

RIBBON REIGN: 20 YEARS OF POSTMODERN INFLUENCE ON A CULTURAL
PHENOMENON

A Thesis

by

DEBRA L. SPILLANE

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

December 2003

Major Subject: Sociology

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ABSTRACT

Ribbon Reign: 20 Years of Postmodern Influence on a Cultural Phenomenon.

(December 2003)

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Diverse sociology theoretical constructs serve as the lens to examine the evolution of two popular symbols of US culture in the last 20 years: yellow ribbons displayed as decoration and awareness ribbons worn as personal accoutrement. This research was motivated by society's weakened state of "collective consciousness," whereby shared beliefs and values have declined and some have completely disappeared, and sought to determine whether symbols will survive in a culture without commitment to the social. Invoking Christopher Lasch's *Culture of Narcissism*, Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*, David Riesman's theory of other-directedness from *The Lonely Crowd*, and Stjepan Mestrovic's *Postemotional Society*, this work examined the significance of public displays of ribbons (whether on animate or inanimate objects), theorized why certain diseases and social causes "earned" their awareness ribbons and others did not, and demonstrated that these ribbons have served as multivalent symbols to accommodate our culture in a postmodern world. These symbols have not maintained their unifying function and now serve at the whim of the individual participant or observer. Ultimately, the act of wearing or displaying awareness ribbons and yellow ribbons, like so many other symbols, has been severed from the idea and is a free-

floating, simulacrum to be used in whatever mode our postmodern, postemotional society requires.

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I recognize my Committee Chair, Dr. Stjepan G. Mestrovic, for his insight, guidance, and instruction first in his role as Professor, and second, in his role as Chair. While I've always considered myself an advocate of sociology, years spent out of academia and in the business world did not promote my pursuing a scholarly analysis of what I *sensed* to be our "morphing" culture and society. Thank you, Dr. Mestrovic, in your capacity as professor and provocateur, for yours was the class that motivated and escalated my interest to examine what I consider to be our declining social solidarity. I am unsure whether in the future I will pursue advanced scholarship in a formal academic setting, but I am certain your skills as teacher and author will encourage me to investigate, challenge, and communicate what does and does not *feel* right within our social world.

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INTRODUCTION: THE PROGRESSION OF SIGNS AND SYMBOLS

Symbolism is a primitive but effective way of communicating ideas. The use of an emblem or flag to symbolize some system, idea, institution, or personality, is a short cut from mind to mind. Causes and nations, political parties, lodges and ecclesiastical groups seek to knit the loyalty of their followings to a flag or banner, a color or design. (319 U.S. 624, 632)

Signs are seen as the basic building blocks of meaning. Anything can be a sign as long as someone interprets it as signifying something – *referring to* or *standing for* something other than itself. We interpret things as signs largely unconsciously by relating them to familiar systems of conventions.. According to a founder of semiotics, the study of how signs are produced, maintained, and changed, linguist Ferdinand de Saussure proposed a two-part model of the sign. The first part was composed of a *signifier*, the form which the sign takes; and the second part held the *signified*, the concept it represents (Saussure 1983:67). The sign is the whole that results from the association of the signifier with the signified, and this relationship is referred to as “signification.” Saussure believed a sign must have both a signifier and a signified; that it was not possible to have a completely meaningless signifier or a completely formless signified (ibid.: 102-3).

This thesis follows the style and format of *American Sociological Review*

Turning Saussure's theory of signification on its ear, Baudrillard's theory of simulation proposes that the *ordering* of the basic elements of signs, from the signified (the *form* which the signs takes) preceding the signifier (*concept* it represents), is, in our postmodern society, reversed, such that the signifier precedes the signified. In other words, the *concept* the sign represents precedes the *form* which the sign takes. According to Raizman, Baudrillard postulates that mass media and the proliferation of signs across all boundaries, has, in its most extreme form, disintegrated Saussure's concept of the sign, "leaving a world completely divorced from the real and containing only infinitely recursive simulacra" (1998: 1).

Late 19th century begins the domination of signs over other objects. It is a direct result of capitalism in that the obsession of the commodity has come, in a society that places more and more value on information itself as a commodity, to be applied to ideas and images themselves. Just as the concept of use-value had been eroded for material goods that came to have only exchange-value, so did the concept of use-value of the signified's relation to the signifier become eroded, leaving only exchange value between signs (Baudrillard 1981a). This is the origin of simulation, a sign whose only value is that of exchange with other signs, its use-value, which for a sign means the connection between signifier and signified, eroded into nothing. Simulations are removed from the real, like currency whose only value is in exchange.

THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTS OF CULTURE OF NARCISSISM,
SIMULATION, OTHER-DIRECTED TYPES, AND POSTEMOTIONALISM

In this thesis, I argue that symbols may not survive in a culture without commitment to the social. By this I mean in our weakened state of ‘collective consciousness,’ whereby shared beliefs and values have declined and some have completely disappeared, symbols now serve at the whim of the individual beholder. It matters not what becomes of the original, unifying construct of the symbol, because America is now, according to Christopher Lasch (1979), a conglomeration of individuals unable to look beyond their self-image. This culture of narcissism thrives today, where “to live for the moment is the prevailing passion – to live for yourself, not for your predecessors or posterity”(ibid.:268). This new narcissist, Lasch elaborates,

...seeks not to inflict his own certainties on others but to find a meaning in life...Fiercely competitive in his demand for approval and acclaim, he distrusts competition because he associates it unconsciously with an unbridled urge to destroy...He praises respect for rules and regulations in the secret belief that they do not apply to himself...The narcissist has no interest in the future because, in part, he has so little interest in the past (ibid.:22-3).

As a result of this cultural shift, from looking outward towards society to inward towards the self, from relying on a few grounded, integrated symbols to numerous, rootless, unincorporated symbols, a culture of narcissism has profoundly affected our

ability to establish (and produce) symbols that result in meaningful connections to the symbol, and to each other.

Relating to my argument that the meaning of symbols has weakened in our current culture of narcissism, Jean Baudrillard, in *America* (1986), discusses the popular practice of completing some sort of task or accomplishment and to publicly proclaim, “I did it!” Completing a marathon, having a child, even graffiti carry the same message – that we continually have to prove to ourselves that we are “up for the task” and, we, do, indeed, exist (ibid.:21). Baudrillard points out these are challenges to “one’s own self,” and not necessarily an original or creative enterprise for the greater good of all:

This is a society that is endlessly concerned to vindicate itself, perpetually seeking to justify its own existence. Everything has to be made public: what you are worth, what you earn, how you live – there is no place here for interplay of a subtler nature (ibid:86).

According to Baudrillard (1981b), simulation is the substitution of signs *of* the real *for* the real (emphasis added). Baudrillard further proposes the symbol or sign exists without any meaning or reference. This simulation produces a type of hyperreality: whereby the real is not only what can be reproduced, but that which is always already reproduced: The hyperreal is entirely in simulation, therefore, everything becomes real – in fact more real than real ...(ibid.). Hyperreality is the production of models of the real without the existence of originals, for example: computer generated environments, television situation comedies, or, simulated cities similar to Las Vegas and Disneyland.

The simulation appears to be reproducing some original model existing in reality; however these simulacra do not have any true model in what used to be reality. It is what Baudrillard calls the precession of simulacra (ibid.).

The “real” can be interpreted as such that existed in a pre-modern way: that which is significant, valuable, and relevant to the definition of our existence. The borderline between the real and imaginary is eroded, and reality is no longer the check or validation that we use to determine the truth-value of something – it’s difficult to determine the difference between the real and illusory. While it is true that with all these images, we technically experience more of the world today than any other past generation had an opportunity to do so, these are only rootless images, in that they are removed from their historical context and become part of this order of the simulacrum (ibid.). Furthermore, there is no depth, only images layered over each other that exist in a type of never-ending present. According to Baudrillard, four successive stages of the image exist:

1. It is the reflection of a profound reality;
2. It masks and denatures a profound reality;
3. It masks the *absence* of a profound reality;
4. It has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum (1981b:6).

Examples of the fourth order of signification include the creation of bars in America, especially found in airports, that appear identical to the bar from the long-running situation comedy, *Cheers* – the bar was created as a set for a television program.

Also, Nike advertisements, with just a “swoosh” symbol, imploring people to “Just Do It.”

To further illustrate Baudrillard’s four stages, applicability can be compared to the US company “Ameritrade,” which produces on-line trading of shares:

1. The online company logo is a symbol of a service.
2. The service is a symbol of the interactive process of stock trading.
3. The share that is being traded is a symbol of a portion of the company.
4. A credit card (a symbol of cash) is used to pay for the service.

This primacy of signs leads to the development of simulation, the process whereby representations of things come to replace the thing being represented.

Therefore, the representations are considered more important than the “real.”

Baudrillard’s claim that symbols are rootless, circulating fictions without any meaning is considered an extreme claim by many social theorists. Perhaps there exists a continuum of meaning, whereby Baudrillard’s stage four has not yet been fully realized. According to Marshall McLuhan in *The Medium is the Message*, (1967), societies are “...shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication” (:8). McLuhan argues it is the *type* of technology that influences how the message/symbol is received, not necessarily the content:

The alphabet and print technology fostered and encouraged a fragmenting process, a process of specialism

and of detachment. Electric technology fosters and encourages unification and involvement. It is impossible to understand social and cultural changes without a knowledge of the workings of media (ibid.).

Regarding communication, McLuhan seems to be foreshadowing Baudrillard's hyperreality:

Our electrically-configured world has forced us to move from the habit of data classification to the mode of pattern recognition. We no longer build serially, block-by-block, step-by-step, because instant communication insures that all factors of the environment and of experience co-exist in a state of active interplay (1967: 63).

In *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), David Riesman ventured to break all of civilization down into three basic social character types: "tradition-directed," "inner-directed" and "other-directed." Tradition-directed types rigorously followed ancient rules and customs; inner-directed types are self-motivated and goal-oriented; and other-directed types, are conformists who want primarily to be loved and accepted. Tradition-directed types were conforming and relatively unchanging:

The important relationships of life may be controlled by careful and rigid etiquette, learned by the young during the years of intensive socialization that end with initiation into full adult membership. Moreover, the culture, in addition to its economic tasks, or as part of them, provides ritual, routine, and religion to occupy and to orient everyone. Little energy is directed toward finding new solutions of the age-old problems, let us say, of agricultural technique

or medicine, the problems to which people are acculturated (ibid.: 11).

The shift from tradition-directed society to inner-directed society was profound, according to Riesman "...the greatest social and characterological shift of recent centuries did indeed come when men were driven out of the primary ties that bound them to the western medieval version of tradition-directed society" (ibid.: 13).

According to Riesman, the society that emerged from the Renaissance and Reformation serves to illustrate the type of society in which inner-direction is the principal mode of securing conformity. The accumulation of capital and never ending expansion of goods and people produced a new directive to live by: inner-directed types, though rigid in character and beliefs, could achieve and become a highly individualized character. The inner-directed, though, was bound by family and social traditions. His life-course was established early in life, yet he is "...aware of the existence of competing traditions..." (ibid.: 16). He does not, however, think of himself as an individual able to control his own destiny: "The inner-directed person is not only chained to the endless demands of the production sphere; he must also spend his entire life in the internal production of his own character" (ibid: 126).

As population rates declined and industrialization increased, a transition occurred (and continues to occur, as Riesman writes in 1950), to the other-directed social characteristic type, so that:

The hard enduringness and enterprise of the inner-directed types are somewhat less necessary under these new conditions. Increasingly, *other people* are the problem, not the material environment (ibid: 18).

The increase in commercialization and consumption promoted this shift from 'inner-' to 'other-direction' in the US, and fostered a new way of life:

...many of the desires that drove men to work and to madness in societies depending on inner-direction are now satisfied relatively easily; they are incorporated into the standard of living taken for granted by millions. But the craving remains. It is a craving for the satisfactions others appear to attain, an objectless craving (ibid.: 79).

In the political world, the other-directed type uses his wealth of social skills to enhance his ability to be on the inside or, at least, to know people on the inside of an inner circle. Riesman identifies this group as *inside-dopesters*; although the majority may not actively participate in politics, those that do thrive in the political sphere:

...the inside-dopester is politically cosmopolitan rather than parochial. If he cannot change the others who dominate his political attention, his characterological drive leads him to manipulate himself in order not to change the others but to resemble them...He must have acceptable opinions, and where he engages in politics, he must do so in acceptable ways (ibid.: 181, 184).

The other-directed type described by Riesman more than fifty years ago, is invoked by Mestrovic, in *Postemotional Society* (1997), as the bearer of postemotionalism, his theoretical construct "...to capture a distinct tendency in contemporary social life toward the mechanization of emotion life" (: 1).

Postemotionalism is necessary to elucidate what postmodernism fails to adequately explain: the break between cognition and emotion in contemporary social life.

Ambivalence and lack of commitment are the social norms in a postemotional society; and, as related to ribbon phenomena, this paper will demonstrate contemporary social life is comprised of other-directed types inhabiting a postemotional society.

Mestrovic argues, regarding the postmodern focus on knowledge and information:

How much more rationality must we adopt before humanity is saved from irrationality? We have reasoned *so much!* Is it not high time to look for an alternative to more rationality to cure the excesses of rationality? (ibid.: 46).

Various theoretical constructs will serve as the lens to examine two popular symbols of US culture in the last 20 years: yellow ribbons displayed as decoration, and awareness ribbons of color worn as personal accoutrement. The familiar loops of yellow fabric found on front porches during wars and other crises, and the most widely recognized of all awareness ribbons, the red ribbon of AIDS awareness, are so firmly embedded into the popular culture their two dimensional image alone provides the viewer instant recognition and signification. This work will examine the connotation of

public displays of ribbons (whether on animate or inanimate objects), theorize why certain diseases and social causes “earned” their awareness ribbons and others did not, and demonstrate that these ribbons have served as multivalent symbols to accommodate our culture in a postmodern world. Ultimately, the act of wearing or displaying a ribbon or bow, like so many other postmodern symbols, has been severed from the idea and is a free-floating, simulacrum to be used in whatever way a postmodern, postemotional, society requires.

RIBBONS AS TRADITIONAL SYMBOLS

The frontrunner to the popularity of the awareness ribbons was the yellow ribbon phenomenon that began, by most accounts, with the public display of yellow ribbons for the American hostages during the Iran crisis in 1979 - 1981. Penne Laingen, wife of hostage Bruce Laingen, *charge d'affaires* at the Tehran embassy, tied a large, yellow ribbon to an oak tree in her front yard (see fig. 1)(Parsons1991:10).



Figure 1. – Penne Laingen’s yellow ribbon. (Permanent exhibit at American Folklife Center, The Library of Congress, Washington, DC)

Interviewed for a *Washington Post* article, she announced she was,

...standing and waiting and praying... and one of these days
Bruce is going to untie that yellow ribbon. It's going to be
out there until he does (ibid.).¹

The source of Mrs. Laingen's inspiration was a popular song by Irwin Levine and L. (Larry) Russell Brown, copyrighted in 1972 under the title, "Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree." Recorded by numerous artists throughout the 1970's, the hit version recorded in 1973 by the musical group Dawn, featuring Tony Orlando.

The song narrative is about an ex-convict returning home hoping that his girlfriend pledged her fidelity to him by tying a yellow ribbon around an oak tree. He is overwhelmed to see a tree covered with yellow ribbons.² How then, did the theme of the song about a recently released ex-con become the nationally recognized symbol for support of US soldiers at war? Penne Laingen is credited with effecting the transition.

1. Although Penne Laingen may have been the first person to publicly express the connection between yellow ribbons and reuniting families or loved ones, in 1975, Gail Magruder, wife of Jeb Stuart Magruder of Watergate fame, displayed yellow ribbons on her front porch to welcome her husband home from jail. Mrs. Laingen watched this event on the evening news (Parsons 1991:10).

2. Referencing note (1) above, notice how closely Mrs. Magruder's reasons for her public display of yellow ribbon parallels the popular hit song

When interviewed on a CBS news broadcast in 1980, she commented,

“It just came to me,” she said, “to give people something to do, rather than throw dog food at Iranians. I said ‘Why don’t they tie a yellow ribbon around an old oak tree?’ That’s how it started” (Parsons 1981: 9).

The song and lyrics, whose ownership is the subject of at least one lawsuit, and the ‘new’ tradition of displaying a yellow ribbon for an absent loved-one, sparked a debate about the origins of an American tradition.³ The authors of “Tie a Yellow Ribbon” have been asked frequently about the origin of their song, and Brown recalled hearing about the story while he was in the Army (Parsons 1981: 9). They wrote the song and recorded it on a cassette, but originally were not pleased with the results and discarded the recording. Three weeks later they rewrote the song and the music and were this time pleased with the results. In the Army story, the symbol was a ‘white kerchief,’ instead of a yellow ribbon. However, the word ‘white’ did not scan into the melody to which Levine and Brown set their lyric. When Washington Post writer Sandra Saperstein asked Levine why they made the ribbons yellow, Levine replied that the color seemed “musical and romantic” (ibid.). In this version, concludes Parsons, “it appears that...the choice of the yellow ribbon as *symbol* is conditioned by requirements of versification” (ibid.).

3. For an in-depth, scholarly review of this tradition, please see Parsons 1981 and 1991.

Parsons offers another possible source for Levine and Brown's adoption of the yellow ribbon. In 1949, the civil war era film titled *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* starring John Wayne and Joanne Dru was released. A song from the movie, "(Round Her Neck) She Wore a Yellow Ribbon" became a song hit. The song itself had been registered for copyright a number of times, with similar versions (save purple garters in the place of yellow ribbons) reported as a 1920's – 1930's college song. A typical verse of the college song type, taken from Frank Lynn's *Songs for Swingin' Housemothers* runs as follows:

Around her knee, she wore a purple garter;
 She wore it in the Springtime, and in the month of May,
 And if you asked her whey the Hell she wore it,
 She wore it for her Williams man who's far, far, away
 (ibid.:10).

It was also a favorite song from the 1960's television show *Sing Along with Mitch*, where an accompanying headnote to the songbook refers to it as an "old army marching song (based on a traditional theme)" (ibid.). Parsons further speculates that combining the army reference from Mitch Miller's songbook and the civil war theme from *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* promulgated the "mistaken idea that wearing a yellow ribbon as a token of remembrance was a custom of the Civil War era" (:10). In fact, anthologies of Civil War songs do not mention "Round Her Neck" or yellow ribbons, nor does any photograph or diary entry contemporary to the war provide such evidence.

Whether or not Levine and Brown were influenced by the film *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* is not known, however, the song can be traced back earlier than the 1920's college song version, to a song heard in minstrel shows from the mid 1800's called, *All Round My Hat* (see fig. 2) (ibid.).

AUNER & JOHNSON, Song Publishers, 12 S. 8th St.

**ALL
ROUND MY HAT.**

All round my hat I wear a green willow,
All round my hat, for a twelvemonth and a day,
If any one should ask the reason why I wear it,
Tell them that my true love is far, far away.

'Twas a going of my rounds in the streets I first did meet her,
Oh, I thought she was a angel just come down from the sky,
[SINGERS.] She'd a nice ~~right~~ ~~countenance~~; ~~rosy~~ ~~nose~~; ~~red~~
~~and~~ ~~streaks~~; ~~and~~ ~~curly~~ ~~hair~~.

And I never heard a voice more tender and more sweeter,
Yet she cried "Buy my Primrose, my Primrose come buy."
All round my hat, etc.

Oh, my love she was fair, and my love she was kind, too,
And cruel was the cruel judge not had my love to try;
For stealing was a thing she never was inclined to,
But he sent my love across the sea far away!
All round my hat, etc.

For seven long years my love and I am parted,
For seven long years my love is bound to stay;
Bad luck to that chap you'd ever be false-hearted,
Oh, I'll love my love for ever, though she's far, far away!
All round my hat, etc.

There is some young man is so preciously deceitful,
A coaxing of the young girls they wish to lead astray;
As soon as they deceive 'em so cruelly they leave 'em,
And they never sigh nor sorrow when they're far, far away.
All round my hat, etc.

Oh, I bought my love a ring on the very day she started,
Vich I gave her as a token all to remember me;
And when she does come back, oh, we'll never more be parted,
But we'll marry and be happy, oh, for ever and a day.
All round my hat, etc.

AUNER & JOHNSON,
SONG PUBLISHERS, CARD & JOB PRINTERS,
No. 12 SOUTH BICLETTE ST.,
Below Market, West Side, Philadelphia.
22-CARDS, CIRCULARS, BILL HEADS, &c., &c., READY PRINTED.

JOHNSON, Song Publisher, No. 7 N. Tenth Street.

Figure 2. – Sheet of song lyrics to “All Round My Hat.” (c. 1853, public domain)

According to Parson, this song could presumably be the ancestor to the later (*Round Her Neck*) *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, and the chorus, with its familiar ending, reads:

All round my hat, I veers a green willow,
 All round my hat, for twelve month and a day;
 If hanyone should hax, the reason vy I veers it,
 Tell them that my true love is far, far, away. (ibid.).

Earlier versions of the song can also be traced back three centuries further into English tradition, including Shakespeare's Desdemona referring to "green willow" in *Othello*, Act. IV, Scene 3.:

[Singing] The poor soul sat sighing by a sycamore tree,
 Sing all a green willow:
 Her hand on her bosom, her head on her knee,
 Sing willow, willow, willow:
 The fresh streams ran by her, and murmur'd her moans;
 Sing willow, willow, willow;
 Her salt tears fell from her, and soften'd the stones;
 Lay by these:--
[Singing] Sing willow, willow, willow;
 Prithee, hie thee; he'll come anon:--
[Singing] Sing all a green willow must be my garland.
 Let nobody blame him; his scorn I approve,-
 Nay, that's not next.--Hark! who is't that knocks?

From this 400+ years historical perspective, it is understandable that green willows eventually became purple garters, which in turn morphed into yellow ribbons. Folklorists, however, do not consider the yellow ribbon a traditional symbol, according to Parsons (1981), for two reasons:

First, the color seems expressly contrary to tradition. We have already noted that yellow seems to have appeared in the two popular songs that bear on this for reasons of scansion rather than to evoke ancient associations. The discussion of color symbolism in Charles Platt's *Popular Superstitions* (London: H. Jenkins, 1925) suggests that white might have been a more appropriate choice, and indeed, in at least two versions of the returning prisoner

story taken from oral tradition the symbol is a white ribbon or kerchief (:11).

The second reason is the substantive difference in themes; a returning ex-convict vs. returning hostages and soldiers that have ostensibly committed no crime.

AMERICAN SYMBOLS IN TIME OF WAR

The American home front during World War II was not without its public display of symbols. The human component of the symbol and what it stood for came to be pointed stars was known as “Gold Star Mother.”⁴ A crocheted banner depicting five-pointed stars was displayed in the window of homes supporting the War effort. The number of stars depicted reflected the number of family members serving in the U.S. Armed Services. Stars reflecting Americans in active service were crocheted with blue yarn. Stars made from gold yarn signified a family member had lost his or her life in the War. Thus, a passer-by and/or community would know the War's impact on their own neighbors and friends. These stars as symbols were personal, emotional, and humanitarian; the viewer didn't have to speculate about its significance or hidden political meaning.

Such is not the case regarding the use of the yellow ribbon during the 1991 Gulf War. In 1990, citizens of the US and many other nations were held hostage by the government of Iraq. Throughout the United States, the yellow ribbons immediately appeared, consistent with their use in 1979 for the Iran hostage epic (Santino 1992: 26). What *did* change, however, was their staying power *after* the hostages were released. As the United States presence and interest in the Persian Gulf increased, and involvement in a military conflict with Iraq was imminent, the ribbon displays proliferated. America

4. My thanks to Edward J. Spillane, Jr. for bringing this fact to my attention.

was awash in a sea of yellow ribbons, adorned on private homes and public institutions, as well as politicians and college students.

Yellow ribbons now represented soldiers, not hostages, or originally ex-cons. Although the argument can be made that the change from hostage representation to soldier representation established the yellow ribbon as a more patriotic symbol, "...the ribbons still referred, more generally, to *people*" (ibid., emphasis added). In this sense, one could "safely" support the troops for humanitarian reasons, and maybe or maybe not the government policy that sent them to war in the first place. To distance themselves further from possible confrontation, many supporters stated they were "*thinking* about the troops" as opposed to *supporting* the troops (Larsen 1994:16, emphasis added). While the humanitarian connection regarding the use of the yellow ribbon in the 1990's for "support of the troops" and the "Gold Star Mother" banner of the 1940's to publicly recognize family members in the War appear very similar, I argue, in fact, they are not.

AMBIGUITY IN YELLOW RIBBONS: A SIGN O' THE TIMES

Americans were united and fervent to go to war after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. Preparing the "war machine" became a new way of life. New automobile purchases during the war were not allowed, and gas rationing was implemented by distributing stickers depending on whether car use was essential or not (Szalkowski 1996). Food items, such as butter, coffee, and certain meats, were restricted and shoppers were issued rationing stamps (*ibid.*). These examples of individual efforts to support the war significantly affected the way of life for Americans from 1941 through 1945. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, support of the war was unambiguous and clear; this was an inner-directed era, involving allegiance to basic emotions and pre-determined, established values. Therefore, use of the banners depicting blue and/or gold stars uniquely symbolized support for the soldier and their families; in a largely inner-directed society, symbols were interconnected throughout all aspects of culture.

The symbolism of the yellow ribbon, beginning with the 1991 Persian Gulf War, has decidedly become ambiguous. Support for American hostages is customary, support for committing ground troops to a conflict (without national interest) in a desert land halfway around the world from the U.S. is not. If, in fact, the rationing of foodstuffs and gasoline, or, the delay to purchase a new car were necessary for the 1991 Persian Gulf War, were Americans unified and committed in the 'cause' to do so? No, it would take a shift in focus, an allegiance to the soldiers and demonizing of Saddam Hussein (but that didn't take much effort) to sell this war. As Kellner (1992) points out, the ribbons "mesmerized the media, scared Congress, and demoralized anti-war protesters" (:245).

Every effort was made to 'neutralize' the meaning behind the ribbons. When Heilbronn (1994: 170-71) surveyed 31 households about the meaning of yellow ribbons, responses included "troops not forgotten", "for hostages or POW's", "loyalty to the troops", "because of the song", "safe and speedy return", "the color to use", "symbol associated with the war". None of the responses considered the ribbon a symbol to oppose the war. But, such a response *could be* a response at some point in time. Given the fact the yellow ribbon first symbolized a released convict's homecoming to what is now, "symbol associated with the war", this continuum of meaning bears resemblance to Baudrillard's question, "how far can we go in the extermination of meaning...?"(1986: 10).

These numerous and varied meanings of the yellow ribbon are what Baudrillard (1981) has referred to as "simulacra and simulation." According to Baudrillard, the domination of signs leads to the development of simulation, which is the creation of the real through conceptual models without having any connection or origin in reality (ibid). Signs that use to represent things are drained of their original meaning, creating "hyperreality," whereby signs no longer represent or refer to an external model. They stand for nothing but themselves, and refer only to other signs. They become interchangeable, and eventually become simulacra, having no relation to reality and are total simulation. In other words, the sign *is* reality.

There was yet another meaning attached to the yellow ribbon. Many Americans were also thinking of the Vietnam veterans who never had a ribbon in their honor. These yellow ribbons were an attempt to, not only support the Desert Storm troops, but

...redeem the old war's failings, not only by restoring America's status as a world power, but also by extending the thanks of a grateful nation to the 'boys abroad' who a generation ago had carried out its thwarted mission. Vietnam veterans wouldn't be thanked directly, of course, but they could still bask in the gratitude extended to their Gulf War counterparts (Tuleja 1994: 27).

In a sense, many Americans hoped the yellow ribbon symbol of the Persian Gulf War could, in connection with Vietnam veterans, be used as a 2 for 1 coupon, a "get out of guilt" pass for the end of the century. It could "morph" into an olive branch and be extended to those soldiers to "right past wrongs", and be used to once and for all, neatly wrap, tie up, and throw away the guilt-laden baggage of Vietnam. This gesture follows exactly the postemotional and other-directed type response. If strong emotions of guilt or anger did exist for many Americans about the way Vietnam veterans were treated after the war, in a postemotional society, extending the olive branch with yellow ribbons, parades and media attention would take care of any hung-over, bad feelings. Mestrovic (1997) describes this blending of nostalgia and emotions:

Postemotionalism involves the use of 'dead' emotions from a nostalgified tradition and inner-directed past that are almost always *vicarious* and *conspicuous* and are treated as objects to be consumed. The emotions do not disappear, but are socially transformed (:62).

These guilt-laden emotions from the ghost of Vietnam were now politically correct, “socially transformed,” and the Vietnam veterans were deemed properly feted.

The authenticity of expressions that support the yellow ribbons in 2003 for the “Operation: Iraqi Freedom” war is more uncertain than during the Persian Gulf War of 1991. While many communities in the US brought out once again the yellow ribbons and American flags at the beginning of the 2003 war with Iraq, numerous incidents of “ribbon rebellion” occurred at the same time. For example:

Alameda Times-Star newspaper, April 26, 2003 – “U.S. Troops Targeted for ‘Yellow Ribbon’ May; Resolution not Intended as Statement of War, says Redwood City Councilman.” By Suzanne Zalev. The City Council would not consider taking a position against the war, but it is going to consider declaring May “Yellow Ribbon Month” in support of US troops. The move is “not intended to be a statement on the war,” said Councilman Jim Hartnett, who worked on the resolution that will be considered on Monday... The resolution says those in the military are “performing their duties at great sacrifice to themselves, their families, and their community.” It also states those services are “vital to the freedom enjoyed by the citizens of Redwood City” and that they “further the principles of democracy and liberty respected by the citizens of Redwood City.”

The Boston Herald newspaper, April 27, 2003, “Yellow Ribbons Now Welcome,” By Franci Richardson. – The Rehabilitation Hospital for the Cape Islands has bowed to public pressure, reversing its decision to strip staff of the tiny yellow ribbons worn as a show of support for the US troops in Iraq... “I sincerely regret the distress the previous directive caused our staff, our patients and the public. In particular, I regret any implication that we at RHCI are not in support of the safe and swift return of our troops,” read a statement by Dr. Carol Levy, president and CEO of the hospital... According to John Mullen,

commander of the VFW Post in Brewster, “I thought they were going a little bit too far with their ruling...I just didn’t understand why they would object to a little yellow ribbon and little American flag when patients see TV all day, every day.”

Dateline: Camden, Maine – “Tourist town awash in ribbons – and controversy.” AP article, By Jerry Harkavy. A Korean War veteran complained that yellow ribbons were political statements indicating support for President Bush and the war in Iraq, which he opposed...Select Board member Paul Cartwright voted with the majority to remove the ribbons, reasoning that it would be wrong to allow the views of some individuals to be expressed on public property when residents were divided about *what the ribbons symbolized* (emphasis added).

The meaning of the yellow ribbon symbol, in the 2003 US war with Iraq, is showing signs of simulation. Interestingly, as these community news stories indicate, some government bodies consider the ribbon promoting the actual decision for the US to go to war with Iraq, while their constituents declare the ribbon a symbol of support and concern for US troops and their safe return, not the mission in which they are engaged. These groups responsible for displays of yellow ribbon in public areas have demonstrated the inability to commit to a value or cause; these are examples of other-directed and postemotional types. Their actions confirm they are members of Mestrovic’s postemotional society,

...a society without opposition...” and where “...passionate commitment to a cause or value or belief has evaporated for individuals as well as groups and organizations” (1997:158).

Ambivalence and fear of non-conformity in this context are very familiar to those exhibited by Riesman's other-directed type and further described by Mestrovic as,

...a vast array of superficial emotions that are as easy to slip on as off, depending on circumstances, and that are managed, even staged (ibid: 49).

SOCIETY VS. SELF: RIBBONS ARE NOT THE SAME FOR YOU AND ME

Displaying a yellow ribbon in your front yard or pinning an awareness ribbon to one's shirt may begin as a private thought but the gesture is clearly for public consumption. The reaction from the other is an important element of ribbon display, but within a postemotional society, one that can no longer be considered a "sure thing." This interactive process brings to mind Cooley's "looking-glass self" theory, which describes the theory of self and social interaction.

Cooley did not believe society and the individual were separate entities but "...aspects of the same thing" (Levine 1995: 265). One entity did not exist without the influence of the other. Cooley and other American sociologists, for example, Mead and Park, were skeptical that the individual and society played dichotomous roles. Cooley believed the self is part of and emerges within the social process. It is this process of socialization that moves the 'self' from the subjective aspect of 'I' (the unpredictable, non-conforming part) to the 'objective' aspect of 'me' (the conventional, rule-following part). We may ask ourselves, "How will I respond to this situation?" and "How would society want me to respond in this situation?" Cooley explains this self-evaluating process occurs concurrently within the individual, and is referred to as the "looking-glass self"(LGS). Two principal elements of LGS are: (1) we imagine how we appear to others and imagine how others judge our appearance and/or performance; (2) we experience a positive or negative self-feeling, not just by a reflection, but based on the imagined effect of this reflection on others' judgments (Cooley {1902}1998: 164). In other words,

we will change our behavior, our 'self,' according to what we see in the mirror held up to us by others. The character and weight we attribute to the other makes the difference in our self-feeling.

The looking-glass self (LGS) develops through learned social experiences. Children develop LGS by direct observation of others and realize their actions cause reactions in others. If an infant cries, an adult will respond. Children do mature into this skill; for as they age, they learn the importance of hiding the real wish or desired effect (ibid.: 165). As an adult, calculated emotions are used to hide the real wish to affect the self-image. It is perceived that an individual who is overt in seeking out approval and good opinion is often judged to be weak and ineffectual.

George Herbert Mead's work related to Cooley's, however, he proposed that the self arose from participation in gestures, and the meaning of any gesture was found in the response of the other. The social process is encoded in symbols and gestures. Mead believed that in order to have human community, a gesture of significant symbol was required (1902/1985). The gesture should call forth the same response in *you* as it does *me*. On one hand, because some gestures are significant, we are able to communicate; on the other, gestures that cannot be communicated cannot be part of the social process.

The yellow ribbons displayed and awareness ribbons worn today are less significant gestures than ever before, and ribbon reflection from Cooley's "looking-glass self" is diffuse and unrecognizable. The ribbons no longer provide a human "community" or "collective consciousness" because the meaning of the gesture is different for everyone. And ribbon reflection provides a distorted self-feeling, if any

feeling at all. The participant is unable to alter a self-image based on "...the character and weight we attribute to the other..." ({1902}1998: 164), because the meaning of the ribbon (the "other"), is simulacra. The ribbons, embraced by narcissistic, other-directed types in a postemotional society, are tangled up in Cooley's and Mead's theories on interaction of self and society.

THE START OF SOMETHING BIG

Exactly when it happened and for which cause or disease it represented is not entirely clear. I'm referring to the red ribbon, an internationally recognized, single fold of fabric pinned on the lapel of the participant. The earliest reference to its use as a symbol of support, care, and empathy is in the late 1970's, early 1980's, when African-American children were being murdered in Atlanta (Santino 1992: 26). In 1985, Drug Enforcement Agent Enrique Camarena was murdered while working to uncover identities of drug kingpins in Mexico (National Family Partnership, www.nfp.org). The children of his hometown, Calexico, California, began wearing red badges of satin (Camarena's symbol) in his honor (*ibid.*).

According to the National Family Partnership web site, "the NFP and its affiliated organizations soon began to wear Red Ribbons as a symbol of their commitment to fight the illegal use of drugs. Today, the Red Ribbon is the symbol for drug, alcohol and tobacco prevention across America. This began the continuing tradition of wearing and displaying red ribbons as a symbol of intolerance towards the use of drugs" (*ibid.*). Mothers Against Drunk Driving, or M.A.D.D., formed in 1980, and in 1986 adopted the red ribbon as their symbol for safe and sober driving. By far, however, the most widely recognized use of the red ribbon awareness represents the AIDS epidemic.

Known as "The Ribbon Project," the idea was conceived by a group of New York artists known as "Visual AIDS" (Fleury 1992: 14). In 1991, in an effort to raise

awareness to the AIDS epidemic, the Visual AIDS Artists' Caucus held a meeting and the discussion quickly turned to the very current Persian Gulf War and the explosion of yellow ribbons (ibid.) Eager to avoid allegiance confusion between AIDS awareness and support for the troops, the subcommittee decided a simple, single fold of red ribbon would be their new symbol. Entertainment industry contacts provided the nod they needed for instant recognition - at the upcoming Tony awards the ribbon was introduced on national television by actor Jeremy Irons (ibid: 16). The ribbons were noticed and became a national icon.

With the success of the red ribbons, what happened next is further evidence of symbols de-differentiated by other-directed types in a postemotional society. In the early production of awareness ribbons, new colors and causes were fairly easy to remember; after all, they represented easily recognized constituents. Pink ribbons became the symbol of breast cancer awareness. The Blue Ribbon Campaign sought the preservation of "online" freedom of speech in the electronic world. Green ribbons support the environment. With the runaway success of the red ribbon for AIDS campaign, other diseases, injustices, and tragedies jockeyed for their own ribbon and identifying color. In other words, "...the inevitable occurred: Ribbon Envy" (Kastor 1993). Yes, you, or your group can design your own unique style and color, cut and "paste up" on your web site, and wait for the e-mail messages and monetary pledges of support to add up. A recent search on the Internet found the following ribbon icons and their causes; including a web site for ribbon campaigns that have disappeared (Ribbon

Campaign 2003):

- Solid Purple – “I am a Pro-Life Feminist!”
- Pink and Blue Ribbon – “Stop Partial -Birth Abortions”
- Gray on brown – “This ribbon is for 1 of 1500 Lives Lost on Titanic”
- Solid Black – “Melanoma Awareness”
- Blue w/Rainbow on top – “End School Violence”
- Solid Yellow (*in the shape of a bow*) – “For Citizens Who Were Imprisoned in Iraq”

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECT OF COLOR

What is it about the color yellow or red for ribbons? Many studies on color association have been done in the past to find out how colors affect people. Research into the physiological effects of color has shown that it truly has an impact in our lives, often in unconscious ways. Color can act both as a perceptual and physical stimulus. Emotionally, it can change our moods, provoking certain emotional responses and suppressing others. Some of the more common beliefs on colors and moods are:

Yellow – produces a warming effect, arouses cheerfulness, stimulates mental activity, and represents happiness and optimism.

Red – is associated with energy, war, danger, strength, power, determination as well as passion, desire, and love. It is the strongest of all colors.

Green – is the color of nature. It symbolizes growth, harmony, and fertility and has a strong connection with safety. It is a soothing color and suggests stability and endurance.

Pink - hints at trustworthiness, happiness, youth and sweetness. It signifies romance and love, and denotes feminine qualities and passiveness.

Blue – reflects a calm, restful, and relaxing environment. It symbolizes trust, loyalty, wisdom, confidence, faith and trust.

Orange – combines the energy of red and the happiness of yellow. It represents enthusiasm, fascination, happiness, creativity, determination, and stimulation.

White – is associated with light, goodness, innocence, purity, and virginity. As opposed to black, white usually has a positive connotation.

Black – is associated with power, formality, death, evil, and mystery. It is considered to be an elegant and prestigious color, but is usually has a negative connotation. (Ritberger 2000)

Dorcus (1926) found that yellow has a lower affective value for females than males. Although associated with cheerfulness and happiness, the color yellow, has for the most part, been associated with cowardice, such that if someone is said to have a “yellow streak,” that person is considered a coward. “Yellow journalism” refers to irresponsible and alarmist reporting. While colors of some of the most popular awareness ribbons seem to be associated with their psychological or emotional meaning, i.e., pink for breast cancer awareness (femininity) and green for environmental issues (nature), it is unclear whether colors chosen for these ribbons rely on deep or superficial meanings.

POLITICALLY CORRECT RIBBONS AND OTHER-DIRECTED TYPES

People suffering from “ribbon envy” cry out, “where’s my ribbon? My suffering is legit...” If the popularity of ribbons representing diseases was based on quantitative data, the red ribbon for AIDS would not be so widely recognizable. Nor would the pink ribbon for breast cancer awareness. In the US, lung and bronchus cancer will claim an estimated 158,900 deaths (men and women) in 1999 alone (American Cancer Society 1999). Comparatively, breast cancer will claim an estimated 43,700 deaths (43,300 women, 400 men) (ibid.), and AIDS claimed 16,685 deaths (men and women) in 1997 (National Center for Health Statistics, 1997). Claiming close to 100,000 more lives each year than AIDS and breast cancer deaths combined, quantitatively speaking, the ribbon for lung cancer should be our most popular. (Does *anyone* know what it looks like?) It will be interesting to follow whether the ribbon for lung cancer ever achieves the popularity of the red AIDS awareness ribbon or pink breast cancer awareness ribbon or will it remain unfamiliar and unsupported.

Conceivably there is another goal in mind regarding ribbon popularity and status.

As Kastor, in a 1993 *Washington Post* article ponders:

Perhaps when the red ribbon degenerates into an utter cliché, when it becomes as predictable and meaningless as the peace symbol in an earlier era ... that will signal that the disease behind it is no longer shocking and those with the disease no longer stigmatized.

The ribbon functions in two worlds - the world of the participant, and the world of the observer. The participant, by just wearing the ribbon, proclaims “I support

AIDS...” Therein the problem lies. Does the ribbon mean I support research funding for a cure for AIDS? Does it mean I’m not against a person with AIDS working in my office? Or, that I spend time or would spend time at an AIDS hospice if I felt like it? What does a ribbon mean to the observer? A pink ribbon worn by a woman certainly evokes feelings of sympathy from the observer. Does *she* have breast cancer? Does her mother, sister, or daughter? Should I ask her why she wears it? Does she want me to know?

The POW/MIA bracelets worn by Americans during the Vietnam War were popular cultural symbols of the time. Started by a grassroots campaign consisting of two college students, the bracelets were sold to supporters of the growing numbers of missing or captive soldiers in Vietnam (Brown 1999). Nearly five million bracelets were distributed. The bracelets were engraved with the soldier’s name, rank, and date of loss, and they were to be worn until the soldier arrived back home in the United States. The bracelets were worn like a watch, in public view, similar to awareness ribbons. But the AIDS ribbons and breast cancer ribbons are not personalized with the names of the people who died from the disease or are still suffering from it. The ribbons and the participant remain detached and uncommitted from a human, one-to-one involvement, content on being part of the crowd that appears to care about popular causes.

In a postemotional society, the difficulty is determining whether such emotions and empathy are authentic. Other-directed types will rationalize and process each and every experience, so that the response becomes cognitive, instead of a genuine, spontaneous emotion. If, as described by Mestrovic (1997), communities are held

together based on sentiment, not knowledge, then it follows that in a postmodern culture, the collective effervescence (Durkheim ({1912}, 1995) of community and group is no longer spontaneous and genuine, but induced and synthetic. As Mestrovic describes in *Postemotional Society*:

The other-directed type is seduced by so many choices and options that the idea of commitment to one of these is out of character. Postmodernism conceived as a social movement has enshrined ambivalence and ambiguity as social virtues (1997:159).

Interestingly, the ambivalence toward the ribbons was noticed in 1992 by David Seidner, a writer/photographer with AIDS, commenting on what many may have been thinking:

The proceeds from the sale of the ribbons and brooches have made some financial contribution to AIDS care and research, but the more important function of the ribbon seems to be to *alleviate guilt through trickle-down awareness, to make people feel comfortable without having to do anything*. Never in history has so much schmaltz been generated around an illness. The ribbon is becoming an epidemic itself (*The New Yorker* magazine, emphasis added).

Seidner's assessment of the motivation behind the wearing of the red ribbon seems to describe the social characteristics of Riesman's (1950) other-directed type, i.e.,

cosmopolitan, suffering from diffuse anxiety, “at home everywhere, and nowhere, capable of a rapid, if sometimes superficial intimacy with and response to everyone” (ibid.: 25). Just wearing the ribbon provides the other-directed, inside-dopester with all the conformist recognition she needs without any personal commitment. To be clear, it is the public display and *consumption by the group* that is the expected behavior (see figure 3).



Figure 3. Lapel pin cartoon. Wall Street Journal, September 9, 2003 (Permission granted, Cartoon Features Syndicate, Cambridge, MA)

It is unlikely she will be found at home wearing the ribbon, rather, it is more important to her if her peer group observes her wearing the ribbon. Riesman (1950) describes the importance of acceptance by one’s peers by the other-directed characteristic type:

He seeks not fame, which represents limited transcendence of a particular peer-group or a particular culture, but the

respect and, more than the respect, the affection, of an amorphous and shifting, though contemporary, jury of peers (: 137).

Awareness ribbons do not appear to be as popular in 2003 as they were when first realized in the 1980's and 1990's. Indeed, a search on the Internet found numerous anti-ribbon sites (Elkins, accessed 2003). Has the red ribbon campaign for AIDS awareness performed its job so well it's no longer viable? While it is true, the red ribbon no longer makes frequent appearances on the lapels of the rich and famous on televised award shows, it is not because a cure was found or vaccine developed. Perhaps it's because the novelty has worn off, *some* of the stigma surrounding the disease has diminished, and lastly, the multivalent meaning of a symbol phenomenon has led to its demise.

THE EMOTIONAL REACTION OF SYMBOL DESECRATION

I have thus far discussed the meaning and acceptance of symbols, but what happens to these groups when they no longer believe in, or further, desecrate established symbols? The tradition-directed person would experience shame, or even the *fear* of shame, as an emotional sanction for her maverick behavior. The response of the inner-directed person for “getting off course” from her pre-set and established life course would lead to feelings of guilt. Riesman’s other-directed type would experience diffuse anxiety if no longer considered part of the group and how the group thinks; especially living in a postemotional society. Other-directed types are influenced by political symbols, e.g., national flags and related symbols of allegiance – a pledge or song – which usually evoke significant emotional responses and expression, and our discussion will review this phenomenon.

Political symbols accomplish more on the emotional level than they achieve on the purely intellectual level. The emotional function of political symbols underlies the state’s interest in their protection, and is thus of particular importance to the analysis of the flag desecration decisions (Krudewagen 2002). Political symbols serve to create a national identity and produce, through its use, a unifying power among its citizens.

Durkheim ({1912} 1995), regarding all symbols, summarized:

It is by shouting the same cry, saying the same words, and performing the same action in regard to the same object that they arrive at and experience agreement (:232).

Symbols matter so very much because a person's attitude and belief in a symbol provides others an insight into that person's character. People rely on this information when deciding whether to engage in accommodating behavior in all areas of life. Further emphasized by Posner:

Indeed, because symbols matter so much, people's efforts to show respect for them lead to significant forms of conformity that can be described as "social norms" (1998.:767).

The creation of social meanings through spontaneous behavior on the part of the group, but guided and exploited by norm "leaders," helps explain the phenomenon of "invented traditions." The contradictory connotation arises because old behaviors provide focal points which people use to signal their devotion to a new political entity (Posner 1998). When symbols change, some people obtain advantages in forming cooperative relationships while other people lose advantages they held. Since change in symbols can result in material loss for some people, these people resist when the government or other people challenge a particular system of symbols. As Posner further illustrates,

...because cooperative behavior can be highly sensitive to symbols, there are great incentives for the government to regulate symbols, and dangers, too (ibid.).

The politicization of behavior occurs with the creation of a law that requires people to engage in some behavior in which previously they had engaged voluntarily (Posner 1998). People already salute the flag or pray at ceremonies; then a law is created that requires exactly the same behavior. Politicization destroys important social meanings by legally compelling behavior that derives its meaning in part from the fact this it is not required by law. Results of government efforts to change or sustain symbols, whether through legal devices or less formal means, are unpredictable. Thus, government's efforts to change signals can backfire, leading to a strengthening of symbols that the government sought to change, or to reification of the desired symbol. And when government efforts, whether deliberately or not, destroy or reify existing symbols, norm entrepreneurs will propose new symbols that may have worse effects than the old ones (Posner 1998).

The question of the functions of symbols leads to the question of the state's interest in the protection of these symbols. The state can demand respect for its symbols, and not for the ideas and values they represent; it has to justify why it nevertheless intends to outlaw certain forms of disrespect of its political symbols (Krudewagen 2002). The state is more likely to claim an interest in preserving the emotional function of symbols.

In an interesting comparison of two countries' concept of democracy and its effect on national symbols, Krudewagen (2002) discusses the concept of "flag enigma" that exists between the US and Germany. In the US, the American flag occupies a predominant role in the hearts and minds of many Americans. There exists a cult around

the flag, with the flag considered sacred and esteemed. In Germany, however, the flag plays a minor role for most Germans. As Krudewagen relates, “It identifies the German nation-state, but there is no Flag Day, no pledge of allegiance to the flag, not even private display of the flag of any significance” (ibid.: 699).

Given the prominent role of the US flag in American Society, one would expect that the United States Supreme Court would try to protect the flag and its symbolic value. In the case of a conflict between the state’s interest in protecting the flag and the individual’s interest in exercising free speech, one would also expect that the Supreme Court give priority to the state’s interest in protecting the flag. In particular, in the case of flag desecration through the exercise of the First Amendment right to free speech, one would expect that the US Supreme Court would uphold a conviction under a state or federal flag desecration statute. On the other hand, according to Krudewagen, regarding the minor role of the German flag in the German culture and society, one would expect that the German Federal Constitutional Court, or Bundesverfassungsgericht, would show little interest in the protection of the national flag (ibid.) According to Krudewagen, if a conflict between the state’s interest in the protection of the flag and the individual’s interest in the exercise of free speech rights arises, one would expect that the Bundesverfassungsgericht would give the individual’s interest to free speech greater weight than the state’s interest in the protection of symbols (ibid.).

In the case of flag desecration through the exercise of the right to free expression, one would expect that the Bundesverfassungsgericht would strike down a conviction under the federal flag statute. Interestingly, Krudewagen finds, the exact opposite holds

true in practice. The US Supreme Court categorically refuses to protect what the public considers to be worth protecting, while the Bundesverfassungsgericht is willing to protect what the public regards with indifference. Although both Courts struck down convictions for desecration of the flag or the national anthem, the reasons underlying the decisions reveal such profound differences in the Court's willingness to protect the flag and its symbolic value that it is justified to speak of a "flag enigma" (Krudewagen 2002).

Perhaps the United States and Germany have different concepts of democracy. While the American concept of democracy is based on the spirit of popular sovereignty and inalienable individual rights, the German concept is based on the notion that the democratic state needs to defend its own foundations. Therefore, the US Supreme Court's flag decisions were based on the notion that the people as the sovereign retain the authority to define national symbols. In the US, a nation which was built as an "ideological construct", symbols create a common identity, and these symbols represent not only nationhood but also liberty and the right to dissent, however, according to Krudewagen, the Bundesverfassungsgericht, recognized the state's interest in protecting itself against attacks on its national symbols (ibid.). The German concept of democracy is based on the assumption that the basic structures of democracy are not safe from internal dangers. Therefore, stability, internal peace, and the authority of the state have to be defended. In other words, the attack on the symbol – the flag – is understood to include an attack on the symbolized – the free democratic basic order (ibid: 709).

In conclusion, Krudewagen notes a speech-protective trend in German free speech jurisprudence over the last 10-20 years, perhaps explained by the “nation’s growing stability and self-confidence” (ibid.:711). Recent Court decisions have found the individual’s interest in free speech expression outweighs the state’s interest in protecting itself against attacks on its basic principles. If the shift in German constitutional jurisprudence is in the direction of its American equivalent; it is interesting to ponder whether postemotionalism will follow as well.

SUMMARY: WILL SYMBOLS SURVIVE IN A CULTURE WITHOUT
COMMITMENT?

We may know what we do and why we do it, but we often
don't know what we do *does*.

Michel Foucault, 1972 (emphasis added)

Our “collective consciousness” could be considered the perspective that humanity as a whole operate under; a unified response to events of the world. In that sense, the yellow ribbons and awareness ribbons appear to serve that purpose. Upon further examination, if we unravel the bows and untie the ribbons, Durkheim’s heightened level of social solidarity is today elusive. Shared beliefs and values by narcissistic, other-directed types are amorphous; the meaning of the ribbon gesture does not communicate the same response for participant and observer in the social process.

Referring to Foucault’s quote above, we know what we do by displaying or wearing the ribbons, but we no longer know why we do it or what happens after it’s done. I conclude displaying or wearing the ribbons is our attempt to *find* Durkheim’s social solidarity, but ribbon simulacra is the reason we *lose* our way. This is a shallow, ‘lite,’ version of social solidarity, less satisfying but tempting nonetheless.

This research invoked four sociology theoretical constructs – culture of narcissism, simulacra and simulation, other-directed types, and postemotionalism – to demonstrate that yellow ribbons and awareness ribbons do serve as multivalent symbols in our postmodern culture. There is evidence of yellow ribbon “rebellion” in

government and private locales; the voices of one or two “curdled indignants” in our postemotional society will reverse established policy. Other-directed types lack personal and organization commitment to a particular cause or belief, and compassion fatigue is evident. Awareness ribbons (or the color they represent) are “morphing” to become part of popular consumable products instead of being worn on the lapel of the human participant. From ex-cons to “symbol associated with the war”, from a united community gripped by fear of crime to marketing consumable products, the yellow ribbons and awareness ribbons provide tangible evidence of a continuum, perhaps extermination, of meaning for symbols. The ribbons are well on their way to becoming simulacra.

There is a commonality between the yellow ribbon displayed during national events or crises, and the awareness ribbons affixed to the participant for disease or social cause recognition. The yellow ribbon originally represented the hope and desire for an old sweetheart to return home, or the welcoming spirit of a nation for its own citizens held captive in a foreign land. The original awareness ribbons were created to honor a murdered federal narcotics agent and support a frightened and outraged African-American community. The unifying effect of the ribbons is evanescent; many symbols and traditions are apparitions of what they formerly represented. The ribbons we display today, in their postmodern condition, are too faded, frayed, and full of holes for the new millennium.

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