Celebrity Culture and the American Dream
Stardom and Social Mobility
Second Edition
Karen Sternheimer

CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

PREFACE

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

CHAPTER 1 THE AMERICAN DREAM: CELEBRITY, CLASS, AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

CHAPTER 2 BEYOND SUBSISTENCE: THE RISE OF THE MIDDLE CLASS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

CHAPTER 3 PROSPERITY AND WEALTH ARRIVE: BOOM TIMES AND WOMEN’S SUFFRAGE IN THE 1920s

CHAPTER 4 PULL YOURSELF UP BY YOUR BOOTSTRAPS: PERSONAL FAILURE AND THE GREAT DEPRESSION

CHAPTER 5 WE’RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER: COLLECTIVISM AND WORLD WAR II

CHAPTER 6 SUBURBAN UTOPIA: THE POSTWAR MIDDLE-CLASS FANTASY

CHAPTER 7 IS THAT ALL THERE IS? CHALLENGING THE SUBURBAN FANTASY IN THE SIXTIES AND SEVENTIES
CHAPTER 8  MASSIVE WEALTH AS MORAL REWARD: THE
REAGAN REVOLUTION AND INDIVIDUALISM

CHAPTER 9  SUCCESS JUST FOR BEING YOU:
OPPORTUNITY IN THE INTERNET AGE

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

INDEX
2.1 Unlike today, when products boast of low calorie content, cheap foods providing high calorie counts would appeal to struggling families

2.2 Staged publicity photos such as this one emphasized the wholesomeness of early movie performers

2.3 Ads regularly invited fan magazine readers to try to join the new movie industry

2.4 Fan magazine ads regularly promised readers they could help them get jobs and move into the middle class

2.5 Ads emphasized that women’s upward mobility was tied to their appearance

3.1 Ads such as this one emphasized the possibility of middle-class status through consumption

3.2 Despite more professional opportunities for women, ads warned that failure to monitor one’s body continually would lead to loneliness

3.3 Men were also warned by advertisers to monitor their bodies, and that they would be to blame for lack of success if they failed to do so

3.4 Women’s burgeoning independence was often described as threatening in articles such as this one from the December 1927 issue of *Motion Picture Classic*

3.5 Ads admonished women that ignoring domestic chores could lead to loneliness

3.6 As women gained new freedom and wore less restrictive clothing, ads such as these emphasized the importance of being thin

4.1 Fan magazine articles emphasized the glamorous lives of celebrities during the Depression

4.2 Advertisements frequently included people dressed in evening wear, such as this woman doing the laundry
4.3 Signs of the Depression occasionally seeped into fan magazines, as in this ad asking readers if the man in their life needs a job.

4.4 Desperate-sounding ad copy reflected advertisers’ desperation for consumers during the Depression and relied on concerns about women remaining unmarried.

4.5 While ads in the 1920s warned women that they would be lonely if they were too heavy, many Depression-era ads cided women who were too thin.

5.1 Fan magazine stories focused on celebrities serving in the military, as with these pictures of actors Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., and Wallace Beery.

5.2 Ads during World War II frequently featured images of strong women aiding the war effort.

5.3 Public service announcements encouraged readers not to spend money during the war.

5.4 Conservation, not consumption, was a common message in ads during wartime.

5.5 Unlike before the war, strong, independent women were not seen as threatening, but as patriotic.

5.6 Ads frequently emphasized how women’s war service was compatible with traditional notions of femininity.

6.1 After the war ended, fan magazine ads and articles encouraged readers to travel and enjoy more leisure time.

6.2 Photos such as these suggested that celebrities lived in modest suburban homes.

6.3 Celebrity photo spreads emphasized their family lives in the postwar years.

6.4 Home became the site of glamour after the war.

6.5 Many women married in their teens after the war.

6.6 Marriage once again took center stage in advertisements for women’s cosmetics.

6.7 Advertisement from the July 1953 issue of Motion Picture.

6.8 Family life was central to celebrity coverage during the 1950s.
6.9 Image from the September 1958 issue of *Photoplay*

6.10 Stories about celebrity baby showers and pictures of nurseries became common after the war

6.11 Image from the January 1955 issue of *Photoplay*

7.1 Traditional fan magazines expanded their coverage beyond movie stars after the studio system’s collapse. The Kennedys became a favorite subject

7.2 During the 1920s and 1930s, images of African Americans relied on racist stereotypes

7.3 Image from the July 1929 issue of *Photoplay*

7.4 The civil rights movement barely earned a mention in fan magazines; here the focus is on white actress Debbie Reynolds’ views on the subject

7.5 Ads such as this one reflect shifts in marriage and divorce during the 1960s

7.6 Rumors of pending celebrity divorces were common during the 1970s

7.7 During the 1940s and 1950s carefully staged pictures of celebrities and their children like this one regularly appeared in fan magazines

7.8 During the 1970s images of celebrity children were much less formal than in previous decades

7.9 Ads offered women opportunities for careers and, in this ad, “a glamour job where the pay is far above the average”

7.10 Family planning ads began to appear in fan magazines in the 1960s

7.11 Fan magazine stories began including more scandals in the 1960s, frequently featuring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton

7.12 Fan magazines covered stories and included photos that might have been covered up during the heyday of the studio system, such as Jane Fonda’s 1971 arrest for drug smuggling
During the 1970s, stories about celebrities’ faith appeared regularly in *Movieland and TV Time*, as did ads for religious paraphernalia.
Love it, hate it, or love to hate it, celebrity culture is one of the hallmarks of twenty-first century America. Never before has it been so easy to know so much about so many people, even people we might not want to know about. We seem to be on a first name basis with them, give them nicknames, and sometimes even feel as if we know all about them. We hear about their romances, their escapades, and, of course, their failures. Entering this fishbowl does not require any unique skill or talent; in fact, many people join the celebrity realm by just allowing the public into their lives (or their bedrooms), as the Karsdashians, and the cast of the Real Housewives series have done.

**What Does Celebrity Culture Tell Us about American Society?**

Rather than simply superficial distractions, celebrity and fame are unique manifestations of our sense of American social mobility: they provide the illusion that material wealth is possible for anyone. More than simply changes in taste or style, the fluctuating nature of celebrity culture reflects and reveals the so-called American Dream itself, a dream that continues to evolve and change along with our expectations about what it means to achieve success in America.

Using examples from the first celebrity fan magazines of 1911 to those of the present, *Celebrity Culture and the American Dream* considers how major economic and historical factors shaped the nature of celebrity culture as we know it today. Rather than simply
hypothesize about the “effect” celebrity behavior might have on the rest of us, this book uses a sociological lens to examine how celebrity stories serve to reinforce the prevailing notion of success. Celebrities seem to provide proof that the American Dream of going from rags to riches is real and attainable.

The goal of this book is to use a sociological imagination to take an in-depth look at our culture of celebrity—something familiar to all readers—and understand its broader sociological importance. While I primarily focus on the connections between celebrity culture and concepts of social mobility, this book also provides an opportunity to examine issues such as consumption, social change, and social structure. Celebrity culture also reflects shifts in gender, marriage, families, relationships, and race relations in addition to political and economic changes, and this book can be used in a wide variety of courses about American society.

Books by and about celebrities dominate the trade market today, and dozens of academic titles about celebrity culture have been published over the past two decades. Most of these books are written primarily for a scholarly audience, offering comprehensive theoretical discussions that would be difficult for lay readers and undergraduate audiences to connect with. This book aims to avoid academic jargon in order to provide a straightforward discussion about the role celebrity culture plays in American life.

The second edition of Celebrity Culture and the American Dream includes updated examples from the world of celebrity, more discussion of the role of the internet and social media in celebrity culture today, as well as an expanded theoretical discussion in the first chapter. Key features of the book include:

• explores the relationship between celebrity culture, consumption, class, and social mobility;
• discusses social changes pertaining to class, gender, marriage and divorce, and race;
• includes numerous pictures from fan magazine articles and ads;

• examines the connections between celebrity culture and economic, political, and social changes;

• considers the importance of the structure of the entertainment industry in order to understand how celebrity culture is manufactured;

• includes questions at the beginning of each chapter to help readers focus on central issues within each time period.