The Myth of Demythification: A Response to Don Mitchell's "Heritage, Landscape and the Production of Community"

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In an attempt to rectify what he considers to be a miscarriage of historical justice, Don Mitchell argues that Johnstown's legacy of "struggle and contest, control and cooperation," has been "jettisoned" in favor of a seamless, consensus history. The charge is a serious one: Mitchell bases his argument on the premise that hegemonic forces have conspired to create a myth of community. But while much of the critique is well argued, it is unclear whether the proposed "alternatives"--a revisioning of Johnstown's social and cultural "landscape"--reflect a more accurate history, in either substance or form, than the episodes of "myth making" the author appropriately excoriates.

Mitchell's description of present day Johnstown at times accurately characterizes the way in which history is recycled in the service of image. But his more pointed criticisms of heritage park plans are both premature--our interpretive plans and themes have not yet been fully articulated--and denuded of context. Even public history's most virulent critics concede that museums face constraints which academic historians have largely been free of. While the infrastructure of higher education supports studied opinions and sophisticated theorizing, the public market of culture is not nearly so patient. Exhibits, as opposed to monographs and other conventional forums for scholarly discourse, must constantly balance the imperatives of education with the leavening techniques of entertainment. It is the rare history museum that willfully violates the now tired stricture against the "books on the wall" school of exhibitry. Audience here is the critical factor. Whereas research journals and classrooms deliver a captive, albeit increasingly specialized and narrower audience for academic history, museums must seek out and stimulate an often fickle mass of visitors, many of whom leave exhibit labels unread.

This is not to excuse public history programs from the mind-numbing superficiality to which they are often prone, or to suggest that exhibits are inherently incapable of challenging their audiences or presenting "good" history. It is only meant to reveal the delicate context within which public historians and their institutions must operate. Appealing to a broad audience demands a certain level of
finesse that many academics indifferent to and at times contemptuous of public “accessibility,” are not required to exercise. Many history museums in their quest for audience simply fail to negotiate the line. (Beware of exhibits that propose to “celebrate” some heretofore ignored aspect of history.) And without diligent attention to quality, history museums will follow the iron rule of marketing and succumb to the tug of lower standards and nostalgia-sweetened history—lowest common denominator to be sure, but neither challenging or stimulating. To allude to such symptoms without bothering to sort out what is possible within the context of this very public work does nothing to advance the argument. As Michael Wallace admitted a few years back, until academic historians become aware of the entire process, most will make no better exhibit than film critics would film directors.  

A second much more troubling feature of Mitchell’s critique is his substitution of a “radical” but nonetheless monolithic interpretive framework for the consensus history he decries. Indeed, it could be argued that the search for the dark forces of hegemony and social control that characterizes the tone and substance of his argument constitutes a myth in its own right. Instead of a rosy land of heroic, universally enfranchised citizens, Mitchell’s alternative Johnstown is populated by a mass of feckless proletarians, suffering from prolonged false consciousness, relentlessly acted upon by hegemony hungry capitalists. Thus, while Mitchell allows that the history of Johnstown’s workers is “more complex” than a local Chamber official may have admitted in his characterization (which, by the way, was less an attempt to describe a pliable workforce than to connote Johnstowners’ lack of pretense), this sort of typecasting hardly complicates matters, or advances the argument. Oversimplifications, abstractions, and radical chic jargon become the foot soldiers of an ideologically driven intellectual exercise, leaving one to wonder whether in fact this “alternative” reading of a “lost” history is in fact any different in kind.

A case in point is Mitchell’s reinterpretation of Johnstown’s catastrophic flood of 1889. The author justifiably qualifies the bloated statements of heroism, “togetherness,” and the “triumph of the human spirit” that have monopolized public understanding of the “terrible wave.” The process of recovery was undoubtably more complex than popular historians like David McCullough have allowed, especially given what scholars know about the complexity of social relationships and the contours of power. But to greet nearly every public action with innuendos of conspiracy and hushed whispers of hegemony reduces complex historical characters to cut-out figures in the drama of Class Struggle. Measures imple-
mented shortly after the flood were intended to restore order but could hardly be uniformly equated with a modern definition of "social control"—a phrase that the author carts out in deference to ideological tradition, but which in this case is stretched beyond all interpretive value. In the Johnstown of 1889, the presence of class conflict more than likely did not preclude the existence of other social controls that flowed from commonly shared concern; order expressed more than just the arbitrary will of a self-serving elite.

Such a consideration would have infinitely illuminated the discussion of the city's post-flood recovery. According to Mitchell, much of the relief effort served to extend state power into "the very spaces that the newly marginalized had secured for themselves." Thus, after the tent cities set up immediately after the disaster "represented paternalistic spaces that in many ways refused to acknowledge any moments of autonomy among the residents." But Mitchell presents no evidence to suggest that the common man would have wanted it any other way, and assuming this is not another case of mistaken consciousness, it is difficult to discern just what he would have gained from—dare we say it—law and order. Concepts of proper boundaries of behavior, like those that distinguished deserving from undeserving poor, were entirely consistent with a Calvinist world view rooted in hard work, self-denial and restraint, and enjoyed an nearly universal acceptance: in short, they were part of a common standard of decency. To reduce such beliefs to rhetoric that merely "reinforced and strengthened existing class and racial biases" rests on ahistorical analysis of the worst kind and a very inflexible notion of "social control."³

This is not to suggest that the term as we now know and understand it did not exist. It most certainly did. But it is important to stress, as Mr. Mitchell does not, that the abuses of power which did occur can be traced to external entities, most of them eventually operating without local sanction. Johnstown's leadership remained an independent voice throughout the recovery period, but within four days, outside authorities such as the Pittsburgh Relief Committee, and later the state militia, had moved in. The latter stayed for five months. Certainly there was need for police powers in Johnstown: store stocks and bank deposits were unguarded and every vestige of local government had disappeared. But the rapid appearance of the so-called "mushroom" police after the flood was often a great irritant to the survivors. Frequently, visiting relief committee members assumed police powers, wearing rudely cut tin stars and carrying baseball bats. By June 9, one report had 1,500 temporary police in Johnstown, more than the disorganized
people knew how to obey. Temporary police arrested photographers and put them to work. When the police began shooting stray dogs and cats, it was too much for residents, who complained to reporters. Obviously, this was not a coherent plan for reasserting control, but rather the anxious efforts of outsiders unrestrained by central authority. Of the 425 arrests made in July and August of 1889, eighty-eight percent were non-residents of Johnstown, leading to the conclusion the sources of instability were from without.

Mitchell's interpretation of the little Steel Strike is on more certain footing, since labor-capital contests inherently bring points of conflict between competing social groups into sharp relief. But even here, nuance and a more considered interpretation are needlessly obscured under a cloud of monolithic class conflict, whereby all participants are sorted out as either capitalists or the Masses—an abstraction if there ever was one. This is not to deny that power relations in this industrial city were not hopelessly skewed in favor of Bethlehem Steel, which exercised considerable latitude in the city's public affairs. Indeed, Johnstown could have accurately been described as a company town as early as the 1860s, when Cambria Iron payrolled most of the city's work force and doled out goods from the company store. To no one's great surprise, Johnstown's steel executives have been less than enthusiastic about the prospect of sharing the throne with craft and industrial unions.

But the attitude of Johnstown's workers to their ubiquitous employer was and remains profoundly ambivalent. Generation after generation experienced corporate avarice first hand and witnessed the imposition of the company's will into almost all facets of life in Johnstown. But the city also benefited from corporate largesse and a studied paternalism that, in a world of hard-bitten industrial competition, showed moments of genuine social responsibility. Compared to larger competitors like U.S. Steel, which practiced a more financially expedient policy of social laissez faire, Cambria and Bethlehem Steel's hands-on style allowed for palpable improvements in the quality of life for many residents.

The testimony of investigators who arrived in Johnstown after the 1919 steel strike corroborated Cambria Steel's relatively positive impact on the civic life of the community. In almost every steel town in the Pittsburgh district, investigators discovered the strike to have been a nearly direct result of deplorable living conditions. In places like Braddock and Homestead, for instance, the industry's notoriously low wages kept "hunky" steelworkers and their families in a relentless cycle of poverty, best characterized by the squalor of immigrant courts. But in
Johnstown, investigator B.T. Saposs reported that "the housing situation seems very much better. . . . The worse homes in Johnstown corresponded to the poor homes in Pittsburgh, but in no case did I find the two family dwellings that were so common in Homestead and Braddock."  

The occasion of the 1919 strike provided another revelation that impressed investigators: the relatively harmony that existed among "foreigners," native born workers and mill management. "Everybody certainly has a kindly feeling towards everybody else, even towards the company," remarked Saposs, no apologist for the industrial order. And while it would be unwise to make too much of such comments, it does suggest more complicated sources of worker behavior. Ewa Morawska skillfully demonstrated the point in her careful analysis of the city's first and second generation Eastern European immigrants. Underpaid, overworked and underrepresented, they conformed to the structural composite of an industrial proletariat. But their peasant world view, shaped by centuries of rural life, continued to exert itself well into the second generation. In the end, Morawska settles on the construct of "peasant-worker" to characterize the mixed identity with which immigrants negotiated their New World condition--not as a single, unified Mass of Workers, but a varied lot whose responses and decisions reflected both inherited and acquired aspirations.

We present such evidence in the spirit of advancing historical knowledge of both a typical and atypical industrial city. It would be naive to suggest that Johnstown represents an unspoiled polity in which all citizens were equally enfranchised and in which catastrophes, both natural and man-made, nurtured the "triumph of the human spirit." But it is of equally limited value to replace one monolithic interpretation with another. History is inherently selective and best guided by a strong point of view. But its faithful reconstruction also requires that evidence lead to theory and that the past be evaluated on its own terms.

The Johnstown Flood Museum is, as Mitchell points out, the initial phase of a larger program of heritage preservation and cultural tourism designed to serve community revitalization. A second goal is to memorialize and validate the experiences of Johnstown residents, to dignify the experience of a community whose labor has helped to build this nation. Rather than sanitizing the history of the city, as Mitchell suggests, we aim to preserve and present it with all its contradictions and complexities.
Notes

1. At best, exhibitions and other popular vehicles such as newsletters can provide an accurate impression of an historical event, not full exposition. The issues raised by Mitchell concerning the Johnstown Flood are secondary to the understanding of the key facets of the disaster, and inevitably would be omitted in any popular treatment of the disaster.


3. In a recent, thoughtfully argued essay, Christopher Lasch attributes the replacement of informal controls with organized bureaucratic controls to the dubious triumph of liberalism. “… (I)f (a culture) allows every impulse a public expression …,” Lasch writes, “then it not only invites anarchy but abolishes the distinction on which even the category of truth finally depends.” It seems quite reasonable that the concern for “pauperism” that Mr. Mitchell accuses Johnstown’s leadership of “circumscribing” was in fact simply part of “a code of common decency so widely accepted that it hardly needed to be articulated,” or in this case, defended as appropriate. Certainly it is easy to see why those who could work but did not—“the undeserving poor”—were widely perceived as a threat to the community’s collective welfare, especially in a time of crisis. Lasch, “The Fragility of Liberalism,” Salmagundi, 92 (Fall, 1991), 16.


6. Ibid.

Whose History and History for Whom? Questions About the Politics of Heritage: A Reply to Miner and Burkert.

The production of history is a political project. Doubly so is the production of the geography through which history is represented. I wrote "Heritage, Landscape, and the Production of Community" as an explicitly political intervention into the debates in Johnstown (and elsewhere) over the commodification of history and geography, and its uses in the pursuit of economic development. I am pleased, therefore, that my intervention has been met by another, explicitly political, commentary, which seeks to rebut the claims that I make. My regret is that Curt Miner and Richard Burkert fail to address (except obliquely, and then only to reaffirm consensus notions of the past) what I felt were the most important claims in my paper, namely, that the commodification of history should proceed by making room for competition between competing visions; and that by selling a certain vision (and geography) of the past, other were being lost. The bulk of my paper was given over to "one possible intervention" into how history is envisioned by examining some of subsumed histories of struggle that went into Johnstown's making. Rather than reiterate my argument, let me address the substantive charges made by Miner and Burkert, and hopefully in the process, the debate on the politics and economy of history in Johnstown will be advanced as Miner and Burkert undoubtedly would want.

Miner and Burkert's criticisms revolve around two main points. First, public history is not the same as academic history. Second, I substitute one monolithic history for another. In essence, my class-based analysis erases as much as it inscribes: I tend to mythologize "the Masses" (their term, not mine) when less abstract and less simplistic notions of community construction would be more helpful. Unfortunately, both criticisms read more like defensive attacks than criticisms (or even dismissals) of my argument.

Having curated historical exhibits for the Pennsylvania State Museum, I am quite aware of the immense difficulties inherent in the popular representation of history. I found the presentation of labor history to be the most problematic of all because the complex processes which sometimes led to civil strife were almost impossible to represent iconographically without demonizing one side of the battle or the other, or without sensationalizing the confrontation itself.

That said, I had great trouble with Miner and Burkert's insistence on a hard and fast wall between "public" and "academic" history. Most troubling of all is
their insistence that public history museums must subsume behind “finesse” contentious and “delicate” issues. Why not bring them to the forefront? I realize the danger of such a proposition: the reaction to the Smithsonian’s exhibit on the American Frontier in 1991 showed well how quickly powerful patrons can turn into equally powerful sensors.

Yet do not public museums have an obligation to show not only “history” but also the processes behind the making of the historical “product”? That Miner and Burkert shy away from this issue is most apparent in their first footnote. According to them, the issues that I raise concerning the Flood “are secondary to the understanding of the key facets of the disaster, and inevitably would be omitted in any popular treatment of the disaster” (my emphasis). What a curious statement! What makes one set of issues primary and another secondary? Who decides? Under what sets of constraints, and reconciling which divergent sets of interest? Indeed, what is inevitable about the process of historical representation? I want to believe that the Johnstown Area Heritage Association and the Johnstown Flood Museum “aim to preserve and present (the history of the city) with all its contradictions and complexities.” My visits to the Flood Museum do not make me doubt the authors’ sincerity. But if this is the case, why elevate one set of factors and processes above another without engaging debate as to why it is important to do so? I made claims for one kind of history. I tried to support those claims. What evidence and justifications can Miner and Burkert present to show that their claims are not only better, but also historically and intellectually “prior” to mine? If history is forged through struggle as well as cooperation, through debate and consensus, then why should not the representation of history be forged through like processes?

The second criticism made by Miner and Burkert is related to the first. Not only is my history academic and insensitive to the needs of public history, but it is naively Marxist as well (and thus doubly ignorant of the true needs of the diverse “audience” that is Johnstown). According to Miner and Burkert, I substitute “Class Struggle” for historical nuance. I don’t know how the authors jibe this criticism with my references to the divisive (intra-class) politics of both contemporary and historical Johnstown. No one would doubt that “order expressed more than just the arbitrary will of a self-serving elite,” as Miner and Burkert claim. And indeed, no one who has studied the aftermath of any of Johnstown’s Floods, or most other “natural” disasters for that matter, would argue that immediate actions were part of “a coherent plan for reasoning control” which city elites possessed to guide their
actions (as Miner and Burkert suggest I assume). But to have no plan does not preclude the development of social-historical results. One of the privileges of doing historical analysis is that we are able to discern social processes, events and patterns that developed at least somewhat independently of individual or social intentionality. For all its problems, the great value of the historical language of social control developed by Foucault allows us to see that social processes of control often develop precisely in spite of individual or class intentionality (which is not to say it loses its functionality, and that is what I was examining).

The elision of historical result and elite intentionality likewise mars Miner and Burkert’s analysis of the events leading up to the 1937 “Little Steel” strike. Paternalistic housing strategies did make for better conditions. But at what price? If in 1919, because of company policies, “Everybody . . . has kindly feelings . . . even towards the company,” why did the strike spread to Johnstown? If in 1937 community feelings toward the company was so strong, why did the SWOC campaign develop as it did? These are important questions. I no doubt provide only partial answers. But Miner and Burkert’s reassertion of community good will does not even allow for the raising of these questions.

By the same token, questions I ask are largely absent from the historical and promotional literature emanating from Johnstown as a result of deindustrialization and the promotion of heritage. The Johnstown Flood Museum and other organizations concerned with both heritage and development play an exceptionally important role as Johnstown is economically and socially restructured. But observing this process and reading Miner and Burkert’s commentary, I am left wondering for whom Johnstown’s history is being developed, and to whom it is being sold. Is it symptomatic that Miner and Burkert dismiss my questioning of the publicized heritage park plans as “premature”? After all, these plans represent someone’s vision of both past and future. Are we to assume they are closed to critique from outside the development process until finalized in the very spaces of the city? Shall not competing visions of past and future be allowed to confront what will surely be shared geography of a deindustrialized city?

Don Mitchell