Herman in Theory and Practice:
Race and Power
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Abstract
With the passing of Edward Herman, it is important to reflect on the ways that race and power figured in the theories he posited about the media. This essay discusses Herman’s theories on the ways in which capitalism and race intersect within news.

Keywords
Race, news, media bias, capitalism

I had not heard of Edward Herman the day that I sat in a rather gray meeting room with colleagues at a national show on PBS. While I was only a lowly production associate at the time, I was also the only black editorial staffer. So there were times, like this one, when I felt the need to speak up.

We were screening a piece on living wage campaigns which featured two families, one black and one white. The ostensible objective of the show was to convey the little-known (or little-acknowledged) truth that most poor Americans are employed in full-time jobs that pay them too little to support their families. Each family featured in the episode had more than one child – but the host asked only the single black mother why she was pregnant and having another child in light of her struggles to make ends meet.
I was, to say the least, shocked by the question. Was he suggesting an abortion? Adoption? Permanent sexual abstinence for a grown adult? A narrative of irresponsibility because she had, like many humans before her, conceived a child? Was it her fault that her employers did not pay her enough to support another child?

Edward Herman’s work might have helped me cogently explain the way the question was shaped by anti-blackness and only served to push the failures of capitalism onto this woman’s shoulders, stigmatizing her reproductive choices rather than the lack of resources thereof. I might have reminded them, as Edward Herman once argued, that we were falling into the trap of journalism in which we portray “anti-Black theorizing, even if blatant and a rerun of long-repudiated doctrine, [not as] provocation and bigotry; [but as] courageous truth-seeking” (Herman, 1995: 86). This was PBS, the bastion of liberal news and public service. If they could not understand the sexism and racism embedded in questioning the reproductive decisions in the only family not headed by a white man, then who would?

Instead, my voiced concern about the interaction between the show’s host and a working poor black mother seemingly fell on deaf ears. I recall gently querying why she was being asked about her choice to have a child and suggesting we take the exchange out. I was told, in response, that “our viewers want to know”. Even in the world of non-profit news, consumerist impulses to meet audience expectations and biases guided such decisions.

But it is, of course, the obsession with engaging the loyalty, desires, and ideology of viewers that frequently concerned Edward Herman the most. It is through his work that such newsroom scenes can be rethought, analyzed, and reconfigured.

Herman’s discussion of capitalism and the way it shapes our political and informational institutions was the primary focus in his work. His relentless emphasis on examining political economy in journalism demanded that we think not just about the messages that the media produce, but the forces that shape those messages.
In his book *The Myth of the Liberal Media* (1999), Herman argues that a capitalist emphasis on a free market approach to media production and dissemination necessarily constrained free expression. Property owners and the monied elite typically owned or controlled the means of free expression and, thus, constrained it to suit their own interests. As Herman saw it, this was a fact embedded in the very Constitution and the intent of its wealthy authors.

The influence and ownership (and we should add, race and gender) of wealthy Americans on mass media produced a “media bias towards status quo and interests of the corporate system” (ibid, p.15). To rely on advertising revenue meant the media must generate content that appeased and propelled business interests, creating an aversion to controversy and opposition to those in power. In this way, Herman argues that the “free market model limits free expression” and creates instead a “decentralized pursuit of a set of micro-interests” that support the actions and goals of those most in power (ibid, 16). In other words, mass media under capitalism made the media just another set of tools for extending and maintaining control. While the media do not all share the same perspectives and point of view, Herman and his friend Noam Chomsky argued that the media did work collectively to exclude “views that challenge fundamental premises or suggest that the observed modes of exercise of state power are based on systemic factors” (Herman and Chomsky, 1988: xii). In such a media system, reigning ideologies that bolster those in power – racism, anti-blackness, patriarchy, sexism, heterosexism, militarism, elitism, etc. – would overall be positively and consistently conveyed (even if implicitly).

For me – as with most theory – Herman’s insights become most keen at the points in which they meet my own experience, study, and engagement with the media. It means almost nothing to state repeatedly that the media function as complements and conduits of a capitalist regime without a personal history and context through which one can fully understand the everyday mire of journalism’s entanglements. It is through the mire, I think, that Herman’s theories are most clear.

Herman’s theories were rooted in his own work as a journalist, including his experience of being blacklisted. As an occasional op-ed writer for the *Philadelphia*...
Inquirer, he reported his own observations of pro-war, pro-conservative stances within the paper. He experienced his own brush-up with the paper’s leadership when he wrote a column “on state terrorism, which identified Israel (among others) as a terrorist state” (Herman, 1999: 122). According to Herman, this column upset enough pro-Israel supporters that he was “de facto blacklisted”.

This narrative and its veracity, of course, rests on one’s perspective of a conflict that continues to be a political and academic lightning rod to this day. For Herman, it represented a pro-war media stance that supported a powerful and successful lobby. For others, of course, Herman’s accusations represented an anti-semitic point of view. In either case, it could be argued the Inquirer’s actions in publishing Herman’s column and excluding his future contributions appealed to a hawkish and xenophobic right-wing.

In my experience, the mire of journalism, capitalism, and politics was represented in a single exchange in a production meeting about a young black mom in a small gray room. Of course, I would be the first one to point out that racism and sexism did not heavily figure within Herman’s work. He, like most socialist writers of his time, seemed to see them both as mere consequences of capitalism rather than its pillars.

But Herman’s critiques of anti-blackness and racism in media, while scarce, remain poignant. In Triumph of the Market (1995), Herman discusses the ways in which racist messages find footing in mainstream media. For example, Herman points out the widespread media attention given in the 1990s to The Bell Curve, a book written by Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray that argued the intellectual inferiority of Black people compared to their white peers. Herman pointed out the failures of media networks to place Herrnstein and Murray’s claims about the education of Black children “in the context of scientific racism”, a lengthy history of white supremacist pseudo-science research. Fast-forward to 2017, and a more recent CBS Sunday morning segment about college students protesting paid right-wing speeches on campus presented Charles Murray as a sympathetic researcher with a controversial point of view. The media segment neglected to mention his stakes in
racist claims and ideologies – uncomfortably similar to media coverage that Herman observed more than two decades ago.

The core issue, Herman explains, is that the media normalize racism, which is “made acceptable to an important racist constituency and fitted to serve the political agenda of the powerful, setting the intellectual and moral stage for a new wave of harsh policies towards the descendants of the victims of the slave system” (ibid: 90). In this way, anti-blackness is not only specific to media coverage of Black people, it is also endemic. The media portrays systemic attacks on the freedom of Black people, such as slavery or lynching, as “tragic errors” – simple mistakes in a generally progressive nation rather than fundamental building blocks upon which our politics, policy, and economy continue to rely.

Of course, this is in line with Herman’s overall argument about a market-oriented media that must justify the oppression of the poor and venerate the wealthy. Anti-blackness works “in accord with the law of markets”, rewarding those (in particular, anti-Black Black people – think Stacey Dash, Clarence Thomas, or Sherriiff David Clarke) “who are prepared to help administer the necessary blows and discipline to the dispossessed” (ibid: 95).

More recent examples of these market-based dynamics can be seen in Disney-owned media groups censuring and censoring Black media professionals for their coverage of a nationwide police brutality National Football League protest. The protest began with a Black quarterback named Colin Kaepernick kneeling during the National Anthem in 2016 to display his objection to a series of largely unpunished police killings of unarmed Black people. The protest spread and involved mostly Black players on other teams, garnering swift and widespread criticism from right-wing and right-leaning football viewers who saw the athletes as unpatriotic; in particular, the newly elected president Donald Trump, who expressed in a speech that he wished NFL league owners would “say, Get that son of a bitch off the field right now! Out! He’s fired!” (Graham, 2017).
In response to the threats to bench players, a Black woman ESPN anchor named Jemele Hill (already criticized by the White House and others for calling Trump a “white supremacist”) tweeted that “This play always works. Change happens when advertisers are impacted. If you feel strongly about [a threatening owner’s] statement, boycott his advertisers” (Pallota, 2017). ESPN is not only owned by Disney, but also has a $15 billion contract with the NFL to air its games. Their punishment for advising a threat to revenue dollars was swift. Hill was subsequently suspended and removed from her position as show host. A few months later on ABC, another Disney-owned company, the network canceled an episode that discussed Kaepernick’s protest on “Blackish”, a weekly family comedy focused on race (Holloway, 2018). Profit, advertising, and brand imperatives allowed only anti-black discourse to reign on the subject and led to the removal of narratives challenging white supremacy and profit. Kaepernick himself, considered one of the best quarterbacks in the country, still remains without a contract until he agrees to cease his silent protest (Garcia, 2017). As Herman would have predicted, capitalism and systemic ideologies about the oppressed prevailed.

Herman’s theories on anti-blackness, power and imperialism help in thinking through the ways in which we understand race and journalism today. In discussing the police, the purveyors of disproportionate violence against black people and people with disabilities, Herman explains that the media tends to portray the police as credible and authoritative information sources. In covering immigration, Herman notes that American media neglect to mention our country’s role in generating and contributing to the crises and conflicts from which people flee (Herman, 1992: 109). The media create categories that distinguish between “constructive”, “nefarious” and “benign” bloodbaths, skewing these narratives based on the extent to which a conflict benefits Western interests rather than the collateral damage that it produces (Herman, 1995: 104). The media propagate and give a platform to conservative ideology and policies that “generate disorder, crime and job scarcity by increasing unemployment, withdrawing the safety net from the weak, unleashing greed, encouraging corporate abandonments, and returning society to the law of the jungle” (Herman, 1992: 79). That is, the media help those in power to violate the very
meaning of the social contract, and do it by reestablishing its boundaries. In this way, Herman argues that the media help “normalize the unthinkable” (ibid: 97).

There is, too, an almost prescient quality to Herman’s work. I haven’t decided yet if that’s because history tends to repeat itself or if there is something more magical afoot. But it strikes me fairly often that Herman’s work seems to have predicted the Donald Trump presidency as a natural progression in America’s hegemonic political and media system, even if he himself did not predict Trump’s victory. Like most progressive and liberal voters, Herman was too distracted by the power and influence of what he called the “Clinton menace” to clearly see the rise of Trump (Herman and Garrison, 2016). But it is, ironically, in Trump and Trumpian policies that Herman’s theories are best revealed.

In Herman’s earlier work, he gave a clarion call on the potential rise of fascism in America. There are some real nuggets in these texts, such as explaining why environmentalism fails under capitalism or the salience of “law and order rhetoric” in authoritarian regimes. In particular, Herman explains that “the “market” does not like anything approaching real democracy, which invariably imposes higher taxes on those who can afford to pay and supports worker rights and benefits” (Herman, 1995: 116). Instead, the market favors authoritarian governments and pressures journalistic narratives to do the same. As the market resists constraint and any limits to growth, environmentalism is also seen as running “counter to fundamental characteristics of a capitalist economy” (Herman, 1992: 110). While he does not state it explicitly, these impulses necessarily affect the media that cover issues such as climate change and pollution. Hermanian logic would dictate that journalists would tend more to support the individualist and consumerist ideologies that bolster anti-environmentalist rhetoric rather than focus on the communal impact and consequences of environmental neglect and injury.

It is probably most in his descriptions of “Law and Order” regimes that Herman’s Trumpian echoes are most clearly elucidated, as are the importance of thinking through race and racism in any political economy analysis of media and policy. In a 2017 speech before police officers, President Donald Trump implored cops to not
“be too nice” to suspects and encouraged them to rough up people in their custody (Swanson, 2017). Trump ran on a “Law and Order” platform, telling his supporters on the campaign trail that “We must maintain law and order at the highest level or we will cease to have a country, 100 percent. We will cease to have a country. I am the law and order candidate” (Nelson, 2016).

Herman explains that law and order regimes “gradually enlarge the rights of the state and the powers of police, increase the severity of penalties for lower class crimes, and fill up the prisons” (Herman, 1992: 82). Moreover, the racial implications of such rhetoric are clear – as Herman points out,

“law and order” (L&O) and its doublespeak partner, “crime in the streets”. These code phrases signify the purported threat posed by poor blacks and other minorities to white safety and jobs. [...] The conservative “solution” to increased crime and violence is more police, prisons, and an end to “coddling” (Herman, 1992: 79).

This dynamic creates a feedback loop that journalists and the news media help maintain and legitimize (Gilens, 2009; Hall et al., 2013; Reeves and Campbell, 1994). The media treat this racism and disenfranchisement “gently”, Herman claims, with little or no reflection on the morality or depravity of such stances. It is, in the end, a media system that dutifully follows the lead of a political government which manufactures villains and crises that are instrumental to capitalism and market-based political control.

Herman is useful for thinking through the consequences of a media system that promotes and abets a capitalist regime that puts profits ahead of people. For my work in particular, Herman not only reminds me of what is at stake in media and democracy, but what it means concretely for the perpetuation and justification of oppression. While it may be surprising that Herman’s work makes me recall a moment of failure in disrupting a hegemonic narrative in a news story I was helping to produce, it also reminds me of the importance and stakes that lay in speaking back. Moments of rupture help provide a space for consideration of taken-for-
granted narratives and the biases that lay within. And this, perhaps, is the most significant Edward Herman lesson of them all.

**References**


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