

CELEBRITY CULTURES

an introduction

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CELEBRITY AND POLITICS

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This chapter looks at the ways in which lines between the worlds of politics and celebrity have become more closely entwined in recent years. As such, not only have some celebrities gained official political office, such as Ronald Reagan, Imran Khan, and Arnold Schwarzenegger, but an increasing number are endorsing and popularizing political causes that they are personally motivated by. The result is that alongside official political figures now are individuals such as Bono, Matt Damon, George Clooney, Oprah Winfrey, Lady Gaga, and Katy Perry, highly visible as advocates in the political system and using their fame to inspire and motivate the public to support their endorsed causes. However, while such actions are arguably laudable and constitute a responsible use of celebrity, critics point to the effect this has from a democratic perspective, and in some instances argue that celebrity politics ultimately serves the interests of the particular celebrity's personal brand. To explore and examine the celebrity politics debate, the chapter will cover:

- The development of celebrity political engagement
- The concept of the powerless elite and the limits to celebrity political power
- Celebrity and public visibility
- Celebrity politicians
- Celebrity activism and the functions of political celebrities
- Critical reactions to celebrity political engagement

To illustrate the myriad relationships that exist between celebrities and political engagement, the chapter will discuss specific celebrity examples such as Ronald Reagan, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Bob Geldof, Bono, Brad Pitt, and Angelina Jolie.

CELEBRITY POLITICS

From a cynical perspective, the British philosopher John Gray argues that the borders between politics and entertainment are fundamentally distorted to the

extent that in ‘the current media culture of revelatory diaries and confessional memoirs, kiss-and-tell journalism and voyeuristic television, ex-politicians are no different from anyone else in seeking to turn themselves into marketable commodities’ (2004: 202–3). But in the view of John Street (2006), who has extensively examined the link between politics and celebrity, this is not really so unusual, as in recent years it certainly appears that the worlds of politics and popular culture have become indivisible as politicians have increasingly become more like celebrities.

To make sense of this development, Street turns to the thoughts of the economist Joseph Schumpeter and his work *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, published in 1943. Within this seminal text Schumpeter focused attention on the similarity between the worlds of business and politics, arguing that the connection lay in the way in which the business person dealt in a particular commodity and the politician traded in votes. As such, both effectively were regulated by the operation of a distinctive market force: the law of supply and demand. Consequently, ‘success in business and success in politics were just a matter of producing a product that customers wanted. Competition ensured that the best won’ (2006: 359). The link between business and politics has intensified since the 1940s, with the ethos of business practice increasingly establishing itself as a central tenet within the political process. For instance, political parties and politicians evoke the language of market research as policies are invariably ‘advertised’ and voters strategically ‘targeted’, while parties have become branded ‘products’ characterized by the importance of maintaining an appropriate public image and competing for votes in a manner akin to the way in which businesses compete for customers. In line with the classic economic view of Schumpeter, Street points out that voters frequently make their choice between parties on the basis of the evaluation of competing policy content and promises and thus behave in a manner akin to consumers in a market. This rationale was proffered as a key reason why the British Labour Party’s electoral campaigns continually resulted in defeat throughout the 1980s and early 1990s as they were judged by the electorate to lack a plausible ‘product’, even to voters who would have political sympathies (opposed to the right-sided political identity of the Conservative party) to their natural constituency.

Within a British context this changed in the 1990s with the rise to power of Tony Blair, a figure who moved away from the more overly leftist stance of previous Labour leaders (most notably Michael Foot and Neil Kinnock) and who possessed a professionalized and charismatic sense of political authority. Furthermore, Tony Blair represented the historic ‘rebranding’ of the classic Labour Party into a new identity, that of ‘New Labour, defined by its left-of-centre stance, or its embrace of ‘Third Way’ politics with its fusion of welfare state commitment and focus upon social equality connected with the market economy and the ethos of ‘no rights without responsibilities’ (Giddens, 1998, 2000). Furthermore, Tony Blair’s New Labour would also see the lines between politics and fame blur as a number of ‘cool’ celebrity figures of the stature of Noel Gallagher of the rock band Oasis were invited to 10 Downing Street (Street, 2001).

STAGED CELEBRITY AND THE POWERLESS ELITE

As Rojek argues, the linkages between politics and celebrity illustrate the central quality and nature of ‘staged celebrity’. Staged celebrity refers to the calculated technologies and strategies of performance and self-projection designed to achieve a status of monumentality in public culture. Rojek cites Abraham Lincoln’s iconic ‘journey from a log cabin to the White House’ narrative as a key historical example (2001: 121), arguing that Lincoln’s ‘plainsman oratory’ style was a key factor in courting voters and was part of a process of skilful political calculation. Furthermore, as celebrity culture established itself as a distinctive social presence, it would progressively provide new opportunities for celebrity endorsement of political figures and parties. Consequently, presidents from the 1920s have sought to obtain voter allegiance through actively courting film entertainers. The most visible instance of this practice occurred in the 1960s and surrounded the presidency of John F. Kennedy. Hence, Kennedy, via his ‘Ratpack’ film actor brother-in-law Peter Lawford, was brought into contact with high-profile actors of the stature of Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis Jnr, and most famously, Marilyn Monroe.

The combination of presidents (and would-be presidents) with celebrities would become a permanent fixture within the American political landscape. For instance, in the 1990s Bill Clinton was dubbed the first ‘rock ‘n’ roll president’ when he used film and pop stars to enhance his image, while his wife Hillary Clinton’s bid for a seat in the Senate was supported by Nicole Kidman and Robert De Niro. But Barack Obama’s two successful presidential campaigns have seen a glittering array of Hollywood and music elites, from Barbra Streisand, Oprah Winfrey, and Bruce Springsteen, to Matt Damon, George Clooney, Anne Hathaway, Katy Perry (even sporting a Vote Obama dress at one pop performance), Lady Gaga, and Jay-Z and Beyoncé, show public support. And for commentators, the rationale for this association is clear from the perspective of politicians as the ‘intention is to create an aura of “popularity”, to borrow precisely from the relationship of trust and admiration that is associated with figures in popular culture’ (Street, 2001: 191). But in some instances, for example Nicolas Sarkozy, the former President of France (from 2007 to 2012), his celebrity connection was forged through his marriage to the Italian singer-actress-model, Carla Bruni.

Arguably, a more striking facet of contemporary culture is not merely the instances of politicians transforming themselves into celebrities, but the ways in which the blurring of the line between politics and celebrity is resulting in ever-increasing numbers of celebrity figures entering into the political arena, either as activists, advocates, or elected figures. And yet, this should not be possible due to the very nature of celebrity itself. This position is conventionally related to Francesco Alberoni and his now-classic article *The Powerless Elite* (1972), in which he articulates an influential sociological account of the rise and nature of ‘stardom’. For Alberoni, within every society there are individuals who, in the eyes of other members of their society, are considered to be remarkable and who, crucially, attract widespread social attention. Historically this is usually applied to individuals who held positions of political, economic, or religious power, such as kings, aristocrats, or priests – individuals who possessed the ability to influence their societies. But, while such individuals are also

readily identifiable within modern Western societies, Alberoni identifies a further social group 'whose institutional power is very limited or non-existent, but whose doings and way of life arouse a considerable and sometimes even a maximum degree of interest' (1972: 75). These are the stars or cultural 'idols', the celebrity figures C. Wright Mills defines as 'The Names that need no further identification' (1959: 71–2), who may have cultural influence, but who are 'unimportant from a political point of view' (1972: 76) and who cannot occupy institutional positions of power. Thus, while stars (film, sport, etc.) are clearly a significant (adapting and re-formulating C. Wright Mills' famous sociological term) 'power elite', they cannot convert this status into institutional power that would see them direct or govern political decision making. And the principal reason why such influential individuals cannot assume political positions of power is very particular to their nature.

This is because the stars' sphere of influence is restricted to the level of culture and there is no possibility of their 'charisma' (Alberoni utilizes Weber's idea) of ever becoming significant from a political perspective. As such, stars represent a noteworthy social phenomenon, an elite and highly privileged group who do not instil social envy (because within open democratic states that are characterized by social mobility, anyone, in theory, could become a star) and who possess no real access to political power. But this does not fully explain exactly how powerful individuals who can excite fervent followings (as we saw in Chapter 2) seemingly cannot translate this into political power. The answer to this, for Alberoni, actually lies within the very nature of stardom itself. This is because for stardom to work, it requires a large number of spectators within a large-scale society, a mass audience, to render a minority of people into points of reference for the entire population – simply put, that they are recognizable to significant numbers of a given population. However, this visibility negates the 'true nature of power' because the genuine 'power elite', those who drive society and dictate its actions and future, are typically characterized by isolation.

A key reason why this is the case is that traditionally the powerful seek to ensure a degree of secrecy since their actions might not accord with those of the general, non-privileged population. Consequently, the power elite seek to reduce their observability. As such, any increase in observability is frequently a demonstration of the diminution of power and of the power elite never wishing to be exposed to a high degree of observability (we might think of Julian Assange's WikiLeaks organization as a contemporary example of the controversy in revealing the 'secrets' of the power elite, be they governmental or business). In the case of stars, the reverse is the case because for them 'observability is practically unlimited' (Alberoni, 1972: 82); indeed, it is the lifeblood of celebrity status. Therefore, because stars are always in the public eye, they are rendered politically powerless as their status contravenes the nature of institutional power.

CELEBRITY VISIBILITY, NEWSWORTHINESS, AND POLITICAL CAUSES

Alberoni is another of our 'usual suspects' in speaking of classical approaches to the study of celebrity, and his ideas are intriguing, but limited. Dyer (1982), points to

the fact that in the 1950s and 1960s there were numerous Hollywood stars (Marlon Brando, John Wayne, and Jane Fonda) who, while possessing no institutional political positions of power, nevertheless transmitted very clearly-defined ideological positions and expressions of personal political views – views that had power directly because of their visibility as world-famous Hollywood film stars. Furthermore, the increasing celebrity status of many American political figures in 1960s America was a direct result, argues Todd Gitlin (2003), of media focus due to their newsworthiness and recognizable cultural status. Therefore, as Cashmore notes, Alberoni's approach has become progressively out of step with the contemporary celebrity/politics equation because the link between celebrity and politics is centrally based on the *overt* cultural visibility of such figures, a visibility/cultural power dynamic that can be transmuted into political currency. According to Jessica Evans (2004), global charitable organizations such as Oxfam have recognized the value of using celebrity figures to communicate and simplify potentially complex economic and political arguments. Celebrities can raise public awareness directly, due to their cultural visibility and fame. Consequently Oxfam campaigns have frequently featured international celebrity figures, such as Chris Martin, Youssou N'dour, Djimon Hounsou, Colin Firth, Thom Yorke, Gael Garcia Bernal, Angelique Kidjo, and Michael Stipe. Additionally, the charity has several further avowed celebrity supporters that include Alicia Keys, Ed Sheeran, Rooney Mara, Annie Lennox, Scarlett Johansson, Kanye West, Lady Gaga, Chris Martin, Bono, and Yoko Ono.

A crucial issue to explore is the degree to which the link between politics and celebrity stretches back further than Alberoni acknowledges. For example, in van Krieken's view, the celebrification of politics is traceable back to the sixteenth century and the strategies of self-presentation that were being enacted by monarchs.

Chapter 1 discusses the historical self-promoting exploits of Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, and Louis XIV, but to this list we can also add Henry VIII of England, who similarly engaged in practices to win the 'hearts and minds' of the population while enhancing his own image in a strategic manner. And he did this by constructing a public persona that would, in contemporary terms, be viewed as 'an action-man celebrity identity, a combination of swashbuckling film idol, military hero and sports star' (van Krieken, 2012: 102). Here, then, was a king who wished, via public displays of prowess in sports such as jousting and archery, to transcend his ascribed monarchical status and did so by transforming himself into a publicly-recognized political celebrity figure.

Moving into the early twentieth century, the political power of celebrity influence was not lost upon social decision-makers. For instance, referring to American war leaders, Leo Braudy (1986) observes that such political figures turned to the emergent film industry, and more importantly to its new stars, within the period of the First World War to 'sell' the conflict to an American public who viewed it as a geographically remote European campaign. As a consequence, stars such as Douglas Fairbanks Jr., Charlie Chaplin, and Mary Pickford heavily promoted the selling of war bonds. Similarly, as the celebrity commenter Cooper Lawrence (2009) argues, the singer Kate Smith's weekly radio programme, *The Kate Smith Hour*, ended with her singing a rendition of Irving Berlin's 'God Bless America' in support of raising money for war bonds for the US military in the early 1940s, to considerable

effect. The recognition that celebrities could indeed have potent political influence was developed in America in the 1960s by Alan R. Novak, a senior counsel to the Democratic Senator, Edward M. Kennedy, who identified that many Hollywood stars were openly Democrats and that a number of benefits would be reaped in recruiting them to endorse candidates, from substantial financial contributions, to the more influential issues of lending glamour to the party and ensuring maximum media coverage, factors that have been intrinsic, as pointed out earlier, to the Democratic party ever since.

Although such instances show that for decades celebrities have demonstrably had considerable persuasive powers, or at least political and military figures have believed them to have such abilities over public opinions (to the point of galvanizing an American population to support and join the First World War), we might still argue that Alberoni's analysis remains intact. The celebrity examples I have just cited have political significance, but still lack institutional power. They have powerful voices that many people did listen to, and still constitute a powerless elite. But there have been celebrities who have gained political office, and have wielded considerable institutional power and thus represent a critical evaluation of Alberoni's 'powerless elite' concept.

CELEBRITIES AS POLITICIANS

The most striking example of a 'star' attaining political power is that of the American actor Ronald Reagan, who moved from acting in films such as *Hellcats of the Navy*, *Cattle Queen of Montana*, and *Bedtime for Bonzo* in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, to becoming the President of the United States from 1981 to 1989 (with his second election a landslide victory). And not only would he become an iconic president, but he would, via what would be dubbed 'Reaganomics', establish himself as one of the key political popularizers of neoliberalism, the economic doctrine based upon the principles that true human wellbeing must be achieved through enabling individuals to realize their entrepreneurial freedom within a social framework based upon private property rights, free markets, and free trade (Harvey, 2007: 2). Ronald Reagan attained a considerable level of institutional authority, and while his Hollywood career was long abandoned, Ellis Cashmore (2006) argues that Reagan's climb to the Presidency of the United States was based upon skills transferred from acting and his status as a film star. When he retired from acting in 1964 (the date of his last film, *The Killers*), Reagan's political experience was largely limited to his tenure as the President of the Screen Actors Guild between 1947 and 1952 and 1959 and 1960. However, switching political allegiance from the Democrats to the Republicans, he stood for the office of Governor of California in 1966 and was successfully elected. In the 1970s, on his third attempt, he successfully gained the presidential nomination and ran against Jimmy Carter, defeating him and becoming elected as President. With regard to his political success, Cashmore stresses that Reagan's acting skills were an invaluable asset, especially in debates with opponents, and for the changing American media landscape as supporters and

rivals dubbed Reagan ‘The Great Communicator: his expression of ideas in plain, easy-to-understand language was made for a culture in which the media was taking on greater importance’ (2006: 214).

While Ronald Reagan had an apprenticeship in politics with the Screen Actors Guild, the next dramatic example of a Republican celebrity gaining political power relied instead on his globally recognized star image, and that was the election of action-film mega-star Arnold Schwarzenegger to the position of Governor of California in 2004. In a recall election against an unpopular Governor (Gray Davis) that gave him only 62 days of campaigning time, Freya Thimsen argues that Schwarzenegger drew upon the generic conventions of his film career (the heroic, physically imposing figure represented in films from *Pumping Iron*, *Conan the Barbarian*, and *The Terminator*, to *Total Recall* and *True Lies*) to enable him to ultimately ‘metamorphose into ‘The Governator’ (2010: 49). And the play upon his iconic screen cyborg character was deliberate, as Cashmore states, because the rhetoric of his campaign was filled with slogans such as his promise to ‘terminate taxes’ for the people of California. As such, due to his communicable efficacy, his ‘American dream’ persona (a body-builder from Austria coming to America and making it big), but more importantly, his globally-recognizable image, Schwarzenegger drew far more public attention than his fellow aspiring politicians who lacked film star status, and easily eclipsed other candidates who did possess a cache of fame (including former child star Gary Coleman, pornography magnate Larry Flynt, and Arianna Huffington). In essence, then, *being* Arnold Schwarzenegger was a key factor in electoral success.

Furthermore, Ronald Reagan and Arnold Schwarzenegger are not alone in having gained political office. Clint Eastwood, Sonny Bono, and the wrestler-turned-actor Jesse ‘The Body’ Ventura have all been elected to mayoral positions. And in a wider global context, the Pakistan cricketer, Imran Khan, launched his own political party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, in 1996 and attained considerable political visibility in the 2013 elections. Consequently, Alberoni’s view that stars do not have the capacity to make decisions that actually change society can be directly countered with reference to Reagan, Schwarzenegger, and so on – celebrity figures whose public visibility has been instrumental to their political success within positions of institutional power. And yet, it could be argued that these examples, significant though they may be, are still relatively rare and that, in the main, celebrities remain a powerless elite. But if we consider the issue of *unelected* political roles that are adopted by celebrity figures, then the inadequacy of Alberoni’s view becomes an issue again.

CELEBRITY POLITICIANS-WITHOUT-OFFICE

The concept of the celebrity ‘politician-without-office’ is a term that has arisen, Cashmore argues, principally from the mid-1980s, a period in which the boundaries between the worlds of politics and celebrity became progressively indistinct, and an increasing number of celebrity figures began to become visibly associated with political causes. The key difference between these figures and the likes of Arnold Schwarzenegger is that, as Street states (referring to Bono), they speak out

on political issues and claim ‘the right to represent people or causes without seeking or acquiring elected office’ (2004: 438). For example, issues such as conservation and environmentalism have attracted numerous celebrity figures, from Kit Chan Kit Yee, Robert Redford, Sylvester Stallone, Amitabh Bachchan, to Leonardo DiCaprio, Matt Damon, and Cate Blanchett, who ‘take the authority to speak out as politicians on environmental matters’ (Brockington, 2009: 29). Yet, for many commentators, it was the mid-1980s that saw a definitive rise in the political activist celebrity and which paved the way for the preponderance of contemporary celebrity voices. A key element was the process initiated principally by Bob Geldof and his activities relating to famine relief in Africa. Geldof’s fame stemmed from his position as lead singer for the Irish band the Boomtown Rats, who rose to prominence in the British punk era and had a number of hit singles, most famously in 1979 with ‘I Don’t Like Mondays’, which attained the number one chart position in the United Kingdom, before splitting up in the 1980s.

Although carving out a respectable musical career, as Cashmore observes, as the Boomtown Rats faded, Geldof’s public persona would morph from rock singer to that of ‘St Bob’, due to his ascent to position of ‘international statesman’ through his initiation of the Band Aid project which resulted in the release of a song, ‘Do They Know It’s Christmas’, that brought together a range of pop and rock musicians (Sting, George Michael, Bono, Simon le Bon, Midge Ure, Phil Collins, Geldof, and many others) to raise funds for Ethiopian famine relief. The single went to number one in 1984 and ultimately sold 3 million copies. Geldof then co-organized the globally-transmitted Live Aid concerts performed in July 1985 (which consisted of two concerts, one in London and the other in Philadelphia). Live Aid raised over \$100 million for use to alleviate famine in various parts of Africa, and, in addition to representing a global media event (with an audience of 1.5 billion) and supremely successful charitable and humanitarian endeavour, also announced ‘the entry of rock stars and celebrity figures into the realm of global politics’ (Cashmore, 2006: 219).

CELEBRITY AND POLITICS: BONO

Within his book, *Celebrity Humanitarianism*, Ilan Kapoor (2013) argues that Live Aid constituted a whole new cultural category within the realm of celebrity politics: ‘Charitainment’, and from this period Geldof became more famous as a political leader. For example, in 2004, Geldof was appointed to the Commission for Africa to lead on global responses to tackling the issue of African debt, a position that saw Geldof assume a position of significant political power, but which also became the driving force for a second musically-based charity event: the Live 8 concerts held in 2005. And in this endeavour, Geldof was not alone as he was joined by fellow rock star singer Bono, on the global political stage. Unlike Geldof, Bono (real name Paul David Hewson) has juggled his increasing political interests with an ongoing position as the lead singer of the hugely successful rock band, U2. Bono’s interest in political issues (aside from his presence within Band Aid and Live Aid) was linked to his role in the NGO (non-governmental organization) Jubilee 2000 in the 1990s, which was an organization

dedicated to eradicating Third World debt. This was followed by Bono's formation of DATA (Debt AIDS Trade Africa) in the early 2000s, and the RED products, versions of Armani and Apple products that donate a percentage of sales to the Global Fund to fight against AIDS in Africa. Additionally, Bono's status as a globally-renowned rock star has enabled him to meet and debate with world leaders, and influence them. For instance, in relation to his role within the Commission for Africa, former President of the United States Bill Clinton identified Bono as 'the person most responsible for the passage of a bill on Third World debt relief through the US Congress' (Varga, quoted in Drake and Higgins, 2006: 90–1). For Rojek, Bono's success as a 'celanthropy advocate' is that, irrespective of his rock star status and estimated £400 million fortune, he presents a public image that normalizes his status to be just like the wider public in order to instil the message of 'Make Poverty History', that 'ordinary people have the power to make permanent change possible' (2013: 61). It must be acknowledged, though, that Bono's political activities are not always appreciated, as evidenced in 2013 when the singer was publicly pursued by a number of German anarchists who were chanting 'Make Bono history' (Anonymous, 2013, *Independent*).

As a result, the number of celebrities engaged in philanthropy and ambassadorial roles has sharply increased in the past two decades, to the extent that concepts such as 'celebrity diplomacy' (Cooper, 2008) have become commonplace to capture the degree to which international relations and goodwill missions increasingly contain celebrity presences, or, more importantly, celebrities are sought out to become the 'faces' of various political causes. However, while Bob Geldof and Bono have been long recognized as key (and highly influential) figures in this regard, others have joined them, most notably the Hollywood actress, Angelina Jolie.

ANGELINA JOLIE: CELEBRITY ACTIVIST

For a significant period during her early career, Angelina seemingly cultivated a media image that vacillated between her work as a progressively acclaimed actress and her off-screen, volatile, unpredictable, and potentially self-destructive personal behaviour which included tattoos, and numerous marriages. However, recent years have seen her assume an avowed and active commitment to 'global issues', a dedication that nominally was expressed via her film career in films such as *Beyond Borders* (Martin Campbell, 2003), her children (adopted and biological), and her highly publicized relationship with the American actor and fellow film star and political activist, Brad Pitt. However, Jolie's political engagement was effectively initiated in 2001, when she assumed the role of Goodwill Ambassador for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (the UNHCR). Jolie was not the first celebrity to be used by the UN, and indeed the UN has a longstanding track record of engaging with Hollywood to raise awareness of its global work. The popular comedic actor and singer Danny Kaye was appointed in 1953 as UNICEF's inaugural Goodwill Ambassador. As Wheeler argues, Kaye was appointed because it was believed that his name and fame would overturn indifference to the plight of children in poverty throughout the world, attract publicity, and raise money for the organization:

Kaye agreed readily and was appointed officially as UNICEF's Ambassador-at-large. Shortly afterwards, Kaye toured UNICEF projects in Myanmar, India, Indonesia, Korea, Thailand and Japan to publicise its activities in alleviating the plight of children. His trip was filmed for a short documentary entitled *Assignment Children* (1954), which was underwritten by Paramount Pictures, shown to an estimated audience of 100 million and whose profits entered UNICEF's coffers. (Wheeler, 2010: 10)

As Lim (2005) notes, the United Nations would appoint people they knew would be heard as further 'Goodwill Ambassadors' – like the actresses Liv Ullman and Audrey Hepburn. Hepburn was the United Nations Goodwill Ambassador for UNICEF in 1987 and visited countries such as Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Vietnam. Therefore, Jolie represents a continuation of this practice, and like Kaye's excursions, as part of her work, she kept a diary to record her UNHCR experiences. These diaries were formally published in 2003 (with proceeds donated to the UNHCR) and were entitled *Notes from My Travels: Visits with Refugees in Africa, Cambodia, Pakistan, and Ecuador*. In these accounts, Jolie emerges not merely as a 'celebrity ambassador', but also as a diarist, and an observer of the human, social, cultural, and economic effects of war and genocide in which she therefore strives to characterize herself not as an 'icon' but rather as a person like any other, as her diaries strive to reveal.

Although not previously associated with any obvious political expression or ideological affiliation, her 'globalized' sensibility would become famous through her adoption of three children: Maddox, from Cambodia, Zahara, from Ethiopia, and Pax, from Vietnam. Moreover, Namibia was her chosen location for the birth of her first biological daughter (with Brad Pitt), Shiloh. Furthermore, Jolie would spend a significant proportion of 2001 volunteering on behalf of the UNHCR. As Jolie stated of her motivation for embracing this role: 'If I can use this celebrity thing in a positive way, that might mean young people get involved, it has to be worth it' (Mercer, 2007: 131). As such, *Notes from My Travels* begins at the very beginning of her political mission:

I am on a plane to Africa. I will have a two-hour layover in the Paris airport, and then on to Abidjan in Cote d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast). This is the beginning of my trip and this journal [...] On the plane from Paris an African man wearing a nice blue suit and a warm smile asked me if I was a journalist. I said 'No, just an American who wants to learn about Africa'. He said, 'Good!' (2003: 5)

In this quote, Jolie seeks to portray herself as an example of an American culture that is critically uneducated about the political and humanitarian situations that exist in contemporary Africa. Moreover, at the outset of her journey, she alludes to an apparent 'anonymizing' process occurring. For instance, while still on the aeroplane on the first stage of her mission, Jolie's famous tattoo designs are noticed, and she is informed by an African fellow traveller that this will make her conspicuous to authorities, as visible tattoos are conventionally used by authorities as a primary reason to detain suspected rebels posing as refugees, since tattooing is a common tribal practice

in Guinea and Sierra Leone. This idea that she could be mistaken for a rebel is a source of humour within Jolie's diary, and an acknowledgement that as a globally recognized film star such misunderstandings do not occur (nor indeed does she often have to state who she is due to her recognizable celebrity status). The incident leads to a reflexive musing by Jolie, about the nature of the world she is entering, the physical environment, but more crucially, the people she will meet and act as an advocate for. Thus, when she arrives at her first refugee settlement in Africa, she states:

While standing in one place too long my ankles began to itch. They were being bitten by bugs so small I couldn't even see them. In some areas the smell was rancid. I felt sick. The strength of survival here is amazing to me. They don't complain. They don't even beg. Contrary to our image of this country, its people are civilized, strong, proud, stunning people. Any aggressive feeling is pure survival. There is no time for casual or lazy behaviour. As I wrote that, I realize I am writing as if I am studying people in a zoo. I feel stupid and arrogant to think that I know anything about these people and their struggles. But I am simply making observations of the people here in Cote d'Ivoire. (2003: 11)

In addition to reportage concerning her immediate experience, Jolie begins a process of actively diminishing and downplaying her 'iconic' public identity. This apparent freedom from her public 'celebrity' self subsequently leads her to act in ways that she would not in the West. For example, Jolie discloses her private American address to a young African girl so that the girl can write letters to her, an act that contravenes the culture of distance that conventionally characterizes the routine Western celebrity–public relation in which the public are kept at a distance from personal contact, by gated communities and frequently security guards, and private details remain closely protected.

Therefore, the dominant tone of Jolie's *Notes From My Travels* consistently centres upon Jolie's attempts to 'anonymize' herself in favour of her 'missions', to downplay her celebrity status and fame to communicate instead the work of the UNHCR, its personnel, and its support to alleviate the conditions faced by refugees. Yet there are instances in which we are reminded that Jolie is very much a *celebrity* intermediary because she is a film star of status and her star-power is substantial. This is best exemplified in Jolie's accounts of the instance in which she is invited to an engagement with Kofi Annan, then Secretary-General of the United Nations, and other prominent UN figures, a political platform few UNHCR workers could engage with.

With regard to the effect that Jolie's political activism has, her relationship with Cambodia remains acute to the extent that, in 2005, she was awarded Cambodian citizenship for conservation work and for setting up two foundations, the Maddox Relief Project (named after her first adopted child) and the Jolie Foundation. Furthermore, Jolie's political activities with the UN have also continued because since her initial missions, Jolie has maintained her intermediary role with the UNHCR and has undertaken a series of further missions to countries such as Sudan, Thailand, Jordan, the Russian Federation, Lebanon, Sri Lanka, Kosovo, India, Egypt, Kenya, Costa Rica, Iraq, and Afghanistan. As with *Notes from My Travels*, Jolie has similarly

documented her political work in the form of journal entries posted on the UNHCR official website documenting these missions. In terms of impact and efficacy, Roy Greenslade (2013) notes that while the issue of awareness-raising in relation to political issues and causes may sound clichéd, nonetheless, the celebrity factor is of considerable impact. As he observes in relation to Jolie's 2013 visit with British Foreign Secretary William Hague to the Democratic Republic of Congo to campaign against the use of rape within war zones, there would have been few mainstream media images contained within newspaper and media content had Hague undertaken the endeavour alone.

THE FUNCTIONS OF POLITICAL CELEBRITIES

It is not just Africa that has seen politicized celebrities becoming activists. For instance, in the wake of the devastation of New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina which struck in 2005, a number of celebrities became involved in relief work and financial support (such as Angelina Jolie, George Clooney, Oprah Winfrey, John Travolta, Jamie Foxx, Celine Dion, Nicolas Cage, and Jay-Z), and in relation to rebuilding projects, in which the most notable celebrity figure is the actor Brad Pitt. As Joy Fuqua observes in her study of Brad Pitt's political activism, Pitt's relationship with New Orleans was expressed through the Make It Right Foundation (MIR) that involved his interest in architecture with a project (initiated in 2007) that combined aid work with sustainable housing, infused with green approaches to house building designed to be resistant to adverse weather conditions. The project involved a competition that brought together architects, engineers, and designers to create new housing structures, with the actor taking a lead role in the process and fronting publicity images and articles that appeared in periodicals such as *Architectural Digest*. Therefore, Pitt acted as both a hands-on participant and 'an icon to direct attention toward MIR' (Fuqua, 2011: 199) and 'his image became the instrument of the reconstruction effort' (Figueiredo, 2009: 3). Thus, from Bob Geldof's impassioned pleas for aid relief in the 1980s, to post-Katrina New Orleans, the concept of the celebrity activist has been firmly established within the cultural landscape.

In the view of David Meyer and Joshua Gamson, one of the most important resources that celebrities have in relation to political issues and political movements is their visibility, because 'celebrities carry a spotlight with them' (1995: 185). As such, celebrities draw media attention and their participation or association with a political event can draw people to it who may otherwise have had no interest, or awareness, of the particular concern. For example, then, people 'with no previous interest in pesticides . . . may listen to a public service advertisement because Meryl Streep appears in it. Rock fans may attend an antinuclear power demonstration to see Bruce Springsteen, yet wind up hearing numerous speakers talk about alternative means of generating energy' (ibid.). Viewed from this perspective, then, the participation of celebrities in political events acts as an effective 'hook' to guarantee media coverage, and it also makes public attendance at events more likely if they include celebrity presences, and generates publicity that can attract wider awareness and support.

Alternatively, as Cashmore points out, celebrities can help in engaging the public in political issues through converting what could be highly complex economic, political, and historical arguments and data into much more easily understandable information that results in greater degrees of public awareness and public action, from the donating of funds to political pressure and activity. For example, Oxfam ran a campaign under the banner ‘Ever felt dumped on?’, which highlighted unfair trading relations between the West and the South with the message that ‘If we all join together and make a big enough noise, politicians and corporate bosses will have to make trade fair’ (<http://www.oxfam.org.nz/what-we-do/issues/make-trade-fair/dumped-on-photo-shoot>). Although obviously a complex issue with various economic and political dimensions (including the historical heritage of Western imperialism and colonialism), the campaign conveyed the central message of rectifying this relationship through a photography shoot that saw various actors and musicians, such as Colin Firth, Thom Yorke, Chris Martin, Michael Stipe, Youssou N’dour, Minnie Driver, Antonio Banderas, and Alanis Morissette being ‘dumped on’ with materials and substances such as coffee, chocolate, rice, milk, cotton, maize, and wheat. Therefore, through a series of striking visual images including a stellar cast of celebrities, the issue is simplified, but the message is clear: that global trade is unequal and action must be taken. Such an example further fits into the perception that the engagement of celebrities with political issues, from the activities of the UN and Oxfam through to environmental conservation and Third World debt, ensures that such issues are firmly in the public arena. In this sense, then, celebrity status, with its prominent degree of visibility, is an effective vehicle to be utilized by political groups. Indeed, it is also a factor that is recognized by celebrities themselves, as the actress Susan Sarandon (who has spoken out against the war in Iraq, and been a visual Democrat supporter) stated of translating her celebrity status into political activism: ‘If my privacy is going to be invaded and I’m going to be treated as a commodity, I might as well take advantage of it’ (Meyer and Gamson, 1995: 185).

THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE ‘CELEBRITOCRACY’

While the political roles of celebrities can ensure that political messages and causes receive maximum publicity, and thus raise awareness for key social issues and problems, there are a number of critiques of politically-inclined celebrity. At one level, argues Cashmore, the ways in which politics and celebrity have become intertwined is indicative of a culture in which media have altered the nature of politics and transformed it into a spectacle and a series of popularity contests in which political messages are secondary to slick images and performances on camera. Furthermore, the progressive presence of celebrities within the political arena, whether formally elected, invited to front organizations, or self-appointed commentators, has resulted in a ‘dumbing down’ of politics. Hence, on the one hand celebrities such as Arnold Schwarzenegger can run for office relying not on political expertise, but on sound bites that draw upon his star persona – he is electable because he is Arnold

Schwarzenegger; while on the other hand, there is the danger that complex issues can be reduced to simple photographic images that cut through what *are* complex debates and which require a deeper level of engagement than that afforded by slogans and photographic images of appealing celebrities. Related to this critique is the charge that celebrities, regardless of how sincere and committed they may be to their political cause and message, are not sufficiently informed on the crucial matters, and not qualified to speak out on intricate matters of geopolitical economics and national, religious, and ethnic conflicts.

For instance, Marina Hyde, within her acerbic book *Celebrity: How Entertainers Took Over the World and Why We Need an Exit Strategy*, cites the example of the actress Sharon Stone, and her peace mission to Israel which included meetings with Israeli President Shimon Peres. In Hyde's view, Stone's official statement explaining her presence in the country, and the degree to which she believed her celebrity status could act as an agent of change in the enduring conflict between Israel and Palestine, captures the lack of insight the famous have, and the degree to which they over-state their political influence while not fully understanding the actual politics of the situation. This is what Stone stated:

I just think that because I have fame . . . I have the opportunity to sit here and reflect back to you anything that you have or desire to see happen. The only power that I have is the opportunity to be a mirror back to you of something that you may be thinking and need to be reminded of. So the only power that I have is to remind you of something that is alive in your own heart. If you want to have something change maybe I can remind you of that. (2009: 82)

Stone compounded these words with the additional statement that she 'would kiss just about anybody for peace in the Middle East' (2009: 83), further compounding Hyde's assessment that while the desire to use celebrity for good is frequently genuine, it is also just as frequently naive and demonstrates that the understanding of politics lacks firm foundation. Although Hyde's use of Stone points to the more eccentric example of the perception that celebrity can be a force for change (even if the celebrity in question is not entirely clear how it can be harnessed), there are commentators who point to more serious consequences of the celebrity politician. This is the concept of what Lawrence (2009) refers to as the 'rise of the celebritocracy', a social cultural condition in which, while they themselves are citizens entitled to political expression like any other citizen, nevertheless, their voices are far louder than the non-famous, an issue that could have serious implications for democratic processes.

This is the view of Kapoor, and he offers a sustained and frequently scathing perspective on the effects of celebrities within the world of politics. Indeed, he questions the motives of such celebrity activism and identifies insidious effects of the 'celebritization' of politics, as he states:

Far from being altruistic, such activism is ideological: it is most often self-serving, helping to promote institutional aggrandizement and the celebrity

'brand'; it advances consumerism and corporate capitalism . . . and it contributes to a postdemocratic political landscape. (2013: 1)

What this implies is that celebrity figures have become part of a process within the Western world that has increasingly seen policy issues and decisions that have traditionally been the preserve of states taken over by private agencies who are unelected, but which wield considerable power. Therefore, Kapoor's approach to celebrity humanitarianism, advocacy, and diplomacy is deeply critical and is centrally informed by Slavoj Žižek's use of ideology which accords with the idea that it 'is that which attempts to obscure the Real, to cover . . . gaps, contradictions, or imperfections' (2013: 6). As such, far from representing acts of altruism and goodwill, celebrity political activities are ultimately conservative due to their complicity with the prevailing social and economic order because the various activities, from advocacy work to staging charity events, seldom question the causes of global poverty, debt, and so on, but rather address the symptoms – with maximum publicity for those involved (and, in the case of Live 8, resulting in huge increases in music sales for many of the key performers). Therefore, celebrities such as Geldof and Bono seek to address issues of global inequality without questioning the exploitative nature of Western economic structures, and assuming that these systems can rectify global inequalities. Consequently, celebrity advocacy is seldom anti-capitalist and sustains neoliberal ideology, and it frequently serves to silence the voices of peoples who experience economic inequalities as it is the celebrity who is the advocate, and the individual who garners media attention and political audience. As a result, commentators point to the ways in which celebrity diplomacy and humanitarianism actually serves to disempower the oppressed, or, as Nicholas Kristof caustically states of the relationship between poverty and celebrity charity, figures such as 'Bono and Angelina Jolie have made Africa almost sexy' through their celebrity sheen (2007: 1). In this sense, celebrity activism reduces politics to a media spectacle and, somewhat paradoxically, often renders the subjects of its advocacy invisible.

Consequently, contemporary culture depicts a very different celebrity relationship with politics than that articulated by Alberoni. While on the one hand the number of celebrities who attain actual institutional positions of power is still comparatively rare, on the other, the emergence and proliferation of celebrity 'politicians-without-office' has become a distinctive and pervasive feature of modern celebrity culture to the point that Kapoor argues that 'do-gooding is a virtual career requirement for the established or aspiring star' (2013: 13). Of course, as citizens within democratic states, celebrities, as well as any other member of the public, are perfectly entitled to either stand for political office or engage in political activism. The critical issue that surrounds the 'celebritocracy' is that, in line with Kapoor's critiques, celebrity voices are louder due to their status and a society that is fascinated with them. In this sense, although clearly many celebrities are associated with laudable causes (indeed, the American actress Jessica Alba and singer Christina Aguilera have fronted the Declare Yourself campaign which encourages young people to vote, thus enhancing democratic participation), the equation with political issues (many of which cannot be solved with donations) is reduced to a glamorous spectacle.

WHEN CELEBRITY POLITICS GOES WRONG

As a final point, and to provide a counterpoint to the bleak ideological function of politically-motivated celebrities outlined by Kapoor, activism, advocacy, and political endorsements do not always have the anticipated outcome. A recent example of this occurred at the 2012 Republican National Convention that concentrated upon supporting presidential candidate Mitt Romney's attempt to unseat Barack Obama. As part of the festivities, the Hollywood screen legend Clint Eastwood took to the stage to address the Party members and publicly endorse Romney. Although scheduled to deliver a rousing five-minute speech to close the Convention on a note of triumph, Eastwood proceeded to speak for just over 12 minutes in an improvised address to an empty chair that represented Obama 'in person' to mock his various failings as president since 2008. Although intended as a humorous act, the hesitant delivery and unscripted format resulted in widespread media coverage the next day, much of it derisive, with numerous pastiches and skits based upon it from comedians and talk-show hosts (such as Jon Stewart) and the public posting their own versions on social networking sites and YouTube. Thus, just because celebrity status can lead to political platforms, that does not mean that the outcome is a given, or that the public will react accordingly, regardless of ideological content or intent. Although, as Grant Cos and Kelly Norris Martin (2013) note, the event had a serious side, as in the wake of the Eastwood performance there were subsequent incidents of chairs found hanging from trees, and which were interpreted as racially offensive displays designed to symbolize the lynching of President Barack Obama.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has looked at the ways in which the worlds of politics and celebrity have progressively converged, and while Alberoni's view that celebrities conventionally do not acquire institutional power (there are still very few examples of celebrity figures winning political office), the number of celebrities speaking out on causes and acting as political advocates has intensified significantly. A prime (and perhaps surprising) example of this process is the example of the British comedian and actor, Russell Brand, who has emerged as an anarchistic political advocate for widespread social, economic and political change, a vision set out in his book (or 'manifesto'), *Revolution* (2014). However, for some critics, this raises questions concerning democratic representation and also raises the debate as to whether celebrities should communicate their political affiliations to the wider public with the intention of influencing them. Similarly, the issue of personal gain and brand enhancement, combined with the degree to which celebrities are qualified and knowledgeable enough to engage in political discourse, is a further crucial factor to consider. However, in the view of Jo Littler, and as this chapter has explored, although there are a number of issues that place the celebrity/politics/advocacy nexus in a problematical position, 'celebrity do-gooding is a response to suffering, and this should not be underestimated' (2011b: 137); such consciousness-raising can act as a stimulus for others to act to tackle issues

of injustice. But whether we are cynical or supportive, the political world is now firmly entrenched within celebrity culture, and shows no signs of disengaging itself in the near future.

FURTHER READING

With regard to providing a historical and cultural context to the link between politics and celebrity, readers should consult:

- Street, J. (1997) *Politics and Popular Culture*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Todd, G. (2003) *The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, CA and London: University of California Press.

Of further interest are texts produced by celebrities engaged in political advocacy, and three key ones are:

- Cheadle, D. and Prendergast, J. (2007) *Not On Our Watch: The Mission to End Genocide in Darfur and Beyond*. Dunshaughlin: Maverick House.
- Geldof, B. (2006) *Geldof in Africa*. London: Arrow Books.
- Jolie, A. (2003) *Notes from My Travels: Visits with Refugees in Africa, Cambodia, Pakistan, and Ecuador*. New York and London: Pocket Books.

For further reading concerning critical views of celebrity involvement with political causes see:

- Hague, S., Street, J., and Savigny, H. (2008) 'The voice of the people? Musicians as political actors. *Cultural Politics*, 4(1): 5–24.
- Kapoor, I. (2013) *Celebrity Humanitarianism: The Ideology of Global Charity*. London and New York: Routledge.