

Celeb-Reliance: Intellectuals, Celebrity, and Upward Mobility

- "Scholars Fear 'Star' System May Undercut Their Mission." Appearing on the front page of the *New York Times* in December, 1997, this headline advertised to the world the perplexity that has surrounded the emergence of so-called academic stars, both inside the academy and beyond it. Does the academy **have** a "mission" for these celebrities to undercut? If so, what is it? The sources quoted are not forthcoming on these points. Nor can they agree about whether it is brilliance or mere trendiness that gets rewarded, whether teaching suffers or benefits from the stars' presence, whether they are to be admired as hyper-productive geniuses or despised as fakes and opportunists. This is not merely journalistic balance; it also traces the outline of a more widespread narrative. While worrying conscientiously about the cost of off-scale raises and reduced teaching loads, the *Times* titillates its readers with success stories like that of historian Alan Taylor, whose prize-winning book won him overnight offers from several prestigious universities. The thrill is familiar, and so is the way its enjoyment is hedged round by scruples about the means, misgivings about the ends. New the academic celebrity may be, but we have all heard stories like this before, from *Great Expectations* to *Hoop Dreams*.

- For the *Times*, in other words, celebrity is a contemporary variation on the notorious national theme of self-reliance and upward mobility--a point that Jeffrey Decker has recently made at greater length (xiv-xv). And this suggests that academic confusion about the new academic celebrity may reflect a more general confusion about self-reliance itself.

- Before elaborating on this suggestion, let me try to distinguish between what does and does not deserve complaint. What clearly deserves complaint is the tendency, in an increasingly corporatized university, to institute a two-tiered employment structure and a two-tiered salary scale: that is, to increase the already dramatic divide between fewer and fewer tenured and tenure-track people on the one hand (whether stars or not) and more and more untenured, adjunct, part-time people on the other. This drive to proletarianize the vast majority of university teachers is an abomination, though an abomination with non-academic precedents; one thinks for example of the increasing recourse to cheap and disposable part-time workers that helped precipitate the recent UPS strike. If it is allowed to widen much farther, the divide between part-timers and full-timers will destroy the relatively democratic version of higher education that has arisen since World War II. The two-tier system has to be maligned and mobilized against at every opportunity. Taking it on will require people organizing on the bottom tier, and without much expectation of support from those who have lucked out generationally and now find themselves with job security or reasonable expectations of it. And it will mean academics fighting corporatization in the university as part of a self-conscious struggle against the same corporatization elsewhere--speaking up against all forms of outsourcing, subcontracting, and systematic irresponsibility, making the exploitation of part-timers

in the academy into a general case in favor of more accountability. Otherwise, where are our non-academic allies supposed to come from?

- But vague sentiments about celebrity can only cloud current assessments of the academic job crisis and the shifting conditions of academic work. Celebrity is usually defined by starting from fame and subtracting something: fame minus merit, or fame minus power. The sparest of these definitions by deficiency is Daniel Boorstin's: being known for being known. Whatever its other deficiencies, however, celebrity cannot be defined as a cause or result of two-tier employment. Arguing that stars "command an ever larger share of shrinking resources," David Shumway adds, with understandable hesitation, that their salaries "may have encouraged the hiring of more part-time and temporary faculty members" (94). Sharon O'Dair argues with no such hesitation that we have the star system "**because** [the emphasis is hers] there are so few tenure-track jobs" (609). Are we really supposed to believe that if there were more jobs, there would be none of the inequalities of intellectual visibility, veneration, and influence that celebrity implies? Cary Nelson is surely right to dismiss this argument out of hand. However greedy, self-delusive, and disgusting the behavior of certain academic celebrities may be, he writes, and however "morally corrupt" it is "to reward some categories of people while literally impoverishing others" (43), "the argument that superstar salaries are a significant financial problem for higher education is a sham" (39). Celebrity itself may well be inevitable; what is not inevitable, Nelson declares, is that it will be "quickly converted into a lifetime salary way above the discipline's campus average" (43). We should certainly try--it won't be easy--to break the links between reputation and salary. But we should do so for moral and political reasons, not in the illusion that this will make a decisive economic difference to universities that spend the enormous sums they spend on athletics, administration, and so on. "No academic honor is supportable," Nelson says, "unless all employees are treated fairly" (54). Note that this is a moral argument; it is about jobs and salaries, not about reputation or fan psychology; and it applies as much to tenure and even to the tenure track as it does to stardom.

- It seems likely that a great deal of complaint about academic celebrities has nothing to do with the parlous condition of academic labor. Much of the resentment is probably, in Jennifer Wicke's words, "celebrity worship disguised as purgative hatred of celebrity" (775). Given how unjust the allocation of rewards can be, some resentment is natural enough. But I think there is something more interesting going on here than mere resentment.

- Shumway's argument shares at least one thing with Sean Wilentz's denunciation of supposed "celebrity-mongering" on behalf of the new black public intellectuals, and for that matter with the *Times* article. All three criticize the celebrity-besotted present in the implicit name of a past in which merit was supposedly granted its just reward.¹ For Wilentz, the modern celebrity writer, valued for personality rather than ideas, was born with the Dick Cavett show, or generally with television (294). As a historian, Wilentz should know more about the pre-television lecture circuit of the

nineteenth century. From the 1840s on, something like half a million people a week went to public lectures in season. The lecturers, avidly competed for by different towns and avidly written up in the newspapers, were certainly celebrities. Often they were college professors who were supplementing their income. "The importance they attached to their public lecturing," historian Donald Scott observes, "... appears to have exceeded that which they gave to their classroom activities" (17). If this sounds familiar, and it should, then television is not the root of the problem.

- For Shumway what's wrong with the present is the airplane and the conference-circuit rather than TV, and the pre-celebrity past is represented by the profession of literary criticism before the First World War. In that period men with three names like George Lyman Kittredge and John Livingston Lowes were disciplinary heavyweights but not, Shumway says, stars. If "visibility" is the defining value of academic work today, the value for Kittredge and company, he goes on, was "soundness" (94). Shumway apparently accepts this "soundness" at face value; he apparently presumes that in that era, unlike our own, professional judgment somehow measured merit accurately and rewarded it appropriately. In the context of today's job crisis, let us recall that "soundness" was also the criterion by which the patronage system, otherwise known as the "old boy network," which is what Shumway is describing, worked to define and allocate jobs. If we do not assume that jobs were justly allocated under that system, is there any reason to think that the old boys did better in objectively judging intellectual merit?² By supplying an alternative method for distributing cultural capital, the celebrity cult has served (among its other functions) to open up what remains of those tight, all-male professional circles.

- But if this opening up can be called an improvement, as I think it can, it is not because we have now escaped the old boys, or modern counterparts to the old boys. When I suggest that "soundness," Shumway's standard of merit, conceals the mediating presence of the patronage system, I don't mean to imply that there exists a version of pure, genuine, absolute merit that would not depend on patrons or mediators at all.³ On the contrary. This is the mistake that makes critics of celebrity into perhaps unwitting celebrators of self-reliance.

- Whether or not they are nostalgic for the days when merit supposedly got its just reward, critics of celebrity tend to imply that there can and should be such a thing as merit in a pure form--merit without the external intervention of the media, influential mentors and patrons, prestigious institutions, or whatever. Yet the classic ideal of self-reliance on which they thus rely is less straightforward than it might appear. Consider for example this characteristic throw-away by William Henry III in his *In Defense of Elitism*: "an entertainer is someone who can actually do something, someone who has a verifiable skill or talent, whereas Vanna White is a celebrity" (181). The interesting ambiguity here resides in what Henry doesn't mention: Vanna White's good looks, which stand for her apparent lack of merit. But are good looks so obviously distinct from merit? Like "skill or talent," they too might be seen as "God-given," acquired without verifiable sweat and toil. And what counts as being able to

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"actually do something" is almost as difficult to pin down as the question of where the ability came from. What will count in the case of a woman, for example, may not be quite the same as what will count in the case of a man. "Whereas the traditional self-made man sold his story as an afterthought to the accumulation of riches," Decker writes, "the celebrity's primary source of income is her story" (113). For Decker, the upward mobility story has been taken over by women (his examples are Susan Powter and Oprah Winfrey), its female protagonists are celebrities, and these female celebrities no longer do anything, they merely tell a story--even though, as Decker himself notes, the story that both Susan Powter and Oprah Winfrey tell involves laboring on their bodies, working hard to refashion them through dieting, exercise, and will-power. As if in answer to Henry on Vanna White, in other words, both present good looks not as given but as earned by their labor. Yet that does not soften the reflex invocation of celebrity as fame minus merit. This double standard is of course not unprecedented. Recall in *Sister Carrie* what Dreiser has the authorial Ames say to Carrie about the acting talent that has made her a theatrical star: "It so happens that you have this thing. It is no credit to you--that is, I mean, you might not have had it. You paid nothing to get it" (385). Even if Carrie had paid for it, the questions would not stop. Where did the money come from? Who was her acting coach? Dig deep enough into any instance of merit, and you will discover social determinants, factors like family and friends, lovers and mentors, identities, interests, and institutions that advantaged some and disadvantaged others. Why choose to deconstruct merit here, at the intersection of women, theatricality, and media, and not deconstruct it everywhere?

- Surprisingly, one does not have to dig very deep in order to catch a glimpse of social determination at work beneath apparent self-reliance. It lies right at the surface, though not precisely at the center, of the most notorious self-reliance stories we have, the tales of Horatio Alger. As many critics have noticed, Alger's stories are not in fact the tales of triumphant self-reliance they are popularly thought to be. "Alger's heroes are rarely 'alone and unaided,'" John Cawelti noted in 1965, "and do not win their success entirely through individual effort and accomplishment. From the very beginning of his career, the Alger boy demonstrates an astounding propensity for chance encounters with benevolent and useful friends, and his success is largely due to their patronage and assistance" (109). Alger's texts concern themselves largely if paradoxically with mediation by patrons and benefactors, figures who invite the suspicion that (like Alger himself) they are interested in something less innocent than merely rewarding the merit of their young protégés. In Michael Moon's words, social ascent happens through "a mutual seduction of sorts" between street boys, with their "handsome faces and comely bodies," and genteel patrons (94). It is about boys and old boys--one might say, dirty old men. But what social determinants do these old boys represent?

- Aside from the pederasty that led to Alger's expulsion from his Massachusetts ministry, the most obvious explanation for these patrons is that they represent a throwback to an earlier time, a kinder, small-town America that had not yet

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discovered cutthroat capitalism--and where family and old boy connections were still decisive, as indeed they were early in Alger's life. For Cawelti, the patrons demonstrate Alger's "reassertion of the values of a bygone era in an age of dramatic change and expansion" (120). Yet a case could be made that the social force incarnated in these mediating figures is something newer than residual paternalism or sublimated homoeroticism. Moon's argument, brilliantly buttressed by an analysis of the double meaning of "saving" in *Ragged Dick*, is that this homosocial bonding stands for an incipient corporate capitalism. As Moon points out, Dick is not merely interested in rising; he also carries on the "saving" of other boys--a practice learned from his own benefactors--by means of free spending that drastically (if only temporarily) depletes the savings deposited in his own account. Thus, though the "all-boy families" formed around these moments of generosity may represent, as Moon says, a version of capital's own fantasy of "asexual breeding" (104) and may hide a supplement of erotic interest, they are not founded on a simple computation of self-interest of the kind that the word "corporate" might suggest.

- In his efforts at "saving" the less fortunate, Dick is also imitating the role of benefactor that Alger himself, only months after leaving his ministry, began to adopt toward the homeless boys of New York City. "Alger's room, first in St. Mark's Place and after 1875 in various boarding houses around the city, became a veritable salon for street boys," his biographer writes. "A generation after he settled in New York, Alger remained a kind and popular benefactor of the street Arabs" (Scharnhorst 77). His work was long commemorated for example by the Children's Aid Society (80). Scharnhorst suggests that the "stock adult character, the Patron... paralleled the part Alger had begun to assume among the street children of the city. He literally projected himself into his stories" (83). Were Alger's sustained and well-documented philanthropic efforts only the legitimate margin of a lifetime of illicit erotic activities? Did this life remain secret only because these boys, unlike the children of his congregation, conveniently had no parents to suspect or complain? These are not unreasonable questions, but evidence is lacking. Whatever their motivation, however, the social experiments in which Alger participated were part of a historical process by which the private efforts of parents and philanthropists, who could no longer cope with the proliferation of homeless children generated by industrial capitalism on a massive scale, found an eventual if still insufficient and sometimes sinister substitute in public institutions. This shift from private to public responsibility required a momentous ethical transformation. The resistance this shift elicited at its earliest stages can be surmised from the fear and loathing of state interference that such taxpayer-financed institutions so often continue to elicit.

- The self-reliance story has of course been read as part of that resistance to public responsibility. But Moon's astute alignment of Alger with corporate (as opposed to entrepreneurial) capitalism suggests that Alger may be less nostalgic than anticipatory. The "limited liability" that gave the corporation its first English name involved a dispersal of individual responsibility that, however convenient as a device for making and protecting profits, was also about to be put to very different uses. It

defended investors against proper demands for accountability, but it also encouraged the threateningly relativistic "no fault" view of poverty, based on a vision of ineluctable social interdependence, that support for the social welfare state would require. After all, the welfare state needed "limited liability" no less than the corporation did.

- As a recent parallel, consider the film *Good Will Hunting*, where the climactic encounter between the Therapist (played by Robin Williams) and Heroic Individual (played by Matt Damon) is marked by the repeated phrase "It's not your fault." In order for the film to release the latter's innate talents into the upward mobility they seem to call out for, it must first break down his resistance, compounded of working-class solidarity and anti-authoritarian individualism, and get him to accede to the expert/therapeutic mantra of the social welfare state, here represented by its kindest and least official voice. The individual must come to believe that what he is and does is neither entirely his fault nor--the corollary is inescapable--entirely his achievement.⁴ Pop psychology aside, this social dispersal of the self is just what society as a whole had to be persuaded of in order to divert its resources into rescuing its less fortunate members from what would otherwise seem the results of their own actions and inactions. The logic of the film's therapist/mentor is the logic of Alger's patrons.
- The fact that Alger, who had only one bestseller in his own lifetime, won his astonishing posthumous celebrity only in the Progressive Era could thus be explained by a different aspect of that era. The "virtue rewarded" narrative was obviously useful in combating the newly interventionist state. But Alger's benefactor figures also played a less obvious role in undermining popular patriarchal individualism and preparing the ethical metamorphosis presupposed by the welfare state's increasing replacement of private with public responsibility its establishment of what would look to many individuals like new zones of dangerous irresponsibility. Rather than celebrating the grasping individualists of Alger's own time, then, Alger's "instructive narrative" would thus be (in Alan Trachtenberg's words) "a fictive analogue to campaigns for reform" (106).
- Adjusting individual ambitions to the obliqueness of an emergent welfare state clearly involved learning a new set of lessons about responsibility, social interdependence, and desire. It should not be shocking to consider that some of these lessons were necessary both to capitalism's emerging corporate form and to the civil/bureaucratic institutions emerging to constrain and contain it, or save it from its own drive to achieve short-term profit at all cost. Nor should it come as a surprise, given the current fragility of such institutions, that we are still in the process of learning them. Indeed, this is arguably one of the functions of the media-begotten celebrity.
- According to P. David Marshall's *Celebrity and Power*, Oprah Winfrey exemplifies television's "familiarization function" (131), a term that refers to

"intimate" content as well as to the familial context in which so much viewing happens. But what is the "familiarity" that Oprah's televisual personality produces? Under analysis, it becomes something more like defamiliarization: an opening up of the family to expert knowledge putatively representing a more general and official view of its welfare. In a show on children bullying their parents, Marshall writes, Oprah characteristically "resolves the apparent impasse of attempting to assess blame by concluding that it is a family problem as opposed to a problem contained within any individual family member" (133)--her version of "It's not your fault." Here, as in most episodes of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, this "form of resolution," which is "pivotal to the narrative construction of the show," occurs by means of the intervention of an outside expert (133). "After hearing from the 'problem guests' and after the guests are asked a series of questions by the studio audience and Oprah herself, an expert is positioned in the mediating role center stage, among the guests" (135-36). Though the expert expresses "the voice of authority," offering a solution to the dilemma of the day, his or her authority "does not provide the necessary closure and resolution of the problem raised in the program. Rather, he or she serves as an essential instrument for the way in which Oprah works the program to a resolution.... Oprah positions herself as, once again, the representative of the audience and, by implication, of the ordinary people. She rewords the professional's advice into language of practicality and usability for the audience" (135-37). Just as the Robin Williams figure in *Good Will Hunting* must win Matt Damon's assent to his informed and authoritative viewpoint (in this case, the need to be cured of a neurotic attachment to the conveniently pathologized working class), so Oprah, in Marshall's words, occupies the role of "therapist" in television's "public talking cure" (143). She mediates between the expert's knowledge and a lay audience, in effect putting across that knowledge to a public whose resistance can be assumed.

- Marshall is not starry-eyed about Oprah's social function, but he sees it--correctly, I think--as an instance of mass-mediated democracy. Hosts like Winfrey and Donahue, he argues, "try to present... various discourses of the excluded and marginal" so as to reintegrate them "into the social mainstream. Oprah and Phil represent a cast of American liberals whose main approach to social problems is articulated through the slogan 'Something should be done about this'" (140-41). Especially given the largely female audience for both shows and the political tendencies of female voters, there is reason to speculate that the absent subject implied by the slogan "Something should be done about this" is the social welfare state.
- "Something should be done about this" is by no means the same message as "Seek to emulate my standard of living." To see these two messages intertwined in a celebrity like Oprah, as they are intertwined (no less paradoxically) in the tales of Horatio Alger, is to see that both the fantasy of upward mobility generally and celebrity-worship in particular offer something more than a trap for the unwary.⁵ Both celebrity-worship and the more general fantasy of upward mobility try to seduce, yes. But both seduce precisely to the degree that, unlike the critique of celebrity, they do

not rely on a fantasmatic self-reliance or a paranoid view of powerful, utterly hostile, morally empty institutions that is the obverse of self-reliance. Rather, the power of celebrity and upward mobility resides in a moderated vision of the relation between individual and institution, one that recognizes that media and state bureaucracies, institutions which incarnate better as well as worse values, also let better and worse values enter into their influence over who rises, how, and why.⁶ What tempts the ambition, according to this view, is not merely spectacular wealth or glory but also the perhaps no less outlandish prospect of **legitimacy**--the hypothesis that individual desire might be blessed with institutional support precisely because its satisfaction aids and abets some version of the general welfare.

- I've laid out here, briefly and schematically, a way of reading upward mobility stories, along with celebrity as one recent endpoint of such stories, against the background of the emergent welfare state. But this line of thinking also has something to say to academics trying to face the general blockage of upward mobility. Along with "something must be done about this," it insists "it's not your fault." And this reading suggests that "it's not your fault" is the basis of a political program.

- Organizing is probably the only way to restore dignity to part-time and temporary work. But organizing will not increase the total number of jobs available for refashioning into stable and dignified ones. And the exhortation to organize can easily start to sound like another version of the exhortation to be self-reliant--a collective version of course, but no less committed to the illusion that the burden of responsibility lies on the self alone.⁷ Foregrounding the intrusion of mediators into the story, whether wishful or sinister or both, is meant to highlight the real historical dispersal of that responsibility, thus pointing out more people to blame but also more people with whom to ally and more venues where alliance can be made to matter. The academic job market depends directly on the willingness of the public to fund higher education, along with other social services. For better or worse, the market for our services is bound up with the legitimacy, power, and good will of the welfare state. Academics share a great many interests with other providers and recipients of social services, from parents worried at the proportion of their children's classes taught by non-tenure track faculty to secondary school teachers who--like university part-timers--would love some equivalent of the sabbatical. But academics cannot mobilize around the defense and extension of the welfare state if we continue to see ourselves as uniquely and heroically condemned to be mavericks, outsiders, anti-bureaucrats, and celebrity-haters.⁸

- Those few academics lucky enough to occupy what Stanley Aronowitz calls "the last good job in America" must of course expect the envy and the satire that their privileges attract. They, or rather we, are legitimate targets, for we are a swing vote; it matters a great deal whether we join the fight against the two-tier system or merely continue to enjoy the fruits of that system. This is where something can be accomplished, and not by berating the much tinier and less representative band of academic stars. Nothing can be expected from reliance on the celebrity as scapegoat,

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for that is merely self-reliance itself, old-fashioned and pre-political, decked out in more fashionable clothes.

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Notes

- [1.](#) For Régis Debray, writing in 1979, media celebrity already occupied the same slot in the French "fall of the intellectuals" narrative that later American jeremiads tended to assign to universities in the academicization-of-intellectual-life story.
- [2.](#) As one bit of evidence among others, consider soundness in the context of earlier university publishing. "Until the late fifties," according to Phil Pochoda, "university presses, though publishing many sound scholarly books, could be characterized fairly as academic vanity presses. Behaving more as printers than publishers, they generally produced, without editing or evaluating, books dropped off by their local faculty, or Ph.D, theses written (and the publishing paid for) by their graduate students. Manuscript reviews by outside readers and a wider search for books outside the home institution only began in earnest in the late fifties" (12).
- [3.](#) Charismatic female lecturers whose personal style helps them build intellectual constituencies (by hinting at felicitous answers, for example, to the question of how intellectual work matters to life) may not possess institutional power, like their old boy predecessors. But what they wield is indeed a form of power, and as such will appear equally extraneous and illicit from the perspective of a putatively pure and unmediated intellectual merit--the perspective from which Socrates objected to the gaudily-dressed, honey-throated rhetor Ion. There may well be grounds for complaint, both about Ion and about the celebrity lecturer. But those complaints will get a better hearing if they do not adopt the all-or-nothing mode of complaints about mediation itself. See Langbauer for a complaint about celebrities in cultural studies that takes this point but draws a different conclusion from it.
- [4.](#) On the connection between the therapeutic world-view, the welfare state, and the erosion of individual accountability, see Lasch. For a useful corrective that enables Lasch's insights to be recoded in a less tragic vein, see Livingston.

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5. Academics would do well to avoid such traps, Jeffrey Williams writes: "The star model, offering name recognition and public appeal, suggests a kind of intellectual Horatio Alger story for those unemployed and underemployed to strive for, at the same time that the actual institutional conditions make that dream all the more improbable" (29).

6. Here a contrast will perhaps be helpful. For Bourdieu, bureaucratic institutions are precisely the truth of upward mobility stories. But according to the "oblate" model in *Homo Academicus*, upward mobility can only mean selling yourself, or selling out, within the total, absolute, and unconditional terms of all-powerful institutions. Originally an oblate was "a child from a poor family entrusted to a religious foundation to be trained for the priesthood" (291 n. 31). Bourdieu adapts the term to refer to children without social capital whose upward mobility depends entirely on the educational institution to which they were entrusted, and who respond to it with unconditional loyalty. "They offer to the academic institution which they have chosen because it chose them, and vice versa, a support which, being so totally conditioned, has something total, absolute, and unconditional about it" (100-101). See Robbins (1997) for further elaboration.

Bourdieu's argument is representative of French sociology generally, where "sociologies of 'reproduction'"--that is, investigations of the state educational apparatus--"have taken the place of a theory of social mobility" (Cuin 227). The fact that the state has a major place, perhaps **the** major place in what amounts to the topic of upward mobility in France, while passing for the very antithesis of that topic in the US, is welcome support for my contention that this antithesis is parochial and misleading, and that state institutions are indeed one place we must look for the secrets of upward mobility.

7. This can also be turned around. Anyone who tried to organize teaching assistants and adjuncts by offering them a self-image in which there was nothing but collective interests and collaborative efforts would quickly discover that, for better or worse, this is a profession (it's not the only one) in which allowance must be made for the excess and incorrectness of individual desire. Only a dreamer would think of trying to eradicate these from professional formation.

8. On academics and bureaucracy, see Miller.

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Published in Postmodern Culture 9:2 February 1999 (online journal); reprinted in Radical History Review, 76:1 (1999), 1-12

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