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Herbert I. Schiller. *Information Inequality: The Deepening Social Crisis in America.* New York: Routledge, 1995. xvi + 149 pp. $31.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-90765-1; $95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-90764-4.

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Media Dominance and Oppression

The casual newspaper reader probably read about the following events with little sense that they might have a shared connection to deeper social tendencies: in 1992, under pressure from the United States, the UN Center for Transnational Corporations was dissolved; in its most recent session the Supreme Court struck down a ban by the state of Rhode Island on advertising liquor prices; finally, this year the U.S. Telecommunications Act of 1996 was signed into law. The first was reported as international, the second as legal, the third as business news. For over thirty years Herbert Schiller, a professor of communication at the University of California, has been countering this tendency of the media, and of academic disciplines, to reduce the social world to discrete spheres of activity. He has argued that disparate events of this kind express growing corporate power and has pointed to the troubling implications of this power for meaningful democracy and social justice. In works such as *Mass Communications and American Empire* (1969) and *Culture Inc.* (1989) he has situated developments within communications in the larger context of systemic struggles between rich and poor nations and between corporate interests and popular movements.

His most recent book, *Information Inequality: The Deepening Social Crisis in America*, is a welcome continuation of this project at a time when global developments in communications have assumed unprecedented socioeconomic importance. The book links such diverse phenomena as the gutting of the public library system, the auctioning off of parts of the radio spectrum, and the commercializing of public schools to an underlying battle over social resources between corporate and popular forces. Centrally, Schiller considers various ways in which the weakening of the latter has allowed transnational media, telecommunication, and computer firms increasingly to monopolize global information and cultural flows and to prevent democratic access to and control over communication. He always relates recent developments to broader historical tendencies. For instance, he discusses the extensive privatization of information resources since the Reagan years in the larger context of the corporate-led attacks on social services and regulatory agencies begun at the end of the postwar boom (chapter 2). Similarly, he connects the development of special effects technology for film and television in the 1970s to the pressure corporations then came under to boost sagging profits through novel advertising techniques (chapter 3).

These examples underscore Schiller's belief that class struggle is the shaping force behind developments in communication, a belief that leads him to reject any kind of technological determinism. In his lengthy discussion of the Information Superhighway in chapters 5 and 6, he insists that its future configuration will depend on the way existing systems of social and economic power appropriate the technology. In his view the information highway, like previous communication technologies developed at public expense, is already being, and for the near future will continue to be, turned over to private companies and exploited for profit with nominal concern for the public interest. Throughout the book, however, and especially in the final chapter, he points to the inherent instabilities within a market-driven system, arguing that the economic polarization and environmental destruction endemic to it will inevitably provoke widespread popular resistance.

It is important to note Schiller's stress on popular agency, for it is easy to misrepresent him as a blind adherent of the dominant ideology thesis. His book certainly laments ideological conformity in news and entertainment. To students of cultural studies, who appreciate the popular, subversive, and utopian dimensions of mass culture, Schiller's ideological critique might seem oversimplified. But I would suggest that his limited treatment of the subversive aspects of popular culture chiefly reflects a concern to maintain the totalizing perspective essen-

tial for a radical critique. Schiller resists the tendency in cultural studies to idealize oppositional modes of individual consumption as political subversion. Though he does not belittle or dismiss this kind of resistance, he refuses to treat it as an acceptable substitute for active popular participation in the production of culture. For Schiller, the radical project requires a sustained critique of the way the current system, in its institutional, political, and economic totality, suppresses the human potential for open and informed dialogue and creative expression. Anyone anxious about the increasing corporate control over public discourse and concerned to achieve a more equal and democratic polity in face of these developments will find Schiller's new book indispensable reading.

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