

Poststructuralism and the Political Economy of Scholarship

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Harold Adams Innis (1894-1952), Canada's pre-eminent media theorist and economic historian, developed a nuanced picture of relations between knowledge/culture on the one hand and political-economic power/force on the other. Innis proposed that normally there exists both symbiosis and reciprocity between knowledge/culture and political-economic power. Giving numerous examples culled from various civilizations, Innis adduced that without mutual support between the governors and knowledge/culture workers, civilizations face instability, resulting in either revolution or decline. This system of mutual support, whereby political-economic power rewards knowledge/culture workers for justifying, normalizing and aggrandizing elite power through symbolic artifacts, has existed throughout human history, Innis claimed: from ancient Greece, Mesopotamia and Egypt, to contemporary western civilization. According to Innis, moreover, success at creating or maintaining a compliant public enables physical, coercive force to recede to the background; indeed, people come to mistake indoctrination as press freedom, and misconstrue elite control of media (the means of persuasion) as democracy.

Innis, then, espied a fundamental contradiction between knowledge and power. If knowledge/culture workers mainly serve elite power, Innis deduced, they cannot serve truth. This 'bias' favoring elite power, according to Innis, permeates both popular culture (what Innis referred to as the vernacular) and mainstream scholarship. Regarding the vernacular, Innis gave considerable attention to delusions of press freedom in contemporary America, which I addressed in two previous contributions to *Fifth Estate On-Line*. Regarding contemporary scholarship, Innis was insistent that the universities, particularly since World War II, have become handmaids to the military-industrial establishment. It is to the subservience of scholarship to political-economic power that I address, in the spirit of Innis, the remainder of this Commentary.

Regarding scholarship, Innis, an economist, targeted particularly mainstream economics. He wrote derogatively of the 'penetrative powers of the price system,' and he recommended that small countries develop their own economic theory to be based on their distinct economic histories rather than accept uncritically a 'universal' economics developed in the imperial centres. Today, almost half a century after Innis' death, there is no dearth of critical scholarship recognizing the Innisian 'bias' of mainstream economics. Innis had much to say, also, about university science in the service of the military, about the 'mechanization of knowledge,' and about the lapse of critical thinking. Much of this prescient analysis, too, is accepted by contemporary critical scholars.

However, there persists today a scholarly approach—poststructuralism—that still needs unmasking. Poststructuralism actually claims to be a critical or oppositional discourse. Poststructuralist Mark Poster, for example, declares that poststructuralism is the latest advance in critical theory, critical theory being for him an approach seeking 'to assist the movement of revolution by providing a counter-ideology that delegitimizes the ruling class.' Poster recognizes that critical theory, by this definition, existed long before the arrival of poststructuralism: Marx's writings, for example, countered mainstream or hegemonic

thought in the industrial age, as did scientific writings in the age of faith. For our era, though, Poster asserts, there needs to be a *new* critical theory because, he declares, in the age of electronics discourse supercedes property as the primary site of domination. Poststructuralism contributes to this new critical theory, he insists, by 'raising the question of language' or, stated alternatively, by de-authenticating oppressive discourses.

For Poster, as for many poststructuralists, the knowledge systems ('grand narratives') of the past (modernity and the Enlightenment) are and were oppressive; they augmented, justified, or entrenched the power of the scientific/economic elite, and as well they favoured particular ethnic, racial and sexual groups. Like French poststructuralist, Jean Baudrillard, Poster claims that by focusing on language, these oppressive discourses can be rendered powerless. Like Baudrillard, Poster proposes that language has become *self-referential*, which is to say that discourses are now detached from material reality. In *The Mode of Information* (p. 15), for example, he writes:

'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.'

This is because,

'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' (p. 10).

In *Critical Theory and Poststructuralism* (p. 15) Poster adds:

'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.'

On the one hand, if taken seriously, poststructuralism indeed undermines the Enlightenment project, perhaps more thoroughly than any other critique yet launched. If language indeed refers principally to itself rather than to the non-linguistic realm, then the categories 'realists' have taken for granted—capital and labour, progress, gender, ethnicity, intelligence, rationality, sanity, and on and on—categories that in their seeming 'givenness' often 'justified' outcomes like those bemoaned by modernity's principal critical writers (Marx, Durkheim and Thoreau, for example) are now seen to be merely linguistic constructions, with no authenticity outside of language. In this sense, Poster's poststructuralism would seem indeed to constitute a new critical theory.

However, at a deeper level, poststructuralism can be seen to be *faux critical*. To accept poststructuralism, for example, would be to nullify the pursuit of social justice. Here I will suggest two justifications for this statement. First, if 'reality' is indeed merely a fabrication of language, then the concerns raised by Marx, Durkheim, Thoreau and their successors

regarding conditions in the non-verbal realm likewise become mere linguistic fabrications—mere ‘phantasmagoria’—bearing no necessary relation to material existence. As Nicholas Garnham has noted, pursuing social justice requires a belief that material reality anchors discourse. Were Baudrillard or Poster correct in their claims that ‘truth, reference and objective causes have ceased to exist,’ *social justice* would be devoid of meaning, one interpretation or claim regarding material reality being as valid or as acceptable as any other. Hence, too, are policies challenging political-economic power, in an effort to improve social conditions, negated. It is hard to pursue social justice if one is not merely pointing to, but is actually celebrating differences in analysis, in explanation and in interpretation, as premised on denials that humans can ever access the real.

Poststructuralism entrenches political-economic power in another way, too. According to Poster, social life entails positioning subjects to receive and interpret messages without concern for truth or authenticity. But who is best situated to perform, to concoct simulacra, 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, lacking big budgets, are forced to rely on reason, logic, data, evidence, and a quest for truth—all of which Poster relegates to the dung heap of anachronous curiosities. Wide acceptance of poststructuralism as a paradigm, then, would be a great boon to all professional persuaders and propagandists, as they are absolved not only of deception, but even of the possibility/capacity of deceiving. Any and all press criticism in such a context, for example the Chomsky-Herman propaganda model which addresses the truth, completeness and accuracy of reportage, becomes misguided and irrelevant. In this light, poststructuralism can be seen as merely the latest instance of American scholarship skirting issues of social justice and thereby servicing established power.

Interestingly, popular culture often aids the poststructuralist scholarly project. Feature films like *Last Year at Marienbad* and *The Truman Show*, for example, cast doubt on a knowable reality. Retractions of well-publicized news reports (such as the those concerning Iraqi troops and incubator babies as engineered by the PR firm, Hill and Knowlton) raise similar qualms. Simulated realities in TV commercials and video games may make lived reality pale in comparison.

Compare, however, the nihilism of poststructuralism with how the issue of language/discourse was dealt with by Harold Innis and by the inaugural British cultural studies theorist, Raymond Williams. Innis agreed with poststructuralism to the extent that he, too, recognized that media, which would include language, do not convey messages purely or transparently. But Innis’ solution was not to throw up his hands and give up the pursuit of truth. Rather, he deemed that the primary task and duty of scholarship is to become aware of and to compensate for the biases or distortions inherent in the culture, in the medium, in the scholarly discipline and so forth. Reflexivity, as well as dialogue/debate, were Innis’ responses to inherent bias or distortion.

Raymond Williams confronted the problematic relation between language/discourse and material reality head-on; indeed, this is the issue at the very core of his cultural studies. Williams’ version of cultural studies, as inaugurated in his foundational book, *Culture and Society*, differs markedly from poststructuralism. Whereas poststructuralists maintain that one can never escape language to get at the ‘real,’ and indeed that no ‘real’ exists beyond

language, Williams insisted that changes in the meanings of words (for instance, *culture*, *industry*, *art*, and *democracy*), and the invention of new words, are responses to changes in the lived conditions. Changes in the meanings of words, for Williams, constitutes 'a record' of reactions to changes in social, economic and political life. That record is a type of 'map' guiding explorations into the nature of the changes. Among the words originating in the 'decisive period' 1750 to 1850, according to Williams, are: '*ideology, intellectual, rationalism, scientist, humanitarian, utilitarian, romanticism, atomistic; bureaucracy, capitalism, collectivism, commercialism, communism, doctrinaire, equalitarian, liberalism, masses, medieval and medievalism, operative* (noun), *primitivism, proletariat* (a new word for 'mob'), *socialism, unemployment; cranks, highbrow, isms, and pretentious.*'

Poststructuralism today serves established power very well. First, it masquerades as a critical discourse, claiming to de-authenticate established power by discrediting 'grand narratives,' thereby protecting it from attacks from the left. But, since it proposes that nothing is real beyond discourse and that we should luxuriate in discursive differences, it thereby shields established power from those who would otherwise object to the material conditions; thereby is poststructuralism itself shielded from attacks from the right. Hence we find ample explanation for the longevity of this self-contradictory and in many ways inane 'grand narrative.'