

The right-wing postmodernism of Marshall McLuhan

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Until recently, Marshall McLuhan's vast corpus of media studies provoked little sustained commentary on the political subtext of his studies. What likely explains the traditional lack of attention to the political implications of his writings is the fact that McLuhan himself did not directly take a political position on mass media. At least since the 1960s, McLuhan famously avoided taking what he called a 'moralistic' stance on the goodness or badness of the emerging electric media (1995/1968: 265). Since McLuhan believed that any type of judgement (moral or political) clouds or blocks the true understanding of the effects of media, it is not surprising that there is little evidence of an *explicit* political position taken in his media studies.

Additionally, the relatively little commentary devoted to explicating McLuhan's politics in his lifetime typically centred on the assumption that his politics were a mere epiphenomenon of his fame in the 1960s. In his heyday, when McLuhan eagerly dispensed advice to supportive corporate audiences, the impression emerged among the left that he was a mere apologist for capitalism. Among his detractors on the right, it was assumed that his talk of constant social upheaval in a rapidly changing technological environment was mere pandering to the counterculture. As McLuhan's popularity waned in the 1970s, precious little attention was paid to the accuracy of the traditional left and right views of McLuhan. Even sympathetic observers such as Arthur Schlesinger or Pierre Trudeau concluded that McLuhan's work was not essentially political (Sanderson and Macdonald, 1989: 112–13). McLuhan's 'politics' was simply not taken seriously.

Yet a new awareness of McLuhan's politics has taken hold in the scholarly literature in the past 15 years. This literature, as we shall see,

tends to be far more sympathetic to the content of McLuhan's politics, and its authors are quite eager to tease out very radical implications of these politics in his works. This new interest is not surprising, since many of McLuhan's prophecies about technological change are only now coming true. McLuhan's writings on the rise of tribalism in the television age and the breakdown of homogeneous nationalisms certainly have relevance in an age of conflict in the Balkans and the Middle East. Whether these prophecies amount to an actual political position on the part of McLuhan is another question, but, increasingly, the literature on McLuhan is attributing such a position to his work.

Unlike the 1960s, leftist scholarship in particular now takes a far more supportive approach to McLuhan. Indeed, this literature attributes to McLuhan an emancipatory political agenda that would have been unthinkable in the 1960s, when McLuhan spent more time giving speeches to corporate executives than teaching in the classroom. In addition, the 'new' literature (since his death in 1980) stresses the postmodern dimension to his thought, which purportedly discloses a more critical or postmodern approach to media on the part of McLuhan than was previously thought. In short, this new literature challenges the old ideas that McLuhan took a neutral, apolitical stance to mass media, or that he was a mere lackey of corporate capitalism.

In this article, I intend to build on the new scholarship that is devoted to making sense of McLuhan's politics. I agree that there is indeed an implicit politics in McLuhan's writings, and that the postmodern meaning of McLuhan's politics is worth exploring. However, I will critique the assumptions of many leftist scholars that McLuhan's approach is akin to their own. Indeed, I shall argue that McLuhan's politics are best described as 'right-wing postmodern'. It is well known that McLuhan in his personal life leaned towards a very conservative (and pre-Vatican II Catholic) approach to politics (Marchand, 1989), although he does not explicitly integrate this politics into his work on media. I shall argue that a close hermeneutical reading of McLuhan's major writings reveals a type of conservatism that anticipates the emergence of a more tribalistic, stringently moralistic and technologically sophisticated age, succeeding the liberal, modernist, individualist age of modernity. This I call a mythology of right-wing postmodernism.

Is McLuhan a leftist?

In the 1960s, this question would only have been raised by McLuhan's detractors, who suspected his pandering to the counterculture and youth protests of the time. Despite insisting that he neither approved nor disapproved of the sweeping changes of the 1960s, McLuhan was often

suspected of being sympathetic to the young rebels. As he argued in his 1968 *Playboy* interview, 'It is not an easy period in which to live' for the 'television-conditioned young' who, unlike their parents, cannot retreat into 'the zombie trance of Narcissus narcosis', which numbs any critical response to the impact of the new media (1995/1968: 249). A comment such as this provoked the accusation that McLuhan, despite his denials, was on the side of the counterculture (certainly Abbie Hoffmann claimed McLuhan as an ally).

Yet many on the left in the 1960s were just as suspicious of McLuhan and would not dare call a visible adviser to corporate capitalism one of their own. Indeed, Marxist scholars have accused McLuhan of lacking a coherent social theory and of pandering to the cause of apolitical conservatism, suggesting that McLuhan stressed the futility of changing the status quo (Finkelstein, 1968). This impression sometimes persists to this day. Genosko accuses McLuhan of being an indifferent apologist of commerce, 'a perfect example of Lukacs's contemplative, bourgeois man' (1999: 115). Freind (1999: 60) has deplored McLuhan's indifference to the reality of capitalist economics in the global village. Grosswiler (1998) provides a useful overview of the traditional (1960s) leftist critique of McLuhan.

Since McLuhan's death in 1980, leftist scholarship has become more sympathetic to McLuhan and more determined to mine the potential for social critique and emancipation in his work. Despite McLuhan's professed personal commitment to conservative Catholicism, Arthur Kroker has argued that McLuhan 'expressed that which is most insightful in the liberal side of the Canadian imagination' by seeking to recover 'the civilizing moment in the processed world of technological society' through the development of a 'critical humanism' fitted to the popular culture of North America' (1984: 54). Indeed, McLuhan's liberalism is supposed to mesh well with his Catholic faith by 'releasing the reason in technological experience' (1984: 63).

Kroker is sufficiently cautious to admit that McLuhan suffered a 'blindspot' in connecting capitalism and technology, in that McLuhan was ignorant of the way power functioned in a liberal capitalist society. Yet Kroker believes that McLuhan's insights into the 'almost malignant significance' of the corporate monopoly over electric technologies (1984: 79) are tremendously useful for leftist critiques of capitalism.

Kroker's appreciation of McLuhan's apparent critique of the effects of capitalism has been echoed in the more recent literature. Judith Stamps has argued that McLuhan's understanding of visual technology (such as print media) employs a 'vocabulary similar to that of the Frankfurt School', by arguing against visual technology's reduction of persons to things' (1995: 131). Perhaps even more ambitiously, Glenn Willmott declares that McLuhan belongs to a 'radical culture' consisting of a utopian rejection of

technocratic society, consistent with the New Left (1996: 200). Paul Grosswiler concludes his useful study of leftist appropriations of McLuhan by observing that McLuhan's media theories can help retrain the critical focus of the left, and retrieve the human being from technological structures (1998: 222). Perhaps singlehandedly revealing the intensity of this sea-change, Donald Theall, one of McLuhan's most visceral critics, who originally accused his work of showing no awareness of Marxism (1971: 204), now concludes in a recent, more sympathetic study that McLuhan's Catholic humanism is quite consistent with Marxism (2001: 124).

It would be tempting to argue that all of these writers are basing their assessments of McLuhan as opponent of capitalism on his earliest work, *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (1951), but little else. For McLuhan is brazenly anti-capitalistic in this work. Every page is a searing indictment of the dehumanizing and alienating effects of mass advertising, consumerism and industrialism on the human psyche. McLuhan certainly sounds like the Frankfurt School when he writes in the preface about the industry of advertising, whose purpose is to 'keep everybody in the helpless state engendered by prolonged mental rutting' (1951: v). Elsewhere in this study, McLuhan darkly warns that corporate executives, politicians and movie stars are 'now puppets only vaguely aware of the strings controlling their movements' (1951: 125).

If Kroker, Stamps, Willmott and Grosswiler were indeed relying on *The Mechanical Bride* to make their assessment of McLuhan as crypto-leftist, that would be a mistake, since McLuhan claims to have rejected the moralistic 'Rousseauvian utopianism' of his earlier work for the sake of a more neutral stance on technology's effects (1995/1968: 265). Yet these scholars believe that the *entirety* of McLuhan's works is anti-capitalistic in tone, even during his heyday in the corporate boardrooms of the 1960s. As Willmott contends, McLuhan never abandoned, from *The Mechanical Bride* onward, 'his central ideal' of a collective *dialogue*, which might transcend the totalitarian and monolithic "progress" of the technologically permeated and extended, modern social body' (1996: 99). In short, the revisionist left literature on McLuhan would argue that his emancipatory message exists throughout his writings.

I agree with these authors that there is a discernible political position in McLuhan's works, even after *The Mechanical Bride*. As late as 1977, McLuhan was referring to the Industrial Revolution as a 'bloodbath' which fragmented work and isolated individuals from each other (quoted in Nevitt and McLuhan, 1994: 53). Such a claim harks back to the critiques in *The Mechanical Bride* and certainly gives the easy impression that McLuhan is a crypto-leftist. Needless to say, such comments also suggest that he never actually abandoned the 'moralistic' judgementalism of earlier works (Duffy, 1969: 49–50).

Yet I believe that these writers are seriously mistaken in attributing such a left-wing politics to McLuhan, even in his *Mechanical Bride* stage. Certainly they are correct to pinpoint a sometimes brazen, sometimes subtle, critique of capitalism throughout his writings. Yet these authors too hastily conclude that this critique smacks of a greater liberating project on McLuhan's part. In confusing McLuhan with Herbert Marcuse, they imply that the anti-capitalist sentiments of McLuhan must suggest a leftist emancipatory orientation on his part. It does not occur to these authors that one can be anti-capitalist from the opposite side of the political spectrum.

In fact, McLuhan's opposition to capitalism and the individualistic effects of the print age are spurred on by a more *conservative* political orientation. Perhaps due to their North American backgrounds, these authors are unaware that conservative orientations to politics (at least outside North America) do not necessarily translate into support for capitalism. Indeed, McLuhan's critique of capitalism and print-inspired individualism, as we shall see, is likely inspired by an older conservative tradition that has little in common with the Frankfurt School.

An alternate reading

One of McLuhan's earliest critics, Jonathan Miller, contended that McLuhan's work was heavily shaped by his experience of the American South. This cultural antecedent is important to note, since it provides the foundation for an alternate reading of McLuhan as a *right-wing critic of capitalism*. According to Miller, McLuhan's experience of teaching English in Missouri in the late 1930s exposed him to a rich mythology which romanticized the old agrarian South at the expense of the industrial capitalistic North. This mythology, most famously articulated in the writings of Southern intellectuals like George Fitzhugh or Henry W. Grady, stressed that the South still possessed the old virtues of community, honour, propriety and chivalry. By contrast, the North was individualistic, dishonest, vulgar and acquisitive (Miller, 1971: 38–62). If Miller is correct, this mythology meshed well with McLuhan's Catholic suspicions about modernity, liberalism and progress.

If it is true that McLuhan took this mythology as seriously as Miller suggests, then *The Mechanical Bride* must be read not in the light of the Frankfurt School, but in the context of the Southern suspicion of Northern capitalism. This suspicion constitutes the only conservative opposition to capitalistic individualism in the history of North America. As Louis Hartz (1955) famously argued in his study of American liberalism, the United States was *almost* wholly a liberal, Enlightenment nation from its founding onwards. Unlike Europe, America lacked a conservative aristocracy hostile to the rising industrial class. That is, America lacked such a movement

outside of the Deep South. Yet European political thought has a long tradition of conservative opposition to liberalism and the Enlightenment (Holmes, 1994). Only in the South did Americans build on the old European opposition to capitalism by stressing this mythology of community and the organic society (a useful rationale, as Miller observes, for justifying slavery).

At the time McLuhan was teaching in Missouri in the late 1930s, this mythology was still alive and well in the South. For the remainder of this article, I shall argue that McLuhan, even after *The Mechanical Bride*, never escaped the influence of this Southern mythology. Indeed, his later writings on tribalism are replete with his anticipation of a postmodern retrieval of this organic society, as I shall show.

Other sources of right-wing anti-liberalism and anti-capitalism can be traced in McLuhan's work. The influence of the English literary critic and painter Wyndham Lewis on McLuhan is well known, an influence which became considerable when McLuhan left Missouri for Windsor, Ontario (Lewis's home), during the Second World War. Lewis's politics are widely acknowledged to be right-of-centre, but also anti-capitalistic. In his essay, 'Wyndham Lewis: Lemuel in Lilliput', McLuhan echoed conservative sentiments shared with Lewis over the loss of the traditional ties that bind community, ties which were steadily eroded by liberal individualism. 'The destruction of family life, in theory and in practice, the flight from adulthood, the obliteration of masculine and feminine have all gone ahead . . .' (1999/1944: 195). Both McLuhan and Lewis squarely laid the blame for the decline of the family on the incipient entrance of women into the workforce during the Second World War. The absence of an emancipatory approach to politics is surely obvious here.

Ironically, Lewis's role as a rightist critic of social change and liberalism has become transformed, like McLuhan's, into the image of a leftist critic of capitalism. McLuhan himself noted this development in the reception of Lewis's work when he quoted his friend's contemptuous prediction that his works one day 'will provide "selected passages" for the school-children of the future communist state . . . to show how repulsive unbridled individualism can be' (quoted in McLuhan, 1999/1944: 197). Had McLuhan lived to see his reconstruction at the hands of many leftist scholars, he would have likely expressed the same sentiments about himself.

McLuhan's right-wing postmodernism

If McLuhan is not a leftist, then what is the role of his right-wing politics in his works? Here I shall contend that McLuhan, from the 1960s onwards, anticipated a new conservative (or right-wing) society with the breakdown of the print age and modern individualism. Despite the leftist appreciation

of McLuhan, it is a misdiagnosis to believe that his predictions of a new tribalism or alternate order to the print age constitutes a hope for a new, free society (as imagined by his current left-wing readers). Indeed, I shall argue that McLuhan hopes for a return to the old organic community, whose loss was lamented by Lewis. This community, as we shall see, has postmodern mythological features.

Regrettably, with the exception of Miller, very few students of McLuhan have spotted this type of conservatism in his writings. As I have mentioned, in the past, critics of McLuhan on the left simply lumped him with corporate capitalism; critics on the right associated him with the counterculture of the 1960s. Neither camp grasped the real politics in his work. Yet the new, supportive literature on McLuhan is just as hasty in attributing an implicit leftism to his ideas. These authors have assumed that, when McLuhan accuses print technology of fostering 'homogenized man, creating mass militarism, mass mind and mass uniformity' (1995/1968: 259), or identifies the Industrial Revolution with a 'bloodbath', he must be critiquing capitalism from a leftist viewpoint. Indeed, this is a reconstruction of the old mythology of the South, which suspected rampant individualism and alienation. Still, a few authors have spotted glimmerings of a radical conservatism in his writings. His colleague Eric Wesselow has credited McLuhan with the insight that one can be both conservative and revolutionary (Nevitt and McLuhan, 1994: 223). Even Grosswiler acknowledges that there is an implicit conservatism in his work, which collides with modernist ideas of progress and change: McLuhan 'would also reject the modernists' desire for a "complete break with the past" and the value of novelty and originality. Within his dialectic, the deeper past is always being retrieved as the recent past is being obsolesced' (1998: 159). Yet the question remains: which 'past' is this, and how was it to be retrieved?

It is my contention that McLuhan expected the new electric technology to retrieve some semblance of an older organic community which he had heard of in the American South. This does not mean that McLuhan was committed to the old racist ways of the South; as Miller (1971) argues, there is no evidence of chauvinistic or prejudicial leanings in his writings. Yet it is likely that McLuhan was deeply impressed enough with this mythology to hope for a technologically based delivery of a newly constructed organic community. Despite his protestations that he was neutral on technology and even lamented the death of the print age, certain elements of his writings suggest a hope for a new postmodernist conservative community.

I invoke the term 'right-wing postmodernism' as a way of describing a newly (technologically) constructed tribalist conservatism of the current age. It is right-wing (in the old European, or Southern sense) because it rejects or transcends the old individualistic (read liberal) values of the print age. It is clear from McLuhan's writings that he strongly associated the

print mentality with detachment and objectivity; print does not encourage involvement, like television. Print encourages an objective mind, which then leads to private and even fragmented behaviour. It is a running theme of *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) that print destroyed the pre-modern community by encouraging the triumph of detachment and uninvolvement. Not surprisingly, McLuhan associated the print mind with liberalism. As Holmes argues (1994: 190–7), it is a standard strategy of anti-liberals on the right to accuse liberalism of fostering the death of psychic and political involvement with the community.

McLuhan himself said as much in 1962 when he remarked: ‘The literate liberal is convinced all real values are private, personal, individual’ (1995: 286). McLuhan believed that there are, however, alternate values, whose emergence will occur in a post-print age. These are the values of a new involvement, whose rise he predicted in *Understanding Media*. ‘It is no longer possible to adopt the aloof and dissociated role of the literate Westerner’ (1964: 20). These passages sound like the old conservative opposition to individualism and liberalism, but what makes this post-modern?

Since there are so many definitions of postmodernism, it is a challenge to answer this question. Certainly, McLuhan’s postmodernist side has been much discussed. Heim (1993) has compared McLuhan’s ideas to Martin Heidegger’s postmodern critique of technology as biased in effect. Genosko (1999) has documented the influence of McLuhan on French postmodernists such as Jean Baudrillard. Grosswiler (1998: 159) has argued that McLuhan sympathized with the postmodernist love of plurality of styles, suspicion of progress and the retrieval of history. Willmott (1996: 135–55) has described McLuhan’s media popularity in the 1960s as the embodiment of the postmodern poseur, while McLuhan was playing the role of guru to test out his theories about media. In short, it is not original to claim that McLuhan is postmodernist.

When I call McLuhan ‘postmodernist’, however, I have in mind a particular type of *right-wing* postmodernism. In the literature on post-modernism, such a term seems oxymoronic, since postmodernists are supposed to challenge and expose, not ‘conserve’, authority. Yet the work of Shadia Drury (1994) makes an important distinction between the two main types of left and right (or conservative) postmodernisms. Both the right and the left agree that ideas of truth and reality are essentially myths. Both reject hard-and-fast modernist distinctions between truth and myth. But whereas the left seeks to expose and deconstruct these myths as masks for power, the right intends to use myths for the purpose of saving or reconstructing conservative types of regimes or political spaces. Drury has written (albeit somewhat dramatically) that the politics of postmodernism, whether left or right, ‘is deadly’, since one group ‘glorifies mastery’ while the other ‘glorifies revolt’. ‘One spins the webs of fictions intended to

conceal the reality of domination while the other deconstructs them to reveal the naked power they conceal' (1994: 208).

It is on the right side of postmodernism that I locate McLuhan. As we shall see, McLuhan's brand of right-wing postmodern myth bears little relation to the emancipatory themes that sympathetic leftists attribute to his work.

I shall argue that McLuhan invoked mythical themes in his studies of media in the 1960s in order to describe or anticipate life after the death of the print age. His work on tribalism should be understood in this light, as we shall see. As a religious man, McLuhan was not in the least averse to the use or value of myth. As he declared in a 1970 interview on the future of the Church in the electric age, myth is 'anything seen at very high speeds; any process seen at a very high speed is a myth. I see myth as the super-real. The Christian myth is not fiction but something more than ordinarily real' (1999/1970: 86). If McLuhan is right, the power of myth accelerates in a rapidly changing technological age; myths make sense of the very process of change itself. Myth and technological change are intimately intertwined.

This is not the first time that McLuhan's indebtedness to myth has been noted. Theall accused McLuhan of postulating myths which are akin to a 'depoliticized logos', having no relation to history (1971: 182). Curtis (1978: 88) has recognized McLuhan's use of mythical language as well. Willmott views McLuhan's idea of tribalization and the global village as mythical:

This mythology [of the global village] promised the retribalization of human society on a world scale, with its collective psyche embedded in electronic media, as the ultimate stage of a tripartite historical passage of Western civilization through preliterate, literate, and postliterate technologies. (1996: 120)

I concur with Willmott that the postulation of a global village is very rich in mythological content. Contrary to Theall, however, I shall argue that McLuhan's use of myth is also deeply *political*.

What makes such mythology postmodern? Unlike the myth-makers of the old South, McLuhan recognizes that his myths really are myths. He knows that technological processes have constructed or fuelled these myths; myths of community are constructs, not part of the natural order of things, as the Southern intellectuals claimed about their culture. For McLuhan, as a post-modernist, there is no such thing as 'nature', independent of technology. Nature *is* technology: as he wryly puts it: 'The new media are not bridges between man and nature; they are nature' (1995: 272). In short, the electric media would not simply return humanity to the past; the new media would reconstruct the past, with the use of myth.

Moreover, tribalists are playing 'roles', unlike their pre-modern ancestors; and they are aware that they are merely playing roles (1995/1968:

249). McLuhan observed in 1970 that 'the market itself has returned to theatre', that is, a place of global role-playing (quoted in Nevitt and McLuhan, 1994: 125). McLuhan earlier remarked that youth all over the world acts out 'its identity quest in the theatre of the streets', in search of roles rather than goals, perhaps in futile and elusive ways (1995/1968: 249). Youth have become 'corporate', or tribal, abandoning their individual identity in favour of a role that fits a collective group psychology. The youth are sending the message that they reject 'simple, plain, individual stuff'. They want the 'big corporate role'. The young have abandoned all 'job-holding and specialism' in favour of corporate role-playing (1995/1968: 249).

Recalling Drury, the right-wing postmodernists agree with their leftist counterparts that myth is indeed fiction, not truth, but the former also believe that myths are indispensable and must be preserved for the sake of a greater political purpose. McLuhan surely agreed with this view, since he believed that the young consciously and enthusiastically fill roles that the new myths of the global village provide in abundance.

If McLuhan appreciates myth, then what is the purpose of the myth of tribalism? In my view, this is McLuhan's way of offering or imagining a mythical right-wing alternative to the individualistic and dehumanizing myths of the liberal print age. Thanks to electric technology, humanity is returning to an earlier age of psychic involvement and community. As he argued in the *Playboy* interview, the age preceding the rise of the phonetic alphabet was one in which 'man lived in a world where all the senses were balanced and simultaneous, a closed world of tribal depth and resonance'. The tribal ear was 'sensitive, hyperaesthetic and all-inclusive', contributing to the 'seamless web of tribal kinship and interdependence in which all members of the group existed in harmony' (1995/1968: 239). Since television and the computer bombard or utilize more senses than the print-oriented eye, it follows that these technologies will return humanity to the long lost tribal existence of a pre-modern age. Existentialist philosophy fitted the electric age well, since it was an ideology of 'social involvement' which contrasted with the 'bourgeois spirit of individual separateness or points of view. In the electric age we wear all mankind as our skin' (1964: 56). Throughout his writings, McLuhan attributes 'synaesthesia' (the full integration of the five senses into one vitally rich and heightened awareness) to the 'primitive', and anticipates the return of this state to humanity, thanks to the arrival of electric technology (which, unlike print, dethrones the tyranny of the eye in favour of the other senses). In short, electric technology replaces liberal individualism with tribalist communitarianism. We are all psychically interconnected in the global village.

Such sentiments have suggested to some readers of McLuhan that he is a liberal or a leftist, as we have seen. For he is looking forward to a mythical, technically constructed age of community and interdependence.

Yet it is erroneous to suggest that McLuhan is in favour of socialism, or even emancipation, here. For McLuhan is not entirely uncritical of this new tribalism. McLuhan also believed that the way to this new mythical unity would be confusing and even bloody (in the *Playboy* interview, he darkly predicted the breakdown of nation-states and a rise in racial conflict). McLuhan anticipated the prospect of a 'rich and creative retribalized society', free of the fragmentation and alienation of the mechanical age', emerging from this traumatic period of culture clash. Nevertheless, he added that he had 'nothing but distaste for the *process* of change' (1995/1968: 267, original emphasis).

Generally, however, his tone is very admiring of the *outcome* of this bloody process: 'tribal man', unlike 'homogenized Western man', was not fragmented by overspecialization and individualism, but was integrated through his 'unique emotional blends' (1995/1968: 242). In the same vein, McLuhan adds: 'Literate man is alienated, impoverished man; retribalized man can lead a far richer and more fulfilling life', not that of a 'mindless drone' like the print age personality (1995/1968: 259). In *Understanding Media*, he describes the final outcome of electric technology as the deliverance of a true 'human family, a single consciousness' (1964: 67).

Tribalism is preferable in emotional richness to the poverty of the print age: although print 'released people from the bondage of the uncritical and emotionally involved life', it also led to 'the cult of private information and individual emulation in sports and politics. The quest for private power came quickly' (1999/1977: 63). Most radically, McLuhan declared that the 'white man' is well aware that the 'Negro and the Indian . . . are actually physically and socially superior' to the fragmented and alienated man of Western civilization (1995/1968: 255). Whatever the validity of these observations, and despite McLuhan's protests against judging technology or its effects, it sounds as if he supports the general trend towards tribalism. As the work of Barber (1996) has shown, tribalism is as much a phenomenon of the right as it is of the left.

What is particularly right-wing about this return via technology to the tribalism of pre-modernity? In the 1968 *Playboy* interview, McLuhan anticipates that the rich retribalized society of the future will at certain levels be more morally stringent than its liberal print age counterpart. In a tribalist age, the young will have considerable freedom to experiment. Nevertheless, 'marriage and the family will become inviolate institutions', and 'infidelity and divorce will constitute serious violations of the social bond'. Indeed, such acts will amount to a 'collective insult and loss of face to the entire tribe'. The contrast between tribal and individualistic society is clear: unlike the fragmented values of individualism, tribalist communities 'are *extremely austere morally*, and do not hesitate to destroy or banish those who offend the tribal values' (1995/1968: 253; my italics).

As Theall has rightly noted, McLuhan reveals here a 'deeply Puritanical core masked by a superficial liberality' (1971: 212), despite the allusion to experimenting. It is, more accurately, the postulation of a right-wing postmodern myth: the hope that the counterculture of the 1960s will make possible a new and strict conservative polity. Surely this type of myth is more plausibly connected to McLuhan's conservative Catholicism than it is to Marxism or critical theory. The language of banishment and destruction should give pause to any student of McLuhan who hopes that liberal values of freedom and equality would persist in this new mythical space.

McLuhan's admiration for French Canada can also perhaps be understood in the light of right-wing postmodernism. McLuhan often commented in the 1970s that Quebec was rejecting the old 19th-century print age, with its individualism and industrialism, in favour of tribalism and role-playing. In his view, Quebec was already 'Third World', wedded to a group identity, and was probably in a better position to adapt to the tribalist passions of the global village:

. . . the desire to break away from the industrial community and the highly pyramided, vertically structured, has been felt by all our young people today. . . . Now, we are saying that French Canada is going through something like that on a big scale. (quoted in Nevitt and McLuhan, 1994: 56)

Of course, McLuhan was not the only conservative to admire the defiance of French Canada against the onslaught of conformity. The Canadian conservative philosopher George Grant famously wrote in 1965 that the Quebecois nationalists would not go quietly into the night of technological (Anglo-American) absorption: 'French-Canadian nationalism is a last-ditch stand', but the French in North America will at least disappear from history 'with more than the smirks and whimpers of their English-speaking compatriots – with their flags flying and, indeed, with some guns blazing' (1965: 76). For all of his rhetorical flourishes, Grant's tone is unmistakably defeatist. He has no doubt that the old conservative nationalist attempt to preserve Quebec's (and Canada's) distinctiveness is futile.

Other authors have usually contrasted Grant and McLuhan on their views of technology (Kroker, 1984; Willmott, 1996). I believe it is useful to contrast Grant's conservative defeatism with McLuhan's postmodern forward-looking conservatism, or what James Carey calls a 'nostalgia for the future' (1989: 200). For McLuhan believed that French Canada was the wave of the future, not the detritus of the past. Upon Quebec McLuhan pinned some of his hopes for the mythical return to a pre-modern community. Quebec is the harbinger of the youthful rebellion against print and industrialism. 'French Canada is in a position to save us from ourselves', and the youth's romantic desire to 'get back to the farm'

represents a return to old Quebecois values (quoted in Nevitt and McLuhan, 1994: 57).

It would be very tempting to read this as an endorsement of a left-wing romantic communitarianism. Yet it is more likely to be right-wing myth, since in the same breath McLuhan associated French Canadian tribalism with the rise of the American South in the 1970s. Based on his famous view that the brain is split between two hemispheres (the left favouring cold rationality, the right favouring passion and emotional depth), McLuhan believed that the conservative American South, like Quebec, could rise again because of its greater attachment to the old synaesthetic emotional and tribalist awareness of their past. French Canadians were already 'right hemisphere people', and electric technology made them even more so. The right hemisphere's tendencies towards favouring the ear, music, acoustic space and simultaneity all inspired a return to the tribalism of old Quebec. Yet the American South favoured the same tendencies also, and the unleashing of these led to the election of a very conservative Southern president, Jimmy Carter, in 1976. McLuhan credited the electric media with this feat. Carter 'is the first president from the Deep South, the first ever. Only possible under electronic conditions' (quoted in Nevitt and McLuhan, 1994: 57)

McLuhan's observations on Quebec and the South are clearly consistent with what I have called his right-wing postmodern mythologizing: these tribalist, emotionally rich, morally strict cultures of the past can now be reinvigorated through the new technology while ushering in a new right-wing community.

Conclusion

According to one of his supporters, McLuhan was fond of declaring that 'the ultimate effect of new media is to make us all conservatives' (Nevitt and McLuhan, 1994: 196). Yet the paradox of McLuhan's right-wing politics is that it is not classically 'conservative'. This is a forward-looking conservatism, anticipating that electric technology will first demolish the liberal individualist print age, then replace it with a retribalized community. McLuhan knew that the old anti-liberal traditions (as represented by Lewis and the South) would have to be reinvented. This conservatism had to be created in order to exist. McLuhan relied on the radicalism of technological change as the process that would deliver this living space. The least conservative of all forces, technology, is chosen to actualize old right-wing mythology. There is no hint of Grant's defeatism about dying conservative cultures. Whatever the validity of this mythologizing, it is less a vision of emancipation than a call for a strict tribalist morality and a suppression of

individualism. For all of these reasons, I call this right-wing post-modernism.

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