

Sociology 249

CELEBRITY, FAME, AND FORTUNE

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 and by appointment

Fall 2009
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OBJECTIVES:

Like all things misleadingly attractive, the title of this course cannot offer, much less promise, celebrity, fame, or fortune. On the contrary, its boldest intention is to dissuade you in their pursuit as ends in themselves. As an exercise in the sociological imagination, the course aims to help students think more carefully about the nature of public memory as an historically rooted means of defining what we believe is most important about ourselves as individuals and as members of groups. The hardly inconsiderable and now global fascination with celebrity, fame, and fortune may be among America's greatest export industries ever invented. Not only people, but also things possess social meanings and qualities that are best understood through an examination of the sociological concept of *status*, which is defined most generally as the relative ranking (by whatever criteria) of individuals in relation to one another. This course will address those criteria from a variety of historical and social-scientific perspectives. Students will be asked to think and write about the ways in which the concept of *status* operates in a variety of social contexts, from content analyses of obituary columns to assessments of the nature of leadership in major institutions such as schools and the three branches of government. A basic grounding in sociological ideas and arguments will be followed by many types of examples that illustrate and deepen how we are to understand the excitements and vagaries of celebrity, fame, and fortune.

REQUIRED TEXTS:

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| Braudy, Leo | <i>The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History</i> |
| Cooper, Andrew F. | <i>Celebrity Diplomacy</i> |
| Halpern, Jake | <i>The Fame Junkies: The Hidden Truth Behind America's Favorite Addiction</i> |
| Schmid, David | <i>Natural Born Celebrities: Serial Killers in American Culture</i> |
| Zaid, Gabriel | <i>The Secret of Fame: The Literary Encounter in an Age of Distraction</i> |

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

Class Attendance: All students are expected to attend class. Class attendance will be taken at different times throughout the semester. If your name is absent from more than two rosters, your **final grade** will automatically be dropped by one-third (e.g., A- becomes a B+; B+ becomes a B, etc.)

Examination: The Take-Home Exam is open-book.

A. FINAL PAPER (in form of a Take-Home Exam): Due at the end of exam period. (Distributed at the last class.)

Papers: (All written assignments, including examinations, must be typewritten. They must be submitted by email to me, which will serve as proof that an assignment has been submitted on time. All late assignments will be penalized without exception, unless an excuse has been given. No excuse can be given 24 hours before any assignment is due, so don't ask.

1. Status and Its Vicissitudes (5-8 pages)

DUE: October 1.

2. Application of Concepts to Content (8-10 pages)

DUE: November 5.

Select either PAPER A, B or C (See Discussion of Application of Concepts to Content)

PAPER A: Content Analysis of Types of Celebrity and Fame in Obituaries

PAPER B: A Tabloid Primer: An Analysis of Content

PAPER C: Pathologies of Notice: A Summary of Readings

COURSE OUTLINE AND READING ASSIGNMENTS

September 10: Explanation of objectives of the course.

Leszek Kolakowski, "On Fame" (Distributed in class)

Part One: Sociological and Historical Approaches to Status and Its Vicissitudes

September 14: Defining Status, Prestige and Esteem as Elements of Fame

William J. Goode, "Social Control Through Prestige Processes," in *The Celebration of Heroes: Prestige as a Social Control System*, pp. 1-15. (e-reserve)

Leo Braudy, Part I, "The Urge to Be Unique, Introduction," in *The Frenzy of Renown*, pp. 3-18.

September 17: Erving Goffman, "Symbols of Class Status," in *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (December, 1951), pp. 294-304. (e-reserve)

September 21: Murray Milner, "Celebrity Culture as a Status System," in *The Hedgehog Review*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Spring, 2005), pp. 66-77. (e-reserve)

September 24: Leo Braudy, Part I, "The Urge to Be Unique, The Longing of Alexander," in *The Frenzy of Renown*, pp. 19-28.

September 28: NO CLASS

Leo Braudy, Part V, "Democratic Theatre and the Natural Performer," in *The Frenzy of Renown*, pp. 450-462; 491-514.

Part Two: Celebrity as Commodity, Industry and Business

October 1: The Functions of Publicity

Edward L. Bernays, "Manipulating Public Opinion: The Why and The How," in *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 33, No. 6 (May, 1928), pp. 958-971. (e-reserve)

Edward L. Bernays, "The Engineering of Consent," in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 250 (March, 1947), pp. 113-120. (e-reserve)

Leo Braudy, Part I, "The Urge to Be Unique, Above It All: Lindbergh and Hemingway," in *The Frenzy of Renown*, pp. 19-28.

October 5: Marketing, Co-optation, Selling Out

Graeme Turner, Frances Bonner, and P. David Marshall, "Producing Celebrity." In *The Celebrity Culture Reader*, ed. P. David Marshall, pp. 770-798. (e-reserve)

October 1: FIRST PAPER DUE

October 8: Celebrity Hunting: Audiences and Authenticity

Jake Halpern, *Fame Junkies: The Hidden Truths Behind America's Favorite Addiction*, Parts I and II.

October 15: Halpern, con't, Part III.

October 19: James Bowman, "Everybody is Familiar" *The New Criterion*, Vol. 27, No. 8, April 2009, pp. 56-60. (e-reserve)

Mark S. Granovetter, "The Strength of Weak Ties." *American Journal of Sociology*, 1973, 78(6): 1360- 1380. (e-reserve)

Part Three: Pathologies of Celebrity, Fame, and Fortune

October 22: David Schmid, *Natural Born Celebrities: Serial Killers in American Culture*

October 26: Both Sides Now: Narratives of Descent and Stalking

Louis B. Schlesinger, "Celebrity Stalking, Homicide, and Suicide: A Psychological Autopsy," in *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (February, 2006), pp. 39-46. (e-reserve)

October 29: Above it All

Jonathan B. Imber, "American Sexual Morality after 'That Woman,'" in *SOCIETY*, Vol. 36:3 (March/April, 1999), pp. 29-36. (e-reserve)

November 2: Fame's Misfortunes

Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown*, Afterword, "Fame without History," pp. 599-618.

Leszek Kolakowski, "On the Wheel of Fortune," in *Freedom, Fame, Lying, and Betrayal*, pp. 61-67. (e-reserve)

Part Four: Social Science Perspectives on Celebrity, Fame, and Fortune

November 5: An Economic Approach: Markets and Fame

Tyler Cowen, *What Price Fame?*, Chapter 1 (e-reserve)

SECOND PAPER DUE

November 9: Legal Perspectives and Implications

Alan Story, "Owning Diana: From People's Princess to Private Property" (e-reserve)

November 12: A Psychological Approach: The Difficult Celebrity and the Abnormal Fan

Anastasia Kucharski, "On Being Sick and Famous," in *Political Psychology*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1984), pp. 69-81. (e-reserve)

November 16: A Political-Philosophical Approach: Fame and Founding

Douglass Adair, "Fame and the Founding Fathers," in *Fame and the Founding Fathers: Essays by Douglass Adair*, pp. 3-36. (e-reserve)

Part Five: Fame, Cross-Over, and the Evolution of Notice

November 19: Andrew F. Cooper, *Celebrity Diplomacy*

November 23: The Cult of Notice and Its Handlers

Screening of Segments of *No Direction Home*

November 30: Elihu Katz and Tamar Liebes, “‘No More Peace!’: How Disaster, Terror and War Have Upstaged Media Events.” *International Journal of Communication* 1 (2007), 157-166. (e-reserve)

December 3: The Altruistic Uses of Notice

Joseph Epstein, “The Many Faces of Celebrity Philanthropy,” in *In Character*, Summer 2006. (e-reserve)

December 7: The Future of Fame

Gabriel Zaid, *The Secret of Fame: The Literary Encounter in an Age of Distraction*

December 10: Distribution of Take-Home Final (Due at end of exams)

Important Dates: October 1: First Paper Due
November 5: Second Paper Due (Topics A, B, or C)
December 10: Distribution of Take-Home Final

Discussion of Application of Concepts to Content (2nd Paper Assignment, Due, Nov 5)

For the second paper, you are asked to choose one of the three topics listed below as Paper A, B, or C. In each assignment, I have also included some further supplemental readings (all on e-reserve) that are intended to provide additional ways to frame your analyses. Do not hesitate to contact me with any questions about this assignment. The paper should be no longer than 8-10 pages.

PAPER A: Content Analysis of Types of Celebrity and Fame in Obituaries

This paper requires that you analyze at least 5-10 obituaries of famous people in order to analyze the nature of their fame and/or celebrity. You should be looking for ways to apply concepts, theories, and arguments from the course to analyze what such accounts at death reveal about how fame was achieved (and, if appropriate, lost); what types of achievements merited recognition; what accounts are provided that offer some indication of the extent of fame; etc. In addition to the use of course readings, the following articles may also be of use:

Anthony Elliott, "Celebrity and Political Psychology: Remembering Lennon," in *Political Psychology*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (1998), pp. 833-852.

Frank Furedi, "New Britain: A Nation of Victims," in *SOCIETY*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (March/April, 1998), pp. 80-84.

PAPER B: A Tabloid Primer: An Analysis of Content

This paper requires that you analyze at least three different (supermarket) "tabloid" newspapers that offer specific accounts of the lives of celebrities. An examination of these accounts should include specific descriptions of what these various articles have in common, that is, what are some of the basic themes that underlie why attention is being given to them? How do such accounts reflect "the public interest"? In what ways can you draw a line between advertising and exploitation, between news and entertainment, between fascination and cruelty; and between titillation and moral scrutiny? In addition to the use of course readings, the following articles may also be of use:

John H. Fuson, "Protecting the Press from Privacy," in *University of Pennsylvania Law Review*, Vol. 148, No. 2 (December, 1999), pp. 629-671.

Andrew D. Morton, "Much Ado about Newsgathering: Personal Privacy, Law Enforcement, and the Law of Unintended Consequences for Anti-Paparazzi Legislation," in *University of Pennsylvania Law Review*, Vol. 147, No. 6 (June, 1999), pp. 1435-1472.

PAPER C: Pathologies of Notice: A Summary of Readings

This paper requires that you summarize and analyze a selection of those readings assigned in Parts Three and Four of this course. You should focus on aspects of the readings that have not already been discussed in class, and you should formulate your own theses about the pathological nature of celebrity, fame, and fortune. In addition to the use of course readings, the following articles may also be of use:

Patricia A. Adler and Peter Adler, "The Glorified Self: The Aggrandizement and the Constriction of Self," in *Social Psychology Quarterly*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (December, 1989), pp. 299-310.

Mark Schaller, "The Psychological Consequences of Fame: Three Tests of the Self-Consciousness Hypothesis," in *Journal of Personality*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (June, 1997), pp. 291-309.