HAROLD INNIS

DISCUSSION IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

> Harold Adam Innis (1894-1952) was born in Otterville, Ontario. He earned a bachelor's degree from McMaster University in 1916 and served in the army during WWI. After the war, he earned a master's degree from McMaster University and a doctorate in economics from the University of Chicago. In 1920 he returned to Canada to take a teaching position in the Department of Political Economy at the University of Toronto, where he remained for the rest of his career. His dissertation focused on the history of the Canadian Pacific Railway, and his first publication in the journal was an essay on the railway, "The Jubilee of the C. P. R.," which was published in the January 1931 issue. His later worked also examined how different modes of communication shape the "character of knowledge" transmitted by different cultures. The following excerpt is from a talk titled "The Intellectual in History," which was given at the University of British Columbia in 1935. This talk was his first attempt to develop a theory of communication, and a revised version was published in the January 1936 issue and included (under its original title) in the collection *Staples, Markets, and Cultural Change: Selected Essays* (1995).

THE CHARACTER OF DISCUSSION, like other forms of entertainment, has been tremendously influenced by recent industrialism and inventions. In the nineteenth century, with the development of the printing press, economic expansion and the growth of literacy, discussion from the standpoint of the press was concerned with an attack on abuses which concerned those capable of reading or those capable of subscribing to the papers. . . . The contrast between literacy and intelligence implies a shift of emphasis from an attack on abuses to devices which will attract the interest of the largest possible number of readers. Constant emphasis on wars, watering down of editorials, the disappearance of editors and the emergence of owners,

the tabloid, the chain newspaper, the comic strips and the private lives of great men, are designed to increase and maintain circulation. Politics have dwindled to a situation in which circulation is of first importance. The free press has proceeded to the point where freedom of expression has become important as news interest. Defence of freedom of speech has become an attractive means of attracting public attention. We are scarcely covering unfamiliar ground in all this. Recent improvements in facilities for discussion, particularly the radio, have tended to displace the newspaper, and it may be urged that improvements will overcome the difficulties. Unfortunately there is slight evidence to this effect, and much evidence to the contrary. Even government regulation and government ownership have failed to improve materially or to check the character of the discussion which dominates the air. Whether under government control or under private control, the appeal is to the largest number of possible listeners, and there are even more listeners than readers, or more people capable of listening than reading. The radio, like the newspaper, is concerned with marketing and distribution, and its discussion is probably on a lower level than that of newspapers. Fortunately one does not need to listen to lectures from the university on the radio, or to inter-university debates! A radio can be turned off, and there is always another programme.

In Canada the difficulties are enhanced by the persistent trends toward centralization. Densely populated industrial areas in Central Canada tend to dominate control over news and editorial policy in outlying regions. Magazines and periodicals and the high costs of publication in competition with American products necessitate centralization of production. Local expression is confined to letters written to the editor, or to letters written by the editor to himself. It is scarcely necessary to describe the results in either case.

Let us turn from these alternatives to the great centres of intelligent discussion in our numerous houses of parliament. Again there is the necessity on the part of members and parties of keeping in touch with the largest number of voters, which includes those who cannot read, see, or hear, and the results scarcely need elaborating. It would be unfair to single out the reports of parliamentary activities which appear in the press, as we know what to expect. But those of you who are particularly intelligent for political purposes, and who receive gratis copies of speeches by your local member or by your party leader, will be aware, or I hope you will be aware, of the sort

of thing that passes for intelligent discussion. . . .

Finally, we turn to the real source of intelligent discussion—that carried on by the "intellectual"—the most tragi-comic group in the history of discussion. In the main the intellectual has failed to realize the significance of the change which has so profoundly influenced discussion. He remains as a vestige of an era of discussion which has passed. He is valued by universities as a means of displaying to the public their continued belief in academic freedom—the steeplejack who dances about on the upper structures of the framework to demonstrate its soundness. No self-respecting university can afford to be without at least one. Discussions of academic freedom centre about inefficiencies in the social scientists, and academic freedom has become the great shelter of incompetence. The intellectual writes informatively for a respectable group of people who still believe they discuss the complex problems of society intelligently, and is employed by the paper accordingly, or failing the paper where his efforts are narrowed perhaps to a small column imprisoned as a memorial to freedom of the press, he writes for subsidized journals dedicated to the maintenance of the belief in the importance of freedom of discussion. Political parties find use for him, particularly new parties anxious to seize upon the intellectual limitations and sympathies of any group, and not cognizant of his limited value or even of his character as a liability. Intellectuals in large numbers will sink the raft of any party, and if allowed to write a programme will kill it. In many cases a keen observer, the intellectual has the satisfaction of predicting the course of events with accuracy, and in his old age he begins to point to his influence on the course of events. The Fabians in England have been notorious examples of individuals who claim to have moulded the course of history. Mr. Wells, like Roo in the expedition to the North Pole described by A. A. Milne, has fallen in the water and drifting with the current, constantly shouts to those on shore "'Look at me swimming." The intellectual's profound belief in his influence, his delight in believing that he lives dangerously, his pleasure at spinning ideologies, at amazing people with his knowledge, particularly of Aristotle and Plato, and at frightening them with bugaboos about the revolution and the breakup of capitalist society, are his consolations. Let us not disturb him.

It is only fair to add that we owe most to the intellectual for artistic discussion. Literature is perhaps the chief beneficiary. Conferences, subsidized and other sorts, for the discussion of problems of the social sciences would

become intolerable with the platitudinous comments of important elderly men of affairs who grace them, and without the entertainment provided by a trained group of intellectuals designed to stimulate those anxious to think they are making important contributions to a solution of the world's problems and to amuse those who know better. The social sciences provide both the opiates and the stimulants to what passes for modern thought. The travelling comedians who masquerade as economists and prophets have fortunately done much to displace the meaningless outbursts of eloquence which delighted our fathers by at least a form of entertainment more suited to the taste of the present generation. We cannot complain of lack of variety. We are given alternately monologues on the gold standard, debates on the British North America Act, dramatics on the capitalist system and production for use and not for profit, and symphonies on social credit.

All this is not to question the change and character of discussion. We must recognize the inalienable right to be amused. The cost of discussion has been terrifically high and will continue to be high, but it is apparently worth it and more. I for one would not like to have missed the excitement of 1935. No one can say we have not solved the problem of circuses, whatever may be said as to the problem of bread. We should perhaps insist on more artistic discussion, since we pay so much for it, but that will come with time. But it has its dangers. The increasing cruelty of political life is a reflection of the increasing interest of the mobs. The struggle for position becomes more violent, and each accession to the political arena shrieks more loudly and vehemently. A tyranny of talk has ominous possibilities. Already raids are being made on the universities, and freedom from political control which universities have struggled to achieve is in danger. The enemy is becoming more vociferous, and the inner resistance is being weakened.

The effects have been most threatening to the social sciences. The possibility of achieving the conditions described by Alfred Marshall as important to the study of their complex problems decreases. He writes:

> An epoch in my life occurred when I was, I think, about seventeen years old. I was in Regent Street and saw a workman standing idle before a shop window; but his face indicated alert energy, so I stood still and watched. He was preparing to sketch on the window of a shop guiding lines for a short statement of the business concerned, which was to be shown by white letters fixed on the glass. Each stroke of an arm and

> hand needed to be made with a single free sweep so as to give a graceful result; it occupied perhaps two seconds of keen excitement. He stayed still for a few minutes after each stroke, so that his pulse might grow quiet. If he had saved the minutes then lost, his employers would have been injured by more than the value of his wages for a whole day. That set up a train of thought which led me to resolve never to use my mind when it was not fresh, and to regard the intervals between successive strains as sacred to absolute repose. When I went to Cambridge and became full master of myself, I resolved never to read a mathematical book for more than a quarter of an hour at a time without break. I had some light literature always by my side, and in the breaks I read through more than once nearly the whole of Shakespeare; Boswell's *Life of Johnson*; the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus (the only Greek play I could read without effort); a great part of Lucretius, and so on.

His wife wrote: "Alfred always did his best work in the open air. When he became a Fellow of St. John's, he did his chief thinking between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. and between 10 p.m. and 2 a.m. He had a monopoly of the wilderness in the daytime and of the new court cloister at night." Such are the surroundings in which solutions to the problems of a complex society are advanced, and such surroundings are becoming more and more difficult to find.

It becomes apparent that discussion plays a minor if not negative role in the advance of social science. The results of such advance can be more satisfactorily placed before the world in writing than in discussion. Stimulation of mental activity follows perhaps more from walking than from talking, and more from lecturing than from discussion. The necessity of focusing the mind on the wider aspects of problems and of grappling in a systematic way with the subject, which lecturing involves, is important in the development of ideas. This will not sound convincing to students, but I assure them there is a grain of truth in it. But the dangers of lecturing to be bright always beset the path of the lecturer. Perhaps the danger of being confident is even more serious. The task of the social scientist is to discover, not to persuade. There are fewer and fewer people who will admit that they do not know, or who have the courage to say that they have not solved the problem. And yet that is what the social scientist must continually keep saying if he hopes to maintain any hold on intellectual life. Constant admission of ignorance is not popular in lecturing, to say nothing of its impracticability as a means of

winning elections.

But the question will be raised, what is the hope of democracy? To which we must reply, what democracy? To an increasing extent it has become more dangerous to trust democracy to think out solutions to complex problems, and more necessary to rely on skill and intelligence. The complexity of economic life necessitates constant attention to detail such as only the civil servant can be expected to give. Policies must be formulated in relation to the work of the civil service. Improvements are essential, particularly in co-ordinating the policies of various departments, and formation of an economic council may do something to pool the resources of the civil service and the social scientist. Co-operation between economic councils set up by the provinces and the Dominion should go far in removing glaring injustices; but make no mistake, the peculiar and extraordinary difficulties of the Canadian economy necessitate long and ardous work on the part of the social scientist before serious injustice can be alleviated. 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. The number of curealls varies directly with our difficulties, and indeed adds to them. Discussion has become a menace rather than a solvent to the problems of a complex society. The task is one of directing it so as to do the least possible damage. Freedom of discussion is of first importance as a means of preventing something worse. So long as attention is focused on circuses, on writing letters to the editor, on attending political meetings or demanding a scapegoat, and getting one, provided it is not too costly, the civil servant and the social scientist have a chance of getting on with the problems. Our hope is in asking that discussion shall be louder and funnier, and in avoiding control by people with plans and blue prints who insist on interfering with the work of the civil servant and the social scientist, or by people who insist on making the civil servant and the social scientist the scapegoat.