Innis' presentation of "Political Economy in the Modern State"), in response to this neglect of reflective academics, Innis was one of the chief organizers of what would become Canada's Humanities Research Council.

In *PEMS* Innis appears to have been thinking about these events where he wrote that "[i]n spite of our efforts, scholarship in the liberal arts has been interpreted as not even in the national interest" (68). Then he added the following:

> Nothing has been more indicative of the decline in cultural life in Canada since the last war than the infiltration of politics in the Universities, and nothing has done more to hamper the development of intellectual maturity than the institutional framework of Canadian Universities which permits and encourages the exploitation of scholars, and plays the treasonable role of betraying the traditions for which we fought in the last war and for which we fight in this (69).

Innis surely was aware that the humanities were not born out of emotion or the love of others but, instead, according to Jaeger, emerged from the "intellectual search for and interest in the true nature of man" (*Paideia* I 280). Indeed, the Greeks had established "a new conception of the value of the individual" (Jaeger in *PEMS* 263). This humanism sought to develop a very different kind of individualism than the one promulgated through sophistry, and Innis appears to have related sophistry to the relativistic thinking of his day. In questioning everything and

believing nothing, the freedom realized by the sophist was viewed by both Plato and Innis to be, in fact, a kind of *un*freedom.[11]

As addressed above, for some time Innis had been disturbed by developments in the academy. In the 1930s state officials and the public sought solutions to the economic crisis and universities responded by producing demonstrably useful forms of knowledge (i.e., research and teaching directly applicable to apparent problems). The secular rationalism of the enlightenment had lost its reflective counterbalance. Innis previously had critiqued the static positivism of neoclassical economics and, through his staples studies, demonstrated the importance of forging a relatively dynamic approach. In the rush to change economic fortunes, approaches developed in core political economies (such as Keynesianism and Marxism) were, in his view, being dubiously grafted on to the Canadian situation. In 1943 he even questioned the influence of positivism on the natural sciences, particularly in cases in which "the problems of human society" were evaded by divorcing science from its background in "the problems of philosophy" ("Review of Physics and Philosophy" xv). Innis believed that positivism entailed mechanized and pragmatic specializations and had emerged alongside the decline of political economy. But, to repeat, he also critiqued the emergence of relativist approaches. Such post-positivist responses to modernity, he believed, had gone too far as, most worryingly, they rejected even the *search* for objective truth.

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[11] However, as Jaeger argues, the debate or tension between the sophists and the Platonists yielded an enduring Greek (and thus civilizational) ideal: "the eternal greatness and fertility of the Greek spirit were created by that conflict between the will to educate and the disbelief in the possibility of a mechanized education" (*Paideia* I 307).

Given these concerns, Innis' resistance to most policy prescriptions and his opposition to the more anti-intellectual aspects of the war effort can be better understood. In his communications research Innis was to laud the counterbalancing implications of the oral tradition, but in the 1930s the unreflective and dogmatic responses to the Depression (and to his own work) made even him wary of discussion. More discussion under these conditions would not lead to more understanding. In fact, for Innis, technological developments enabling a vast increase in the volume and speed of communication had contributed to the cultural and intellectual underpinnings of the Depression and the dangerously centralizing implications of responses to it. Contemplation and reflection had been overrun by mass advertising, faster and more pervasive communications developments (especially involving the newspaper), and subsequent pressures to be current, timely, and intellectually certain in all kinds of interactions. As he put it in 1935,

> A country built up in relation to export markets subject to violent fluctuations as a result of changes in prices and changes in yield, a country with diverse regional problems in relation to these fluctuations, is essentially one in which the politician thrives, in which scapegoats are essential, and in which, conversely, the difficulties of obtaining solutions to problems are increased. … Discussion has become a menace rather than a solvent to the problems of a complex society (*Staples, Markets, and Cultural Change* 453).

Sixteen years later, Innis stated that culture "is designed to train the individual to decide how much information he needs and how little he needs, to give him a sense of balance and proportion" (*Bias of Communication* 85). Modern conceptualizations of the word culture tend to

describe ways of living and thinking among a group of people. It is more an anthropological concept than one concerning values and ideals, i.e., a cultural ideal as a formative principle. It is in this latter vein that Innis appears to have used the Greek tradition as a means of comparison with an understanding that the precise conditions enabling its fluorescence could not be duplicated. The cultural achievements of the classical world served an educational function, not to be mechanically copied but understood as both the foundations of the West and as a source for what was most lacking in 1946: *perspective*.

Modern society, Innis thought, desperately needed to develop this very capacity as even just an awareness of its importance had been all but eradicated. Political economy itself had been fragmented into self-referencing fields such as economics and its many subdisciplines. Innis' statement in *PEMS* that "The most important thing to be said about" the term political economy is that "it is not important" (viii) in part indicated that he had no illusions as to the state of the contemporary discipline and that its revitalization was unlikely. Instead, especially through the humanities and other means, he set out to develop a broader awareness of cultural and intellectual capacities/incapacities by addressing the imbalances of the contemporary world.

Balance, harmony, and proportion were recognized principles of existence well before Plato. In the tragedies of Sophocles balance and proportion were understood to be among the highest values involving not just the intellect, but body and soul also. Later in Greece the soul was seen to be based on innate potentials, much like the body's physical abilities. This became the basis of a pedagogical ideal entailing, much later (beginning in the nineteenth century), what came to be called 'humanism': the process of educating people, originally through the arts and letters of Greece, to fully realize their ideal human nature. According to Jaeger, humanism was "the living ideal which had grown up in the very soil of Greece" (*Paideia* I xxiv). A key

implication of this was that “the history of Greek culture coincides in all essentials with the history of Greek literature: for Greek literature, in the sense intended by its original creators, was the expression of the process by which the Greek ideal shaped itself” (xxvii-xxviii). Likewise, for Innis, the relatively imbalanced ideals and values of modern civilization were reflected in and through predominant media — not just literature, journalism and radio, but the price system, educational organizations and, most importantly, the state itself.

Beyond information communicated, Innis came to understand that relations and intellectual capacities are deeply influenced by a society’s use of media (broadly defined to include institutions, organizations, and technologies). As with geography – which Innis said “provides the grooves which determine the course and to a large extent the character of economic life” (*PEMS* 87) – media retard or facilitate certain ways of acting and thinking in relation to others. Soon after *PEMS* this was to become the essence of Innis’ concept of media bias. By the time of its publication, mechanized thinking and the ability of those in power to control the spatial and organizational aspects of life (to the neglect of continuity and duration) were probably uppermost among the biases he had in mind, as well as the neglected role of the university as a counterbalance to these. As he put it, the university should “demand an obsession with balance and perspective – an obsession with the Greek tradition of the humanities. The search for truth assumes a constant avoidance of extremes and extravagance. Virtue is in the middle way” (65).

In the title chapter of *PEMS*, Innis stated that “[a]rt has been displaced by science” (128). “Political economy,” he continued, had “withered with subordination to mathematical abstractions and science, and became the handmaid of centralized power in the modern state. The

problem of the social sciences is the problem of the arts in Western civilization" (140). For Innis at that time "art" was a synonym for reflective forms of knowledge.

Thus far we have argued that during the years of Innis' transition from staples theorist to communications scholar his concern for the state of civilization, coupled with his interest in Greece as a comparative ideal type, significantly shaped his intellectual development. Before continuing, we should point out that his work on Canada, especially his application of economic concepts, informed his appreciation of classicism and the Greeks. Although word-length limitations prevent our elaboration of these (instead, see Babe and Comor), one such concept is especially salient for the present paper: unused capacity.

Innis related particular modes of thinking to his observation that economies typically operate at less than full capacity. The fixed capital investments and overhead costs entailed in many kinds of production activities usually involve rigidities and unused capacities. For Innis, given the often pressing need to redress potentially wasted investments, these constituted largely unseen forces shaping not just economic history but political and cultural developments also. By the 1940s, he began to associate this dynamic with what a classicist might conceptualize more broadly as the long-term tendency towards equilibrium or state of balance. This orientation likely resonated with Innis' research concerning the history of Canada's enormously expensive infrastructures as this work had long involved him in analyses of their material and intellectual (including creative) implications. In *PEMS* Innis extended this to assess what he called the

"monopolies of *thought*" that he associated with such conditions and dynamics; clearly a final step towards what he would soon term "monopolies of knowledge."[12]

In the modern context, Innis came to see the usually structured responses to unused capacities as more limiting than liberating – foils, in fact, to the ideals of reflection and perspective. Unused capacities involving investments by powerful interests, in effect, had locked society into dangerously limited patterns of thought. In *PEMS* he referred to these as "the chains of modern civilization" (vii). Innis thus had come to understand development to entail the building and maintenance of particular material (including relational *and intellectual*) conditions. In the twentieth century, however, these conditions had undermined the bases for perspective and reflection and, thus, the creativity needed for long-term survival. On the other hand, when assessed in light of Greek ideals concerning human potentialities, unused capacities also implied that creative pursuits might be revived. But, again, if the conditions Innis critiqued were not countered, the capacities that he associated with reflective knowledge might be closed off forever

[12] For Innis, such monopolies entail the capacity to control information and how information is processed into what is known through institutions, organizations, and technologies. In "Minerva's Owl" (presented in 1947) Innis explained that "I have attempted to suggest that Western civilization has been profoundly influenced by communication and that marked changes in communications have had important implications. … In each period I have attempted to trace the implications of the media of communication for the character of knowledge and to suggest that a monopoly or an oligopoly of knowledge is built up to the point that equilibrium is disturbed" (*Bias of Communication* 3-4).

(entailing the prospective largescale use of atomic weapons after 1945). By 1946, Innis recognized that the capacity to modify what is possible is itself dependent on *both* a society's capacity to conceptualize change and its dialectically related material capacity to carry out change.

To more fully appreciate the role played by Innis' classicist colleagues in helping him to bridge his staples work with his emergent communications studies, it should be noted that Innis had frequent opportunities to interact with them. During his regular lunches with several of them at Hart House, for example, Innis would listen to their conversations and, largely unbeknownst to others, follow up with visits to the library to borrow books by authors or on subjects that had been referenced. On at least one occasion, possibly in late-1945 (McEwen 72 n1), Innis sought readings stimulated by a conversation about the "cultural baggage" that the Greeks carried over time through the medium of epic poetry. This discussion, we postulate, influenced him in part due to his own research on fixed capital, overhead costs, and the related subject of unused capacity: baggage of another sort that had had significant implications for developments related to Canada.

In contrast to Canada's position as a colony, the early history of the Greeks was one of relative isolation and illiteracy (entailing the absence of an externally imposed order or great text). Paradoxically, as we elaborate below, this constituted their "prime advantage" (Havelock, *Preface to Plato* 128; also Innis, *Idea File* 52 n167). We postulate that Innis's interactions with his classicist colleagues also prompted him to recognize a crucial communication development that was a precondition for the Greek renaissance – the adoption of the Phoenician alphabet that contained what was, for the Greeks, excess capacities in terms of the consonant characters for sounds that did not exist in their language. The Greeks proceeded to adapt this alphabet to their

vernacular by assigning vowels to what for them were surplus signs (Watson 373). As both Havelock and Innis recognized, the communication and intellectual capacities that emerged (in which the oral tradition was still applied but in a competitive state of tension with writing, briefly compelling orality's near perfection) enabled Greek culture to flourish in unprecedented and subsequently unparalleled ways.

These are just some examples of Innis finding much in his exposure to classicism that was directly relevant to his background and concerns going forward, especially in the context of the economic concepts he previously applied. As he wrote five years after *PEMS*, "it is part of the task of the social scientist to test the limits of his tools and to indicate their possibilities" (*Bias* xvii) and, in this light, many of the ideas and concepts applied in his research on Canada were revised, manipulated, and then put to use. This point is especially germane given, to repeat, Innis' fears about the fate of civilization and his awareness that it was the Greeks who had most explicitly recognized humanity's potentialities. But unlike Canada in the twentieth century, the Greeks had had the freedom to develop their capacities (such as their brilliant adaptation of the Phoenician alphabet) under circumstances that were relatively unrestrained by imposed structural conditions, whether stemming from an organized religion or foreign dominance. It was thus the absence of what Innis after *PEMS* termed a monopoly of knowledge (except, crucially, standards of order and excellence) that enabled Greece to realize an intellectual capacity not driven primarily by a search for wealth or to uphold a sacred order but, instead, by an extraordinary *quest to understand*. For Innis, the fact that such a state of cultural vibrancy likely was exaggerated (as Plato's critiques suggest) and that such 'perfection' existed in the context of stark and exploitative inequalities (i.e., slavery and patriarchy) were secondary to its usefulness as a comparative ideal.

Reflective knowledge, Plato, and the search for truth

Innis delayed *PEMS* following his post-war trip to the Soviet Union in order to complete a final chapter titled "Reflections on Russia." The question of how to "approach" the then emerging Cold War, he believed, "will be the test of civilization" (*PEMS* 262), adding that "a common world view has become indispensable." To proceed, Innis put matters directly: "The significance of Greek civilization to East and West provides an approach to modern problems" (263).

In this chapter, Innis presented a succinct overview of a complicated history dating from the time of Greek dominance. Over the course of centuries interactions between East and West had been sporadic but influential. In the early-twentieth century, wrote Innis, Russia fell to its revolution and tensions between these two branches of Greece deepened. While Innis implied that components of the Greek tradition had been kept alive for centuries, the survival of any such tradition required that its constituting body of knowledge be kept vibrant through, in the words of Havelock, "some kind of educational discipline" (*Preface to Plato* 291). By 1946, however, the capacity of either East or West to even recognize the value of this tradition and thus potentially bridge the divide had been devastated. The Russian revolution, involving absolutist techniques of control, in conjunction with the predominance of positivist and relativist thought in the West, had only widened the chasm.

What, then, did Innis recommend? More than the conservation of their mutual heritage,[13]

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[13] Beyond the prospective counterbalancing role that Russia might play in light of the time-annihilating dynamics of capitalism and the West's related cultural norms (especially its cult of

the following excerpt from *PEMS* bears repeating:

> The time has at last arrived when the Platonic problem of the state in contrast with the problem of the individual must be solved or rather the problem which Plato left unsolved must be met. Attempts to solve it in the Platonic fashion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been all but fatal to western civilization (266).

Innis here made a distinction between the Platonic problem of the state and the problem of the individual (although these are interrelated). For Plato, the capacity of the soul to realize the Good could be fully realized only through the mediation of the state. For Innis, writing in much different circumstances, Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and even Canada demonstrated the state to be a problem – a problem antithetical to the Platonic ideal of a state of balance between power and knowledge. Modern states, all over the world (to varying degrees), had facilitated power's triumph over knowledge. Progress, technology, and the struggle for markets and resources had come to suffocate conservation and creative dialogue. As for the problem of the individual, to repeat, Innis (like Plato) was critical of egotistical and acquisitive forms of individualism. Innis's ideal individual was one who pursued a reflective understanding of both her/himself and her/his society. These individuals included those on the cultural margins whose positions might facilitate the questioning of monopolies of knowledge. Such an individual could

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progress), for Innis the East was important given its retention of otherwise lost components of the Greek tradition.

not emerge in the absence of conditions enabled through the state, yet the state's compulsion for power tended to undermine the development and defense of such reflective individuals.

As for "the problem which Plato left unsolved," Innis was addressing this very tension. Again, but in a different iteration from his economics, this involved the problem of unused capacity. For Plato (and Innis), democracy depends on the reasoning capabilities of polities and leaders but, as with other political systems, usually they are not well developed (and, if they are, they tend to be underutilized or undermined). Modern politicians, like those in Greece trained by sophists, have taken advantage of this incapacity/unused capacity, enabling a further centralization of power and neglect of reflective knowledge. In the contemporary West, desire casts its shadow over intellect while knowledge has been fragmented and mechanized. Fanatical regionalisms and nationalisms divide people while powerful interests dominate democratic processes. Innis concluded that "we are a long way from Plato's ideal of government by those who dislike to govern" (267).[14]

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[14] Massolin argues that Innis shared a "quasi-Platonic" view on the role that intellectuals should play, linking him with other Canadian conservatives responding to modernity: "They [conservatives] wanted to reassert the relevance of the social philosopher and show how, as intellectuals, they occupied societal positions of crucial significance. Above all, theirs was an attempt to restore intellectuals to a rightful place within the social hierarchy" (217-18). We think this overgeneralizes Innis' position. For one thing, Innis recognized that individuals in positions of power (even self-reflective intellectuals) are biased through (and may become subservient to) their institutional situations. In PEMS Innis followed Lord Acton's aphorism that "All power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely" (135) with the following observation from by

Of course Innis was concerned about the state of the world not *primarily* in terms of defending liberal democracy or capitalism but, instead, in the much broader context of the survival of Western civilization. "Civilization," Innis quoted Toynbee, "is the organization of values" (127) and the predominant values of his time were, he thought, dangerously unreflective. In response, Innis sought to identify the historical conditions that had undermined the capacity to

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Mark Pattison: "Power, once constituted, has a tendency to perpetuate itself: it is at the discretion of power how much, or how little, intellectual progress its subjects shall be permitted to make" (136). Indeed, Innis sometimes warned his readers to be alert to his own biases. Interestingly, the most direct statement made by Innis regarding his political philosophy is provided in *PEMS* where he favourably quoted Goldwin Smith: "The opinions of the present writer are those of a Liberal of the old school as yet unconverted to State Socialism, who looks for further improvement not to an increase of the authority of government, but to the same agencies, moral, intellectual, and economical, which have brought us thus far, and one of which, science, is now operating with immensely increased power. A writer of this school can have no panacea, or nostrum to offer; and when a nostrum or panacea is offered, he will necessarily be found rather on the critical side" (xvii). In relation to this, we recommend the analysis provided by Richard Noble who argues that Innis' views closely coincide with the eighteenth century conservative "Whig" tradition (à la David Hume). Among other characteristics, this perspective understands freedom to be derived through certain institutional conditions that evolve in the context of various national histories. In *PEMS* Innis, quoting Hume, states that "From law arises security, from security, curiosity, and from curiosity knowledge" (138). We suggest that the classic power-knowledge dialectic has some similarities to this approach.

recognize this. While Innis was well aware that the attainment of objective knowledge was impossible, he first argued in the 1930s that the key to counter-balancing one's subjectivities was to develop and apply the capacity to be self-reflective ("Role of Intelligence" 283). By the time he presented "Political Economy in the Modern State," his concerns about the state of civilization were couched in terms of the inability of contemporary humanity (rather than just the individual) to do precisely this.

This unreflective (or mechanized) way of thinking – especially in terms of its implications regarding what is or is not valued – was significant also in light of the process through which the state was expanding its powers. While political economy in the nineteenth century facilitated the production of unprecedented wealth, this growth also "enabled large-scale organizations to extend their activities" compelling, in response, the ascent of state capacities "to restrain them." Innis argued that this concentration of power into the hands of politicians and corporations through administrators and experts had been reflected in the decline of philosophy. For this and other reasons (including the rise of the popular press, advertising, and the neglect of the humanities), he concluded that "[w]e have all the answers but none of the questions" (*PEMS* 128).

The reader will recall that the Greek tradition directly involved education or, more precisely, humanism. Ideally, for Innis, humanism constituted an ongoing project entailing the nurturing of what Plato referred to as the Good. For both Plato and Innis, the statesman's crucial task (and indeed the intellectual's) is not simply to provide whatever the public craves but to, instead, lead society in the process of developing *paideia* based on (for Plato) the Idea of the Good.

Innis certainly understood that Plato's Idea was an abstraction, not least because the precise material conditions that had defined or reflected its conceptualization were gone forever. Remnants of these conditions, however, still could be found at the margins of civilization, most clearly in corners of what was left of the university. Regarding this institution, as Innis put it, its proper "interest demand[s] an obsession with balance and perspective – an obsession with the Greek tradition of the humanities" (*PEMS* 65) and for him, by 1946, the most important component of the humanities was the (dwindling) field of classical studies.

Classicism, for Innis, was valuable in part because it was largely walled off from political and commercial exploitation (a position altogether unlike his home discipline of economics) while, methodologically, it remained relatively holistic and self-reflective. In effect, its marginal position in contemporary society was one of its greatest assets. Our reading of Innis' transitional period conforms with Watson's argument that the classical dialectic involving power and knowledge fundamentally shaped Innis' later work (in which those in power need critique and creativity to survive while critique and creativity also threatens their perceived and usually instrumental interests). Innis's embrace of this seemingly timeless dialectic again suggests more than just an evolution in his approach but *also* a transformation. His interest in core-periphery and centre-margin relations in the context of European empires (as with his concerns regarding Canada's position and capacities) were developed and eclipsed by a much broader analysis concerning the cultural capacities needed to counter civilizational collapse. Furthermore, his embrace of the Greeks and growing familiarity with classical studies enabled him to conceptualize the strategic importance of an ontology that embraced balance and a reading of history in terms of cyclical change rather than some kind of unending (and, in his mind, a naïve and arrogant) state of progress. Classicism, he came to believe, held the potential to become a

kind of intellectual (i.e., comparative) portal through which the conditions and values enabling reflective thought and survival might be recalled.

Let us develop this observation through an example. Plato's attack on poetry (and thus orality) may have furnished Innis with some amount of perspective on contemporary democracy. The Platonic conceptualization of power through the guise of intellect rather than force gave reflection and reason an elevated status among the Athenians. The importance of philosophy for power thus could be revealed (probably for the first time), providing also a basis for the state's tolerance of (and even support for) reflective knowledge. For Innis, the contemporary East-West divide might be redressed by rediscovering the role of reflective knowledge in terms of this power-knowledge dynamic, not in opposition to power (as with most critical theorists) but, instead, as a means of enabling or impelling those in relative positions of power (but also situated at the margins of power, such as academics) to fully recognize its importance.[15] However dystopian Innis had become alongside other critics of modernity, he remained committed to discerning and promoting the conditions needed for humanity to recognize and redress its tragic situation. A self-reflective materialist critique was the only feasible way to move forward.

To illustrate this project further, through some comprehension of Plato's concept of the Idea, *The Republic* can be understood to have been less a treatise on how to exercise power than

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[15] Innis even suggests, perhaps as a precursor to this, that through ongoing interactions with Russia there might emerge some kind of revitalization: "The transfer of Greek philosophy to the West had brought the Renaissance and the modern world and it remains to ask whether the return movement of Greek philosophy to the East will bring a second renaissance" (*PEMS* 265-266).

one on how a society might pursue the Good. We doubt that Innis, the materialist, found much epistemological relevance in Plato's turn to an arguably spiritual analysis (the Good being similar to a modern belief in God). Innis, however, appears to have acknowledged the Idea to be an important ontological principle. Innis' rejection of positivism and relativism, as noted above, likely reaffirmed for him the importance of seeking objective knowledge (as he had in 1930s) but also, by 1946, the importance of ideals that could advance this process – a process involving, as Thorstein Veblen put it, the application of reflective judgment "*as though* made by an intelligent cause" (*Essays in Our Changing Order* 180, emphases added).

The Platonic state entailed a set of ideals examined and pursued through reflection and reasoning. A note posthumously published in Innis's *Idea File*, likely from 1946, reflects his awareness of this:

> Idea of Plato – possible with shift from oral to written tradition and working out of thought and plan to which society can conform – use of force, rise of industrialism destroys possibility of working out of Idea or plan. Problem of later history of west in inability to work out Idea with power to mould society (71 n12).

Innis here located material pre-conditions for Plato's conceptualization of the Idea. Modern society (or, more specifically, conditions within it) "destroys" even the "possibility" of a shared way of thinking that might include such a perspective. The failure of humanity in the twentieth century to pursue the Idea of the Good (or, more likely for Innis, *truth*) had undermined the pedagogical capacity to "mould society" through, presumably, an applied and principled understanding of reflective knowledge.

Furthering our argument that Innis recognized the Idea of the Good in the context of his interest in counterbalancing the conditions he was critiquing stems again (in part at least) from the work of Cochrane. Innis's interest in pursuing truth was a means of pursuing freedom as, through this process, monopolies of knowledge could be directly questioned. His opposition to public policy prescriptions was not based on some kind of principled conservativism. After all, he had served on royal commissions and made some guarded recommendations regarding the national economy and other matters. The more essential political position he took, however, was his commitment to defend intellectual capacities in the face of commercial, technological, and political developments and the engulfment by vested interests seeking to exploit intellectuals in conjunction with the culture's preoccupation with short term priorities and perspectives.[16] His faith in the pursuit of truth did not reflect an embrace of some kind of epistemological idealism. Instead, an interpretation that is more grounded in Innis' writings follows his reading of Cochrane's analysis of Augustine.

Augustine, argued Innis, "attacked classicism as guilty of secular pride, the original sin" (*PEMS* 264) and this implied something quite remarkable: for Augustine, Christianity entailed some amount of *agnosticism*. "Believe," Augustine said, "in order that you may understand" (in Cochrane, *Christianity* 402). Thus, in effect, the faith prescribed by Augustine sought to free

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[16] How else to explain Innis' defence (by threatening his resignation) of his nemesis Frank Underhill in 1941 when the University of Toronto was under pressure to dismiss him? For Innis, the institutional necessity of the university's protection of scholars (and thus its role in defending the Greek tradition) obviously took precedence in relation to accusations of Underhill's wartime disloyalty (Watson 228-232).

humanity from the bondage of secular pride (i.e., our arrogant efforts to master nature) and other such notions of unreflective truth (Keast 22). This was a bondage (or *baggage*) that the early Greeks did not bear (at least in relative terms or when conceptualized as an ideal). In other words, the kind of understanding that Innis thought the world was lacking might emerge by way of the example set by Socrates – the universal truth that one knows nothing.

This recognition of humanity's limitations (and for Innis the concept of capacity always implied limitations) entailed, of course, the opposite: our potential for humility and thus a comprehension of our biases. In *PEMS*, Innis continued along these lines arguing that "Greek philosophy provided the powerful dynamic which broke down political hierarchies and protected western civilization against the inefficiencies of absolutism and bureaucracy either through revolution or constitutional change" (*PEMS* 265).[17]

Plato almost certainly knew that his ideal state was in practice impossible. He referenced an authority no less than the Muses who recognized that, even if it could be established, its demise would be inevitable: "Hard as it may be for a state so [ideally] framed to be shaken, … since all that comes into being must decay, even a fabric like this will not endure for ever" (Plato 262-63). As a concrete entity (again, like the body) it cannot survive. What might survive, however, under certain material conditions is the Idea or, in Innis' terms, the search for truth.

For Innis and likely Plato also, the fact that the state Plato prescribed could not exist (despite Innis' references to "the Platonic state") is altogether secondary. For Innis, in its modern

[17] It was in this context that Havelock's *Prometheus Bound*, published five years after *PEMS*, powerfully resonated with Innis. In Havelock's analysis of Prometheus, the institutionalized knowledge produced by humankind became a reified and destructive force.

application, it constituted a society in which the centralization of power had all but obliterated reflective critique and creativity. To extend itself and the vested interests it represented or enabled, manipulation and coercion had become predominant. In response, in his communications research, Innis instead stressed the importance of reflexively conceived universals (Babe and Comor XXII). Already by 1946 he called for the development of "a broad approach" (*PEMS* 101) and he had come to share with Plato more than a dialectical search for truth. Innis's affinity with Plato also lay in his ontological appreciation for absolutes, at least as a means of counter-balancing predominant biases and challenging monopolies of knowledge.

We again acknowledge that this assertion might seem to contradict aspects of Innis' materialism. But once we recognize the influence of the Greek tradition – itself *entailing an awareness of universal conditions through reflective thought* – Innis appears to have embraced such absolutes in an altogether strategic and dialectical effort to pursue a seemingly impossible state of balance ('impossible' especially given the conditions underlying a decidedly imbalanced modern world). In a letter that Innis wrote to the Rockefeller Foundation (sometime between 1940-1952), he outlined his concerns as follows:

> What I am wondering about is whether we can reach a position in which there is a continuous discussion of vital problems. Problems cease when they become unmanageable or monopolies. And this is why I would like to see the drift toward the humanities – namely to recognize the intensive work that has been done over the

> centuries… Such a drift might do something to make one alert to the possibilities of the social science of totalitarianism which have become so threatening (in Willits 14-15).[18]

Conclusion

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[18] Innis here refers to the social science *of* totalitarianism rather than totalitarianism *in* the social sciences. As Watson interprets this, Innis "is talking about the deformation of the social sciences *in general*… More and more the tendency is for intellectuals to be required to work within an existing paradigm that actively serves as the ideological underpinning of a contemporary polity. … Innis seems to indicate that he did not disingenuously stumble into his communications studies. It was a conscious and 'political' step" (475-76 n.6). We note also that this political step implied an ongoing materialist epistemology in that the conditions for reflective thought (including the conditions needed to apply Platonic ideals) required substantive policies and political economic conditions. In 1952, for example, Innis completed "The Strategy of Culture" which he called "a footnote to the Massey Report." In it, he supported the Report's call for state intervention in the task of securing non-commercial forms of mass media in Canada. This position may appear to contradict Innis's established reluctance to support state intervention but, in fact, Innis was not opposed to the state playing a role in facilitating the conditions needed for a political economy to function or for cultural vibrancy to be possible (in keeping with the force-knowledge dialectic, how could it be otherwise as knowledge needs force to function?). What Innis explicitly opposed was the state's monopolization of power *over* political economic and cultural conditions.

We offer one more piece of evidence regarding Innis' turn to an ontology involving the reflective pursuit of objective truths. References to "natural law" and "natural order" crop up in *PEMS* and subsequent works. These involved an appeal to universal and timeless principles that were of interest to him most particularly in the context of the contemporary preoccupation with progress and present-mindedness, and he compared natural law to positive (legislated) laws that stemmed from (sophistic) rhetorical techniques. But beyond his interest in countering the latter ways of finding knowledge, Innis' references to natural law also indicate, again following the Greeks, the counter balancing value of at least raising the possibility of universals.[19]

By the time he completed *PEMS*, Innis had undergone a transformation in terms of his ontology. Epistemologically, his view on what we know remained materialist and dynamic, but he also came to understand that, for strategic reasons, society needed to be viewed through the guise of reflectively conceived universals. In his earlier writings Innis defended the uniqueness

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[19] To repeat, this did not entail Innis' rejection of his long-standing historical materialism. Innis, for instance, favourably quoted Jacob Viner concerning Adam Smith as follows: "Smith's doctrine that economic phenomena were manifestations of an underlying order in nature governed by natural forces, gave to English economics for the first time a definite trend toward logically consistent synthesis of economic relationships, toward 'system building.' Smith's further doctrine that this underlying natural order required for its most beneficent operation a system of natural liberty, and that in the main public regulation and private monopoly were corruptions of that natural order, at once gave to economics a bond of union with the prevailing philosophy and theology and to economists and statesmen a programme of practical reform" (*PEMS* 114).

of Canadian developments by *opposing* the universalist pretensions of mainstream economics. Certainly by 1946 his appreciation for the perspective that could be garnered through Greek and humanities-inspired principles had emerged. The reflective ideals of Western civilization or, more precisely, the Greek tradition, constituted this needed perspective – a perspective that was necessarily dynamic as Innis' materialism implied recognition of this ontology's limitations.

Contemporary analysts likely were confused by what appears to have been the linking of a kind of Platonic idealism with his (non-Marxist) form of dialectical materialism.[20] In a letter

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[20] For a more recent example of this confusion, see Bonnett. Noble instructively compares Innis' conservative Whig political orientations with examples of Kantian idealism. Rather than the presence of *a priori* truths involving, for example, individual freedom as *itself* a universal standard of justice, Innis both idealized such standards *and* understood them (including their very conceptualization) to be dependent on material conditions and mediations. As Innis wrote concerning Plato's writings, although they reflected the final days of Greek orality, his work remains a "[c]ontinuous philosophical discussion aimed at truth." It was "[t]he life and movement of [the] dialectic [that] opposed the establishment of a finished system of dogma. He would not surrender his freedom to his own books and refused to be bound by what he had written" (*Empire and Communication* 79). Noble remarks here that Innis had an unorthodox reading of Plato, "whose epistemology is generally associated with the claim that all knowledge derives from immutable Forms or Ideas, which are both absolutely true and knowable through the dialectic" (45 n.5). This echoes our interpretation that Innis applied Plato strategically. Ideas, for Innis, could be materialized through institutions (such as the university) and these might, in turn, enable people to engage in the search for truth. Innis's support for the arts and humanities

dated April 2, 1949, Innis even tried to correct one of his more enthusiastic students: "I feel that the emphasis on the materialist approach [in my work] is to show clearly the limitations of that approach *and of course its advantages…*" (Correspondence, emphases added). Given Innis' commitment to a reflective *search* for truth, it is not difficult to understand why he drew on the Greeks and classical studies in his quest for what he believed to be an urgently needed 'new' approach. As he wrote in *PEMS*, quoting Geoffrey Scott, "Not poetry, but science, not sentiment but calculation is now the misguiding influence" (128).

By 1946 the Greek tradition appears to have been the primary fulcrum around which Innis took stock and then oriented his work going forward. Following his classicist colleagues, he may have related the conditions and mediations shaping the violent twentieth century in terms of the pre-literate Greeks and their praise for unreflective 'men of action.'[21] Going forward, to

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(and later public broadcasting) are examples of this strategic approach aimed at facilitating the conditions needed for what he had come to deem crucial: the unending process of seeking reflective, living forms of knowledge.

[21] Some readers will take issue with our association of Innis' work with Plato's critique of pre-literate (oral) society. After all, Innis famously stated in 1951 that "[m]y bias is with the oral tradition … and with the necessity of recapturing something of its spirit." But, as demonstrated in his opposition to some the "discussion" that took place in the 1930s (addressed above), Innis was promoting the oral tradition not as an absolute ideal in and of itself but, instead, as a materially-conditioned *counter-balance* to "the mechanized tradition" (*Bias of Communication* 190). To repeat what Easterbrook said shortly after his friend's death, Innis applied "the oral tradition of Greece" as "an ideal type *method*" (301 n.42, emphasis added).

assess and respond to universal conditions such as the tendency of power to control knowledge, the predominance of the senses over the intellect, and so on, Innis referenced the Greeks in order to furnish the perspective needed to understand his own culture and others. Consistent with his historical materialism, his emerging analysis relied on more than just relativist or idealist arguments. By implication, he needed a place and time from which comparisons, including the conditions and ideals needed for stability (entailing creativity), could be made (and thus a way forward pursued).

"We have seen the effects of the *disappearance of* the Platonic tradition," he wrote, "in the necessity of appealing to force as the unifying and dominating factor" (*PEMS* 79, emphases added). For Innis, vestiges of the Greek tradition could serve an invaluable function in light of what was urgently needed in 1946 – another Greek-inspired renaissance in the development and use of humanity's reflective and creative capacities.

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