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CONVERGENCE OF POPULAR CULTURE AND POLITICS IN THE USA DURING THE 2008 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN

Key words: Barack Obama, celebrity, popular culture, political discourse, presidential election.

Introduction

This article is designed to explore the convergence of popular culture and politics during the presidential election campaign of 2008. The article shall commence with the clarification of the meaning of the concepts of popular culture and celebrity, and will continue with a short overview of the existing theoretical framework dealing with different approaches to fame and celebrity culture. The analytical part of the article will be devoted to the examination of the narrative structure of the celebrity persona of Barack Obama created by media during the last presidential campaign. The analysis shall be based on a wide range of popular culture texts: newspaper articles, campaign memos, interviews, advertisements and TV reports. The aim of this article is to show how the saturation coverage of celebrity changes political discourse, and how the concept of fame used in the campaign facilitates the reading of celebrity as a derogatory force which downgrades serious politics.

Barack Obama in an interview for the Rolling Stone magazine entitled "A Conversation with Barack Obama" says that popular culture "both shapes and reflects what's happening in the country as a whole" (qtd. in Wenner 2008). His remark aptly reflects the belief that popular culture nowadays with its discursive framing of social issues is at the center of debates concerning contemporary culture. In fact, it is a focal point for the discussion of current political issues and provides a rich conceptual repertoire for their interpretation. However, it is often the case that the boundary between popular culture and politics is blurred or even nonexistent as the authors of *Celebrity Politics* claim when advocating that "Politics is popular culture" (West and Orman 2003: ix). This tenet is the starting point for the investigation of the convergence of popular culture and politics. The aim of this

project is to focus on one particular aspect of the contemporary restyling of politics, namely the dissemination of celebrities in political context and the celebrification of politicians.

Entertainment and media have undoubtedly intruded on the sphere of politics. However, while “manufactured pop has adopted some of the paraphernalia and conventions of political electioneering, politics has become more of a ‘culture industry’, increasingly resembling a talent show or popularity contest”, as Corner and Pels claim. Thus, “star-gazing and infotainment have become equally central as they are to the tabloids and the celebrity magazines” (2006: 2). In this vein, it should come as no surprise that contemporary methods of political communication are based in the particular culture of the time. The contemporary one is pervaded with media generated personas; therefore, the interpolation of ubiquitous phenomenon of celebrity into politics reflects a general trend in contemporary culture. As Liesbet van Zoonen believes: “Politics has to be connected to the everyday culture of its citizens otherwise it becomes an alien space, occupied by strangers no one cares and bothers about” (2005: 3). This everyday culture which constitutes politics could thus be defined as popular culture which is:

“a site where the construction of everyday life may be examined. The point of doing this is not only academic – that is, as an attempt to understand a process or practice – it is also political, to examine the power relations that constitute this form of everyday life and thus reveal the configurations of interests its construction serves”.

(Turner 1996: 6)

Reflecting contemporary popular discourse, the unprecedented dominance of celebrity in contemporary culture finds its manifestation in two major perspectives on this phenomenon. In a “populist democracy” approach, celebrities represent a process of social leveling (Evans 2005: 14). This perspective reflects a Warholian ‘15 minutes of fame’ for everybody. Moreover, it underscores a positive role of this kind of fame, which contributes to effective democracy as it perceives fame as a positive phenomenon connected with personal freedom, equality and self-made men. Leo Braudy considers the lack of accomplishment, which is an integral part of the generic understanding of celebrity, to be functional as “the less you actually had to do in order to be famous, the more truly famous you are for yourself, your spirit, your soul, your inner nature” (1997: 555). Championing being famous for yourself is the epitome of modern ‘DYI’ fame. Furthermore, the ‘populist democracy’ approach to fame finds merit in celebrity on the basis of the fact that it serves as a source of cohesion in the society. Ponce de Leon claims that in the culture of celebrity we celebrate “democratic and collectivist

values connected with the ideal of true success and contrary to the atomistic individualism of capitalist market economy” (2002: 281).

Accordingly, in the vein of the populist approach, the media saturated political culture can be perceived as a positive phenomenon. From “an enabling perspective”, presented by John Corner and Dick Pels in their collection of essays called “Media and the Restyling of Politics”, the media are “necessary agents of the practice of modern, popular democracy” because “their circulation of knowledge, presentation of diverse views and critical scrutiny of those in power will act as a guarantor of political health” (2006: 3). Another optimistic argument for “performative politics” is the fact that it first attracts and then engages the audience. The politics of personal style “may generate democratic effects, by expanding the platforms for engagement and citizenship, and by offering forms of popular appeal and emotional identification that cut thorough technocratic some-screens and institutional inertia” (Cornel and Pels 2006: 10).

The second group of perspectives on celebrity culture called the “cultural decline” or “mass culture” approach looks at contemporary form of fame from a different angle. This critical approach maintains that celebrity is a symptom of cultural decline. It assumes meritorious ground for fame in the past when fame was scarce, and claims that celebrity is “empty fame” devoid of any merit or accomplishment and as such it degrades cultural discourse. Daniel Boorstin (1992) with his seminal work “The Image: a Guide to Pseudo-Events in America” asserts that in the past fame was synonymous with greatness and now the household names are no longer heroes but artificial new products, ‘human pseudo-events’. This negative approach to celebrity is shared by Richard Schickel (2000) who describes celebrity as a distorting force in a society fostering the illusion of intimacy between the favored ones and the unknown mass, a type of “pornography of the spirit”.

In accordance with this line of reasoning, the media saturated political culture is perceived as a negative phenomenon in which there is a dominance of image over substance. In this “disabling” perspective, democracy is undermined by “the substitution of entertainment for knowledge” in which political values are replaced by those of the media (Corner and Pels 2006: 4). In such a case, important issues are downgraded, watered down and distorted because of the personalization of politics, in which image is more important than substance. Such personalization of politics takes place when “powerful sets of values that are historically bound up with celebrity, such as intimacy, confession and revelation of personal lives, are ‘leaked’ into political life more generally” (Evans 2005: 48).

Both approaches to contemporary form of fame indicate a widespread critical belief that the development of celebrity has an ever-increasing influ-

ence on different spheres of life. Through celebrities the media are believed to shape the reality and convey the way in which people see and interpret the world. Through the symbolic meaning of celebrity image, the media create polysemic texts which can be analyzed in a hermeneutic way, housing a number of different discourses, discourses which are interpreted and appropriated by different power groups within the society. Leo Braudy in his seminal book "The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and its History" accounts for this appropriation of celebrity fame into contemporary politics in the following way:

"In aristocratic societies, the political system to a great extent had determined the system of public fame. In mass democratic or totalitarian societies of the twentieth century, however, it is fame that primarily determines political power. Through both the totalitarian "cult of the personality" and the democratic appeal to the crowd, the leader (along with lesser politician) often stresses his symbolic significance more than his actual policies." (1997: 556)

What Leo Braudy describes in this short excerpt is the issue of the "personalization" of politics, which gave birth to the concept of the "celebrity politician". Liesbet van Zoonen in "Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge" proposes to "consider the contemporary politician in terms of the persona he or she manufactures from the equally important ingredients of politics and celebrity culture" (2005: 17). The desired merger of these two is the "public personality". Also P. David Marshall, while discussing the relationship between politicians and celebrities, points to the fact that "One of the critical points of convergence of politics and entertainment is their construction of public personalities" (1997: 203). Furthermore, in his book "Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture", Marshall advances an argument that the political leader and other forms of celebrity "are forms of subjectivity that are sanctioned by the culture and enter the symbolic realm of providing meaning and significance for the culture" (1997: 19).

There is a prevalent sense that the dissemination of celebrities in politics provides meaning and significance for the audience because its function is to "to make a highly complex, and sometimes rather opaque, world simpler by furnishing it with a 'human' or personalized dimension" (Evans 2005: 43). In other words, celebrities organize the perception of the world for us and humanize intricate issues. By doing it, they provide a point of identification and facilitate understanding of the issues in question. However, the potential for criticism of such a convergence of popular culture and politics is not difficult to foresee, especially from the culture decline perspective.

Nonetheless, J. R. Cutler, the producer of the political reality show "American Candidate", in response to criticism connected with the trivialization of political issues in his program, retorted as follows: "Far from trivializing, far from blurring the line we celebrate, in a fairly romantic way, the notion of politics and electoral politics" (qtd. in Stewart 2004). It seems that no event can better illustrate appropriation of political electioneering into popular culture and humanization of politics than the Showtime's Network reality series, "American Candidate". This televised political popularity contest has been designed to choose a person who has the qualities to become the President of the United States. Ten contestants vie for the \$200,000 prize and the chance to address the nation on TV. Each week, they perform the same tasks as real politicians: go around the country, speak at rallies, and hold press conferences. They win the episode on the basis of the number of telephone calls in their support. The program is an excellent example of the convergence of the sphere of politics and entertainment not only in the way it brings "nonpoliticos" into the enactment of fake presidential primaries, but also in the way it uses well-known political spin doctors and famous people to legitimize the show.

To start with, one of the major assets of the show is its creator R. J. Cutler, who was a producer of D. A. Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus's "The War Room," the behind-the-scenes documentary about Bill Clinton's 1992 Presidential campaign focusing on the activities of spin doctors James Carville and George Stephanopoulos. Secondly, the "American Candidate" features a number of well-known political experts advising the candidates. However, as Jennifer Lee (2004) points out in her New York Times article entitled "I Am a Political Consultant and I Play One on TV": "instead of operating behind the scenes, as they do in ordinary elections, in "American Candidate" they were all paid to be both strategists and characters, on-screen players in the unfolding action". The name-brand political consultants who decided to take part in the show include such names as: Joe Trippi, Howard Dean's campaign manager; Tony Fabrizio, a former pollster for Bob Dole; Rich Bond, a former chairman of the Republican National Committee; Frank Luntz, a Republican pollster, and Carter Eskew, a top strategist in the Al Gore 2000 presidential campaign.

The popularity contest reality show in the vein of "American Idol" is an excellent example of the convergence of popular culture and politics. One of the political consultants on the reality series, Carter Eskew, compares the presidential primaries to "one big, extended reality show where people are getting voted off" (qtd. in Lee 2004). Joe Trippi, in turn, comes to believe that "reality television was a suitable home for electoral politics, the elimination game that predates "Survivor" and "The Apprentice." (qtd. in Lee 2004) but

this time “contestants consume political strategy instead of bugs” (qtd. in Keveney 2004). Frank Luntz goes even further claiming that “In one sense, the reality television was more real than real life. The candidate actually lived or died by their own performance, as opposed to campaigns, which have a lot of external influences” (qtd. in Lee 2004).

Such a refashioning of popular culture and politics has far reaching consequences for the way in which political discourse is conducted. One of them is the trivialization of politics; however, Martin Kaplan, an associate dean of University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication claims that “elements of the news media already work to transform politics into “entertainment and punditry” „ (qtd. in Keveney 2004). Nonetheless, potential criticism that the show might muddy the waters between politics and entertainment is hard to deny. In response to the above argument, J. R. Cutler says that the line between these two areas „has been blurred probably since the tabloids made vicious fun of Adams and Jefferson in the first contested election we had after George Washington” (qtd. in Stewart 2004).

Undoubtedly, the “line” has been blurred; media and celebrities have become an integral part of political life, especially since the presidency of Bill Walker Clinton and his appearance on the “Arsenio Hall Show”. However, the recent developments show a drastic change in the perception of the “celebrity-in-chief” president and the White House. It seems that the love affair with the ubiquitous celebrity rhetoric started on July 30, 2008, when a groundbreaking television advertisement titled “Celeb” was released by the campaign of the republican presidential candidate John McCain. In this video, presidential contender Barack Obama is referred to as the „biggest celebrity in the world”. What is even more significant for the subsequent use of the celebrity discourse, the ad shows the footage from Obama’s speech in Berlin with people chanting “Obama, Obama” and thus suggesting a rock star adulation, and features images of pop star Britney Spears and socialite Paris Hilton reeling across the screen. “He’s the biggest celebrity in the world. But is he ready to lead?” says the ad’s narrator against the background of throngs screaming the name “Obama”. The narrative structure of this advertisement creates a storyline corresponding to the imagery used for the presentation of a rock-star rather than a politician. By juxtaposing the image of the presidential candidate with the most recognizable and least liked celebrity signs of Britney and Paris, Obama’s leadership skills are called into question and, thus, the ad’s imagery highlights his lack of accomplishment. The advertisement establishes a narrative of empty fame by associating the Obama persona with celebrity “a person who is known for his well-knownness” (1992: 57), as the most famous definition by Daniel Boorstin

asserts. Bubble-gum celebrities Britney Spears and Paris Hilton are known exactly for the sole reason of being visible because they are “‘names’ who, once made by news, now make news for themselves” (Boorstin 1992: 61).

The argument of Obama’s lack of experience and necessary leadership skills is incorporated in the narrative texts created by McCain Campaign. The commercial was followed by the memo issued by Rick Davis, McCain Campaign Manager. This memo, entitled “Barack Obama’s Celebrity”, tries to establish the narrative which, according to Tom Bevan (2008), presupposes that “Obama is a popular, presumptuous poser whose lofty rhetoric is at odds with his real world accomplishments and experience”. Rick Davies (2008) accuses Obama of egotism, arrogance, and being famous. He writes:

“Barack Obama is the biggest celebrity in the world, comparable to Tom Cruise, Britney spears and Paris Hilton. As he told Congressional Democrats yesterday, he has become the “symbol” for the world’s aspirations for America and that we are now at “the moment... that the world is waiting for.”

(Memo)

Furthermore, Davis uses popularity as the argument against Obama claiming that “Only a celebrity of Barack Obama’s magnitude could attract 200,000 fans in Berlin who gathered for the mere opportunity to be in his presence. These are not supporters or even voters, but fans fawning over The One”.

Rick Davis was not the first one to refer to celebrity status of the presidential candidates as the John Edwards Campaign, bragging about defeating Hillary Rodham Clinton, issued “The State of the Race Memo” slamming Obama and Clinton for being „celebrity candidates”. Issued on January 4, 2008, the Edward’s Campaign Memo says as follows:

“The Democratic Party should be the party of the people. The January 8th New Hampshire primary will be an election – not an auction. Just look at the results of the first contest: two celebrity candidates spend \$200 million against a candidate who’s got an unstoppable message of fighting for the middle class”.

The John Edwards Campaign uses the term “celebrity” in a negative way. However, in comparison with the meaning of celebrity employed by the McCain campaign, the discourse imbedded in this memo has different connotations. While Rick Davies emphasizes the “affective” aspect of the celebrity phenomenon, John Edward’s Campaign associates celebrity status with

elitism, being a part of the “power system” which manipulates ordinary people. Such an approach to celebrity is nothing new as it reflects the long-standing attitude which maintains that celebrities are used to control the society, in Marshall’s words, celebrities are considered to be “attempts to contain the mass” (1997: 243).

Undoubtedly, the use of celebrity as a key factor in the race for the White House is a recent development in the history of “official politics”. However, the problem of convergence of popular culture and politics is by no means a new phenomenon. As early as in 1944 sociologist Leo Lowenthal in his essay entitled “The Triumph of Mass Idols” examined the evolution of popular biographies. On the basis of his research, Lowenthal concluded that the focus of media coverage had shifted from the heroes of the past, which he called “idols of production”, to the “idols of consumption” who were related to the sphere of leisure (2006: 130). Neil Postman, in turn, in his “Amusing Ourselves to Death” warns that “Television frees politicians from the limited field of their expertise. Political figures may show up anywhere, at anytime, doing nothing, without being thought out of place. Which is to say they have become assimilated into the general television culture as celebrities” (1985: 135). This argument raised many years ago succinctly reflects the situation of “celebrity politicians”.

The current intersection of Hollywood type of entertainment and politics could be very clearly observed during the last presidential campaign, in which the term celebrity was used as a weapon against the contenders. In a CNN report entitled “Politics Back in Popular Culture” Jennifer Westhoven points to the fact the major focus of tabloids is no longer on celebrity drama but presidential politics. This tendency can be symbolized by the appearance of the eight-page cover story about Barack Obama in the issue of People magazine right next to a story detailing Lindsay Lohan's relationship with her new girlfriend, Samantha Ronson.

That is why, it should come as no surprise that the U.S. presidential race turns candidates into celebrities as politics has become a pop culture phenomenon. With the advent of Barack Obama as “a celebrity-in-chief”, “a pin-up-president”, “megacelebrity”, “a pop culture star/icon” and “a presidential idol”, we have entered a new era of celebrity politics of pure spectacle. Such a celebritisation of politicians results in the re-fashioning of politics, turning it into an aesthetic exercise when image has overtaken reality, and the truth is submerged in the sea of irrelevance. In the mediagenic culture, fame and celebrities function as a meta-discourse that shapes social and everyday life.

Abstract

This article is designed to explore the convergence of popular culture and politics during the presidential election campaign of 2008. The article shall commence with the clarification of the meaning of the concepts of popular culture and celebrity, and will continue with a short overview of the existing theoretical framework dealing with different approaches to fame and celebrity culture. The analytical part of the article will be devoted to the examination of the narrative structure of the celebrity persona of Barack Obama created by media during the last presidential campaign. The analysis shall be based on a wide range of popular culture texts: newspaper articles, campaign memos, interviews, advertisements and TV reports. The aim of this article is to show how the saturation coverage of celebrity changes political discourse, and how the concept of fame used in the campaign facilitates the reading of celebrity as a derogatory force which downgrades serious politics.

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