



WORK & CULTURE

The Cellphone Project: Demobilizing, Delinking, Disconnecting the Commodity Chain

Working Group on
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Introduction at Cultural Studies Association convention, May 7, 2004.

Good afternoon. We are the Working Group on Globalization and Culture at Yale University, and we will begin by giving a brief account of our work.

We began last fall in an effort to restore to cultural studies not so much the themes or theories of the Birmingham model but its forms of collective work, trying to break out of the framework of the graduate seminar. Coming out of several different disciplines -- anthropology, music, psychology, American studies, and forestry and environmental studies -- we began with a group reading project on culture, globalization and social movements. We zigzagged from world music to the global food supply, from the international organ trade to the nature of global cities, from the political meanings of the World Social Forum to the theoretical writings of figures like Arjun Appadurai, Ulf Hannerz and Stuart Hall.

We found ourselves drawn to the analysis of commodity chains as particularly rich way of crossing borders while remaining somewhat focused; and several months ago we began, as an experiment, to take the analysis of the commodity chain of the cell phone as a collective research project. This work-in-progress is what we will present to you. Though we warn you that no commodity has just a single chain, we will take the story backwards, so to speak, from the cell phone as a object in the life world of consumers, to the ringtones, cell towers and networks that make it work, to the mines and factories that produce it.

Our aim is not to celebrate the cell phone -- that would simply reproduce the commodity fetishism that we are all saturated in. Rather we hope, in a small way, to dispel that fetishism and show the social relations that are embodied in the simple form of the cell phone.