This is the published version:

Marshall, P. David 2013, Recognition culture (blog), Persona Studies, Melbourne, Vic.

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20th June

The following talk was delivered at the launch of the Persona, Celebrity, Publics Emerging Research Group on 17 June 2013 at the City Centre Campus of Deakin University in Melbourne Australia. The debate and discussion with Sean Redmond and the group focussed on whether celebrity was linked to the formation of a transformed public sphere:

In what Stuart Hall has called the Kilburn Manifesto, he outlines a need for a new attack on the current unique configuration of capital and the havoc it is wreaking on social and political life. Hall suggests,

'Market forces have begun to model institutional life and press deeply into our private lives, as well as dominating political discourse. They have shaped a popular culture that extols celebrity and success and promotes values of private gain and possessive individualism. They have thoroughly undermined the redistributive egalitarian consensus that underpinned the welfare state, with painful consequences for socially vulnerable groups such as women, old people, the young and ethnic minorities.'

"Is celebrity culture simply an ideological support of new capital?"

By P. David Marshall

Stuart Hall, in his Kilburn Manifesto [http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/apr/24/kilburn-manifesto-challenge-neoliberal-victory], is looking to form a new political coalition, one that recognises that the past welfare state is inadequate and that the current configuration of capital post-GFC actually is advancing on the dismantling of further efforts of social support. He indicates that capitalism, instead of suffering a retreat as it had done under other massive threats to its organisation under the 1929 Stockmarket crash for example (which led to its consequence - the New Deal and the social welfare state), nothing is building coherently in the polis to counteract these forces. Despite interesting movements and forces, none have cohered to challenge this dimension of capitalism.

And wedded to this, from Hall’s perspective, is a celebrity culture that supports it – that doesn’t allow the emergence of collectives in its celebration of the public person and possessive individualism. So here is the question: is this kind of popular culture leadership really producing a culture that cannot organise, that cannot produce a different constitution of a public and relies instead on its divisions based on the hyperindividual model of celebrity? The answer is classically yes and no... We do have a culture that pushes each of us to present ourselves, draw attention to ourselves and differentiate ourselves. We could use all sorts of monikers to describe this organization of not the self so much as the public self. I am leaning to terms derived from Raisborough and her Lifestyle Media book (2011), where she talks about the push to recognition. We are living in a recognition culture, one that I have described as a “specular economy” in some of my writing (Marshall, 2010), that draws our own attention to how we present ourselves to others.
Anthony Giddens (1991), in his description of late modernity identifies that our contemporary culture organisation has an intrinsic and extrinsic dimension: the intrinsic is how we are focused on self-improvement which manifests itself in efforts such as cosmetic surgery, fitness, and economic well-being and even the individualised religions that rely less and less on traditional culture’s notions of connection and solidarity. Authors such as Micki McGee (2005) and Alison Hearn (2013) have taken this focus on the self as a way that the self is now branded across our culture – inescapably linked to the system of capital in its individualisation – and also linked to a systemic sense of our own inadequacies and a sense of making the self in new improved ways that rely on the material and social psychology of consumer culture. I will come back to elaborate on this further in a moment. Giddens’ extrinsic reading of late modernity points to our outer-focussed qualities – those where the dimensions of globalization are part of our everyday and that these differences in the way that we are drawn to these larger dimensions is equally an assault on what might be defined as more traditional conceptions of collective identity.

What has expanded since Giddens wrote those dimensions and challenges to the self in 1991 have partially been taken up by those such as McGee, Banet-Weiser (2012) and Christine Harold (2013) and it is clearly a sense of how self-branding in its structure is dependent on a global anxiety of inconsistency and sense of perpetual inadequacies that are as much a part of work culture as the way we present ourselves in and through our leisure. What Giddens could not have captured in his reading in 1991, was the emergence of the techniques and technologies of expression that allowed individuals to map themselves – really present themselves – not necessarily globally, but publicly. In the public presentation of the self, there is the sense and sensibility of the local connections and the global programs and applications intersecting. Thus Facebook, as much as its origins are American, is global in its application to the needs of users to express themselves to others; in this way it resembles the phone system in its facilitating of a new sociality. To link them to the past and position in their present and future, I have called these social network applications that are associated with the Internet, computers and other apparatuses of mobile connection, technologies of the social. These technologies of the social thus resemble apparatuses such as television – in other words, they draw people together, they create collective experiences and they provide some of the tools through which we imagine
connection (what I would call here our techniques and ideologies where the collective “we” is effectively used and accepted). However, these new technologies of the social – such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, position the individual differently in the chain of communication, in the organization of engagement, and in the play of connection. They privilege the individual starting point in an elaborate intercommunication chain to constructed micro-publics or networked publics. This is different, this is new and it has been the technologies that are producing a new sociality. Think of it this way: LadyGaga [https://twitter.com/ladygaga] has 10s of millions who follow her on Twitter; and I have 100s – but we are on a spectrum of presentation of the self. Both of us are producing our persona for publics. It is not so much that the individual starting point – whether it be a focus on celebrity or a focus on friendship circle on Facebook – takes away the power of the collective; it is that the public individual – modelled very much on the celebrity presentation of the self – produces a different and valued politics of the social and the collective. Our objective then is to see how these various dimensions of a new public individuality intersect and produce and foster a shifted politics and a new cultural affect that engenders the play of the individual self so closely to a new politics, a new public and a new cultural collective. Harnessing this specular economy, building its affective dimensions via the public individual, via the persona is the challenge – is really my challenge to comprehend it – perhaps facilitate it – read it for all its different flows of power, responsibility and collective formation. It is an anxiety-ridden culture, but it is a different culture that builds from a new constitution of use of technology to establish the relationship between the individual and the social.

We are in an era of the politics of recognition – there is a pragmatic dimension and there is an interesting social and psychological dimension that actually shifts our politics in interesting ways that can be recaptured into forms of social power. Stuart Hall, you are right it is a kind of possessive individualism that celebrity as it intersects with the pervasive culture of public persona elevates; but the social dimensions of the technologies of the social are underexplored as these personas intersect and build their mutual forms of recognition. I find the directions of this politics not clearly aligned with the past, not clearly unharnessable, but demanding a much closer look of how we reach for recognition and reach for different configurations of collective experience that establishes a quite different political and public sphere.

References and Interesting sources:


http://www.personastudies.com/2013/06/recognition-culture.html


Posted 20th June by P David Marshall