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Stars in Their Eyes. Notes on the origins of the cult of celebrity
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truly live with them. Celebrity is the enemy of community. It, and the complex society that denies us full being, are the inheritance of tyranny. All must be destroyed.

only surrounds herself with the grossest displays of opulence, including up to 70 personal assistants, limo convoys, and (highly tacky) fur coats and ownbrand perfume, but actually trumpets this too as part of her image. Clearly, we are being transferred here from the realm of the real to the realms of 'Amerikan dreams', peoples' own aspirations being acted out in the person of such individuals. This, too, is why excessive 'rock star'-style behaviour *a la* Paula Yates is also enthusiastically received — as was that of the archaic tyrants even by those they oppressed. In pre-colonial Buganda, the court of the kabaka felt his potency as a ruler declined proportionate to any decline in the number of executions — necessary or not — that he ordered.

Promisingly, identification with celebrities is not total. They are not role models to be followed mindlessly, not least because most people can't afford their product-placed lifestyle options anyway. The fall of celebrities is followed as enthusiastically as their rise, and most people are glad to hear the like of shaved monkey Robbie Williams confess his life as a celebrity has been extremely unhappy. Some of this is pure class hatred — what, apart from fame, makes them any better than us? — but some of it is more than that, a feeling that they are living their lives at our expense, that by living our lives through celebrity surrogates, they have somehow stolen our lives from us. Of course, the reason the likes of Williams are so unhappy is that their own lives are nearly wholly unreal too, their celebrity images carefully cloaking their real, private lives, existences made all the more insecure as their disclosure is bound to contradict the image and destroy it. Like the Big Man, the star is destroyed by debts, this time to reality, though modern 'Big Men' only survive by appropriately modern carefully contrived isolation from their debtors rather than constant contact with them.

It was the Stranglers that sang "No more heroes any more" (amusingly including Leon Trotsky amongst that exalted number), but why is it celebrity persists? Because they are a safety valve for majority's unrealized aspirations ('someone made it — it could be you', etc) and hotel room-trashing behaviour, a money-spinner in fact. As the Situationists acutely noted, we need to really live without these mediations, to live our own dreams. In fact, it is impossible to

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(typically murderous) deeds described, albeit in rather rudimentary terms — a star system, in effect, as well as a war by the privileged few upon the many.

Thoroughly Modern Wo/Man

A peek into Sir Thomas Malory's 16th century *Morte d'Arthur* shows how long this heroic narrative persisted, although at least the proto-*bourgeois* Malory shows the tensions between king Arthur and lesser nobles like Lancelot, the only ones he really bothers to characterise.

The English Civil War a century later was as much about this question of individuality as it was about power. In arguing for absolutism, Charles II insisted he was the Godappointed unique individual, whereas the *bourgeois* Parliamentarians were arguing for a democratisation of individualism to all. They even had laws and sciences based on such individualistic principles — atoms and so forth. Beheading 'Charles the tyrant' didn't end tyranny, of course, it just created millions of personal tyrannies, each wo/man ruling themselves most harshly, each separated in their individuality from the next in a way that would horrify and mystify their original hunter / gather ancestors.

This atomised individualism was ideal for running an economy where people did highly specialised roles (intense division of labour) mediated through a mechanised industrial / productive grid. The trouble was that this sort of individualism created feelings of vast loneliness and powerlessness, people yearning for older forms.

And in the pages of *OK* and *Hello*, the gossip columns of the tabloid press, we have it. Certain individuals have been raised up as celebrities, albeit strangely not those directly wielding power such as politicians and soldiers, even great thinkers, but entertainers and perhaps the more freaky of curiosities, Jerry Springer and *National Enquirer* material. Their nature is paradoxical: they are presented as both exceptional and everywo/man, remote from us yet aspirations to be achieved. Jennifer Lopez well-illustrates this, whose manufactured image is 'just another *Latina* from the *barrio*', yet who not

in this institution the first step made towards individualism. Chiefs are, in fact, the first personalities who emerge from the social mass. Their exceptional situation, putting them beyond the level of others, gives them a distinct physiognomy and accordingly confers individuality upon them. In dominating society, they are no longer forced to follow its movements. Of course, it is from the group that they derive their power, but once power is organised, it becomes autonomous and makes them capable of personal activity. A source of initiative is thus opened which had not existed before then. There is, hereafter, someone who can produce new things and even, in certain measure, deny collective usages. Equilibrium has been broken.

Rather than the individual being bounden to their society, now the individual — at least one very special individual, the king — has society bounded to him. It is by the king's whim that bounty and punishment is distributed, the death of hundreds seen as an appropriate response to any real or imagined (maybe magical/ witchcraft) threat to the king, and the ruler allowed to break deadly taboos such as those against incest or the eating of certain foods forbidden everyone else with near-impunity.

It is precisely this that hunter-gatherers seek to resist so strongly. Even some relatively complex pastoral groups like the Nuer's neighbours, the Kaingang do:[6]

> Although the Kaingang respect power they cannot tolerate any kind of intensification of it: for such intensification is felt by them to be disruptive. Through their insistence on the primary importance of the other person and their failure to reward achievement, the Kaingang have suppressed processes that encourage the concentration of power in the hands of outstanding individuals.

It is under tyranny that we find the emergence of 'heroes', warriors under the king who have songs sung about them, their characters and

[6] ibid., p.302.

Having abandoned her worthy husband for a toy boy, a young woman dies of a heroin overdose, accompanied only by her traumatised 3 year old daughter. The reaction of mid-50s *Daily Mail* readers, a demographic not known for their tolerance of druggies and single mothers? Fascination, almost adulation — certainly celebration of the woman that died. Of course, she wasn't just any single mother, she was Paula Yates, a celebrity.

Perplexed by this double-standard on behalf of my then-colleagues, I asked what was it Paula Yates was famous for anyway? They seemed pretty vague about it, despite knowing an alarming amount of biographical detail about a woman I'd have thought they had almost nothing in common with. Was it her presenting a bad 1980s yoof pop programme, The Word, badly; getting off with Aussie shag artist, Michael Hutchens, who subsequently managed to hang himself whilst wanking in a closet; being the unacknowledged daughter of another nondescript bygone entertainer, Hughie Green? It seems she was somehow just famous for being famous. None of this seemed sufficient reason for them to suspend their usual judgemental attitudes. I decided to turn to anthropology for an explanation, to find the origins of this pathology.

Before They Were Famous

There is no celebrity in hunter / gatherer, band-scale societies. Farley Mowat observed that whilst individuality was greatly prized amongst the Inuit he lived with, individuals as such are not cherished.[1]

> This is the first great law of the land: that a man's business is sacred unto himself, and that it is no part of his neighbours duty to interfere in any way unless the community is endangered.

The San (Bushmen) are more intolerant of individual prowess, as pointed out by Kevin Tucker.[2] The San are probably the only people

[1] Farley Mowat's People of the Deer (Joseph Michael, 1954), p.173. Male-biased archaicisms are his.

on the planet that still use the exhaustion hunt, one man literally running down game until it collapses with exhaustion. When its meat is returned to the camp, the likely also decidedly knackered hunter isn't met with praise, instead with taunts and demands he hurry up and distribute the meat quickly and fairly to the rest of the band. In Western civilized society, such behaviour would hardly be deemed good manners, but to the San, it is a way of stopping an exceptional person (one fit enough to run down game) getting above himself, feeling he is more special than the community as a whole — and deserving of greater privileges.

The band is so highly prized as each person in it can only survive through mutual effort, either when particular people are too young, old or sick to fend for themselves or when a task needs doing collectively. This extends to a pooling of property — what Bookchin calls *usufruct*, that property is only private when actually used by someone and someone else's when they take it up in their turn.[3] Band people define themselves by the group. Australian aborigines believed that those removed from their bands were effectively 'dead' (though they're most pleased and surprised when they return from police custody or wherever) and Hartmut Heller observed that the Hadza of East Africa strive to be physically in contact with each other at all times. The idea of people sleeping alone and 'personal space' in similar respects is alien and most disturbing to them.

Big Men — Come On Down!

The German sociologist Max Weber argued that the first forms of authority were charismatic. By sheer force of personality, some individuals managed to assert themselves above and beyond their society. This is a complex question and here is not really the place to explore it at length. Regarding celebrity, the 'big men' of New Guinea are a useful touchstone though. The Tairora aren't hunter / gatherers, they are horticulturalists where there is personal wealth is based on holding small gardens and pigs. This wealth allows for the rise of disinct individuals:[4]

> The Big Man's leadership accrues from his wealth, his personal charisma, and sometimes from his sheer physical power and size.

The Big Man uses his pigs to serve up huge banquets, obligating those partaking of them to him. However, eventually he presses too much on these debtors' obligations and is then typically ambushed and killed by them. This is a salutary reminder of the hunter / gatherer principle that however powerful one person is, s/he is never more powerful than the group as a whole. Marshall Sahlins suggests that in New Guinea, societies like the Tairora go through cycles of Big Men and their overthrow by people disadvantaged by the consequences of such individualism for everyone else.

It's rare for a Big Man to have influence over more than 2,500 people due to the limits of personal charisma and communications in New Guinea's mountainous heart-land. This sort of celebrity is a bit like that around the more authentic punk or country bands, based on personal contact with fans who don't like the idea of band members 'thinking they're better', getting too much above them.

Tyranny — Celebrity Proper

Kingship arises when power can be delegated, village headmen (sort of like the Big Men above) acting as local governors and tax / tribute collectors for one ruling over them, their king. The king is inherently despotic, a tyrant, at this stage of societal development. As Weber noted.[5]

> Rather than dating the effacement of the individual from the institution of despotic authority, we must, on the contrary, see

[2] Personal communication via Coalition Against Civilization, PO Box 835, Greensburg, PA 15601, USA.

[3] Murray Bookchin's The Ecology of Freedom (Cheshire, 1982), chap. 5.

[4] Harold Barclay's People Without Government (Cienfuegos, 1982), p.66.

[5] Eli Sagan's At the Dawn of Tyranny (Vintage, 1985), p.301.