

Conclusions

The public culture of a society is a forum where power in its various forms, including meaning and aesthetics, is elaborated and made authoritative.

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Politics is the Entertainment Branch of Industry

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I opened this study with a photograph of Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks giving the Fascisti salute while reminiscing about their May 1926 meeting with the Duce and the memory of his exemplary personal authority. After the discussions in later chapters about the many hagiographic profiles devoted to Mussolini, we can now recognize just how familiar with such views the two stars must have been. Even before meeting the Duce, Pickford praised his personality much more than his political successes. “He must be a true artist,” she told a reporter that April, describing Mussolini’s broad appeal. “You can tell that from his preface to the biography by Margaret [*sic*] Sarfatti, wherein he says he ‘enjoys the feeling of universality that he belongs to all, and yet belongs to none.’”³ The Hollywood couple never again met the Duce, but Pickford must have continued to appreciate other celebratory profiles of him. As late as 1934, she addressed a rally of Fascist sympathizers held in New York City on the anniversary of the March on Rome by reiterating her praise: “Italy has always produced great men,” she declared, “and when she needed one most Mussolini was there. Viva Fascismo! Viva Il Duce!”⁴

In this work, I have argued that the two Hollywood icons’ public encounter with Mussolini was more than an anecdotal occurrence. It signified, instead, the American public’s growing fascination for authoritative popular and political actors. In past chapters, I have drawn the contours of this phenomenon by interlacing two 1920s case studies. I have researched and compared the ways in which the Italian dictator became seen as a charming and romanticized master of anti-Bolshevik governance in America with the ways in which, in the very same years, Hollywood actor Rudolph Valentino rose to fame as an exemplar of forceful and romantic leadership.

I initially availed myself mostly of press sources and films. American newspapers and periodicals, as well as film trade journals, extensively covered both men’s meteoric rise to fame. Several Valentino films and a significant volume of newsreel footage of Mussolini were easily available. When venturing into the secondary

literature directly related to the actor and the dictator, however, I looked in vain for passages that offered a substantial discussion of *both* figures. The duo's popularity has traditionally been explored by two separate disciplines, film history and political history, that have rarely engaged in a sustained or systematic dialogue about popular culture's relationship with dictators and autocrats—and vice versa. Specifically, existing studies of film stars and dictators have rarely taken a comparative approach, preferring instead to extract metaphors and anecdotes from the mines of film scenes, sober or sensationalized biographies, and all kinds of press reports.⁵ The scarcity of such works is unsurprising. Historically, dictators do not appreciate sharing the spotlight in their own country, and they tend to discourage any competition, as the literature on film stardom in Fascist Italy reveals. More comparative in nature, a few studies have focused on different stars in a single national film culture,⁶ or on two, or even three, dictators (or national leaders).⁷ A wealth of studies in different languages has also become available on the "cinemas of dictators"—that is, on film productions under totalitarian regimes. These are typically classified by each individual nation's most dominant personality.⁸ The literature on film stardom in autocratic regimes, however, may not appear entirely appropriate to the U.S. situation even though the abundance of authoritarian public figures who emerged in interwar America (e.g., Father Charles Coughlin, Huey Long) may suggest otherwise. In fact, the American popularity of Mussolini, observed vis-à-vis the rise of film stardom as a key instrument of public opinion management, prompted me to consider the extensive positive response to figures of charismatic authority in a democratic context.

Over the course of this work, I sought to document the historical intersections between the Divo and the Duce in pivotal moments, including their public confrontation over Valentino's plan to acquire American citizenship and the Fascists' belated attempt to attach themselves to Valentino's revered memory. No matter how telling such individual instances were, however, my most compelling finding was that attributes of political and romantic leadership extensively overlapped and even constituted each other. Discovered in articles, biographical profiles, interviews, and cartoons, these intersections reveal a commonality of personal traits that revolve around the notion of seductive authority. In spite of their antidemocratic and misogynistic pronouncements, or rather by virtue of them, both the film star and the dictator aspired to a degree of mass approbation that bordered on the plebiscitary.⁹

Even more remarkably, my research has revealed that the two men's appeal to American public opinion was a heavily mediated one. Valentino and Mussolini's American images were built up by scores of individuals operating on both sides of the Atlantic. These publicists came from a variety of institutional and personal backgrounds and worked, sometimes overtly and sometimes clandestinely, in the service of a diverse set of interests. They often operated across purposes. As a result, rather than describing as inevitable and systematic the emergence of a

relationship of plebiscitarian approval between the Divo and the Duce on the one side and American moviegoers and citizens on the other, I found it more fitting and compelling to detail the accomplishments and missteps made by producers, publicists, journalists, financiers, and diplomats in advancing their popularity. While on screen, Valentino rarely played the role of the impenitent Sheik, but the imprint of his most commercially successful film turned out to be what made publicity campaigns either succeed or fail, even after his death. Similarly, when the regime's Italian and American handlers focused their promotion of Fascism on the Duce's bodily feats and personal leadership instead of his politics, they succeeded—at least for about a decade—in constructing an appealingly masculine model for American audiences.

This comparative lens has helped identify an instructive, if necessarily unsystematic, initial convergence of publicity practices involving mass cultural industries—film, publishing, and press—with financial and political institutions. The cultural and political *promotion* of Valentino and Mussolini's plebiscitarian consensus, in fact, achieved significant results. While their foreignness might have constituted, in theory, an impediment to the marketing of their charismatic and authoritarian personae, it created, in fact, unique promotional opportunities. The Divo's and the Duce's forceful personalities, made to convey Latin bluntness and the gravitas of ancient Roman history, facilitated a cosmopolitan and authoritarian reimagining of American male leadership. The simultaneous politicization of the Hollywood star and the aestheticization of the Italian dictator on American soil revealed the appeal that authoritarian leader-celebrities held over a diverse mass citizenry that was adjusting to the changes wrought by the war, by the extension of suffrage, and the advent of mass culture.

By bringing film and political history into close dialogue through the lens of publicity and public opinion management, the conclusions of this study pertain not only to either film or political history. Instead, they address both disciplinary camps within the domain of American public culture. *The Divo and the Duce* ultimately argues that celebrity culture in modern democracy grew out of the tension between expanded mass access to consumption, information, and civil rights and the well-promoted personal appeal of (male) leadership figures. The resonances between the two men's carefully crafted public personae have underscored the paradox that a public with expanded civic and consumer opportunities is also a public primed to embrace a celebrity's iconic authority.

Applied to the world's most exemplary democracy, this statement may sound disturbing. Celebrity studies has often linked celebrities' "distinctive discursive quality" to "the twinned discourses of modernity: democracy and capitalism."¹⁰ But even though "the celebrity as public individual" and "as a marketable commodity" "serves as a powerful type of legitimation of the political economic model of exchange and value," the political economy of celebrity culture also rests on models of civic identity.¹¹ Stressing the link between celebrity and commodity in

a liberal economy, in other words, does not exhaust celebrities' political dimension, though it may well end up masking it. Mussolini and Valentino, in their outspoken endorsement of nondemocratic governmentality, show that the authority that commercial society grants a celebrity affects much more than the dynamics of free economic exchange. It also affects public discourse about authority and citizenship.

Key civic consequences of such mass mobilization of film and political authority in American public culture included the insertion of private interests in public affairs and, attached to it, the spectacularization of political discourse. In *Liberty and the News* (1920), Walter Lippmann critiqued the emergence of a new balance of constitutional power in which the influence of the press on public opinion and, consequently, on the executive, resulted in a "plebiscite autocracy, or government by newspapers."¹² Since public opinion is collected and even manufactured by "special groups which act as extra-legal organs of government," the government is shaped far more by the pressure of these groups than by the elected representatives of the American people.¹³ The result is a "shift in the locus of sovereignty" or, in other words, the effective marginalization of the public from government authority.¹⁴

Lippmann was articulating in eloquent form what others had been hinting at for some time. In the spring of 1906, the young journalist Richard Washburn Child, future U.S. ambassador to Italy, had discussed the same dramatic outcome in an *Atlantic Monthly* article. None other than Edward Bernays, in *Crystallizing Public Opinion* (1923), would refer to Child's insights appreciatively while wondering "whether the acts of men in commercial activity may ever become [. . .] so far reaching in their effect that they compel a universal public interest." "It may be said," Bernays continued, "that at no time have private industries become of such startling interest to the community at large as at present in the United States."¹⁵ The pioneer of public relations practices closed the paragraph by noting, rhetorically, "How far present-day tendencies have born out Mr. Child's expectations of a growing and accepted public interest in important industrial enterprises, the reader can judge for himself."¹⁶

Bernays's currency was high in the 1920s, a decade of laissez-faire policies that under Presidents Harding and Coolidge were extremely favorable to American businesses. In applying the lessons learned from prewar Progressive muckraking, U.S. corporations sought a great deal of public acceptance by showcasing their espousal of public service and responsibility in their advertisements and public relations activities.¹⁷ Talent moved around accordingly. The decade saw the consolidation of a revolving-door custom whereby public servants found lucrative positions in the corporate world, primarily as lobbyists. Will H. Hays's career move from the Harding administration to the chairmanship of the MPPDA—as Hollywood's master lobbyist and publicist—was one of the most visible of such transitions. Washington's strengthened alliance with the film industry also affected the degree of political

leaders' modes of public presentation. Demand for publicity expertise grew in all domains. President Coolidge, despite his notorious aloofness, made himself repeatedly available for newsreels. His successor, Herbert Hoover, possibly outdid him through several stunts, including a celebrity-packed re-creation of the invention of the light bulb, starring Thomas Edison himself, which was broadcast live throughout the country and devised by none other than Bernays.

In the following years, the partnership between Hollywood persuasion and Washington power intensified. Through his contact with the Hoover administration, Louis B. Mayer had become by 1932, according to *Variety*, not just an "international statesman" but also "the only American holding that dual honor" of being "a national figure, of politics and the show business."¹⁸ Mayer was not alone. Jack Warner competed with him on the same terrain, if on the opposite side, of presidential politics.¹⁹ The mobilization of the vote for Franklin Roosevelt (Warner's candidate) and his subsequent victory turned studio executives' formerly rare practice of political advocacy into a rule. It was a New Deal in both government and business, with overlapping and cross-fertilizing public relations campaigns.²⁰ Once Roosevelt realized that Hollywood could sell his political agenda, showmanship became an essential quality of his government. Americans came to see Roosevelt as a celebrity, particularly through his starring role in newsreels and radio programs. Conversely, Roosevelt began to see Americans as movie audiences and radio listeners.²¹

At the same time, the migration to Los Angeles of New York cultural radicals, together with the arrival of European Jews, infused the movie capital with a leftist political culture that led to the unionization of the film industry, the creation of the Screen Actors Guild by the likes of Will Rogers and Joan Crawford, and the emergence of celebrity civic activism.²² In 1934, California's hard-fought gubernatorial contest saw the conservative candidate Frank Merriam best former Socialist Party member (and MGM scenarist!) Upton Sinclair. Merriam's victory was helped by conservative-thinking studio heads like Mayer who led a most effective film campaign that helped build a decisive margin against their enthusiastic but less organized leftist opponents.²³

In the fray of show business politics, one also encounters the familiar, eclectic profile of newspaper magnate, film producer, and gubernatorial hopeful William Randolph Hearst and the equally eclectic newcomer Joseph P. Kennedy. Hearst's background in filmmaking and yellow journalism made him appreciate "the theatricality of politics and the potential for political communication inherent in motion pictures." With equal showmanship, he used his press influence first to support the New Deal and eventually to do an about-face and oppose Roosevelt's domestic and internationalist policies. Similarly, Kennedy, the Irish banker with Harvard and Wall Street credentials, crossed many corridors of power from New York to Hollywood, where he shaped the trajectories of companies, actors, and executives while also enriching himself. It was in Hollywood that he "learned to

perform as a public personality,” something that his family members treasured as they entered public life.²⁴

By the 1930s, the marriage of politics and showmanship provided a context in which the authoritarian style of governance and Mussolini’s performative leadership could no longer appear to be utterly alien. The emergency of the Depression introduced Americans to a new level of emboldened executive power as shown in Roosevelt’s famous inaugural address delivered on March 4, 1933. Only a shared sense of civic sacrifice and discipline could lead to effective leadership, he warned the crowd. And if Congress was unwilling to support his plan of action, he promised that

I shall not evade the clear course of duty that will then confront me. I shall ask the Congress for the one remaining instrument to meet the crisis—broad executive power that would be given to me if we were in fact invaded by a foreign foe.²⁵

Not paying any mind to the speech’s commitment to democracy, the press welcomed it and described it accurately as a call for dictatorial powers. As Benjamin Alpers has shown, such general acceptance of exceptional authority lasted only a few months, but “the idea that America might need some kind of dictator appeared in a wide variety of places, including a pair of unusual Hollywood films”: the aforementioned *Mussolini Speaks* (1933) and *Gabriel over the White House* (1934).²⁶ The period was also characterized by the public visibility of demagogic politicians and forceful radio personalities, including Father Coughlin and Huey Long (a regular in newsreels). Coughlin and Long feuded with many celebrities and moved from being strong supporters to vehement detractors of FDR and eventually became anti-Communist witch hunters. Neither man hesitated to express public admiration for the Fascist style of mass and personality-centered governance.²⁷

While the 1930s is an obvious field of inquiry for the intersection of politics and mass media, we may also look beyond this decade, toward more contemporary challenges to the notion of popular sovereignty. Recent writings on the contemporary crisis of democracy brought about by the hegemony of mass media might be illuminating. As sociologist and political scientist Colin Crouch wrote in *Post-Democracy* (2004), although elections remain fundamental tools of political change, the staging of “public electoral debate is a tightly controlled spectacle, managed by rival teams of professional experts in the techniques of persuasion” and focused on a small and selective range of issues. While citizens play a passive role in the spectacle of the electoral competition, “politics is really shaped in private by interaction between elected governments and elites that overwhelmingly represent business interests.”²⁸ Reduced to sound bites, empty rhetorical slogans, and growing personalization, political communication, for Crouch, does not enhance “true political discussion” but “is designed to be beyond the reach of scrutiny” by common voters. For years, Crouch adds, “only manipulative demagogues like Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin” seemed to know “the secret of power through mass communication.”

Not any longer: Lippmann's worst fears have become a daily reality. Today democratic politicians, especially in the United States, conduct their "personality-based election campaigning" by relying on a "persuasion business" that reaches from the advertising industry and commercial television to social media.²⁹ "Promotion of the claimed charismatic qualities of a party leader," Crouch remarks, "increasingly takes the place of debate over issues and conflicting interests."³⁰ In this climate, the news-making business reproduces the personalization of the candidate's political message with its "rapid, eye-catching banality." Echoing Lippmann's dystopian *Liberty in the News*, Crouch concludes that the "control over politically relevant news and information," is in the hands of "a very small number of extremely wealthy individuals."³¹ In *Paradoxes of Democracy* (1999), sociologist Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt similarly remarked that the concentration of power over "the central nerves of the democratic process—the production and distribution of information," leads to "a 'technocratization' of knowledge" that excludes the public at large from the political process.³²

The outcome for the destinies of the governed is not unforeseeable. First, liberal governments' policy making is largely shaped by lobbying, a much more secretive and less democratic mode of influence than traditional party politics.³³ Secondly, elite control over news and the political process leads to "withdrawal from political participation."³⁴ Historian Emilio Gentile has noted that as democracies are turned into theatrical representations, the state becomes the stage, politicians the leading players, and citizens the extras.³⁵ In a departure from the most famous passage from Lincoln's Gettysburg Address—"government of the people, for the people, by the people"—the voting public has become the real *idola*, in Francis Bacon's sense. What remains is not an "absent demos," to quote the *Economist's* 2015 Democracy Index, but an "acting demos" that plays a role scripted elsewhere.³⁶

Early-twentieth-century American celebrity culture ostensibly publicized the values of freedom and individualism. Yet, even in an inaugural phase, the popularity of iconic personalities diluted the ideals of direct democracy in favor of charismatic representation. Celebrity publicity is neither conservative nor progressive but constitutes a regular component of mass democracies, and as such has a history that deserves to be told. As cinema has been central to this historical dynamic, film historians may have a privileged vantage point in telling it, particularly in an epoch that is all too familiar with the convergence between celebrity culture and political leadership. This analysis of the encounter of film stardom and political leadership has shown that celebrity politics does more than merely promote a celebrity's political convictions, whether liberal or conservative; it also inspires a commanding form of social governance that has remained integral to modern democratic life.