

Why Youth Culture

By Ralph Cintron, University of Illinois at Chicago

A few weeks ago I read an article by a philosopher (whose name I cannot recall) in the *New York Times* and the subsequent blog responses. The subject was Lady Gaga. Many of the responders could not fathom why a philosopher would want to waste her time on a cheap cultural icon who “clearly” was meaningless—or rather had only one meaning, namely, the commodification of meaninglessness under hyper-capitalism. They asked: Is this the irrelevance to which contemporary philosophy had sunk?? Several of the bloggers thought that “old” philosophers seemed to enjoy, perhaps even salaciously, commenting on the sexual practices of youth and making moral statements. Were they thinking of Plato?

As someone who has also written about youth culture—along with Joe, Dwight Conquergood, and many others—I would like to meditate on that theme just a bit. But before doing so, some *epideictic*. I met Joe only once, at the Palmer House in Chicago, if I recall. Rob Fairbanks on several occasions has told me that my writing had been influential on Joe. As I was reading Joe’s chapter on “Youth Spaces. . . Power. . . and Performance,” it was obvious that Dwight’s work too was very important for Joe. Dwight had extended a hand to me early on in my career. I was shocked when he died. He was much too young. And I was shocked when I heard of Joe’s death. Obviously, he was much too young. So two deaths embracing each other, even as I remain standing, was one reason for writing this. I hope, I genuinely hope, that Joe’s wife and child can feel this short essay as tribute, this thing done in memory of another for the memories and well being of those closest to Joe, the chance that the child at some point may read this and know something about their father. Scholarship, research—whatever you want to call it—is a strange action: someone be-

queathed something to Dwight, which he passed on to me without knowing it, and I, just maybe, passed it on to Joe, also without knowing it, and so on down the line, a thematic moving through the hands of those who may be real strangers, but in the actions of reading and writing turn out to be not so strange to each other. Again my best to Joe’s wife and his family.

So, some of us have this thing about youth culture. There is so much of it in the anthropological literature and in cultural studies, wassup? (To ask “what” of anything seems a bit portentous, but a “wassup” seems to lead to less ontology, and that seems about right here.) Why does Paul Lee, the teacher and organizer of the American-Asian Studies curriculum in Joe’s research, want the performances at Brimley High to “breakup stereotypes” and “articulate complex identities”? Why are stories that “enlarge the self” necessary and how do they counter marginalization? Is there some “natural” opposition between the two? Why should students be “empowered to change things”? Why do the leaders of Lyric and Asian-American Studies value resistance, agency, and the poetics of identity? Why do Fine and Weis at the end of Joe’s essay talk about the importance of voices being heard, the articulation of differences, and leaving deficit models at the door? And then most intriguingly, and also at the end, why are Lyric and Asian-American Studies linked to “democratic institutions”?

These are very familiar *topoi* or the-matics that seem to drive most work on youth culture. For many readers the answers to the above questions are obvious: justice and fairness are moral imperatives and acknowledging the worthiness of difference is one way to realize a more just world. I want to raise questions about their “obviousness” and frame things a little differently: why do Paul Lee and his performers

and the Lyric performers believe what they believe? Why has this become their commonsense? And why isn’t it everyone’s commonsense, for instance, those people on the other side of the culture wars? There is a need for the making of a sympathetic, historical inquiry that maps the evolution of the liberal/progressive social imaginary, what its foundational claims are and its particular dependence on a certain interpretation of social change. Such a map, I suspect, would have a number of scattered nodes linking up a very deep network of ideas at historical junctures.

My current work offers nothing like that, but it has begun poking around. Mind you, I am not just talking about youth culture now but something much bigger than that: all the tinkering that has gone into the making of the liberal/progressive social imaginary but also its right wing counterpart. Perhaps that last phrase sounds strange, but increasingly I am beginning to believe that the tea partiers imaginary, whatever that means, (and I use them as just one example of the right) is historically joined, sort of, at the hip of liberalism/progressivism—and this is what makes modernity look a bit monstrous, unwieldy, but at the same time rather wily. In a sense modernity is trying to survive, and the struggle between the right and left is an apt sign of the fragility of this most thorough-going artifice.

So, a few riffs unsustainable. That phrase “democratic institutions” mentioned earlier works well into my interpretive scheme. Some of the early modern and enlightenment writers on democracy fetishized democracy in its opposition to monarchy. Someone like Thomas Paine, for instance, is rather notorious, but even the Federalist papers written with much more sobriety framed the American democratic experience as a unique, unfolding experiment in the progress of civilization. There is a politics of enthusiasm here

that I summarize with the concept of *potentia*—that the democratic rhetorics (equality, freedom, rights, liberty, transparency, and so on) release human *potentia*, meaning that hierarchy must give way to the “will of the people,” the “common man,” and so on. It is this *potentia* that becomes the moral standard that replaces such older moral foundations as the “divine right of kings,” and even divine right itself for a figure like Nietzsche. Today, human rights talk speaks more convincingly to our metaphysically-abandoned world, but not even human rights can abandon vestiges of transcendence, perhaps because human law has its conceptual origins in natural law. So transcendence sneaks back in. At any rate, the democratic rhetorics released a very special *energia* that continues to consume us with the belief that the world we ought to live in should be a world of opportunity for everyone. Mind you, this is a strange belief. Even a cursory glance through history and ethnographies of others, including exotic others, indicates that such notions are not necessarily common. Social order and cosmic order are often hierarchical. Even in those societies where a version of egalitarianism does appear, it is more straight forward and ad-hoc; that is, egalitarianism in these instances functions without the deep formalities and thick entwinements of laws, constitutions, and theoretical notions such as rights, the self, social contract, and so on. Ours, but not theirs, is the systemization of egalitarianism—a rather oxymoronic concept perhaps. At any rate, now that democracy has become a thorough-going, global ideal, there are no “people” outside its political arrangement or its imaginary. Democracy has become the revolutionary force that one cannot revolt against.

There is something messianic about those early accounts that reappears in the language of Paul Lee and Fine/Weis: “Youth need spaces. . .to explore the pleasures of not-yet identities, and to organize movements we can’t even imagine.” Democracy as a grand opening of human *potentia*, a *dynamis*, an ideology that gives foundation to the not-yet imagined and says

that who we are are the not-oppressed. Indeed, the idea of oppression has moved from the early days of democratic imagining, where the physical oppressions of state power were the targets of revolt, to the later days of democratic imagining where the oppressions are of cultural bias and stereotype. And yet the same necessity, even urgency, to address what seem to be fundamental “wrongs.” The messianism cannot just disappear but must keep finding “spaces” to do its work.

The curious thing about democracy is that everyone buys into it even as they buy out of it. Edmund Burke and Jeremy Bentham never fully bought into it, but neither did Xenophon, Plato, and the other oligarchs of classical Greece. It’s just too careless and unpredictable—which in effect is what the liberals and progressives also felt as they saw Sarah Palin rise out of the populist nowhere. Ultimately no one quite believes in equality because we cannot truly live in it. So equality circulates less in our actions and more in our talk, particularly in those contexts where we can afford the talk of equality, that is, those contexts where equality cannot snap back on us to deliver people and ideas that we truly abhor. Hence, Yale and Harvard became the great bastions of contemporary oligarchy, sifting through the masses and training their charges to do likewise and assuring that global order will continue to be safely managed. Why aren’t they under siege? In a society truly wedded to egalitarianism they would be, right? Furthermore, why did the idea of the random lot distributed to the whole citizenry not become the mechanism for choosing political candidates? Think of it: all citizens with the obligation of serving in political office for a brief time once in their lifetime, but each one chosen randomly by lot? Instead, we create two parties that function, in effect, as massive monopolies in charge of the distribution of wealth and power. They too are not exactly under siege, but sometimes they seem to be. These entities can co-exist with egalitarian democracy and not seem anomalous because of some interesting moves, some rather primal

and others rather subtle. On the primal end is the simple fact that we stand to lose too much in a siege: all of our economic well being, even our poverty, is tied up in the existing order. We are all financialized now—even welfare recipients. On the subtler end is that we have found ways to dampen the punch of the egalitarian side of democracy through a set of tricky terms such as “meritocracy.” In sum, we buy into the democratic rhetorics even as we buy out of them.

Well, I have not said anything here that Foucault did not say much more succinctly on page 65, for those who have the 2008 Palgrave edition of his *The Birth of Biopolitics*: “Freedom is . . . constantly produced. [Liberalism] proposes to manufacture it constantly, to arouse it and produce it, [along with the] constraints and the problems of cost raised by this production.” That is, democracy through its rhetorics, and in some cases its empirical successes, has produced a certain subjectivity that is far from running its course. It is thorough-going in the sense that both the right wing and left wing subscribe, for instance, to the maximization of choice. The right may put the emphasis on the marketplace and the left on state power, but the real revolution would consist of a radical reevaluation of choice. But the fear is that such a notion would diminish the human and return us to the old hegemonies of theology. But notice how some contemporary fundamentalist Christians have finessed this problem with the argument that God too wants us to prosper by maximizing choice. Modernity indeed is wily.

But let me put an end to this. The point of these incomplete riffs was to suggest that Paul Lee and his Asian-American curriculum and the performances at Lyric have deep roots in a subjectivity that keeps reproducing us. It is a contradictory subjectivity delivering, as Joe says, positives and negatives—or what I am calling our antinomic social system, our divided mind. At any rate, we are on its roller coaster inventing hip-hop culture and its kin. Youth culture, then, outlines part of that vehicle for us—but so does the tea party.

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