

The Hegemony of Celebrity: Iron Fist in a Diamante Glove

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Theme: [History](#)

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Today, we live in a world that turns people into almost instant global brand identities for mass marketing and lavishes them with untold fame and riches. Celebrities lead lives that most ordinary folk could not even begin to imagine. The outcome, however, has sinister implications not only for those coping with fame and playing out the illusion, but also for those who buy into celebrity worship and the aspirant mindset that surrounds the phenomenon.

Craving fame and wealth has become the blind faith of the age. TV programmes like 'X Factor' and 'Indian Idol' are based on the falsehood that this is what the masses should aspire to become, as they drool over a fast food smorgasbord of here-today-gone-tomorrow commodity forms (of which 'celebrity' is but one) to be glorified then spat out when considered obsolete. It's an obsession built on crazes that have little resilience in a world of media-induced, corporate-backed fabrications and fickle idolisation.

While acquiring celebrity status may be a somewhat liberating experience for those who emerge into the limelight from lives of poverty and hardship, the crass fetishisation of wealth and wannabe celebritydom coupled with a pervasive cult of excessive individualism is socially divisive.

Such a culture eats away at a sense of communality, solidarity and camaraderie by encouraging folk to seek unlimited material wealth and self-gratification and to set themselves apart from everyone else around them. It also fuels a certain arrogance, which can lead people to regard themselves as being above and beyond society's standards of accountability - a gateway into the world of corruption and deceit that wealth and unaccountable power afford in general.

You didn't have to read about some movie star in India a few years back who was involved in a vehicle that ran into people sleeping on a Mumbai pavement and who then walked away free, in order to have an inkling of the type of sickening conceit that fame can bestow and the corrosive influence it has. Nor do you have to watch that person bounce in and out of court, lodge numerous appeals and serve mere days in prison for crimes that ordinary folk would be banged up years for.

But fame begets privilege, and its influence is everywhere in today's world of multi-channel 24-hour TV, powerful public relations agencies, gossip columns and instantly accessible social media.

The whole issue of aspiring to be different, to be famous, to be unimaginably wealthy is part of a power play. It was Michael Foucault (1) who suggested that our taken for granted knowledge about the world in general and how we regard ourselves may seem benign and

neutral, but must be viewed within the context of power. Today, fame and individualism have increasingly become an accepted form of 'truth', of reality, and of how people view themselves and evaluate those around them. Endless glossy commercials and TV shows that wallow in the filthy veneration of money, celebrity and narcissism convey the message that greed is good, fame is the epitome of success and the individual is king.

This is, of course, based on a false assumption, on a lingering lie of consumerism. And part of that lie is the joining of fame and failure at the hip. Notions of failure are implicit in the messages surrounding individualism, money and fame. If you are not famous or do not stand out from the crowd, you are somehow a failure. If you don't buy this product, wear that item or apply some whitening skin cream (in India, this is a big fad), you somehow don't cut it.

It's a culture that preys on insecurities, which the media, ad agencies and product makers manipulate at will. In true Foucauldian style, it's part of a discourse that is concerned with redefining who people are or what they should be. Fame and a notion of 'the self' in terms of individualism, not the collective, dovetail neatly with 'free' market ideology and an easily manageable population divided from each other with a weakened compulsion to act collectively against the increasingly not so hidden oppressive hand of the forces of 'liberal democracy'.

In a world where elected governments have abdicated their financially redistributive roles concerning their respective populations, it's become a case of each one for his/herself, whereby the carrot of celebrity status or the hope of 'making it big' provide the perfect antidote for a lifetime of ever decreasing benefits, diminishing rights, low pay and poverty and of generally being surplus to requirements. A craving for (not the actual acquirement of) fame and fortune is the promised-land, the American Dream exported, the ultimate opiate for modern man and woman. The message is that you too can be a winner: from David Beckham in the UK to Kareena Kapoor in India, the product-endorsing who gets wheeled on to TV and splashed across the tabloids to try to fool the downtrodden into believing just how wonderful the system is.

But before we get too carried away, by themselves wealth and fame are very narrow measurements of success anyhow. As a concept, 'success' is much more encompassing. Humans are social animals and a sense of personal well-being derives from our relations with one another and with the general social environment around us, as Emile Durkheim (2) once indicated and as 'happiness' and well-being surveys tell us this time and again.

It may bring material riches, but, by its very nature, fame, particularly the near instant variety, can be anti-social and ultimately 'anti-happy'. It can catapult a person into a turbulent stratosphere, where lives and relationships can be thrown into turmoil. From Hendrix to Cobain, personal isolation, alienation or self-destruction has blighted the lives of countless celebrities. If the core value of society becomes 'the self', what future society? Indeed, what future the individual?

While some crave fame, others do not. Amy Winehouse is once reported to have said that all she wanted to be was a singer. Perhaps some never set out to acquire fame. But, unfortunately for such types, it comes knocking, regardless. Although a lot cave in to the pressures, a few have the good sense to shun fame or get out early in the knowledge that it isn't for them. Fame and happiness can be uneasy bedfellows. For many who died early,

they were perfect strangers.

While there may be little wrong with the notion of fame in itself, especially when set within the context of a fair and just society, is there any benefit to be derived by society from today's acute obsession with celebrity and individualism? Not much. The media overly focuses on the lives and deaths of privileged, well-known individuals (whose often lack of unique talent proved to be no barrier to acquiring fame), while scant regard is paid to hundreds of millions who are left to live and die in poverty. And, ultimately, that's the role the worship of celebrity increasingly plays. It acts as a device to legitimise inequality, to bind the masses to the system, to divide people from one another based on the clamour to be 'individual' and to divert attention away from the functioning of illegitimate systems of governance.

Notes

- 1) Foucault, M. 1998, *The Will to Knowledge, The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, Hurley, R., trans., Penguin Books, Great Britain.
- 2) Durkheim, Emile (1997) [1951]. *Suicide : a study in sociology*. The Free Press.

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