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# Bureaucracy, Institutional Change, and Deegan's Theory of Core Codes and Liberating Rituals

Michael R. Hill

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*, michaelhilltemporary1@yahoo.com

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BUREAUCRACY, INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE, AND  
DEEGAN'S THEORY OF CORE CODES AND LIBERATING RITUALS

Michael R. Hill

Department of Sociology  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln  
Lincoln, Nebraska 68588-0324

Abstract

In American Ritual Dramas: Social Rules and Cultural Meanings (Greenwood Press, 1989), Mary Jo Deegan presents a theory of core codes and *communitas* that implicitly challenges the present organization of sociological practice in bureaucratic structures such as universities. The rituals of modern academic sociology are permeated by the same core codes that Deegan finds in many modern participatory and media-constructed rituals, specifically: the codes of oppression (class and sex codes) and the codes of repression (bureaucracy and time codes). Sociology remains little more than a rationalization for repressive and oppressive social control mechanisms unless it convincingly demonstrates and acts upon its own capacity for *communitas* and emancipatory change as an organized academic discipline. Empirically, this argument is grounded in a brief analysis of the shift from *communitas* to increasingly bureaucratized alienation and control at the University of Nebraska in the early 1900s. Deegan's analyses suggest that bureaucratic alienation is not inherently a necessary feature of modernity, but can be reversed through the cooperative invention of new rituals that celebrate rather than hegemonically exploit the anti-structural possibilities of ritual activities.

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Midwest Sociological Society  
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**BUREAUCRACY, INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE, AND  
DEEGAN'S THEORY OF CORE CODES AND LIBERATING RITUALS<sup>1</sup>**

Michael R. Hill

Department of Sociology  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln  
Lincoln, Nebraska 68588-0324

**Prologue<sup>2</sup>**

It is my experience that higher education in the United States far too often exploits, alienates, and finally crushes the liberating impulse that draws many students to the unfulfilled potential of sociology to be an emancipatory force in modern society. In presenting the following ideas for discussion, action, and extension, I hope to contribute to a humanist transformation of higher education. In choosing to explore historical conditions at the University of Nebraska, I engage in a project of self-examination, insofar as my intellectual training is grounded in Nebraska's social and educational institutions. In turning to the theories of Mary Jo Deegan, I recommend and hope to further the work of my life-partner, work that I find increasingly creative, generous, and renewing.

**Introduction**

The centrality and coerciveness of bureaucracy in modern life is well-recognized by social scientists (e.g., Weber 1968; Ferguson 1984; Rizzi 1985). The bureaucratic organization of mass violence, intensified by sophisticated industrial technologies and surveillance measures, is a defining characteristic of the modern world (Foucault 1979; Giddens 1985). The intrusion of bureaucratic structures into everyday life has in the twentieth century reached unprecedented levels, and we must now add "bureaucratization" to E.A. Ross' (1901, 1905) turn-of-the-century inventory of the agencies of social control.

In this paper, I note the extension of bureaucratic control into the institution of higher education, point to the results of the bureaucratic transformation of academia, and advocate an emancipatory response to bureaucratically-generated alienation in

higher education. To advance this project, I outline several features of the University of Nebraska at the turn-of-the-century, and interpret this historical example in terms of Mary Jo Deegan's (1989) theory of core codes and communitas, explicated in her most recent book, American Ritual Dramas.

### Methodological Perspectives

I am not concerned here to produce another causal model or positivist explanation of bureaucratic behavior (Hill 1981, 1984). Rather, I adopt a rationalist strategy of explanation (Sylvan and Glassner 1985), draw on the insight of experiential sociology (Reinharz 1984), and work toward emancipatory outcomes in which the institutionalized manufacture of alienation is challenged through cooperative social action (Lee 1973; Hill 1977, 1984; Giddens 1987; Deegan 1989). The data for this analysis result in part from historical and archival techniques (Hill 1989a, 1989b, 1989c, Forthcoming b, Forthcoming c) that are only now making waves on the shores of the sociological establishment. A particularly instructive example of historical archival sociology is Deegan's (1988) study of Jane Addams and the Men of the Chicago School, 1892-1918.

Hidden beneath the necessarily schematic historical account presented in this paper lies a mass of intersubjectively verifiable archival detail that is fully documented and more adequately explicated elsewhere (Hill 1989a). In asserting that Deegan's (1989) theory of ritual usefully informs our understanding of bureaucratic transformation, I make recourse to a rationalist turn of explanation (1) to "emphasize the simultaneous importance in sociological explanation of structural and interpretive elements" (Sylvan and Glassner 1985: 6) and (2) to outline the possibilities in Deegan's theory for creating social realms that transcend the control-oriented ideologies of systematic empiricism. My archival comprehension is augmented by my experiential participation in higher educational bureaucracies in a variety of roles during the past twenty-five years.

### Deegan's Theory of Ritual

Victor Turner (1967, 1969, 1974), on whose work Deegan's theory is partially founded, defined the patterns of ritual interaction as "anti-structural," by which he meant that ritual patterns differ from the usual, mundane patterns or structures of everyday routine. This anti-structural characteristic is most

fully developed during the "liminal" phase of ritual interactions. In Turner's pre-modern world, "liminality" involves the topsy-turvy inversion of everyday rules of order and structure. Liminal play in rituals often reverses sex and class roles, for example, or requires giving away possessions that are highly valued in everyday life. Liminality is often accompanied by dancing, singing, feasting, fasting, drug use, sexual abandon, exotic costumes -- in short, by anything that helps differentiate a ritual event from the standing patterns of mundane routine. For Turner, ritual transport to -- and return from -- a liminal world that is "out of everyday time" and "out of everyday space" builds bonds of *communitas* between ritual interactants.

Deegan, however, demonstrates that modern American rituals incorporate rather than banish, challenge, or "play" with the core codes of everyday life. Participants in American rituals rarely escape the repressive/oppressive structures of daily life. Deegan identifies four codes that deeply structure social experiences in American society, specifically: (1) capitalism, (2) sexism, (3) bureaucratization, and (4) the commodification of time. Supplementary codes, including racism, agism, homophobia, and able bodyism, compound the reality and experience of repression and oppression, a point that Deegan (1975) raised in her earlier analysis of "multiple minority statuses."

The core codes of American life are not turned topsy turvy in our ritual interactions, and thus result in alienation rather than *communitas*. Modern rituals, however, are not without some anti-structural features, and they are frequently experienced as "fun" (in contrast to liminal "play"). "Having fun" is a primary goal of many participatory American ritual activities, including going to football games, pick-up bars, and auctions (Deegan 1989). Michael Ball (Forthcoming) adapts Deegan's framework to survey the core codes that structure professional wrestling. Media-constructed rituals (Deegan 1989), such as watching Star Trek and sending postcards, are also permeated, more often than not, by the principal core codes. Deegan (1989) shows, however, in her analysis of The Wizard of Oz, that American rituals can attain considerable liminality.

Deegan is severely critical of "fun" and the core codes that reinforce it. "Fun," unlike *communitas*, generates alienation to the degree that "fun" is achieved through ever greater incorporation of the core codes in ritual activities. The price of "fun" is the negation of *communitas*. "Fun" events generate group identity by creating "in" and "out" groups, "winners" and "losers." When ritual play is liminal, however, there are no outsiders, no one "loses." Liminal play explodes

exclusivity and cuts across the lived, socially-constructed realities of class division, sexual domination, administrative compartmentalization, and the pervasive equation of time with money. When realized, liminal play is a vital source of community strength and revitalization.

Deegan's theory posits a spectrum of ritual practices, from thoroughly flawed to deeply liminal. The degree to which core codes permeate specific ritual practices varies considerably. Building on the recognition that liminal play is possible in modern settings, Deegan pragmatically shows us how to revise old rituals and devise new ones that eliminate (or reduce) the intrusion of the core codes into our ritual celebrations, thus generating renewal and *communitas*. Let us now turn briefly to an earlier time when *communitas* was more fully realized in higher education, specifically at the University of Nebraska.

### Ritual and Communitas at the University of Nebraska

At the turn of the century, academic life at the University of Nebraska was robust and vital, and was marked by a sense of community. This was a productive era for three of Nebraska's most accomplished sociologists. Edward A. Ross (founder of social psychology and social control theory), George Elliott Howard (founder of institutional history), and Roscoe Pound (founder of sociological jurisprudence) were all colleagues together on the Lincoln campus. They enjoyed the momentum and excitement of intellectual and political debate to which they contributed and from which they drew inspiration and renewal.<sup>3</sup>

The creative climate of interdisciplinary exchange and intellectual ferment at Nebraska was in part structurally generated through standing patterns of ritual interaction that challenged the alienating forces of capitalism, sexism, bureaucratization, and the commodification of time. Deegan's theory of ritual helps me interpret the campus community at Nebraska from 1900-1907. Several interactional patterns fostered *communitas*, including:

- (1) Student-organized literary and scientific societies
- (2) The University of Nebraska Graduate Club
- (3) Campus convocations
- (4) Town and gown clubs
- (5) Student-owned campus publications
- (6) Faculty carnivals

(Predictably!) lack of time today precludes a detailed account of the anti-structural features of these socially patterned events. Suffice it to say that the student literary societies were inclusive and for a period struggled successfully against the sex segregation and class exclusiveness promoted by Greek letter societies. The Graduate Club met monthly in faculty homes and extended membership to all persons, faculty and student, in all departments who possessed baccalaureate degrees. Campus convocations were weekly affairs that drew large crowds of students and faculty to listen to lively examinations of current issues. Several town and gown clubs drew faculty members from disparate departments together with educated laypersons for monthly, off-campus dinners and formal intellectual discussions. Student literary publications were student owned, and free from university control. The annual faculty carnivals involved nearly all faculty members in a day of silly exuberance for the entertainment of the students (for details, see Hill 1989a, especially chapter 4, "Sociology, Communitas, and Alienation at the University of Nebraska, 1899-1907").

Deegan's core codes intruded to some degree into all of these interactional patterns, but much less successfully than today. The playful enthusiasm and community generated on the Nebraska campus at the turn of the century was remarkable (Hill 1989a). E.A. Ross, for example, was an avid participant in the 1903-1905 faculty carnivals and the student papers gleefully reported his antics in detail. Striking instances of community action include a unanimous student, faculty, and administrative outcry against plagiarism in 1905. This era culminated in the spring of 1905 in a faculty-sponsored proposal to create an interdisciplinary School of the Social Sciences. But, this reality and vision of academic community was short lived.

The archival record documents the intensification of bureaucratic control at this time at the University of Nebraska. Roscoe Pound's increasing frustration and bureaucratic entanglements as the Dean of the Law College from 1903-1907 exemplify the erosion of academic communitas. From a hard-working, fun-loving, sometimes mischievous youth (Hill, 1988d, 1989a) at the University of Nebraska (where he had been a student), Pound left Lincoln in 1907, embittered by his experiences in an increasingly bureaucratized and administratively rigid world.

In 1905, the university chancellor and board of regents closed ranks and permanently tabled the faculty plan to establish a School of the Social Sciences. 1905 saw the last faculty circus and the demise of the College Settlement program. In

1906, E.A. Ross resigned and moved to Wisconsin. Of nationally prominent sociologists, only George Howard remained at Nebraska. Greek letter societies were ascendant while the student literary and scientific societies suffered losses in popularity. Previously malleable departmental configurations were solidified while administrative protocols were regularized and routinized at the expense of innovation and spontaneity. By the close of the first decade of the twentieth century, bureaucratization held the University of Nebraska firmly in its grip (Hill 1989a).

### Liberating Rituals

Bureaucratic control and "fun" -- rather than *communitas* and liminal "play" -- structure our experiences in the modern academy. Sexism, capitalism, and the commodification of time intensify the experience of bureaucratized academic alienation. Archival data show, for example, that by 1930, Hattie Plum Williams' sociological research experience at Nebraska was an exemplar of bureaucratic alienation and exploitation (Hill 1988b). At the close of the twentieth century, I find that liberating patterns of ritual interaction are difficult to organize and sustain in educational bureaucracies (Hill 1989a: 371-373, Forthcoming a). Liminal play has no bureaucratic rationale or legitimation, and offers no rewards to bureaucratically ambitious colleagues.

Liminal play is antithetic to administrative coercion and cannot be successfully dictated by bureaucratic fiat. Neither is ritual play conducive to administrative approval. Ritual playfulness is risky, as Victor Turner (1982) discovered when members of his graduate seminar ritually burned an effigy of the Regenstein Library at the University of Chicago. Administrators pressured him to desist from future acts of liminality. At Albion College, where costumed members of my sociology class visited other classes unannounced during Halloween, my chairperson received complaints from faculty members who warned that such behavior, while not in itself objectionable, held the "disturbing potential to be disruptive."

In the conclusion of American Ritual Dramas, Deegan (1989: 162-167) identifies ways to liberate the alienating rituals she documented in the course of her research. As students, teachers, researchers, and administrators, we can explore ways to generate liminal play and *communitas* in bureaucratic educational settings. These explorations are most likely to be successful if in their conception and execution the explorers guard carefully against the creeping intrusion of the core codes.

The generation of ritual play requires bracketing many deeply ingrained habits and patterns of social interaction. Many of us fret about stepping on administrative toes, we too easily entomb decision-making in bureaucratic committee structures, many of us remain hamstrung by lack of funding for proposed projects, and we all meticulously schedule institutional time (as evidenced by the temporal structure of this conference).

In the interest of generating *communitas* in higher education, I recommend that each of us return to our bureaucratic settings and create a liminal event. Take it on your own responsibility, or get together with a few friends and colleagues, but do not "ask permission" and do not form a committee. Avoid contests that result in "winners and losers." Be inclusive. Invite inversion of the core codes and everyday patterns. Do not give students "credit" for participating. Do not charge admission or raise money for so-called worthy causes.

Liminal play is its own reward. In the bonds of *communitas*, we find strength and renewal, and the faith to play seriously at the transformation of a coercive and increasingly dangerous world. In *communitas*, perhaps we can find the excitement and energy that characterized American academic sociology during the early years of the twentieth century at the University of Nebraska and elsewhere.

#### Notes

1. Presented at the Midwest Sociological Society, April 11-14, 1990, Chicago, Illinois, in a session co-sponsored by the Association for Humanist Sociology. For responses to earlier versions of several ideas presented in this paper, I am indebted to Alan Booth, Miguel Carranza, Mary Jo Deegan, and Robert H. Stoddard.

2. The Association for Humanist Sociology (AHS) requires that all papers submitted for review to Humanity and Society "be preceded by a reflexive statement which briefly states the author's values and perspectives with respect to the subject matter" in the work [Humanity and Society (November 1987): iiiii]. In keeping with the spirit of that AHS policy, this prologue is provided.

3. This era of Nebraska sociology is discussed by Ball (1988), Deegan (1979), Deegan and Hill (1989, Forthcoming), Hertzler (1979), Hill (1988a, 1988c, 1989a, 1989c), Hill and Deegan (Forthcoming), Howard (1988), Keith (1988), and Ross (1936).

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