

Paul Willis

The Ethnographic Imagination



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I, Herodotus of Halicarnass, am here setting forth my history, that time may not draw the colour from what man has brought into being.

The History, Herodotus (translated by David Greene),
University of Chicago Press, 1987

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Paul Willis

Polity

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Foreword

This book outlines an approach to method and understanding in the social sciences, an approach which I've termed the ethnographic imagination. The juxtaposition of 'ethnographic' and 'imagination' is meant to surprise, condition and change the meaning of both. The two may seem far apart, ethnography faithfully reporting 'the reality' of the everyday, imagination deliberately seeking to transcend the everyday. But, actually, for its own full development ethnography needs a theoretical imagination which it will not find, 'there', descriptively in the field. Equally, I believe that the theoretical imaginings of the social sciences are always best shaped in close tension with observational data.

Perhaps I could have called the book *Ethnography* and *Imagination*. But I mean to emphasize the ethnographic as conditioning, grounding and setting the range of imaginative meanings within social thought. Ethnography provides the empirical *and* conceptual discipline. Ethnography is the eye of the needle through which the threads of the imagination must pass. Imagination is thereby forced to try to see the world in a grain of sand, the human social genome in a single cell. Experience and the everyday are the bread and butter of ethnography, but they are also the grounds whereupon and the stake for how grander theories must test and justify themselves. They should be not be self-referenced imaginings but *grounded* imaginings.

The particular articulation of how the everyday and the social imagination are brought together depends on many things, not least the type of research question being asked, what drives the curiosity of the researcher. I will explore some of these in detail, but there is a broad conjunction which provides the main spine for how this book is organized. It underlies much of my own work and is relevant to many social questions and issues. This is the bringing together of ethnographic accounts of everyday life and aesthetic questions. I pose the question in this book: what happens if we understand the raw materials of everyday lived cultures as if they were living art forms?

A biographical vignette may help.

In October 1968 I registered as a PhD student at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Birmingham University, UK, to conduct a field study on Biker and Hippie cultures (subsequently published as *Profane Culture*, Routledge). The Centre was in an English Department and I had previously studied English Literature at Cambridge. Newly arrived at the Centre, I was asked to lead an early seminar analysing Blake's 'Tyger, Tyger'. Trained in the techniques of literary criticism, specifically in practical criticism and close reading, I struggled to analyse how the words on the page achieved their effects: 'Tiger, Tiger'... OK... twice for effect, but why 'burning'...that's unusual, tigers don't usually do that,... 'symmetry', OK, but why 'fearful'? Why an industrial metaphor to describe an animal, nature and the jungle? That same night I was using the same techniques of 'close reading' to try to understand the bike culture in the city centre of Birmingham: why the 'cattle horn handlebars'...that's unusual...why the 'chrome exhausts' and 'no baffles' in the exhausts...that's anti-social...why 'no helmets'...that's dangerous...why and how was an industrial product used for meaning-making in a flesh and bone, human world? Almost on autopilot, by chance or unconsciously, there I was trying to use the categories of art to understand an example of lived culture.

Practical criticism and 'close reading' techniques had come both to baffle and bore me at Cambridge. They seemed intuned, narrow and related only to judging canonical hierarchies, displacing altogether the life-enhancing breadth and openness which had inspired me, an unlikely candidate in many ways, actually drawn me into literary studies. By contrast and surprisingly, in the

living context of the bike culture these techniques of practical criticism seemed full of life and promise. They seemed to grant significance where condescension had ruled. Almost accidentally and in drastic measure, I had reconnected what had been slowly drained out of literary studies at Cambridge – in a word the *social connection*, the connection with real life in all its tumbling profusion and messiness. At the same time, however, these same approaches and techniques, violently relocated to the social, *also* offered an immediate inoculation, so to speak in the other direction, against the flattening reductions of social science. Further and not least, my version of a transplanted practical criticism offered a productive, concrete and unfussy practice and methodology for the study of the real world. My afternoons and evenings were not so far apart. The dreaming spires and the spiral springs of the motor-bike world could be brought together imaginatively.

That is the same engagement I am trying for now on a grander scale: understanding the nitty gritty of the everyday as containing its own forms of symbolic creativity. Chapter 1 of this book sets the scene and traces through, in an evocative kind of way, some of the implications of bringing together ethnographic and aesthetic categories into the same frame. The rest of part 1 takes up the main issues and develops them in more analytic ways.

Perhaps this is an unusual book; method, theory, substance all in one. I aim to bring together, codify and extend the essential themes and concepts as they have developed in my work over the past thirty years. I aim to present not only a chosen methodological approach (ethnography) but also an allied theoretical approach, and also, overlappingly, theories for and some account of its subject matter, varieties and forms of lived everyday cultures: at school, on the dole, on the street, in the mall, in front of the TV, in the dance club. This Foreword supplies a map, some signposts and definitions, making clear some of the broad-brush assumptions that underpin my whole approach.

At bottom, you could say that in this book I am trying to outline an experimental, *profane* theoretical methodology. Imagine that I am a bit of an academic vandal, in the nicest possible and disciplined way. I take, develop or invent ideas (while immersed in the data) and throw them, in a ‘what if?’ kind of way, at the ethnographic data – the real world of the nitty gritty, the messiness of

everyday life – to see what analytic points bounce out on the other side, pick them up again, refine them and throw them again. The problem with many empirical data, empirically presented, is that they can be flat and uninteresting, a documentary of detail which does not connect with urgent issues. On the other hand the ‘big ideas’ are empty of people, feeling and experience. In my view well-grounded and illuminating analytic points flow only from bringing concepts into a relationship with the messiness of ordinary life, somehow recorded.

Part of the difficulty in defining what I mean by the *ethnographic imagination*, and its focus in this book, is that, in general, I refrain from precise or neat definitions of concepts. I do not see the social sciences as comparable to the natural sciences (or an early version of them), requiring precision to mirror objectively and as exactly as possible separate elements in nature in order to determine the pattern of their relationships: discovering unchanging laws controlling the movement of atoms. As Blumer¹ says, the social sciences can hope only to develop ‘*sensitising* concepts’ about the social world, approximate conceptions which are rough and always provisional guides to a changing and complex reality. Social science conceptions have to be fluid, not least because the subject matter with which they deal is comprised of, certainly in part, the views and thinkings of social agents themselves, if you like, deploying their own kind of ‘sensitising concepts’. Though in much more informal ways, they are trying to understand, for themselves, the world in which they have to operate. Atoms thinking for themselves! Even as they are in some sense determined from the outside. How to encompass this? By capaciousness and imagination, I reply. First step: use broad ethnographic techniques to generate observational data from real life, recorded with goodly inputs from subjects themselves and with sufficient finesse that you are able to register something of the internal ‘life’ of social atoms. Second step: experiment by bringing this into forcible contact with outside concepts, accidentally or inspirationally chosen, by trying to frame the whole with necessary complexity and to deliver analytic and illuminating points not wholly derivable from the field but vital to conceptualizing its relationships. Of course, the effects can be unpredictable when you throw concepts at things. You might just get shards, useless academic fragments in crazy piles. But the ambition, at least, is to

tell 'my story' about 'their story' through the fullest conceptual bringing out of 'their story'.

But these concepts which I throw at the data are not about scientifically understanding how human atoms respond to general laws. They are fallible, continually revised *approximations* of the relations of external forces to the interior life and movement of the atoms. Since these latter are fluid and dynamic and, changing in their own way, playing the same game, then, perforce, my own categories, ideas and concepts about them are bound, themselves, to be even more fluid and always provisional.

There is a further complication. Social agents are not academic sociologists or organized in obedient seminar groupings, so their practices of sense-making require some digging out, some interpretation – the further exercise of an ethnographic imagination. An important line of argument pursued throughout the book is that embodied 'sense' is often not expressed in language; sometimes, more strongly, it is organized against, or in tension with, language. Such meanings have to be translated into language. Furthermore, there are what we can think of as informal traditions of meaning-making, relating to gender, humour and self-presentation for instance. They are often sedimented in their own ways, long-running and semi-ritualized, so producing their own long durees and slow motion logics with respect to how quickly they can change and react to changed circumstances. The motives, meanings and lived dynamics of everyday culture are also multi-fold and organized for different questions and situations, with time scales enforced by different immediacies: getting to work, holding a family together, 'getting a life' through and on top of it all. All these are often unconsciously, chaotically or eccentrically organized with reference to each other, not rationally spoken, so requiring further interpretation.

Let us move on now to some more specific signposts and definitions. What about my practical methodology? There are many possible approaches to understanding the field of everyday culture. My approach foregrounds the experiences and practices of social agents, sensuously understood and ethnographically studied. But what do I mean by the 'ethnographic method'?

It is the central spine of an overarching set of techniques, one of only two families of methodological approaches for generating primary data about the social world: the quantitative and qualitative approaches. On the one hand, you can send out questionnaires

to generate responses you can *count*, concerning essentially the regularities of what people do – at school, at work, so many people going to the cinema, to the pubs, to the clubs, so often a week, spending so much, etc. This yields *quantitative* findings. On the other hand, you can make direct contact with social agents in the normal courses and routine situations of their lives to try to understand something of *how* and *why* these regularities take place. If possible participating in those activities yourself over a long period and through many situations, you witness and record in detail what they do, their practices in schools, in pubs, in cinemas. Through observation, interview and informal interaction you inquire into the meanings and values they attach to particular activities that are the focus of study, and further inquire how they see them in relation to wider and central life concerns and issues. This produces *qualitative* findings. Any one of the constitutive techniques of this ethnographic range of techniques can produce qualitative data, but it is only a combination of them over time that produces sufficient ‘quality’ data to generate an *ethnographic* account of a social or cultural form.

More directly, the ethnographic impulse is to be so moved with curiosity about a social puzzle – why do working-class kids get working-class jobs?; why are the unemployed so passive?; is TV an agent of passification? – that you are seized to go and look for yourself, to see ‘what’s going on’ as bound up with ‘how they go on’. Physical and sensuous presence then allows observation and witness and the use of five-sense channels for recording data relating to social atmosphere, emotional colour and unspoken assumptions. You can also sense for yourself important aspects of context and of the material and institutional features of the enclosures and regimes through which subjects pass, seeing for yourself how they use and manipulate surrounding resources in their cultural practices. This same physical presence also allows you to interact and to pursue questions and issues related to your puzzle, probing and reconstructing how subjects symbolically inhabit their worlds: what are *their* agendas, *their* de-codings, *their* stories, *their* uses of objects and artefacts.

What about art. What do I mean by it? Why use it? What I have said about fluidity and indeterminacy has to be firmly borne in mind here. What follows are starting points that my own work has developed and extended in ways which stretch my original metaphor, perhaps into unrecognizable forms. Following Marcel

Duchamp, I could simply say, 'Art is whatever I say it is.' Finally, in effect, perhaps that is exactly what I do in this book: report the results and sum of conceptual developments over many years and move way beyond my starting-out points. But I also mean to utilize and lean on the sedimented meanings of art throughout. I know that proclaiming 'life as art' may come across as a cliché and banal. But all labels are or become clichés; that is why they stick. And I want my assertion to raise questions which stick. Essentially, what are the consequences of viewing everyday relations as if they contained a creativity of the same order as that held to be self-evidently part of what we call the arts. What analytic tools do we need to comprehend that the 'sensitising concepts' used by social agents might be indissolubly linked to aesthetic forms of feeling and knowing.

So, to my provisional definitions. Most basically I am using 'art' to specify a quality of human meaning-making. Human beings are driven not only to struggle to survive by making and remaking their material conditions of existence, but also to survive by making sense of the world and their place in it. This is a cultural production, as making sense of themselves as actors in their own cultural worlds. Cultural practices of meaning-making are intrinsically self-motivated as aspects of identity-making and self-construction: in making our cultural worlds we make ourselves. At least for those who have moved out of economic subsistence, perhaps the balance has tipped from instrumental to expressive struggle, so that humans now are concerned more with the making of their cultural world than with their material world. Even in their material struggles for survival, they grapple with choices in 'how to go on', so as to deal with practical exigencies in ways consistent with the maintenance of a viable cultural identity and its distinction and acknowledgement from others.

Crucially, this making of identity is achieved through creative cultural practices which produce something that was not there before, at least not fully or in the same way. With formal works of art as a result, legitimate artistic creativity shares in this defining feature, but not as its centre, only as its regional exemplification and reification. At the centre are lived cultural practices in which this creative aspect is bound up essentially with the cultural birth of the self, knowing the self as 'home-made' difference, however small, from all that has been received.

In everyday life this meaning-making and finding difference become ever more important. The old, 'off the shelf' cultural worlds no longer supply believable practices and materials. Class traditions, work, trade unions, organized religion, the family, parental role models, liberal humanist education – these things no longer believably place and fill identity in connected and homogeneous ways. No one knows what the social maps are any more, there are no automatic belongings, so, more than ever, you have to work for, and make, your own cultural significance.

I come now to the second main element of my provisional definition of art. This is that important and specifically creative aspects of meaning-making are accomplished through *work upon forms*. Meaning-making is not an internal quest, a search for an ever elusive (disappointing if found) true self as an unchanging inner essence or state of being or intrinsic soul. Meaning-making can be considered a work process involving its own kind of labour and expressive outcomes issuing into some kind of inter-subjective space. This work is never 'done': only by expressing themselves over time do human beings continuously reproduce themselves culturally. This process of labour requires, assumes and reproduces a locating cultural world through which self-expression is achieved.

Among other things, meaning-making is a form of cultural production which works upon materials received from this cultural world, remaking them. Formal notions of art have a developed self-consciousness about their crafts upon form, but only within secluded traditions of what constitutes the cultural world and its materials. Everyday cultural practices, by contrast, are unselfconscious and take the normal life world of everyday culture as their working context. There is, therefore, an important contemporary dimension in the provision of relevant forms. This may be in some narrow participation in 'retro' or contemporary cultural styles, or in absorption into some passion – football, Elvis, country and western. But it is also in the ordinary responsibilities of deciding 'how to go on' when 'things have changed so much', how to find moral bearings or criteria for making choices when tradition does not help much but when a range of clues are on offer in a complex and messy web of chats with friends about 'what they're into', TV programmes, soaps, films, ads, talk shows, magazines, songs deliberately played or serendipitously caught,

kissing you from the radio. Meaning-making is a 'poetry (that) constructs a voice out of the voices that surround it'.²

The third and final element in my specification of art concerns a *social connection*, which is usually lost or suppressed in more formal and textual versions, though often the secret hallmark of great art. This is a poignancy in which social and structural location is articulated not as an 'add on' context but as an indissoluble and internal relation, a quality or property itself, of meaning-making. Social structure and process are encompassed as things to be made sense of, as providing fields of things to be discovered or understood, as carrying their own possible meanings, including ideological presentations, which can be adopted, contested, explained, refused. The combinations here of meaning-making, form and social connection, all condensed, produce elegance and economy deserving the name of art.

The social connection of cultural practices in the everyday is of great importance to the ethnographic imagination and is subject to a particular conceptual development here and throughout the book. The title of this book echoes, of course, that of the famous book by C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*. In it he defines his version of this social connection as 'enabling us to grasp history and biography and the relations between them'.³ I follow this but want both to add some complexity, some middle terms, to this relation, and to be relentless in the pursuit of the *internality* of possible relations and strings of overlapping connection between the creativity of individuals and groups, ethnographically held, and wider structures. Everyday culture is the main middle term that I want to add as mediation between individuals and structures. I see the production of this symbolic realm as in part a result, *upon conditions*, of the creative self-activity of agents, also thereby producing and reproducing themselves. But the symbolic realm also operates at another, connected level, where it is involved, viscerally, in the maintenance and differentiated formation of the social whole or whole social formation, including the reproduction of the conditions upon which 'self activity' originally takes place. Hard as it may be, these are the further threads of hooped strings that I have to pull through the eye of my ethnographic needle.⁴

Part 2 of the book looks at how agents 'self activity' operates, under all developing aspects of my definition, within the new conditions of the commodization of culture and its universal,