Touching the Liberty Bell: Affect and Expectation in Ritual

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Abstract:

While some sites of national importance (such as the Lincoln Memorial and Independence Hall) seem to fulfill visitor's emotional expectations, the Liberty Bell Center oftentimes falls short of this goal. Considering that these sites are often designed to often bolster national feeling, what happens with the expectations of the experience does not match up with the actual experience? In this paper, I consider how these expectations (as mediated by sources including school textbooks, patriotic imagery and mythological narratives) can change the nature, and thus the efficacy, of these political ritual. I therefore examine what I call the expected, made, and floating ritual modes of ritual. While most other sites of national importance therefore rely on the union between the former two modes (expected and made) to reify national values, it is precisely this disjuncture in relation to the Liberty Bell (or the floating mode, as captured through a close analysis of participant accounts of this activity on the review site Yelp.com) that can allow this same process to occur. However, this process occurs differently than it might without this mismatch of expectations; I argue that the Liberty Bell Center simultaneously exposes the arbitrariness of visiting the Bell while also strengthening the values that underlie this action. In the end, my goal is to create a new theoretical framework through which we can better understand how political rituals may work, or specify the particular ways in which these rituals may serve to get participants to either internalize, reject, or reconcile the political paradigms they represent.