The Convergence of Crises and the Crisis of Representation: Intermedia Research

Dr. Sourayan Mookerjea
Director, Intermedia Research Studio
Department of Sociology
University of Alberta
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This paper sketches out an *intermedia theory of the commons* that underpins research underway

at the Intermedia Research Studio in the Department of Sociology, University of Alberta. This

research is provoked by and responds to a multitude of crises including the crises of knowledge,

representation and of our modes of belonging together.

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Fourteen ninety-two can be taken as a symbolic date for a break or rupture in human history of

many different kinds. Among these is the advent of new world scale social crises and their

convergence with ecological crises, a process that has intensified and amplified to universally

apocalyptic proportions in our day. But crises have long been apocalyptic for many societies.

The Columbian exchange was as much an ecological catastrophe as it was the beginnings of a

new planetary scale ecological order and the Conquest and settler colonialism are better

understood as world scale social crises. They are the consequences of the formation and

projection of a new forms of power and violence by an European warlord class projected on a

world scale over the 16th and 17th centuries in order to defeat peasant rebellion gathering steam

across Europe ever since the Black Death, another convergent crisis.

3

Marx pointed to this accumulation of violence and its institutionalization as power in his sarcastic debunking of Enlightenment political economy's fantasy of "primitive accumulation" as the origin story of world capital. Against forgetful and eurocentred postmodern histories of power, Anibel Quijano has given the name "the colonial matrix of power" to this accumulation of violence that is at once meticulously local as it is systematically global (indeed, the operation of money gives us an approximate representation of its spirit) while drawing attention to the necessary intersection of racism and class domination in its mobilization. Silvia Federici's pathbreaking book, *Caliban and the Witch,* fills out the picture by showing how capital's colonial matrix of power is also a new kind of patriarchal power that destroyed European women's collective political power through the enclosure of agricultural and forest commons, that seized control of women's bodies and reproductive power, depoliticizing both as a heteronormative, sexual commons for patriarchal capital and rendered women's work invisible in the social division of labour through the construction of a new misogynist, witch-burning and colonizing state. This *longué durée* of convergent crises is precisely why a decolonizing perspective on climate change politics and the convergence of crises today is crucial.

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But Federici's intervention is of crucial importance in another way that needs to be underscored. Her work along with that of other social reproduction feminists enable us to understand how capitalist wealth rests on a foundation of social reproduction in which women's childbearing and other unpaid and/or cheapened work is central, along with the subsistence and domestic

reproductive activities of the world's "dollar a day" poor, of children and the elderly, without any of which the accumulation of capital is impossible. Not only does this entail an enduring and systemic circuit of crises but gives rise specifically to a crucial *representational crisis*: While capitalist wealth depends upon, and indeed, expropriates commonwealth, *capital,* through its own regime of representation, cannot represent *commonwealth* in its beauty, grace, creativity, in its power, in its dancing, blooming, animal fullness of being. Capitalist wealth cannot represent commonwealth because all it can do, in order to be itself, is externalize costs by raping, pillaging and destroying the commonwealth of our planetary ecology. Not only does this instance a paradigmatic dialectic of quantity and quality, where a penny saved somewhere in the global economy results in violence against a body in its ecosystem somewhere else, but this crisis of representation opens up the space for a research problematic that intermedia research at our Studio takes up. How can we represent social contradictions?

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Capital, as a sociopolitical assemblage of power, wealth and violence needs the commons, indeed needs to create ever new commons but in order to enclose and thereby destroy them. This is its fundamental contradiction, which Marx's inaugural critique enables us to grasp: it is a contradiction in which the more capital succeeds, and turns the limits it encounters into hurdles to leap over, the more it paints itself into more complex and desperate corners. Thus the convergence of ecological and social crises makes the question of navigating social contradictions an even more urgent one for social justice politics today. Thus the Studio proposes to undertake research probes that explore the representational dilemmas posed by the entanglement of multiple social contradictions of power and politics.

6

The critical challenge we take on regarding the problematic of intermedia has to do with the tenacious persistence of reification, technological reductionism and transcendence that beset any engagement with it. All of these genre conventions of modern colonialist discourse are in play, for example, when the term media is used in its narrow, restricted and conventional sense which crystallizes its object by pulling away from questions of power, capital and violence that mediate social belonging along with its exclusions and class instrumentalities. Debord's (1977) theory of spectacular society famously diagnosed this fetishism —the substitution of images for social relations—while theorizing its roots in the separation and enclosures of capital formation rather than as the accumulation of images as such. In doing so, Debord reactivates the specific difference of Marx's dialectic from Hegel's which turns on the representational dilemmas posed by what Marx theorizes as the exchange abstraction underlying the value form on which the possibility of capital accumulation rests. The abstraction presupposed by commodity exchange is institutional and so concrete and a social reality but also an appearance from which the key story of capital's power is structurally and fetishistically occluded as an effect of class power. (Marx 1977) The contradiction between common wealth and capitalist wealth is connected to this fetishistic convolution of power and representation. Thus a dialectic emerges in which the restricted sense of various media and this more general one of the conditions of possibility of belonging, exclusion and exploitation point to each other without being reducible to each other. A deeply colonialist-Enlightenment rationality analytically splits this problematic into two reified

orders of transcendence, in many cases not ever bothering to think through their mutual intereference patterns.

7

Insofar as the work of Canadian political economist and communication theorist Harold Innis (1951) anticipates many aspects of Debord's intervention, while locating his critique in the singularity of historical marginalization, his "bias of communication thesis" has served as an important fulcrum around which we have tried to rethink the connections between Marx's critique of political economy, information saturation, the cultural politics of new and old media, and what Guha and Martinez-Alier (1997) call the "environmentalism of the poor".

8

As an economic historian of social institutions through which the British Empire became the dominant power in the Americas, Innis was sensitive to the significance of problems of communication for the working of markets and the possibilities of capital accumulation through the Atlantic cod fisheries, the Fur Trade, the Atlantic triangular trade, the opening of the Canadian West via railroad construction, the wheat boom and immigration, each of which are major turning points in Canadian settler colonial nation-building. Innis writes his communication theory as the British Empire is being superseded by U.S. cold war leadership intervening in another wave of globalization of the system of nation-states through decolonization in Asia and Africa.

9

The capacious scope of his historical imagination is crucial to our understanding Innis' bias of communication thesis and his denunciation of our "obsession with present-mindedness" which

he theorizes as the "space bias" of modernity. (Innis, 1952) In this diagnosis of the spatialization

of time and history as the paradigmatic crisis of modernity, Innis joins not only Debord (1977)

but also Lukacs (1972), Lefebrve (1991) and Heidegger (1962) among others. But it is the

specific way Innis formulates the matter that is important to us here, not the least of which is his

idiosyncratic deployment of the term "bias" itself. (Mookerjea 2011)

10

Innis adopts the term "bias" from electrical engineers and more specifically from the circuitry of

telegraphic signalling where a direct current is used to establish a reference point enabling an

alternating current to amplify a signal. Rather than point to issues of mere opinion and prejudice

then, Innis' critique of objectivity (his target here are the claims of the new discipline of

neoclassical economics to constitute a "value-free" science) launched through his metaphor then

proposes a mediation of mediation, just as "cutting on the bias" in tailoring creates a special

property of the cloth cut. The bias of communication is not then its slant imposed by an abstract

monadic subjectivity. Rather, Innis' historical research investigates media with regard to whether

the historically located, social, cultural and geopolitical assemblage of which they are a part turns

up the bias of communication for strategies of projecting power across space or over time.

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 Innis' normative ideal illuminating this historical analytic sets its bias to balance the

contingencies of space and time. Unlike the many ancient empires Innis examines, an ideal

empire able to balance the communicative imperatives of space and time, he supposes, would

endure. These historical studies, however, are but preparation for Innis' main concern, capitalist

modernity and its cutting edge, the British Empire, then in full collapse. (1952: 120) The

communicative space bias of capitalist modernity, then, not only has to do with a system of communication making world scale markets possible but also mediating this space of accumulation with modes of political power —competitive and warring absolutist empires and then nation-states—on which the accumulation of capital depends but which accumulation then, in a feedback loop, also fuels.

12

Innis connects modernity's space bias then to the dominance of one assemblage of communication which he describes as "industrialized communication based on the eye". (1951: 79-81) This approximation of the theory of spectacle has the further advantage of enabling us to conceptualize *information* socio-historically, beyond the reifications of cybernetic theory and applied mathematics. Innis' historical approach to theorizing information thus sets into relation the history of writing systems, the emergence of prose, various genres of reports, the news, the news of prices and so on against oral tradition in order to pose the problem of information in terms of what we today call media ecology. Innis moreover connects his account of the dominance of "industrialized communication based on the eye" over all other modes of communication to his theorization of Canada's postwar passage between the British Empire and American imperialism and his grasp of the key global role that the American military industrial complex and the transnational corporation would come to play in the emergent cold war world order all of which are both cause and effect of "present mindedness."

13

This media-ecological (and dialectical) aspect of Innis' work was deeply important to McLuhan, who recognized its possibilities and built upon it, as it is for our mobilization of the concept of

intermedia now. McLuhan's restaging of the story tells of the "world environment" projected by the American superpower and, in turn, theorizes Canadian society in terms of its cultural borderlines as the hidden ground of a *counter-environment* to American power, an idea to which we will return below. (McLuhan 2009)

14

Famously, McLuhan's field theory of media environments arrives at its ultimate conclusions by including all technology under the rubric of media, since all technology communicate and extend the human senses; all technologies mediate by changing patterns and scales of perception. McLuhan eventually develops his inaugural media ecological insight that "the message of a media is another media" (1964: 24) into his tetradic hermeneutic of "retrieval, reversal, obsolescence and extension" (1988: 116) which I argue yields the seeds of a new intermedia dialectic.

15

In order to grasp this possibility, we need to return briefly to his mentor's bias of communication thesis and make clear that space bias and time bias, for Innis, are not binary oppositions. Within the structural dominance of modern space bias, rather, the time bias of communication offers the possibility of what Innis calls a "strategy of culture" that he argues might be able to offset the space bias of industrialized communication based on the eye from its inside. As a "strategy of culture", Innis' plea for time directs us to the ethico-political core of the problematic of communicative praxis. "Culture is concerned" he writes "with the capacity of the individual to appraise problems in terms of space and time and with enabling him [sic] to take the proper *steps* at the right *time*." (1951: 85, my emphasis) Here is where we find Innis' cultural politics; one that

still appeals in Arnoldian terms to a humanist mobilization of high culture, to be sure, against the cultural imperialism of American mass culture. But there is even here a symptomatic slippage, as Innis turns to oral tradition as well, and so also to popular culture, for another possibility of a strategy of culture against present mindedness. (1952: 76) The mediation of mediation that the concept of communicational bias brings into the foreground, then, also opens the door to some kind of dialectical interrogation and cultural political intervention in our media ecology that moves the problematic intermediation from the domain of ontology to that of collective political praxis.

16

McLuhan then transposes the terms of this Innisian dialectic and proposes to probe the possibilities of resonating intervals of televisual acoustic space against the hegemony of Gutenberg linearity. Yet readings of McLuhan tend to overlook the geopolitical situation that is decisive for both Innis' and McLuhan's thought. As a result, they also ignore McLuhan's exploration of what he calls those *cultural borderlines* that makes Canada different from both the US and Europe. As we have already noted, McLuhan here proposes the concept of a *counter-environment* in relation to the US led world information environment which he argues serves as the latter's hidden ground, enabling the workings of this world environment to become profiled in new and critical ways. (McLuhan 2009: 71-86) At the Intermedia Research Studio, we find this aspect of McLuhan's thought to be intriguingly suggestive and so appropriate and refunction this concept of *counter-environment* for our purposes to mean the sacrificial ground upon which history's victors stage their version of events. (Mookerjea 2015) Furthermore, we appropriate McLuhan's signature thesis "the message of a media is another media" and pull out an

intermedia theory of the commons by reading Marx's formulation of his concept of mode of production in the *Grundrisse* (1973) in its light.

17

Marx, in the *Grundrisse*, sketches out an account of human collectivity mediated by reproductive relations with nature which are in turn mediated by social relationships. (1973: 25-30) Different modes of social reproduction organize these intermediations variously. The two mediations — social relations mediated by nature and transformations of nature mediated by social relations— comprise a vicious circle which resist all attempts to stabilize this concept of social reproduction either ontologically or historically. Rather, these two entangled axioms circulate mysteriously at the heart of Marx's materialism of "sensuous praxes". This double mediation —*intermediation* — is the condition of possibility of every kind of commons —from forests and streams to art, science and cities— which are all media technologies in McLuhan's sense of transformations in the pattern and scale of sensuous praxes. Intermedia research consequently takes McLuhan's hermeneutic tetrad of retrieval, reversal, obsolescence and extension to define strategic possibilities in subaltern and class struggles over the creation or enclosure of the commons and its mystery.

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To bring this compressed and no doubt sketchy account of an intermedia theory of the commons to something like an intelligible conclusion, I return now to a singular media praxis that provoked my approach to intermedia research and has inspired my theorization of this problematic in many important ways. This is the video work of a group of non-literate Dalit women organic-biodiversity farmers in Andhra Pradesh, India (a region notorious for debt related

farmer suicides) who have been contending with climate change related drought for over a decade, along with intense oppression, exploitation and marginalization.

19

The videos these women make are politically engaged: Gender, environmental, and agricultural issues, particularly involving seed sovereignty, biodiversity, and subaltern women's autonomy are prominent themes of the work. Videos range in genre from grassroots investigative journalism, to point- of-view documentaries, to participatory research and training videos, made in collaboration with the Deccan Development Society and a network of cooperatives to which the women belong and for whom they make these videos. Their video work has long searched for ways to represent the crises they and the communities around them live. Their videos are regularly screened in their own communities and farming villages throughout Andhra Pradesh, especially during an annual travelling biodiversity festival and the videos circulate nationally and internationally as well through development and environmentalist social-movement solidarity networks around the world. This singular video practice mediates the self-management of their cooperatives in many ways and it is this aspect of their work that interests me here.

20

The women present their videographical manifesto in a short video work, *The Sangham Shot*, which leads us directly toward the singularity of their political aesthetic. Here, they explain that their videos are organized around the formal principle of an eye-level shot which they call the "sangham shot," since in the *sangham*, they say, "we are all equals." This shot is distinguished from two others: the "patel shot" (or landlord shot) where the camera is positioned

to look down on the women working the soil from up high; and the "slave shot," a reverse shot taken from below looking up.

21

In their videos, a mid range face-to-face frame of someone making a statement or declaration about a particular problem or issue replaces typical "talking head" explanations.   This syntax plays a particularly crucial role in the video *Making of an Agricultural Biodiversity Register*, as it documents extensive community involvement in creating an agro-biodiversity register. The video's specific syntax foregrounds individual involvement and community cooperation, as well as women's leadership role in this creative process. In advocating the use of such biodiversity registers as a seed sovereignty and autonomy strategy, the video explains how the village of Khasimpur created its biodiversity register, presenting this as an example for other subaltern farming communities to follow. For the sangham's solidarity network of outsiders, this explanation takes the form of English subtitles outlining the steps. But this is the barest of explanations, as it becomes clear from another kind of writing the farmers inscribe on the grounds of the village assembly out of flour, vegetable dyes, seeds, plants, and terracotta figures that extensive knowledge of dryland agriculture comprises this account. This, however, enables the video to underscore another crucial point it seeks to make. Not only are the assembled farmers experts in biodiverse agriculture, but this expertise belongs to the community. As the editing cuts back and forth between the colourful register on the ground and the public

deliberation between farmers around it, the face-to-face intimacy of the sangham shot serves to show how this expertise is cooperatively sustained.

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The video *On Women & Genetic Diversity* provides, on the other hand, a paradigmatic demonstration of how the sangham shot can be inverted into an image of a singular kind of movement of embodied belonging. The video is composed primarily of various movements of biodiverse agricultural production performed by women especially. These movements include shots of women saving and storing seeds, varieties of seeds, the use of a seed drill, crops at various stages of growth, rain, and women collecting seeds. The analyses of agricultural technique these videos present lie in the composition of movements, achieved during both filming and editing processes. (To assert just this, all of their videos include shots of themselves videotaping). Their agricultural practitioner's expertise becomes indispensable to both this camera-work and the editing. The intelligibility of the videos' analyses rests with the composed visibility of the movements of social reproduction. In important respects, this is a training video but one that makes no pedagogic concession to the habits of literacy. One must attend the image with one's body and some other power of thought.

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I want to suggest that what is compelling about these movement compositions is that they are capable of bringing orality's time bias of communication into the foreground of our perceptual gestalt. The women's camera "sees the world" just as the primary producers of this kind of

agriculture see and understand the relationships between each activity (ploughing, sowing, weeding, harvesting, cooking, nurturing); we also see how each becomes the other. Such analyses of movement in these videos are nothing less than Taylorist time-and-motion studies carried out on the basis of some other principle than the efficiency of domination in the production process.

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These videos show us that the agricultural practices we are seeing (bullock ploughing, hand winnowing, hand weeding, etc.) are neither archaic agricultural practices nor soon to be obsolete movements of production. Rather these movements compose some kind of Utopian past-future liberated not only from petrochemical dependence, nor those economic and political dependencies petroleum-based agriculture here presupposes, but all the dependencies which have been accumulating in the world ever since the Industrial Revolution fatefully introduced a host of spatial contradictions and conflicts between town and country. Since this past-future is also that of an oral culture, the movements that make possible petroleum-free agriculture must also be sung whenever they are shown. It is in this articulation that the time bias of communication asserts its powers. This is what the aesthetic-politics of the sangham shot is capable of achieving.

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