

Critical Concepts

Charles Horton Cooley and the Origins of U.S. Communication Study in Political Economy

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This paper argues that, contrary to received wisdom, political economy lay at the core of the project of communication study at its originating academic moment in North America. It makes that case by reconstructing persistent political economic dimensions in the work of Charles Horton Cooley, who more than anyone else deserves to be called the intellectual founder of communication study in the U.S. Drawing out previously neglected aspects of Cooley's thought, it sketches how his pragmatist, social democratic brand of political economics took a holistic, historically informed view of the communicative constitution and social organization of selves, institutions, and political cultures. Cooley provides a starting point for a revised understanding of the history of political economic thinking about communication and ways that it has intersected with sociology, cultural study, and democratic theory.

Contrary to much of the received wisdom, political economy lay at the core of the project of communication study at its originating academic moment in the United States. Before Dallas Smythe, Herbert Schiller, and Harold Innis there was Charles Horton Cooley (1864-1929), who more than any single thinker deserves the title of intellectual founder for the study of communication in North America. To this point, Cooley's contributions have been overlooked, misunderstood, or selectively read in nearly every significant history or commentary about the field of communication in the U.S.¹ This essay aims to help right those wrongs, and in so doing to offer a new perspective on the historical place of political economy within the broader study of communication and media. My purposes are more than historical, however, for I believe that Cooley's lifelong project has things to teach or remind us today. Across more than three decades of work, Cooley provided an expansive vision for communication study that blended normatively grounded political economy, interpretive sociology, social psychology, and cultural criticism into a larger project committed to democracy as a way of life. His was the first extended American social theory of communication, which he took to be constitutive of selves, moral communities, and society writ large. In an accessible essayist's style, he cast institutions and communicative practices within larger social totalities and longer historical processes, advocated public regulation of industries, and attended to questions of class, conflict, and the systematic production of inequality. Cooley certainly had his limitations, and I draw attention to some of them as well, but on balance he offers us more than we have generally recognized, and opens up new perspectives on the history and ongoing project of po-

litical economy within communication and media studies.

Cooley is most remembered today as one of the classic triumvirate who lay the foundations for symbolic interactionism (William James and George Herbert Mead are the others), but he began his career in the 1890s as a political economist and returned to that subject in writings of the 1910s that served as a capstone to a social theory that put communication at its center. To get the full picture, we need to read Cooley's early, middle, and later work together and see how different elements complement one another to construct a spacious theoretical whole. When we do, we put ourselves in a position to see that received wisdom about both Cooley and the history of political economy in North American communication study have reflected what Raymond Williams called a "selective tradition."² I will address memories of Cooley in the first section of this essay, but I note at the start that the collective self-image of political economy since Smythe and Herbert Schiller has been one of an institutionally and intellectually marginalized formation fighting hegemonic forces both within and outside the academy. Like most tales, this one is partly true, but it also reflects a particular definition of political economy, advanced by influential scholars with radical or broadly Marxist political identifications, and a selective reading of the past linked to the social dynamics of an intellectual formation of which they have been part.³ As an Emersonian and pragmatist social democrat widely known as a symbolic interactionist, Cooley doesn't fit the dominant image of political economists of communication. But if we read his work both closely and synoptically, we find themes that strongly resonate with contemporary conversations.

After addressing collective memories and potential obstacles to bringing Cooley into the fold of political economy, I turn to reconstructing key dimensions of his lifelong study of communication, amplifying previously overlooked elements of particular relevance to the mission of *Democratic Communiqué*. My argument extends a longer and complementary account I made about Cooley in a book I recently published, and interested readers are directed there for more detail about Cooley's project and historical status as intellectual leader.⁴ Here I sketch how he drew from political economy, sociology, social psychology, and cultural interpretation—approaches that are not often drawn together in our own era, and which have frequently existed in tension if not outright hostility. Nicholas Garnham, Janice Peck, Eileen Meehan and others have called for a rapprochement between political economy and cultural studies, and here I believe Cooley shows a way.⁵ Peck has insightfully read this paradigm debate in terms of deeper intellectual dualisms between the mental and the material, the cultural and the economic, "individual activity and instituted social relations"—dualisms that she seeks to push past with help from Jean-Paul Sartre, Raymond Williams, and Maurice Godelier.⁶ Cooley advanced an analogous project as pragmatism's first-generation sociologist and political economist. He advocated holistic, non-reductive analysis that utilized multiple analytic perspectives to make sense of the symbolic, material, and interactional dimensions of what he would aptly term "the communicative life."⁷ He mapped communication as it manifest itself through individuals, small groups, media technologies, organizations, economic classes, and other social institutions. Though he went nowhere near as far as Sartre, Williams, and Peck, Cooley collapsed distinctions between the

cultural and the economic, historicized markets and demand, and cast communication in all its material manifestations as inextricably linked to the always-already social mind—all dimensions of contemporary political economy. His project was both ambitious and tentative, produced at a moment when there was little systematic research organized around the still-novel theoretical concepts of ‘communication’ and ‘media.’ Parts of it can be read as a liberal and social democratic variation on themes Antonio Gramsci was working out more rigorously at the same moment Cooley penned his later writings on political economy. After briefly drawing out parallels between the two, I conclude my reconstruction of forgotten elements in Cooley by considering his significance within the field of political economy today.

Collective Memories of Cooley

Charles Horton Cooley was born and spent the bulk of his life in Ann Arbor, Michigan. He was the son of a prominent jurist, Thomas McIntyre Cooley—professor at the University of Michigan, Judge on the state’s Supreme Court, author of a highly influential text on constitutional law, and first Chairman of the Interstate Commerce Commission. A shy child who had trouble speaking, the younger Cooley entertained dreams of becoming a great orator but grew instead into a socially retiring professor of sociology at the hometown university. As an undergraduate at Michigan, he came to know John Dewey, then a young instructor in philosophy, and he sat in on at least one of Dewey’s courses when he moved on to graduate study at the same institution in the 1890s. Taking a break from graduate studies he recently began, Charles worked for his father at the ICC, conducting research on railways that would feed into his dissertation, “A Theory of Transportation” (1894). Commentators have generally argued that after the dissertation Cooley turned to what he called “thought transportation”—or communication as we understand it today—forging in *Human Nature and Social Order* (1902) and *Social Organization* (1909) concepts of the “looking-glass self” and the “primary group” which subsequently entered the lexicons of sociology and communication studies (and which Theodor Adorno appreciatively used as a pivot into social alienation in his essay on Balzac).⁸

Though not infrequently mentioned as one of the classic Progressive Era writers on communication, Cooley’s reputation has suffered from two interrelated acts of symbolic inscription: a relative diminishment in comparison to Dewey and Mead, and a characterization of him as a loose-thinking and naïve idealist (in both senses of that word) who valorized minds and their symbols and neglected the material realms of bodies, institutions, and power. In communication and media studies, Cooley’s diminution in relation to Dewey gathered force in the 1970s through the influence of James Carey, whose enshrinement of Dewey in his much read “Cultural Approach to Communication” (1975) helped set the tone for a series of historiographical treatments that took that philosopher as the leading intellectual figure of the first generation of American communication study. Inflected by different politics and conceptual problematics, Daniel Czitrom’s *Media and the American Mind* (1983), Hanno

Hardt's *Critical Communication Studies* (1992), and Dan Schiller's *Theorizing Communication* (1996) all followed Carey's lead. Their otherwise excellent critical histories either largely ignored Cooley (Hardt and Schiller) or failed to give him the full credit he deserved (Czitrom). As I argued in my book, Cooley developed an earlier and far more extensive social theory of communication than Dewey did, while operating from the horizons of political economy and reform-minded attention to democratic social life.⁹

The "idealist" moniker dates back at least to an encomium-cum-critique Mead published in 1930, a year after Cooley's death. Writing with what Glenn Jacobs calls "ambivalence toward his precursor Cooley, whose influence he never fully acknowledged," Mead would fault Cooley for being an unscientific mentalist who was unable to separate the social process from individual consciousness.¹⁰ More recently, both Jacobs and Hans-Joachim Schubert have argued—correctly, I believe—that Cooley's theory of self and society were not psychological but rather *communicative*, thus giving sociological shape to the pragmatist project and emphasizing the centrality of "communicative interaction contextualized by group and institutional structures."¹¹ Besides his importance on these grounds, commentators have called for renewed attention to Cooley as a forefigure in the sociology of emotions, "the only founder of a leading U.S. sociology department who firmly opposed positivism,"¹² and an architect of a pragmatist "sociological theory of social action, social order, and social change that could serve as his instrument for analyzing the social problems and the cultural crisis of the age."¹³ Jacobs has also led the way in turning interest back to Cooley's work in institutional economics, which I will return to and draw upon below.¹⁴

Among the relatively few discussions of Cooley in the tradition of political economy, the historian Jeffrey Sklansky's nuanced and fascinating interpretation stands as its own kind of obstacle to the reading I am trying to give in this essay. On the one hand, Sklansky acknowledges that Cooley's "pathbreaking studies...entitle him to primary credit for that master creation of American social science, the 'social self,'" an entity that displaced the classic republican and liberal ideals of the "sovereign self" rooted in the possession of property and self-regulated virtue.¹⁵ Although a defense of democratic ideals of self-expression and communal identification that also included a "sharp cultural critique of the 'pecuniary values' of American capitalism," Sklansky argues that Cooley's theory also "shifted the stakes of social struggle away from political and economic rights and toward psychosocial norms, desires, and needs."¹⁶ He continues, "Cooley turned away from political economy's traditional focus with the factors of production toward a new focus upon the factors of exchange." In so doing, Cooley was part of a generation that helped shift "the ideological stakes of struggle from the terrain of political economy to that of social psychology [and] helped to legitimate the triumph of capitalism as a system of class rule even as they proclaimed its transcendence."¹⁷

As will become clearer in my reconstruction of Cooley's project, I believe that Sklansky underplays the persistent thread of political economy in Cooley's work and his ongoing commitment to republican producer ideals. He also truncates Cooley's account of communication by calling it a theory of exchange, which downplays the degree to which communication is a constitutive force for Cooley, creating consciousness and collective life through

symbolic and material means. This constitutive dimension puts Cooley in a position to supplement traditional political economic analysis with attention to structures and dynamics of meaning, social and economic valuation, and the cultural reproduction of capitalism and class dominance—all of which I sketch below. At the same time, Sklansky reminds us that Cooley's was neither a traditional neo-orthodox nor a radical political economics but rather one that grew in theoretically novel directions. Though it may have ironically been co-opted within the rapidly developing capitalist society it aimed to critique, Cooley's communicatively grounded theory of society also offered a path toward integrating economics with culture, and critiquing anti-democratic capitalist excess.

Political Economy into Social Theory: Cooley's Early Work

We can do worse than identifying 1894 as the birth year for the formal academic study of communication in the U.S. and casting Cooley in the leading role.¹⁸ He published a thesis and an article on the subject that year, and he taught what was likely the first course in North America that explicitly featured communication as a central social concept. In retrospect, we can trace the roots of his theoretical innovation back to his early fascination with the power of oratory and his uptake of Emerson, but the more proximate sources were his experience with the regulation and political economy of railroads and his reading of the German sociologist Albert Schäffle. The former began when he interrupted graduate study at the University of Michigan to spend two years working with his father in Washington, D.C. The younger Cooley had taken his undergraduate degree in mechanical engineering and had knowledge of statistics. He was enlisted to collect data and prepare reports for the Census Bureau as well his father's Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC), then engaged in determining regulations for the industrial behemoth of the railroads. Out of that context came his first publication, "The Social Significance of Street Railways" (1891), which cast statistics on speed and ridership costs within a framework of the social functions of transportation, and urged cities to focus not just on economic revenues but also public service in their street railway systems.¹⁹ Thus began his morally-informed social scientific publishing career.

In the lexicon and understandings of the 1890s, railroads were considered forms of "communication," a view Cooley took back with him to Michigan in 1892, when he resumed doctoral studies in political economy with minors in sociology and statistics. He built off what he called his "educative experience" in Washington, and found ideas for a framework from a "an arduous perusal" of Schäffle's *Structure and Life of the Social Body*, an influential treatise of the era that conceived society as a totality bound together by its lines of communication and transport that functioned as its nervous system.²⁰ Cooley incorporated them into his thesis, *The Theory of Transportation*, written for the Department of Political Economics under the supervision of Henry Carter Adams, who, like Cooley's father, advocated government regulation of railroads and commerce.²¹

The thesis anticipated some of Harold Innis' broader claims about media, society, and history, and like the Canadian's work, was a recognizable product of a different and spa-

cious era in the study of political economy. In it, Cooley attends to physical dimensions and “social relations” of transportation and their impacts on political, economic, military, and cultural institutions over long historical time. Attending to both “material” and “psychical” dimensions, Cooley advances the claim that the mechanism through which society organizes and extends itself “is Communication in the widest sense of the word; communication of ideas and physical commodities.” Considering everything from military roads to political ceremonies, traveling clergymen, newspapers, postal systems, and the coercive state, Cooley casts his net wide. In the process, he makes his first serious attempt at taking what he calls an “organic view of society,” by which he means one that recognizes interconnectedness, totality, and historical development. As he puts it at one point, “all social processes are intimately bound up with others, and isolation of one can only be partial and provisional.”²²

He goes on to make one of those provisional isolating distinctions in perhaps the most-quoted line from the thesis: “Transportation is physical, communication psychical.” But this sort of hard division runs counter to his larger commitment to understanding totality and organic interconnectedness, a point toward which he feints a few sentences later when he says that the study of communication is a branch of social psychology “which embraces language as an instrument of social organization *and all the material agencies that language employs.*”²³ I think there are two, sometimes unreconciled voices in Cooley—the political economist attentive to the material realm and the sociologist attuned to the symbolic. Those voices persisted through the rest of his career.

His sociological political economy shines through in his argument that transportation “is not merely an industry larger than others, but it is quite a different sort of thing.” He called it “one of several fundamental social processes,” an agency by which society itself is organized, its parts brought into relation with one another.²⁴ He pivots from this insight to make a case for government regulation of transportation in the public good, which for him meant writing laws, resisting monopoly, and openly communicating the results of relevant social research. Though Cooley did not explicitly make the case, one can apply his logic to media industries as well. Given his view of communication as a “fundamental social process,” the *sui generis* nerve system of society, he would clearly reject those like the former Federal Communications Commission chairman Reed Fowler, who argued that televisions are like toasters, and media industries are therefore not different in kind from other businesses. Similarly, Cooley’s logic lends support for the argument Robert McChesney and John Nichols have recently made in support of public subsidies for newspapers.²⁵

After completing his thesis, Cooley turned from transportation to his new master term, “communication,” building out from political economy to study the interactions, symbols, and institutions that constituted life as experienced by humans. An important essay of 1897, “The Process of Social Change,” launched the project and provided a bridge from *The Theory of Transportation* to his core trilogy of books—*Human Nature and the Social Order* (1902), *Social Organization* (1909), and *Social Process* (1918). Working out from a historically inflected variation on Darwinian naturalism, he declared, “The existing system of communication determines the reach of the environment. Society is a matter of the incidence of men upon one another; and since this incidence is a matter of communication, the history of

the latter is the foundation of all history.”²⁶ The language of environment provides an opening toward an ecological view of communication and its media, attuned to political economy, and attentive to all manners of symbolic and material interaction. He would amplify this insight across his three books, filling out details at different scales of social organization.

Human Nature and Social Order showed individuals to be always-already social, developing as selves through face-to-face interactions and imagined others, and growing through various kinds of participation in “the communicative life.” The book offered a sociology for James’s idea of the social self and advanced the broad anti-Cartesian project of the pragmatists. Language, gesture, and shared sentiment create social environments we live in, our sense of individual and collective being, and our categories of experience. “Where there is no communication there can be no nomenclature or developed thought,” Cooley argues.²⁷

Social Organization meanwhile casts attention beyond individuals to consider the communicative constitution of primary groups, publics, social classes, and other collectives and institutions. Cooley confesses at the start that he will approach “the larger mind” through a method he terms “sympathetic introspection,” so it’s right to be wary of an idealist project. Consciousness and social feeling are to be sure featured topics of the book, but he also pays attention to what he calls the “organization” of communication “into literature, art, and institutions”—the “visible structure of thought, as much cause as effect of the inside or conscious life of men.”²⁸ A system of communication provides “a tangible framework for our ideas” that Cooley compared to the railway system and the commodities it carried.

The book’s second and third sections present what is perhaps *the* classic Progressive view of communication and democracy, with compact, accessible accounts of the communicative construction of self and society, the meaning and social formation of public opinion, and the faith that newer media can extend the boundaries of moral solidarity and democratic community. Blending romantic expressivism with pragmatist social constructivism and American exceptionalism, it holds out hope that communication can fuel progress and embeds it in a grander historical narrative from early to contemporary times. Optimistic and in places naïve, it is a hope that continues to circulate today, sometimes sold back to us through advertising for commercial purposes. It represents one of the secular faiths of the twentieth century, pliable enough to serve multiple purposes.

Though the sentiment courses across his trilogy, Cooley’s morally oriented democratic reform impulses come out clearest in *Social Organization*. He often expresses them as declarations about what he asserts to be trends in modern life—toward, for instance, an increasing breadth of solidarity, moral community, and concern for justice in socially distant places. In these moments, it is easy to read him as a naïve moral idealist whose cloistered existence blinds him to the persistent injustices and exercises of power that, like democratic progress, are also dependent upon communication. But one can also find evidence of a more nuanced view, attendant to the realities of power and hegemony, and striving to articulate a normative vision for morally redeeming, democratic forms of communication that would advance the broader projects of social justice, egalitarianism, and affective identifications with distant others. This normative project took on spiritual dimensions for him, achieving

the status of a kind of heterodox (post-)Christian faith in communication itself. If we dial back the spiritualism, however, we can see Cooley's democratic moral impulses as consonant with the explicitly moral commitment that continues to inform a more radical, Marxian inflected political economy of communication today.²⁹

Returning to Political Economy: Middle and Later Work

Tempering, if not fully counterbalancing, the excesses of his spiritually oriented social hope was the reform-minded political economist in Cooley, who reappears in the latter part of *Social Organization* and stays through the 1910s. The last two sections of *Social Organization*, "Social Classes" and "Institutions," address, among other topics, "the ascendancy of a capitalist class" (256-83), "the organization of the ill-paid classes" (284-289), and the organization and reproduction of social institutions (313-341). These chapters represent a little-remembered Charles Horton Cooley and include passages ripe for retrieval by contemporary critical scholars looking to reconstruct a genealogy and usable past spoken in an American idiom. In them and a decade of writings that followed, we can find incomplete efforts to chart communicative dynamics of domination and power and to link culture and economy, the symbolic and the material. We might read these passages as bourgeois, social democratic pragmatist variations on the similarly anti-reductive analyses by Gramsci in the same decade.

Cooley identifies several types of social power, one consisting of "control over the human spirit" and exercised "without any means but the ordinary symbols of communication." Among those endowed with such "spiritual" power are "poets, prophets, philosophers, inventors and men of science of all ages, the great political, military and religious organizations, and even the real captains of industry and commerce"—a list that betrays both an Emersonian attraction to "great men" and a more sociological/ political economic insight into the institutional control of a culture's dominant symbols. He also identifies a "more tangible kind of social power... [that] depends chiefly upon organizing capacity, [and] which may be described as the ability to build and operate human machinery." Linked to communicative work characteristic of the 19th and 20th centuries, this was the power necessary to run "the vast and diverse social structures rising about us—industrial enterprises, political parties, labor unions, newspapers, universities, and philanthropies."³⁰

The capitalist class possesses these and other forms of power, Cooley argues, which range from "immediate power over goods and services" to direct political power, indirect influence over the professional classes and newspapers, and general dominance of the currents of public opinion and sentiment. Here lay the seeds for a theory of hegemony, dynamically maintained through a variety of fully and less-conscious mechanisms. Professionals tend to come from or adapt their thinking to the upper classes, which beckon ambitious youth and buy off promising labor leaders by offering them jobs. Newspapers are generally owned by the rich and, even more, "depend for profit chiefly upon advertisements, the most lucrative of which come from rich merchants who naturally resent doctrines that threaten

their interests.” Even that portion of the press with readership among “the hand-working class is usually more willing to carry on a loud but vague agitation, not intended to accomplish anything but increase circulation, than to push real and definite reform.” Public issues “that are backed by wealthy interests have a great advantage in the urgency, persistence and cleverness with which they are presented,” fueled partly by “writers [who] live unconsciously in an atmosphere of upper-class ideas from which they do not free themselves by thorough inquiry.” The “money-making ideal” also exercises control over popular sentiment, prompting millions of people “to run themselves out of breath and courage in a race they should never have entered.” All of these sorts of power work to construct a more general “upper-class atmosphere” that Cooley calls the “medium of thought and feeling” in which “[m]ost of us exist.” Official American ideals of freedom deflect attention from the miseries of the lower class, which lives in a “social system...administered with little regards to its just needs.” And finally, “as an ally of established power we have to reckon with the inertia of social structure, something so massive and profound that the loudest agitation is no more than a breeze ruffling the surface of deep waters. Dominated by the habits which it has generated, we all of us, even the agitators, uphold the existing order without knowing it.”³¹

Passages like these—particularly the final sentence of the previous paragraph—put a temporary stop to Cooley’s customary emphasis on communication as a progressive force for the creative production of self, community, and democratic society. They point instead toward the social reproduction of anti-democratic social dominance and toward structure as against creative agency. Here Cooley the hopeful Emersonian sociologist is momentarily supplanted by Cooley the critically minded, culturally attuned political economist. He can’t fully shed his own privilege and bourgeois sensibility, but he strongly sympathizes and partially identifies with “the hand-working classes,” and he shows himself to be intellectually sensitive to the range of structures and dynamic forces that disadvantage them.

Cooley was neither a radical nor a political activist, but in the founding intellectual moment of the field of communication in North America, he articulated insights that would become central to critical political economy and cultural studies—though neither of those formations would draw upon him directly. He declared, for instance, that “an organized and intelligent class-consciousness in the hand-working people is one of the primary needs of a democratic society,” and he called for them to be “conscious and self-directing.” He conceived of labor unions as “spheres of fellowship and self-development” that provide training “in democratic organization and discipline,” and he argued that spokesmen for radical doctrines do “good public service to the public mind by setting in motion counterbalancing, if not more trustworthy, currents of opinion.” Still, he maintained hope that conflict and hostile feeling among classes might be overcome through better mutual understanding and face-to-face discussion, particularly by “those in authority...[who] fence themselves with formality and the type-written letter” and refuse to meet with workers.³² Communication hope never lay far for Cooley.

After *Social Organization* was published, Cooley returned more explicitly to his political economic roots in a series of papers that fed into the culminating book of his trilogy, *Social*

Process. Having gained insight into the communicative constitution of various dimensions of social reality, he would advance a critique of neo-orthodox economics in a 1910 paper published eight years later as “Political Economy and Social Process.” He took the economists to task for insufficiently recognizing what we would call the social construction of both demand and competition, making them seem natural instead of emerging from specific historical circumstances where they were shaped by particular social and cultural processes. Demand was for Cooley “an expression of economic power and will as determined by all the existing conditions,” and it carried “with it those struggles and compromises that make up human history.” He called it “largely a class phenomenon” whose genesis and social expression needed to be scrutinized instead of simply taken as “a datum.”³³

These were themes he would pursue at greater length in *Social Process*, the least known of his three core books. Sections of it do not wear at all well today—for instance his accounts of race, the women’s movement, and “moral degeneration,” all of which reveal the limitations of his methodology, social knowledge, and moral imagination. But elsewhere in the book we find pioneering insights, as in his discussion of “organization,” an expansive ontological idea with application to everything from traditions, customs, and political parties to languages, theories, and individual people. It was a theme he had addressed more broadly in his previous book, but he condensed and focused the idea in a chapter in *Social Process*. As he described it there, organization is a quality generated through the interaction and dynamic growth of social and material entities, traversing both human and non-human worlds. It frequently occurs without clear intentionality or consciousness, and it is always “in some degree, an expression of the whole system.” As a category, organization spans ideation (e.g. “an occupational system of thinking”), emotion (e.g. the “institutional character” of sentiment and passion), action (e.g. language use), and physical structure (e.g. the neighborhoods and transportation grids of a city). Reflecting his Darwinian inheritance, Cooley tends to view most organization as “adaptive” to larger environments or “social situations,” but he also maintains a partly muted sense of what a later generation would call dysfunctional forms of organization, too. The category strains his overarching humanism while also extending a critique of the self-directing autonomous individual that had been part of his project for two decades.³⁴

Organization is related, both conceptually and etymologically, to the organic theory of society Cooley had been developing since *The Theory of Transportation*. As I mentioned earlier, by “organic” Cooley meant a view that situates social phenomena in the flow of history and within the broader totality of the current moment. It recognizes patterns of interaction, chains of connectedness, and embeddedness in systems of organization across variably sized ontological realms—from individuals and groups to “thought-systems” and institutions.³⁵ An organic view demands that one take up multiple analytical perspectives, methods, and disciplinary orientations—social, cultural, political, historical, and economic in Cooley’s own work. It prompts one to look for the interpenetration of different processes within larger systems, searching for dynamic interplays among organized structures and individual creativities. The organic view is thus anti-reductive and holistic, and Cooley makes a point of distinguishing it from “economic determinism” and other “particularisms.”

Against reductive materialisms, he argues that ideas and social institutions are also real, helping to create cultures with customs of understanding and action that produce distinct meanings and objects in the world—these in turn serving as both causes and effects of diffuse patterns of organization.³⁶

Cooley's anti-reductive political economic thinking is best exemplified in his discussion of "valuation as a social process." Calling valuation "a system of practical ideas and motives for behavior," he spaciouly addresses both economic ("pecuniary") and other kinds of values, drawing out historical and institutional dimensions of each, and attaching them to the process of organization more generally. Valuation occurs both consciously and unconsciously, driven by both technical classes with special knowledge and institutional access and by the wealthy, who exercise "a dominating and somewhat monopolistic influence over values," particularly those linked to the market. "Power is concentrated about the functions of the dominant institutions, and the powerful class use it, consciously or otherwise, for their individual and class advantage. Surely one has only to open his eyes to see this," he went on, anticipating C. Wright Mills in *The Power Elite*. "There is, it seems to me, a growing feeling that class, which the prevalent economics has relegated to oblivion under some such category as 'imperfect freedom of competition,' is in fact at the very heart of our problem."³⁷

Consonant with political economy today, Cooley explored the relation among economics, social relations, and political life and did not take "existing social and class relations [as] a given," as Robert McChesney has put the matter.³⁸ Cooley added a dimension less common on the contemporary scene, however, by focusing also on the political economy of values—something that Phil Graham has criticized McChesney, Mosco, and other contemporary political economists for neglecting. "[I]f the primary goal of political economies of communication is to comprehend and change social inequalities created by communication practices for the better...then the field requires a comprehensive theory of value at its foundation," Graham argues. Such a focus would direct attention to considering how the production and reproduction of values maintain patterns of inequality and domination, something closer to the ideology-critique of cultural studies, but with greater attention to the economic realm, too. Though Graham broadens the customary genealogy of political economy, he doesn't mention Cooley, whose project came close in spirit to what Graham is calling for. Cooley's theory of valuation traverses economics, culture, and communication, and embeds them in dynamic, historically specific institutional contexts.³⁹

Cooley's critique of processes of social valuation is tied in part to his own defense of small producer craft values (an element of his thinking that Jeff Sklansky underplays). Cooley was himself a skilled carpenter who interpreted his writing production in terms of craft ideals and devoted workmanship. He faulted commercialism and mass production for socially undermining such values, and he praised guilds, trade unions, and the evolving professions for their countervailing tendencies. Non-alienated labor had both a moral and aesthetic dimension for Cooley, allowing for individual and collective self-expression for those who engaged in it. There was an anti-modern element to this view, but a modern or perhaps proto-postmodern impulse as well. He extended the craft ideal from the realm of traditional labor

to that of culture and education as well, recognizing productive elements of the latter, and drawing out aesthetic dimensions of trade work, learning, and everyday life alike.⁴⁰

Cooley pursued these themes further in his essay, “A Primary Culture for Democracy” (1918), advocating a newly democratic culture that would provide a social medium through which to create a meaningful common life at the participatory grassroots. It would organize itself through schools that taught language, history, economics, and sociology, as well as through community centers, public architecture, and civic celebrations. Countering both the “upper-class atmosphere” that had permeated earlier forms of culture and the commercialism that threatened it now, Cooley’s primary culture for democracy represents a collectively cultivated way of life that infuses the everyday with a democratic aesthetic.⁴¹ As he made clear in *Social Process*, that democratic culture also requires organized social criticism “well instructed in social science and history, familiar also with practical conditions,” and combining “both observation and interpretation.” “We urgently need a criticism of our social system that shall be competent to a somewhat authoritative estimate of the human value of the various activities,” he intones there.⁴²

Cooley’s cultural writings of 1918 could be productively read and taught next to Gramsci’s famous 1916 essay, “Socialism and Culture.” Written for a socialist newspaper in the midst of a life that was coming to be devoted to revolutionary praxis, Gramsci’s article arose from a radically different inventional space than Cooley ever inhabited. However, both men shared a broad historicism, organized their thinking around organic root metaphors, rejected positivism and hard economic reductivism, and saw culture as a realm of both class domination and potentially democratic self-determination. Though Cooley would not have identified with the revolutionary politics of Gramsci’s essay, he would have found much to agree with—beginning with Gramsci’s refusal to conceive of “culture as encyclopaedic knowledge, and men as mere receptacles to be stuffed full of empirical data and a mass of unconnected raw facts.” Cooley would also have agreed with Gramsci’s assertion that

[c]ulture is something quite different. It is organization, discipline of one’s inner self, a coming to terms with one’s own personality; it is the attainment of a higher awareness, with the aid of which one succeeds in understanding one’s own historical value....Above all, man is mind, i.e. the product of history, not nature...The fact is that only by degrees, one stage at a time, has humanity acquired consciousness of its own value, and won for itself the right to throw off the patterns of organization imposed on it by minorities at a previous period in history. And this consciousness was formed not under the brutal goad of physiological necessity, but as a result of intelligent reflection, at first by a few people and later by a whole class.

Similarly, when Gramsci concludes the essay by advocating that the proletariat learn the history and ways of the capitalist class, he mobilizes a Hegelian dialectic that would sit comfortably in Cooley’s interactionist ontology: “the ultimate aim” is “to know oneself better through others and to know others better through oneself.”⁴³ Gramscian self-discipline

and intellectual rigor were far more intense than the meandering essayistic Cooley's, but both men held hopes that a reformulated culture could help creatively invent a better and more democratic life; and both advocated for and practiced non-reductive critical reflection upon social wholes in historical context. They were organic intellectuals from their respective classes, operating at the same moment in different national and institutional locations, and articulating two versions of heterodox political economy.

Conclusion

I began by saying that Cooley is of both historical and contemporary significance. Let me try to bring that claim together here. The first issue concerns the institutional, symbolic, and normative place of political economy within the broader fields of communication and media studies. Voicing a sentiment shared by others, Bob McChesney has called political economy at once "arguably [the] most neglected subfield" and one that should be a "cornerstone" of all communication programs, capturing a dialectic of marginalization and centrality that courses through the academic discourse.⁴⁴ Though I don't identify primarily as a political economist myself, I would support McChesney's argument that political economy should be a cornerstone of our programs and our collective analyses. Its attention to institutions and economies of money, power, and social reality are fundamental to a full understanding of the communicative life that manifests itself at any point in history. Communication programs need to cultivate political economic ways of seeing and understanding if they are to equip students with the tools they will need to be critical citizen-consumers and participant observers of the worlds they inhabit and will help (re)make in their lives after graduation. Political economy should be more central in communication studies than it is.

At the same time, I would argue that political economy has not been quite as historically marginal as often portrayed. Cooley was the leading North American theorist of communication before 1920, the individual figure who went farther than anyone in charting the parts played by communication in creating social, political, and moral life. His work grew out of political economy and never really lost touch with it. To be sure, the bulk of his mature writing focuses more on the symbolic and ideational, but the institutional and material are present in his analyses throughout. If we take this part of his project seriously, then we put ourselves in a position to revise the collective image of political economy within communication studies, and the historiography that has partly underwritten it.

Historical tales of marginalization that start with Smythe and Schiller in the Cold War era reduce the story in two interrelated ways. They miss more than half a century of intellectual history, and emphasize the real marginalization of critical analyses that set in as the Cold War took off. These histories have typically been written from Marxian or left-progressive perspectives, favored historical figures who fit that description, and overlooked or marginalized liberal and more centrist social democratic (not to mention conservative) alternatives—some of which organized themselves in the institutional or intellectual centers of the emergent field of communication. McChesney has gestured toward other figures, in-

cluding Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton, whose work at Columbia in the 1940s helped define the field's intellectual center in that decade.⁴⁵ I have drawn out critical dimensions of their research in a more extended way.⁴⁶ Phil Graham has done some of the preliminary work to bring Harold Lasswell and even Edward Bernays (!) into the political economic fold, while also re-centering Harold Innis there, where he clearly belongs.⁴⁷ Such expanded genealogies have the dual effects of (1) loosening the sometimes tightly-drawn symbolic borders of what counts as political economy; and (2) providing intellectual resources and historical legitimation for making political economy a cornerstone and overarching framework for communication today—as a rich, variegated, and esteemed lineage of thinking and research. There is a politics of boundaries here, and I would argue political economy benefits from continuing to broaden its ideological tent without losing its political convictions. From at least Cooley's "upper-class atmosphere," to Merton and Lazarsfeld's consideration of "the structure of ownership and operation" and media's "narcotizing dysfunction," and C. Wright Mills' observation that "publics become mere *media markets*" in a modern mass society, there is partially submerged American tradition of critically-infused insights about communication, class, markets, ownership, and social power.⁴⁸ In most cases, these ideas are more supplementary than central in the texts in which they appear, but they lie waiting to surface again in the present. Cooley can move us toward a revised intellectual lineage for the political economy of communication in North America.

Cooley can also remind us of continuity in that lineage, since his project shares core values and intellectual impulses with political economy today. In Mosco's magisterial synthesis of the field (which makes a solid effort to portray the ideological diversity of political economy writ larger), he identifies four defining elements of the political economy of communication: (1) concern with "understanding social change and *historical* transformation"; (2) "interest in examining the social whole or the *totality of social relations* that make up the economic, political, social, and cultural areas of life"; (3) a "commitment to *moral philosophy*, which means that it cares about the values that help to create social behavior and about those moral principles that *ought* to guide efforts to change it"; and (4) belief in "the fundamental unity of thinking and doing," the artificiality of "the division between research and action," and the importance of activism and social intervention.⁴⁹ As my reconstruction indicates, Cooley's work reveals dimensions of all four. His own social intervention was limited to scholarly writing and teaching (the significance of which we should not minimize), but he supported activism of other sorts as well, drawing favorable attention to "obscure group[s] of non-conformers" championing ideas that would be accepted in twenty years.⁵⁰ Cooley could also sign on to McChesney's call for inquiry into "the relationship of communication to participatory democracy and both of them to class-divided capitalist societies." His was one of the original voices of the "reasoned utopianism" about media, economy, and democracy that McChesney has called us to rekindle—turning to Pierre Bourdieu for support, instead of Cooley, McChesney's Midwestern Progressive forbearer.⁵¹

We should also attend to Cooley's style, formulated, as Glenn Jacobs has shown, in the essayistic tradition of Montaigne, Emerson, and Walter Pater.⁵² Clear and often elegant, Cooley's style made his writing highly accessible in his own day and in ours (one clear

point of contrast with the often opaque Dewey). Cooley composed his work with a democratic craft aesthetic, building books with care analogous to that he exercised in building a cabin for his family. There was a political economy to this style, built from university-employed labor but resisting the specialist prose of the emergent twentieth-century research system. It fit his aspirations for the communicative construction of a reformed democratic culture peopled by citizens and critics with some understanding of society writ larger in its historical context. Accessible, understandable, and even pleasurable, it is a style that maximizes the likelihood of social uptake by a public readership. It also makes Cooley's work good to teach.

Finally, we might look to Cooley for trying to advance a spacious intellectual project that both makes communication central to social life and interprets it through a multi-perspective "organic" framework. Though he rarely put all the pieces together himself, his work attends to social, cultural, political, ethical, and economic dimensions of communication and casts them as interconnected and historically conditioned. It calls us to look at how communication manifests itself through individuals, groups, social institutions, and larger publics—and how these different ontological "organizations" interpenetrate one another. "[I]nstitutions and processes...work [themselves] out in the lives of men, women, and children," he tells us, pointing toward a relatively overlooked research area in political economy, focused on the social embodiment of media systems at the level of individuals and their everyday lives.⁵³ Here political economy might reach out not just to cultural studies, but also to theoretical and ethnographic work on bodies, affect, material objects, and micro-level social interaction in anthropology, sociology, feminist studies, and communication.

Clearly, Cooley can only take us so far. Ours is a well-different moment than his—our societies more complexly mediated, our knowledge about communication exponentially greater, our academic fields more specialized and abundant. We can't get away with the kind of armchair thinking that he did, nor would most of us want to. My aim in this essay has been to piece together less dominant strains of his thinking and to give him a mostly charitable reading. I do so partly as a counterweight to the momentum of received wisdom, but I don't want to overstate my case. Despite his pioneering insights, Cooley had plenty of limitations, and his writings in political economy are primitive in comparison to what has developed since Smythe. He says little about media ownership, communication-related labor, or public policy, and he repeatedly allows hope to triumph over critical realism. He is often maddeningly brief and impressionistic in his discussions of the communicative constitution of human life, and particularly its political economic dimensions. While creative, he possessed neither a strong philosophical mind nor the empirical drive to illuminate history or contemporary society in rigorous detail. While reform-minded, he led an academically cloistered life and was no kind of activist hero. In all of these regards, his work is seriously limited in relation to where the field is today. But, in spite of his blind spots and limits, Cooley remains good to read, good to teach, and good to think with historically and dialectically. He offers a clear, democratically oriented starting point for conversations we are still having. We could do worse than collectively pushing forward his ambitious project, using the knowledge and methods now at our disposal, creatively engaging the structures that run

through us, and trying to craft a better culture of democracy.

Notes

1. Here I count Daniel J. Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind: From Morse to McLuhan* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983); Hanno Hardt, *Critical Communication Studies: Communication, History and Theory in America* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Everett M. Rogers, *A History of Communication Study: A Biographical Approach* (New York: Free Press, 1994); Everette E. Dennis and Ellen Wartella, eds., *American Communication Research: the Remembered History* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1996); John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); and David W. Park and Jefferson Pooley, eds., *The History of Media and Communication Research: Contested Memories* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008). I also count my own early interpretation of Cooley as misleading (Peter Simonson, "Dreams of Democratic Togetherness: Communication-Hope from Cooley to Katz," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 13 [1996]: 324-342).
2. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 115-120.
3. As Eileen Meehan writes, "For communications scholars in the United States, political economy is closely identified with the North American Critical School of Communications Research. This identification is so close that it would be fair to say that most communications researchers would assume that all political economists are radical, Marxist, etc." She goes on to say that such an identification is mistaken within the larger field of political economy, where a fuller spectrum of ideological positions manifest themselves, but largely true in communications. Reflecting that position, she retells the standard tale of political economy beginning in the 1950s with Smythe and Herbert Schiller ("Moving Forward on the Left: Some Observations on Critical Communications Research in the United States," *Javnost: The Public* 11:3 [2004], 20). Compare also Vincent Mosco's confident, "Dallas W. Smythe began the study of the political economy of communication in the United States" (*The Political Economy of Communication*. 2nd ed. [Los Angeles: Sage, 2009], 82).
4. Simonson, "Cooley's Transcendentalist Quest," in *Refiguring Mass Communication: A History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 91-122.
5. Nicholas Garnham, "Political Economy and Cultural Studies," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 12 (March, 1995), 62-71; Eileen R. Meehan, "Commodity, Culture, Common Sense: Media Research and Paradigm Dialogue," *Journal of Media Economics* 12, no. 2 (1999), 149-163; Janice Peck, "Why We Shouldn't Be Bored with the Political Economy Versus Cultural Studies Debate," *Cultural Critique* 64(Fall, 2006): 92-125; Mosco, *Political Economy of Communication*.
6. Peck, "Why We Shouldn't Be Bored," 93-94.

7. "Multiple analytic perspectives" is Philip Rieff's descriptor for Cooley's orientation (Introduction to *Social Organization*, xix); Cooley, *Human Nature and Social Order* (New York: Scribner's, 1902), 147.
8. "Cooley distinguished sociologically between primary and secondary groups depending on the presence or absence of face-to-face relationships: the person who is thrown abruptly from the one to the other experiences the distinction in the flesh, with pain" (Theodor Adorno, "Reading Balzac," *Notes to Literature*, Vol. 1. Trans Shierry Weber Nicholsen [New York: Columbia University Press, 1991], 121).
9. Simonson, *Refiguring Mass Communication*, 91-122.
10. George Herbert Mead, "Cooley's Contribution to American Social Thought," *American Journal of Sociology* 35 (1930), 693-706; Glenn Jacobs, "Influence and Canonical Supremacy: An Analysis of How George Herbert Mead Demoted Charles Horton Cooley in the Sociological Canon," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 45, no 2 (2009), 117, 123. See also Hans-Joachim Schubert, "The Foundation of Pragmatic Sociology: Charles Horton Cooley and George Herbert Mead," *Journal of Classical Sociology* 6 (2006), 51-74; and his Introduction to Cooley, *On Self and Social Organization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 1-31.
11. Jacobs, "Influence and Canonical Supremacy," 127. As Schubert succinctly puts it in the best brief introduction to Cooley's thought, "Cooley was not a mentalist" (Introduction, 21).
12. George Steinmetz, "American Sociology before and after World War II: The (Temporary) Settling of a Disciplinary Field," in Craig Calhoun, ed., *Sociology in America: A History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 328-331. Steinmetz also draws positive links between Cooley and Adorno (328, 331).
13. Schubert, Introduction to Charles Horton Cooley, *On Self and Social Organization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 1.
14. Jacobs, "The Economy and the Whole: Theory of Pecuniary Valuation," in *Charles Horton Cooley: Imagining Social Reality*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), 216-246.
15. Jeff Sklansky, "Corporate Property and Social Psychology: Thomas M. Cooley, Charles H. Cooley, and the Ideological Origins of the Social Self," *Radical History Review* 76 (2000), 90. See also Sklansky, *The Soul's Economy: Market Society and Selfhood in American Thought, 1820-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).
16. Sklansky, "Corporate Property," 92.
17. Sklansky, "Corporate Property," 100, 106.
18. Simonson, *Refiguring Mass Communication*, 91-95.
19. Cooley, "The Social Significance of Street Railways," *Publications of the American Economic Association* 6 (Jan-March 1891), 71-73; Simonson, *Refiguring Mass Communication*, 99-101.
20. Cooley, "The Development of Sociology at Michigan," in *Sociological Theory and Social Research* (New York: Henry Holt, 1930), 6-7.
21. Jacobs, *Charles Horton Cooley*, 14.

22. Cooley, *The Theory of Transportation* (1894), as rpt. in *Sociological Theory and Social Research*, 39-42, 75.
23. Cooley, *Theory of Transportation*, 61, emphasis added.
24. Cooley, *Theory of Transportation*, 104.
25. Robert W. McChesney and John Nichols, *The Death and Life of American Journalism: The Media Revolution that Will Begin the World Again*. (Washington: Nation Books, 2010).
26. Cooley, "The Process of Social Change" (1897), as rpt. In *On Self and Social Organization*, 71.
27. Cooley, *Human Nature and Social Order*, 149.
28. Cooley, *Social Organization: A Study of the Larger Mind* (1909; New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1983), 63-4.
29. As Mosco writes, "the moral dimension remains strong in Marxian political economy because it provides a powerful defense of democracy, equality, and the public sphere in the face of dominant private interests. This is one reason why, despite the attacks from structuralist and deconstructionist quarters, political economists of communication retain a strong position on the importance of moral philosophy" (*Political Economy of Communication*, 34). Cooley ascribed to similar values. For more on his normative vision as a heterodox religious faith, see Simonson, *Refiguring Mass Communication*, 107-118.
30. Cooley, *Social Organization*, 266, 267.
31. Cooley, *Social Organization*, 267-278 (quotes at 270, 271-72, 274, 275).
32. Cooley, *Social Organization*, 284, 287, 272, 308-309.
33. Cooley, "Political Economy and Social Process" (1918), as rpt. in *Sociological Theory and Social Research*, 253-54. Compare Vincent Mosco's discussion of institutional political economy, which he grounds historically in Thorstein Veblen but not Cooley (*Political Economy of Communication*, 52-54).
34. Cooley, *Social Process* (1918. Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1966), 19-29 (quotes at 26, 21, 25-26, 20, 25, 24, 25). See also *Social Organization*, 4, 21-22 for brief general statements, and later chapters for the organization (and disorganization) of particular dimensions of social life—e.g. moral ideals, sentiments, public opinion, democracy, classes, and institutions.
35. Cooley, *Social Process*, 26-29.
36. Cooley, *Social Process*, 43-51.
37. Cooley, *Social Process*, 283-348 (quotes at 283, 308).
38. McChesney, "The Political Economy of Communication and the Future of the Field," *Media, Culture & Society* 22 (2000), 110.
39. Phil Graham, "Political Economy of Communication: A Critique," *Critical Perspectives in International Business* 3, no. 3 (2007), 226-24. See also Jacobs, *Charles Horton Cooley*, 227-229.
40. Cooley, *Social Process*, 67-77, 343-47.

41. Cooley, "A Primary Culture for Democracy," *Publications of the American Sociological Society* 13 (1918), 1-10.
42. Cooley, *Social Process*, 393, 398.
43. Antonio Gramsci, "Socialism and Culture" (1918), as rpt. in David Forgacs, ed., *The Antonio Gramsci Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 1988), 56-58, 59.
44. McChesney, "Political Economy of Communication," 112.
45. McChesney, "Political Economy of Communication," 114.
46. Simonson and Gabriel Weimann, "Critical Research at Columbia," in Elihu Katz, John Durham Peters, Tamar Liebes, and Avril Orloff, eds., *Canonic Texts in Media Research: Are There Any? Should There Be? How About These?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), 12-38; and Simonson, "Merton's Skeptical Faith," in *Refiguring Mass Communication*, 123-62.
47. Graham, "Political Economy of Communication," 229-233.
48. Cooley, *Social Organization*, 272; Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton, "Mass Communication, Popular Taste, and Organized Social Action" (1948), rpt. in John Durham Peters and Peter Simonson, eds., *Mass Communication and American Social Thought: Key Texts, 1919-1968* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), 235-36; C. Wright Mills, "The Mass Society," from *The Power Elite* (1956), and rpt. in *ibid.*, 390. On Mills in the critical communication studies tradition, see Schiller, *Theorizing Communication*, 72-77; and Hardt, *Critical Communication Studies*, 146-47.
49. Mosco, *Political Economy of Communication*, 3-4. For an expression of complementary principles also consonant with Cooley's project, see James F. Tracy, Editor's Introduction, *Democratic Communiqué* 22 (2008), 1-4.
50. Cooley, *Social Process*, 380.
51. McChesney, "Political Economy of Communication," 114, 116.
52. Jacobs, *Charles Horton Cooley*, chs. 4-5.
53. Cooley, "The Life-Study Method as Applied to Rural Social Research" (1928), as rpt. in *Sociological Theory and Social Research*, 331-342 (quote at 333). See also "Case Studies of Small Institutions as a Method of Research," 313-324.

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Acknowledgments: The author would like to thank Marco Briziarelli, Lee Artz, and Jim Tracy for comments on earlier versions of this paper.

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