

# The Liberty Bell: A Meditation on Labor, Liberty, and the Cultural Mediations That Connect or Disconnect Them

Paul Willis, Keele University

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## The Bell

The Liberty Bell is material and is the product of physical labor, but is also a source and means of symbolic connection.

- The Bell calls for specific purpose, for freedom.
  - The Bell is physical labor; the Bell is cultural production.
  - The Bell condenses material, social and semiotic themes long strung out in different social science traditions, but which now cry out for reconciliation.
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## Cultural Production

Cultural production highlights the activity and creativity of social agents, the essential element of which is transformative labor – producing something new from given materials, not in the same way there before.

- In the case of the Bell, it is the labor of English workmen, but also of workers struggling to form early trade unions.
  - The labor of cultural production is the essential and defining feature of our humanness, our self-making of humanness.
  - Informal modes of cultural production might link culture and structure in privileged and creative ways for dominated and subordinate groups and in a manner that yields critical or new knowledge, consciousness, and possibility differentially for them.
  - The Bell, the product of so many different labors sits there quietly ringing out a whole different way of hearing, seeing, and being in the world than what is central in board rooms and offices.
  - For dominated groups, the experience of their own cultural production provides a counter-posing resource to put against official and ideological explanations of their position, exposing the latter as meant mainly to reconcile them to subordination.
  - The Bell rings for the possibilities of different embedded world views arising from the concrete labors of those stuck on the wrong end of the many tendrils of power, control, and authority.
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## Changes for the Poor

In Philadelphia and other major industrial metropolitan centers across the western world, things have certainly changed.

- The position of subordinate and dominant groups now seems to be changing in most ways for the worse.

- The structural conditions of the working class have deteriorated and there is no apparent increase in outrage or clear cultural or political articulation of the interests of the new poor.
- Perhaps the most dramatic change has been in the material conditions of the working classes.
  1. In the UK, for example, more than half of the manufacturing jobs have been destroyed since the 1970s.
  2. Industry has instituted a restructuring of the kind of work available.
  3. Work has shifted to much lower paid and out of reach, white-collar work.
  4. The new high tech jobs are irrelevant to most of the displaced and to-be-displaced manual industrial workers.
- There is a state-mandated attempt to regulate and reform the labor power of the working class wholesale, attempting to drive the price of labor down and impose a new category of the working poor.
  1. There is not enough work to go around and many are left in suspended animation on varieties of state schemes and dead-end training programs.
  2. When you are displaced from the city, where do you go?
- In some ways inversely reflecting the decline in demand for male manual labor power, women across all classes are achieving higher education levels and rates of labor force participation.
- White youth can no longer take for granted the possibility of a decent industrial wage, which opens the potential for racism and resentment of immigrant groups.

### **The Young**

Young people are becoming less defined by neighborhood and class and more defined by their new relations of commodity and electronic culture.

- As conditions worsen, they find more passion and acceptable self-identity through music on MTV, wearing baseball caps and designer sneakers, and socializing in fast food places than they do through traditional class-based cultural forms.
- The traditional forms did at least give a sense of self in relation to a larger group and a logic for understanding the relations of that larger group to other groups, not least, dominating ones.
  1. The means for placing the self and understanding are plunged into crisis.
  2. Market led processes of individuation have helped to render structural change and deepened subjugation apparently into matters merely of personal misfortune.

### **Cultural Production**

These are bleak new times for popular struggles from below. We are plunging into a kind of a void.

- As never before in recent times, the poor are submerged under an enormous weight of negative stereotyping, assumptions of passivity, and suspicions of various kinds of social pathology and dysfunction.
- We need an openness to new fields and forms with which to understand the importance of the creative labors of the popular classes.
- There is an urgent need for a renewed and re-theorized ethnography capable of picking up new forms of life in the bottom of social space.
- Subordinate cultural production cannot avoid the commodity and the engulfing world of electronic communication – it is commodity culture that helped erode the solidarities of traditional organic communities.
- The half formings and semi decodings of cultural commodities may play an important part in making meaning from below, creating sensuous, social identities and possibilities as *lived difference*.
- With newfound confidence, ethnic minorities are exploring electronically freed up symbolic resources to subvert insulting stereotypes and explore possibilities for new identities to set against traditional assumptions of racial homogeneity.
- In the world of commodity culture and the market imaginary, nobody knows whether you are working class or which part of town you come from or your political views – you can leave your old skin behind.

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**The  
Ethnographic  
Question**

The question for the ethnographer is how will accelerating deindustrialization be understood through, and in relation to, new social representations and identities, through a world of commodity communication whose materials are out of reach for the new workless and barely in reach for the working poor?

- If culture must now be understood, in part, as the creative uses of the resources of the imaginary world of commodity culture, changing gender relations and identities, diasporic cultural networks, syncretic and hybrid combinations of these;
- Then what will happen culturally in the welfare offices, work placement and training schemes, fast food restaurants, and the factories?
- We do not have a public language for the specificities of informal cultural production – the hidden cultural productions of the masses are never seen, recognized, analyzed, or taught and perhaps the biggest fault in informal production is precisely its invisibility to itself.
- Stereotyping and stigmatizing processes are exacerbated by widening economic disparities and all divisions are seized upon with alacrity from above by dominating groups – to divide and rule.
- If subordinate insights or penetrations offered full transparency to cultural forms or practices, neither ethnography nor its frames of theory would be needed.

- Seeking after clarity in social thought requires a double, and to some extent, contradictory focus: respect for and sympathetic understanding of the processes of lived cultural forms and an awareness of the power of the structural conditions under which those cultures form, not simply as supplying a context or frame but mediating what they are.
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## **The Problem**

What are the prospects for a cultural reverse engineering?

- The problem is to find cultural levers, level-specific means of change (politics) or ways of converting cultural meaning into explicit meaning so limiting the scope of new fetishisms, unintended consequence, and self entrapment, lifting the prospects for awareness of collective interest, for collective organization and action to effectively pursue glimpses of freedom flashing from those same cultural resources.
  - The obstacles are immense. We must seek to go beyond the folk categories of common sense, beyond the norms and limits of everyday intuition but in a way that is not irrecoverable to them.
  - Part of the problem may be an unconscious assumption by elite theorists of a symmetry in how subordinate cultures work that mimics actually the wholeness and hermetic sealing of how their own dominant cultures operate, immune from blunt intrusions of want or naked domination.
  - The internal development of cultures includes a crucial moment of externality – images, commodities, styles, music styles supplied by the market, and so an external dimension can be detached and studied.
  - What can be termed the therapy society has emerged.
    1. Looking inward will never resolve problems and feelings that originate in cultures and their relations to structures that lie outside of the self.
    2. The therapy society uncovers problems it can never solve.
    3. Tensions, thirsts, and fears are openings for critical cultural perspectives and make visible the cultural continents that lie behind experienced personal problems.
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## **Education**

Educational institutions have become, themselves, primary sites for and of cultural production, formal and informal.

- New students, many from working class and minority backgrounds, have a thirst for self-understanding in rapidly changing societies and cultures that may cross over or blur public and private realms of knowledge.
- Social studies and allied topics and themes are gaining ground in schools in part as an attempt to interest students reluctant to be in school at all.

- While individual consciousness may be taken up, at least in part, with the chances of individual mobility, locating cultures are more likely to address the implications of living in and through subordination.
  - Capitalist production sites are now global and can find their labor elsewhere if problems arise at home.
    1. But state and educational sites cannot be exported and may come to bear the contradictions and cultural stresses displaced from production.
    2. Cultural insights and analyses can play a role in countering new forms of moral panic about rebellious or disaffected student cultures as well as making more visible their inner social logics.
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## Conclusion

What are the chances for a specifically ethnographically based “therapy” for the injuries of subordinate culture, especially in light of the expanded scope of educational and quasi-educational programs?

- Ethnography might give a critical distance and focus on non-present cultural forms that are nevertheless similar to those experienced invisibly in daily life, so making them visible and offering the prospect of embedding analytic concepts in life worlds.
- The author is trying to narrow down to a handful of catalytic concepts that might act as bridges between submerged or preverbal experience and a language for grasping its social meanings analytically.
- This is not culture working on culture – it has a separate logic of its own. Catalytic resources can be thought of as groupings of a social semiotics to be united with the practical application of how cultural production undertakes its labors.
- Can class meanings enfold within race or gender insurgency, but find there only class stasis or defeat?
  1. The point is to disaggregate and to supply a technology for thinking, for straightening out social aspects of cultural production even if large parts of culture, their internal histories and operations, remain mysterious, arcane or impenetrable.
  2. Cultures are acted on and also make themselves at least in part as lived, if mediated, struggles to understand their own location in baffling historical formations.
  3. The aim is not to bring something new in from the outside, but to strengthen, make true in connecting purpose and outcome, this internal impetus.
  4. This is to strengthen something that is already there, consistently and properly naming the social and its meanings, thus redirecting their force to ring, instead of silence, freedom’s bell.