

Herbert Schiller (1919-2000)

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When I first encountered Herbert Schiller's work in the early 1970's I was struck by how alone he was among people writing for both an academic and a wider public in the United States. It impressed me that, in spite of all the utopian rhetoric about how cable television -- the Internet of that era-- was going to create a wired democracy, Schiller wrote with confidence about how old and new media were expanding the American empire. Amid all the government and business spin about the liberating power of communication satellites, in 1969 he stood almost alone to write carefully and intelligently about how the Kennedy administration and its friends at AT&T, RCA and ITT beat down the opposition and created Comsat and Intelsat to ensure American dominance of this new technology.

It was not easy to be a lone voice asking critical questions about new technologies and businesses enthusiastically supported by both old and new organs of communication. Although he had supporters on the Left, few of them cared much about the mass media, considering it too soft and ephemeral for serious neo-Marxist analysis. Undeterred by the lack of interest on the Left and with the help of people like Dallas Smythe and George Gerbner, Schiller worked to fill this blindspot by describing what amounted to a military-industrial-communication complex.

Although he is given some credit for courageously addressing the political issues surrounding new media, Schiller is not recognized enough for the conceptual work it took in 1969 to understand both the electro-magnetic spectrum and the geo-synchronous satellite orbit as resources and commodities not unlike oil, gas or soybeans. Nor is he recognized enough for the theoretical work it took in 1973, just as Daniel Bell's *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* was appearing, to write in *The Mind Managers* about how information was fast becoming a leading commercial commodity.

Schiller's achievement is extraordinary because he not only worked in relative isolation to make the conceptual breakthroughs necessary to identify and describe the commodification of information and communication, he described in the clearest of prose why these were among the central political issues of our time. Perhaps it was because he made it look so easy, with his signature speaking style- no notes save perhaps for a clipped copy of the *New York Times*- and his clear, accessible writing. For some academics, particularly those who prefer to chew on a concept rather than a corporate executive's leg, it was hard to accept that Schiller could do both so well, so powerfully, and with such good humor and generosity.

Schiller continued to work without much in the way of support within his own country in the 1970s. Communication studies was just beginning to achieve respectability in the U.S., mainly by borrowing from tired behaviorist, functionalist and positivist dogmas that could nevertheless still serve to win a place at the academic table. His work provided little leverage to open doors in universities conservatively committed to the old value of an apolitical academy and the newer one of courting corporate and government money. Nevertheless, his international following grew throughout the 1970s with frequent visits to the Third World, including assistance to the

government of Salvatore Allende in Chile until a U.S.-backed coup ended another experiment in democracy. His 1976 book *Communication and Cultural Domination* expressed in clear, compelling language the increasingly stark divisions in the world and the ways communication and information systems deepened them.

The 1970s and 1980s also brought Schiller a lot of company in critical communication studies. No longer alone, he responded to the swelling of the critical ranks, including formation of the Union for Democratic Communication, the expansion of the International Association for Mass Communication Research, and an outpouring of Marxist- and Schiller- inspired work with characteristic generosity. Yes, it is tough to be a lone voice in a field, but it can also be difficult to accommodate new generations of voices you have inspired. After all, newcomers, however devoted, don't just stand on your shoulders, they also nip at your ankles. Schiller supported the critical community by speaking at its conferences and universities, writing for its edited books and journals, providing letters of reference for job applications, tenure and promotion assessments. He never let disagreements within the critical community get in the way of supporting critical scholars.

Herb also supported critical scholars by his example. He was a committed, politically engaged intellectual, who, for as long as he was physically able, never passed up an opportunity to speak out and connect with people throughout the world. I recall a visit to Ottawa in the early '90's on the invitation of the National Gallery. It was February, as frigid as it ever gets in this city (-25 to -30 Fahrenheit), and Schiller, then in his seventies, left the warmth of San Diego to speak to a public audience on the commercialization of art and culture. Just up for the weekend, he was on the go throughout, never letting the frost slow him down. In fact, he drew on the weather to fill the weekend with his well-known sense of humor, even posing good-naturedly for a few fashion shots in my brother-in-law's fur-trimmed parka that we made him wear for nightly jaunts through the shivering streets of the city. For Schiller, reaching out to artists, librarians, policy-makers, teachers, students, trade-unionists, journalists, and film-makers was more than just a professor's additional responsibility, it was his way of life.

This is one reason why critics who pegged Schiller as a one-dimensional thinker, as an economic determinist who saw capitalism as an omnipotent singularity, are flat out wrong. Sure, he concentrated on the power of global capitalism, particularly the growth of transnational media, information and cultural businesses in the last half of the twentieth century. Events have more than justified this focus. But he also recognized that capitalism was a complex beast and that there was no necessity nor inevitability to its triumph. To demonstrate this, Schiller often addressed the active and conflicted role of the state as a force in the communication arena. From his early work on the role of the military in communication systems, still some of the best in the field and still sadly a blind spot in communication research, to his work on the need for national communication policies in the Third World, Schiller recognized that states could exercise power to advance and to oppose corporate power. His remarkable record of speaking out throughout the Third World, before international organizations like Unesco, and in the First World (who can forget Paper Tiger's "Herb Schiller Reads the *New York Times*"?), demonstrated his belief that it was possible to oppose the global media industries and produce an alternative to commercial culture.

This is clearly revealed in the work he took up in the latter years of his life, starting with *Culture Inc.*, which takes up the central importance of culture in social life and the cultural turn

in academic research. Schiller was committed to media research because he knew that culture was critical to democracy. In the last decade of his life he turned to examine its importance in city streets and parks, billboard advertising, museums, libraries, and a host of other places which demonstrated for him that “a community’s economic life cannot be separated from its symbolic content” and that “speech, dance, drama, music and the visual and plastic arts have been vital, indeed necessary, features of human experience from the earliest times.” (*Culture Inc.* p.31) Schiller focused a critical eye on culture, not as a superstructural derivative of an economic base, but to demonstrate that the symbolic is not only inextricably bound to the material, it IS material. His concern with academic cultural studies was based on the fear that it diminished the cultural by removing it from the arena where it was most important in mutually constituting economic, political and social life.

The last time I saw Herb was in his living room three months before his death. He was frail and in pain, but his face was lit up by more than the warm La Jolla sunshine. His publisher had just delivered his latest copy-edited book manuscript and, though the words came slowly, he talked and talked about it. I could not help but think- what a wonderful way to live a life, to its fullest, right to the end.