

P. David Marshall, **Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture**, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014, 283 pp., \$26 (paperback).

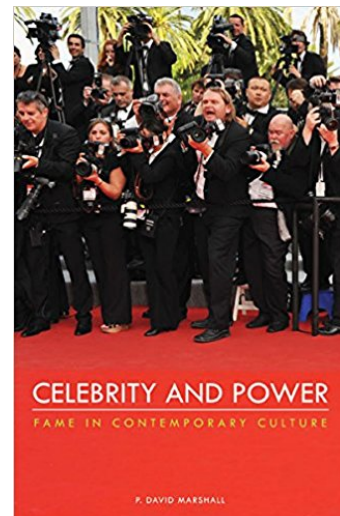
Reviewed by
Swapnil Rai
Brown University, USA

Celebrity has always been an element of American politics . . . Take Donald Trump: the essence of his fame is no different from that of, say, Paris Hilton. He didn't orbit the earth or win an Oscar or cure athlete's foot. He used other peoples' money to buy real estate, and one time pretended to beat up Vince McMahon at Wrestlemania. That's it. . . . He is, in other words, famous for being famous. (Currie, 2017, p. 1)

As celebrity and politics get increasingly intertwined in American culture, P. David Marshall's exploration of celebrity power is perhaps more relevant than when it was first published nearly two decades ago. He brings to our attention the dialectical tension between our understanding of celebrity and celebrities' popularity as ephemeral, fleeting, yet their personas possess significant influence and power. How do we resolve or explain this dialectical tension? The core questions that Marshall's **Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture** address are, What is the signification of celebrity in contemporary culture, and how much power do they possess in influencing the public sphere and altering the public discourse?

Marshall's revised introduction to the book foregrounds the contemporary shift to a networked online culture that creates a new kind of public intimacy with celebrities. Within the new online paradigm, the nature of engagement with celebrity is more personal and constant. Marshall also elaborates on how the techniques of fame have percolated the entertainment world as well as politics, bringing to the fore the critical debate of our current era, the political celebrity. He rightly emphasizes that the boundaries among politics, entertainment, and celebrity in contemporary culture are blurred. The book is divided into three parts. The first part delves into the core arguments. What is celebrity, how do we conceptualize the audience, and what tools do we use to analyze celebrity power?

In chapter 1, "Tracing the Meaning of the Public Individual," Marshall traces the genealogy of the term *celebrity* and its connotations embodied in the 18th and 19th centuries, and he juxtaposes it to the contemporary understanding of celebrity. He parses the basic perception of celebrity, how celebrities operate in today's world, and what kind of power they embody. A few key ideas that emerge from this discussion are that celebrities possess a surface power that is a constant negotiation among the audience/public, the media, and the celebrity him- or herself. In addition, the phenomenon of celebrity in the Western context has its roots in philosophical ideas of individualism, which in turn is a product of



capitalism. Celebrity discourse and power therefore function effectively within a democratic, consumer culture in which the mass audience becomes central in determining the value and worth of an individual.

While the first chapter is about how certain individuals come to embody a different value and power, the second chapter, "Conceptualizing the Collective: The Mob, the Crowd, the Mass, and the Audience," focuses on the collective or the masses that create the celebrity. Marshall traces the early history of the power of the masses to the French Revolution and the birth of the bourgeoisie. He emphasizes that the ways in which the collective is understood and conceptualized in different phases has a bearing on how celebrity is delineated and deployed in society. All this works in conjunction with political, economic, and cultural power structures.

Chapter 3, "Tools for the Analysis of the Celebrity as a Form of Cultural Power," explicates the ways in which we can unpack the nature of celebrity power. Within the consumerist-capitalist paradigm, celebrities permeate our social world to an inordinate degree, so much so that everything we experience is filtered through the celebrity lens. Marshall weaves in Weber and Bourdieu to explore why and how an "irrational" form of power such as celebrity power holds so much clout in contemporary society. He expounds on institutional configurations, social relations, and the fans that work together to imbue celebrities with meaning and symbolic power, a power that is constantly mutating, with meanings and signification always in flux.

Part II of the book presents the reader with case studies from various industries such as film, television, and music.

The fourth chapter, "The Cinematic Apparatus and the Construction of the Film Celebrity," analyses the genealogy of the film star/celebrity. Marshall points out that the industry's roots in vaudeville and theater that already had a cultural industry created around the star were critical in establishing "the star" as a key figure and the economic center in the film industry. The star persona is built on consumer capitalism, and the extraordinarily luxurious lifestyles of "stars as consumers" feed into their affective power and star identity. The affective appeal of the star as a semiotic sign, though, really vests in the people—viewers and fans that consume the star discourse. While most of Marshall's analysis about the working of star power in the film industry is very pertinent, he does not contend with the value of lasting stardom. The term *celebrity* deals with fleeting fame, so how do we then reconcile the lasting star power of Meryl Streep or Tom Cruise (used as a case study in the book) with that of Katie Holmes, Tina Fey, or Kristen Wiig? Within Marshall's framework, all of them work within the same paradigm of "star celebrities," and that leaves out an important distinction, especially within the context of film stardom.

Chapter 5, "Television's Construction of the Celebrity," and chapter 6, "The Meanings of the Popular Music Celebrity: The Construction of Distinctive Authenticity," look at TV and music celebrities, respectively. Contrary to the film star/celebrity, whose star aura and appeal is constructed around his or her distance from the spectator and an air of enigma and mystery that surrounds his or her life, the TV celebrity is all about familiarity. A TV celebrity is familiar, acceptable to everyone, and a constant presence within the home. Marshall weaves together the element of domestic technology and the television industry business model that perpetuates consumer capitalism to create relatable TV personalities such as Oprah,

personalities that are “one of us” and that embody an affective attachment to the audience. These TV personalities then act as “cultural interpreters” for the “masses,” making sense of the world for them, working within the capitalist–consumerist paradigm. The TV celebrity is all about familiarity and populism; the music celebrity, on the other hand, is crystallized around the idea of authenticity. Authentic music and authentic voice are closely tied to technology. Marshall provides a great historical overview of changes in music technology and the evolution of the ideas of authenticity in music, which are directly tied to the persona of the music celebrity.

The third part of the book has two chapters. Chapter 7, “The System of Celebrity,” presents an analysis of how celebrity is configured into modern subjectivity. It looks at the ways in which the system is structured to evoke audience identification and affective responses to the celebrity figure. Marshall brings home his basic arguments about industrial structure and technological changes within the capitalistic consumer-driven marketplace that attach different meanings to the celebrity sign and how it is understood and consumed.

The eighth chapter, “The Embodiment of Affect in Political Culture,” is the most critical chapter in the context of the current political climate and the rise of populist leaders around the globe. Marshall presents a pertinent argument about celebrity culture and a new form of public subjectivity driven by capitalism being configured into the political discourse. He gives the reader critical tools of analysis and the language to articulate the rise of political celebrities like Obama as well as the celebrity-turned-politician like Trump. The aura around politicians and their narrative construction all utilize similar strategies from the celebrity system and create political leaders as “legitimation commodities.” They are able to create affect yet reinforce their individuality, distinction, and aura at the same time by effectively utilizing the celebrity system that has been so well established by the entertainment industry.

Marshall’s observations about the convergence of political culture and celebrity make his work topical. Although his analysis focuses on North America, the rise of similar structures and leaders internationally makes his work pertinent for analyses of political leaders in different contexts. It would be interesting to analyze the workings of political public relations in the Global South in democratic contexts like India or Brazil. Overall, Marshall’s book provides a brilliant analysis of the celebrity system in the entertainment industry and beyond. The few aspects that Marshall’s work does not account for are technological and platform convergence and the ways in which it impacts how celebrities are perceived. Moreover, it does not make a distinction between lasting stardom and transient fame that the term *celebrity* connotes. If Oprah’s stardom transcends television or if Meryl Streep’s aura outlives other stars of her generation, how should we articulate their stardom in relation to others?

Reference

Currie, R. (2017, March 9). Has celebrity become the point of American politics? *Signature*. Retrieved from <http://www.signature-reads.com/2017/03/has-celebrity-become-the-point-of-american-politics/>