The Cultural Arms of the Corporate Establishment: Reflections on the Work of Herb Schiller

George Gerbner

If New York glitters like gold
and has buildings with 500 bars,
let me leave it written
that they were built from the sweat of the canefields:
the banana plantation is a green inferno so that in New York
they may drink and dance (Neruda, 1974).

Herbert Schiller, who died on January 29, 2000 at the age of 80, was one of the most widely recognized and influential political economists of communication. For four decades he represented the center of gravity in the global debates on cultural imperialism, the power of the media, and many persistent and pervasive themes in international communication. As a leader, scholar, and teacher he strived for a just and fair society and a passionate belief in social justice and social accountability ran through all his writings.

Schiller was one of the first analysts to realize that in the late 20th century the Marxist formula for capitalist rule had changed to something at once more pervasive and less visible.

The classic Marxist formulation referred to ownership of the means of production. It evolved toward monopoly or conglomerate ownership and eventually to what Bertram Gross described as "friendly fascism." Gross (1980) maintained that the governing mechanisms in America were obscured by "facades behind which the decisions were made by intricate networks of business cartels working closely with military officers and their own people in civilian government" (p. 31).

According to Schiller, the new driving force, vanguard of the old, is less visible precisely because it is more pervasive. Does the fish in the ocean know that it is swimming in salt water? Today children are born into a commercial media (mostly television) environment that defines their world and their role in it. Lacking an alternative for comparison and judgment, the media-dominated cultural environment seems natural, inevitable, and unalterable. That condition is the prime requirement for ideological control at home and imperial policy abroad.

Corporate rule becomes identified with democracy. The citizen is given no

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alternative vision of the good society. Wealth is extolled, the gap between the rich and the poor widens, and poverty increases unreported and unobserved.

At the dawn of the 20th century, Ambrose Bierce (1946) in *The Devil's Dictionary* defined the corporation as "an ingenious device for obtaining individual profit without individual responsibility" (p. 216). The definition still holds. But near the end of this century, the profits—and grim consequences—of this ingenious device went beyond anything the Bierce could have imagined.

A recent study (Hoynes, 1999) of news and public affairs programming by the media watchdog-group FAIR found that the voice of business on television was much louder than all others even on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). More than one-third of all on-camera sources were representatives of corporate America or Wall Street. The 1999 study also indicated that the recent findings almost doubled the percentage found in a similar 1992 study.

Schiller (2000, p. 101) observed that corporate influence pervades nearly every aspect of society. From simple things, like our daily diet and the clothes we wear, to matters of larger scale, like the way we communicate with each other.

Schiller had foreseen and critiqued all that. He had concluded that the two party system and control of information were inherent in and necessary for the perpetuation of the corporate order. He had lived through the brutality of the Great Depression. In 1929 his father lost his job as a jeweler and was unemployed until 1940, when war production created new jobs. In *Living in the Number One Country: Reflections from a Critic of American Empire* Schiller (2000) recalled the sense of the period:

> There was always the money worry. . . There were frequent quarrels, most of which had an economic origin. . . . This atmosphere penetrated my being with sadness and resentment. I have never forgotten how the deprivation of work erodes human beings, those not working and those related to them. And from that time on, I loathed the economic system that could put a huge part of its work force on the street with no compunction (p. 10).

Schiller was a passionate teacher. Students were attracted to his lectures and writings in part because he represented the progressive spirit of the times. His commentaries often gave rise to sharp responses and strong feelings from the audience, but, in the end, he sent everyone away thinking.

Schiller was more than a brilliant teacher and lecturer. He was one of a few outstanding personalities who embodied the conscience of a generation. His never-failing kindness and generosity and his sense of justice, coupled with a sure and intuitive understanding of people and human affairs, made him a leader and role model in his field.

In the 1960s, when he entered the field of international communication and wrote about American hegemony and corporate power in communication and information, the United States had reached its supreme position in politics, but it was being challenged by the emerging coalition of the Third World, as well as internal social

upheavals. Schiller's skeptical and critical observations of the economic and cultural systems that dominated the world are reflected in the titles of his most widely-read books: *Mass Communication and American Empire* (1969); *The Mind Managers* (1973); *Communication and Cultural Domination* (1976); *Who Knows: Information in the Age of the Fortune 500* (1981); *Information and the Crisis Economy* (1984); *Culture, Inc.: The Corporate Takeover of Cultural Expression* (1989); *Information Inequality: The Deepening Social Crises in America* (1996); and the posthumously published *Living in the Number One Country: Reflections from a Critic of American Empire* (2000).

In one of his last articles, published in *Gazette: The International Journal for Communication Studies,* Schiller (1998, April) wrote:

> One of the most tested and effective means of keeping order in the ranks comes from definitional control—the ability to explain, and circulate, the governors' view of reality, local or global. This capability serves to bulwark, or at least minimize threats, to the prevailing social order. . .
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> The basis of definitional control, accordingly, is the informational infrastructure that produces meaning, and (un)awareness. When the infrastructure is in place and performing routinely, the exercise of definitional control is generally invisible, and almost always reflexive. It needs no prompting or instruction from the top of the social pyramid. It comes into play effortlessly and seemingly guilelessly. Throughout life, from infancy on, Americans, like all others, absorb the images and messages of the prevailing social order. These make up their frame of reference and perception. With few exceptions, it is this framework which insulates most from ever imagining an alternative social reality. . . . (pp. 182-183).

I knew Herb Schiller for many years. In early 1956, when I was a postdoctoral lecturer at the University of Southern California, I happened to attend a lecture by Dallas Smythe. After the lecture I introduced myself. We had much in common, and he and his wife became good family friends. That spring, Dallas Smythe, who virtually single-handedly created the left wing political economy of communication as a field of scholarship, invited me to join him as a Research Assistant Professor in the Institute of Communications Research at the University of Illinois, Urbana.

Schiller joined us at Illinois in 1961. Shortly thereafter, Dallas Smythe returned to his native Canada to assume the chair of the Department of Economics in Regina, and Schiller took over Smythe's courses.

In the spring of 1970 Mike Real visited me and asked for a recommendation for an appointment of a "progressive scholar" to an open position at the University of California at San Diego. I told Real that I knew the best possible person for that job. The rest, as they say, is history.

Herb Schiller was, most of all, an anti-fascist and a radical. He was a prolific writer, traveler, speaker, agitator, and a dynamic teacher with a large and faithful student following. He was too much of a critical scholar, pamphleteer, and activist to bother with the kind of systematic research that occupied most of my career. While I believed that one gains authority, even for radical views, through methodological

rigor and publicly replicable findings, Schiller disdained that academic-style pose and believed in the persuasive power of ideas, especially for radical views that cannot be easily tested either in the laboratory or in the field.

Herb Schiller, as an economist and polemicist, basically ignored media effects theories, including uses and gratifications. He had no use for research done in the style of the British school of cultural studies, considering it too bland, literary, and abstract. His intellectual stance was perhaps closest to my cultivation theory, which focuses on monopoly media, especially television, as a centralized system of story-telling—a structure that brings a relatively coherent system of images and messages into every home, and thereby cultivates from infancy our predispositions, preferences, and world views.

Nor did Schiller present himself as a Marxist (following Marx's own dictum against all "isms") or a "materialist." In fact, Herb had little philosophical inclination or temperament, and he did not explicitly use class as a key to understanding society. But, of course, no left-wing theorist can escape the pervasive influence of Marx on social criticism. One might call Schiller a neo-Marxist who believed that the cultural "superstructure" is as least as important in a media-dominated society as the "material" structure of class and production roles.

In one of his last contributions to *Gazette: The International Journal for Communication Studies* Schiller (1998) wrote:

> Only the most profound shocks in the global and domestic economies will be sufficient to shake the beliefs and values that now prevail in the minds and consciousness of most Americans. This is not a comforting thought. But the machinery of mind management is so entrenched and pervasive that nothing less than seismic movements can be expected to loosen or weaken its pernicious authority (p. 195).

That "seismic movement" will be the best testimony of the significance of Herb's life's work.

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