Celebrity Status*

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Max Weber's fragmentary writings on social status suggest that differentiation on this basis should disappear as capitalism develops. However, many of Weber's examples of status refer to the United States, which Weber held to be the epitome of capitalist development. Weber hints at a second form of status, one generated by capitalism, which might reconcile this contradiction, and later theorists emphasize the continuing importance of status hierarchies. This article argues that such theories have missed one of the most important forms of contemporary status: celebrity. Celebrity is an omnipresent feature of contemporary society, blazing lasting impressions in the memories of all who cross its path. In keeping with Weber's conception of status, celebrity has come to dominate status "honor," generate enormous economic benefits, and lay claim to certain legal privileges. Compared with other types of status, however, celebrity is status on speed. It confers honor in days, not generations; it decays over time, rather than accumulating; and it demands a constant supply of new recruits, rather than erecting barriers to entry.

Almost one century ago, a novel system of social status emerged in human history. From its beginnings on the coasts of North America, it grew into a global hierarchy, entwining itself into huge spheres of the social world. By the late 20th century, members of the high-status group had come to expect obsequious deference, exact significant financial tribute, and lay claim to legal privilege, as aristocratic and caste elites did in earlier centuries. But the new status system was different. It was born out of capitalism and mass media, and its dynamics reflected the conditions of the modern era. This system is called celebrity.

At the same time that the celebrity system was emerging in New York and Hollywood, Max Weber was devising a theory of social status in Berlin. Weber's sketchy statements on this subject are among the most influential pages in 20th-century social theory, and have been taught to virtually every sociology major of the past two generations. Yet Weber's analysis not only ignores celebrity, whose colossal development he could not have foreseen, but suggests that status systems were in decline, dissolving under the pressures of capitalism.

To what extent might Weber's theory of status apply to celebrity? This article tries to imagine a Weberian analysis of celebrity as a status group. The article begins with an examination of Weber's approach to the relationship between status groups and capitalism. It then introduces the celebrity system, and goes on to explore four aspects of the Weberian concept of status, asking in what ways celebrity status is similar to, and differs from, the old-status groups that Weber studied.

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MAX WEBER AND THE FUTURE OF STATUS GROUPS

Max Weber's unfinished essay on status groups (Weber 1946:180–95, 1972:531–40, 1978:926–39)—translated into English by Hans Gerth with the title "Class, Status, Party" (Oakes and Vidich 1999:15–16)—is among the most widely cited and reproduced pieces in the canon of social theory (among other locations, see Calhoun et al. 2002; Edles and Appelrouth 2005; Farganis 2004; Garner 2000). This influence is surprising, for two reasons. First, Weber's writings on the subject are extremely sparse, in contrast to his detailed examinations of other sociological themes. In addition to the seven pages devoted to status in "Class, Status, Party," Weber left an outline of a future essay on status (Weber 1978:305–07) and a dozen references to the subject in other portions of his unfinished life-work, *Economy and Society*, kindly indexed in Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich's English edition (Weber 1978:lx). As little of this work was finalized in Weber's lifetime—Weber edited galley proofs for the "Class, Status, Party" fragment in the months before his death (Mommsen 2005:90)—we may infer that Weber did not give much priority to the subject of status. This is hardly the only instance of posthumous writings gaining unforeseen influence—such as Karl Marx's economic and philosophical manuscripts of 1844—but it is a striking example of an intellectual legacy that has shifted in the years since the author's death.

Second, Weber's very analysis of status would appear to contradict the ongoing influence of his work on the subject. Weber had long argued that status groups would decrease in importance in the modern world, and that class would increase in importance (Mommsen 1985:234). In "Class, Status, Party," Weber wrote that "today the class situation is by far the predominant factor" in the determination of status-group membership (1978:935).[1] "Every technological repercussion and economic transformation threatens stratification by status and pushes the class situation into the foreground" (1978:938). Ultimately, Weber suggested, capitalist society may evolve in the direction of "the so-called pure modern 'democracy,' that is, [a society] devoid of any expressly ordered status privileges for individuals," where class situation dominates the social order so completely that "only the families coming under approximately the same tax [bracket] dance with one another" (1978:932). In keeping with this analysis, Weber presented examples of status that were already fading in importance by the early 20th century, when Weber wrote about them. Knights selected for their bellicosity, one of Weber's exemplars of a high-status group (1978:935), were no longer waging war at this time; Jews, one of Weber's exemplars of a low-status group (1978:934), had been granted citizenship in most of Europe (though Nazi rule would revoke these rights a dozen years after Weber's death).

What is status? To begin, status is a group characteristic, in Weber's view, not primarily an individual characteristic like heroism or charisma, as they are usually described; it is an autonomous social hierarchy, not primarily a product of material forces as in class analyses; and it is constructed by self-interested collective actors, not primarily by the interests or collective identity of society as a whole, as in functionalist analyses. According to Weber's summary definition, status is a social hierarchy defined by "a specific, positive or negative, social estimation of *honor*"—honor that is itself defined by "a specific *style of life*." To maintain the distinctiveness

[1]All page citations refer to Weber (1978) unless otherwise indicated. Böröcz (1997) makes the case for translating Weber's concept of status group as "estate." This article uses the term "status group" because it is more widely known in English.

of their life conduct—a more literal translation than "style of life"—high-honor social circles attempt to limit entry into their group. This involves "restrictions on social intercourse (that is, intercourse which is not subservient to economic or any other purposes)." But it is only when the social circle achieves endogamy that one may begin to speak of a status group. Weber used the term "usurpation" to describe this process: high-status groups "usurp" status honor from low-status groups (1978:932–33).

Usurpation appears not to happen overnight, in Weber's analysis. The next stage of status-group development may be even slower, Weber suggested. High-status groups attempt to reinforce the "purely conventional" situation of differentiated styles of life—that is, status inequality based on social conventions—by gaining state acknowledgment and enforcement of "legal privilege." This road, Weber wrote, "is easily traveled as soon as a certain stratification of the social order has in fact been 'lived in' and has achieved stability by virtue of a stable distribution of economic power" (1978:933). If "economic power" and economic class overlap or are identical concepts, as seems likely, then Weber appears to say that status gains state recognition when it coexists with class for a period of time.

The final stage of status-group development also takes time. Status may be said to have evolved to its "full extent" when "every physical contact" with a member of a lower-status group "is considered as making for a ritualistic impurity and a stigma which must be expiated by a religious act." Status "reaches such extreme consequences only where there are underlying differences [between status groups] which are held to be 'ethnic.'" Not only do endogamy (conventions) and legal privilege (laws) protect the differentiation of styles of life, but rituals now emerge that hold differentiation to be eternal, biological, and sacred, erasing all memory of past intermarriage. Weber used the term "caste" to describe such extreme status hierarchies (1978:933–34; see also 937), drawing on his work on India (Weber 1958). It is unclear in these fragments how Weber would integrate the concept of ethnicity, which he associated with belief in common descent (1978:389), with Hindu beliefs about reincarnation, whereby individuals may cross caste boundaries in consecutive lifetimes (Weber 1958:118–23; see Heesterman 1985).

As a result of this lengthy process of status-group formation, Weber wrote, high-status groups emphasize the past, while low-status groups emphasize the future, "whether it is of this life or of another" (1978:934). High-status groups, in this view, resist change. In particular, they resist the rise of market competition. "For all practical purposes, stratification by status goes hand in hand with a monopolization of ideal and material goods or opportunities . . . typically, entailed estates, and frequently also the possession of serfs or bondsmen and, finally, special trades" (1978:935). Status hierarchies thus result in "the hindrance of the free development of the market," using conventions or laws to "withhold [certain goods] from free exchange" (1978:937; see also 638–39).

According to Weber, the demands of capitalist profit maximization run directly counter to high-status groups' occupation of particular economic niches. He emphasized the disdain that high-status groups maintain for the appearance of acquisitiveness: "Very frequently every rational economic pursuit, and especially entrepreneurial activity, is looked upon as a disqualification of status" (1978:936). "[I]n most instances the notion of honor peculiar to status absolutely abhors that which is essential to the market: hard bargaining. Honor abhors hard bargaining among peers," presumably to reduce competition within the group, "and occasionally it taboos it for the members of a status group in general" (1978:937). High-status groups can

never fully accept the "parvenu," regardless of wealth, "no matter how completely his [sic] style of life has been adjusted to theirs." Only the parvenu's descendants have a chance at acceptance, if they are properly trained, since they "have never besmirched [the group's] honor by their own economic labor" (1978:936–37). Even in North America, where high-status groups used to hold labor in esteem, "a status disqualification that operates against the performance of common physical labor ... is now 'setting in'" (1978:936).

References to the United States are numerous in Weber's writings on status groups: gentlemen's clubs where bosses and underlings play billiards as equals, "the Street" where "society" lives (both terms in English in the original; Weber 1972:535), the First Families of Virginia, "the actual or alleged descendants of the 'Indian Princess' Pocahontas, of the Pilgrim fathers, or of the Knickerbockers" (1978:932–33). In fact, Weber argued that these "status-like" hierarchies—in quotation marks in the original German, to distinguish them from old-status groups[2]—were in some ways more elaborate and more important in the United States than in Germany, where a boss could never treat a "gentleman" subordinate as a status equal in the billiards club, and men were less bound to submit to the vagaries of fashion (1978:932–33).

However, Weber's emphasis on status-like hierarchies would seem to be at odds with his usual description of the United States, particularly after his visit in 1904 (Brann 1944; Keeter 1981; Rollmann 1995; Scaff 1998; Weber 1988:279–304), as the epitome of "high capitalism" (Weber 1995:109), the place where "the pursuit of gain ... has become most completely unchained" (Weber 2002b:124).[3] If Weber considered capitalism to be more highly developed in the United States than in Germany, we would expect status-like differentiation to be less important in the United States, not more important. Equally perplexing is the comparison across time within the United States: we would expect status group distinctions such as the elite prohibition on physical labor to decrease over time, not increase, as the United States came to epitomize capitalism in the 19th century. Two chapters after "Class, Status, Party," Weber identifies the United States as a place where "the hold of status conventions [is] weak" (1978:960).

Weber hinted at a resolution of this contradiction: perhaps capitalism generates its own sort of status groups, distinct from the backward-looking traditions of premodern status hierarchies. Weber's examples of this process are, to be generous, underdeveloped. On occasion, he argued that industrialists might seek to form a new "'nobility'"—in quotation marks again in the original German (Weber 1946:383; see Titunik 1997:692). At somewhat greater length, Weber argued that "[a]n 'occupational status group,' too, is a status group proper. For normally, it successfully claims social honor only by virtue of the special style of life which may be determined by it" (1978:937). Elsewhere, Weber discussed bureaucratic officials as a status group distinguished not so much by a particular style of life as by their educational credentials (1978:998–1001). "Such certificates support their holders' claims for connubium with the notables (in business offices, too, they raise hope for preferment with the boss's daughter), claims to be admitted into the circles that adhere to 'codes of honor,' claim for a 'status-appropriate' salary instead of a wage according to performance," etc. In this way, "bureaucracy, both in business offices and in public service, promotes the rise of a specific status group, just as did the quite different

[2]We thank John Levi Martin for calling our attention to this distinction.
[3]In other translations: "the field of its highest development" (Weber 1998:182); "most unbridled" (Weber 2002a:121).

officeholders of the past" (1978:1000–01). Weber did not pursue this contrast between status-group formation in the capitalist era with the "quite different" status hierarchies of the past. He left this intriguing comment unreconciled with his more general treatment of status, according to which modern society ought to be tied less to status than to class.

In the years since Weber's death, the concept of status has spread throughout the social sciences, growing far beyond the boundaries of Weber's definition (Platt 2001; Scott 2001). For many scholars, the concept refers to individuals in general, not particular historical groups as in Weber's approach (Böröcz 1997). For some, status refers to social hierarchies such as "pecking orders" that can be found in many species, rather than uniquely human hierarchies of meaning making, as in Weber's approach (Mazur 1973). In addition, it is common for scholars to use other terms when describing phenomena that match Weber's definition of status. It is thus somewhat difficult to trace the history of the concept after Weber. Regardless of the term that is used, Weber's concept of status is widespread. Its many permutations include:

- Occupational status groups (Hodge 1962; Reiss et al. 1961), whose relative positions have proved surprisingly consistent in diverse contexts (Hout and DiPrete 2004; Treimann 1977). In keeping with Weber's hints in this direction, occupational status may also provide solidarity and even distinctive lifestyles (Weeden and Grusky 2005).
- The "power elite," which includes government officials, military officers, and opinion makers in addition to capitalists, forming interlocking social circles that "mingle with one another on the golf course, in the gentleman's clubs, at resorts, on transcontinental airplanes, and on ocean liners" (Mills 1956:281), encouraging endogamy through social registers, private schools, country clubs, debutante balls, and other mechanisms of boundary maintenance (Domhoff 2002:45–68).
- "Social capital," as proposed by Pierre Bourdieu (1984), which along with his concepts of "cultural capital" and "economic capital" emphasizes the bodily carriage and discriminating aesthetic judgment that children learn from growing up in a particular "class fraction." Social capital's particular gift is the appreciation for honorable family tradition, symbolizing "a competence which can only be acquired by long frequentation of old, cultivated people and things, that is, membership in an ancient group" (Bourdieu 1984:281).
- Race and gender, which have frequently been taken as forms of status differentiation (Crompton 1987; Myrdal 1944; Ridgeway 1991; Warner 1936). Recent studies suggest that, contrary to Weber's expectations, these and other status-related identities have largely replaced economic class as the basis for political mobilization, at least in the United States (see Hechter 2004).

These various approaches to the concept of status differ in significant ways from one another. Studies of race and gender, for example, view high status not as the privilege of a small minority, but of large segments of the population, who conspire to maintain their position even if they do not form a compact elite. Occupational status focuses on achieved characteristics, rather than ascribed or inherited ones. The power elite emphasizes the incorporation of economic elites in the highest status circles, while Bourdieu's concept of social capital distinguishes economic elites from the highest status circles.

Perhaps the contemporary usage of the concept of status that is most faithful to Weber's original intent is Murray Milner's (1994, 2004) analysis of status relations.

Milner proposes that where status hierarchies are important, high-status groups generate "complex, subtle systems of norms and rituals" in order to foil lower-status imitators, seek to associate only with people of equal or higher status, cannot have their status expropriated the way that wealth or political positions can be removed, and find themselves in a zero-sum game: "Because status is relatively inexpansible, when the status of some is increased, the status of others will eventually decrease" (Milner 2004:30–33). Milner developed this approach through the study of the caste system in India (Milner 1994), and he notes—like Weber—that "rigid status systems are disappearing as a central mechanism for organizing whole societies." Nevertheless, as Murray emphasizes in his study of teenagers in the United States, status systems "are nonetheless present in important pockets within twenty-first-century societies"—primarily pockets involving expressive, intimate, and visible activities that remain largely unstructured by paid labor (Milner 2004:24–25, 182–83). The status system of American high schools, Milner argues, serves the interests of capitalism through the creation of consumers (Milner 2004:155–80).

All of these approaches consider status to be important in contemporary society, not disappearing as Weber appeared to suggest. In these approaches, the spread of capitalism systematically generates new forms of status, in addition to or in place of economic classes. At the same time, all of these approaches follow Weber in treating status as a relatively stable group characteristic, with clear group boundaries and little movement across these boundaries. Race, gender, social capital, and membership in the power elite do not usually change much over the course of an individual's life, though mechanisms for small-scale mobility may exist, coupled with resocialization mechanisms that keep mobility from undermining the stability of the status system. Perhaps the most fluid of these contemporary forms of status—aside from Milner's (2004) high school cliques—is occupation, where large-scale quantitative studies of industrial-capitalist societies have found a significant number of adults experiencing more than one status group during their working lives (DiPrete 2002:282; Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992:331).

There is, however, another status-like system that looks quite different: celebrity. Its boundaries are uncertain, with interlinked circles shading from highest to lowest status. It is extremely volatile, with members of the highest-status groups being whisked in and out every year. Moreover, it has burst out of the narrow "niches" and "pockets" of society that Weber and Milner identified as likely locations for status groups, and occupies an increasingly central position in the self-imagination of inequality in contemporary societies.

CELEBRITY STATUS

Heroes and fame have existed for millennia, but celebrity is a recent phenomenon. To be a celebrity is to be "known for [one's] well-knownness," according to Boorstin's (1962:57) well-known definition. The roots of celebrity reach back to Alexander the Great, whose manipulation of publicity and global ambitions may make him "the first famous person" (Braudy 1986:32). However, celebrity acquired new significance in the era of mass media. Abraham Lincoln became the most widely recognized U.S. president because his photograph was so widely disseminated (Braudy 1986:494–97). Visual images "made fame instant and ubiquitous in ways that the printed word could not match" (Rojek 2001:128). The development of motion pictures marked a solidification of celebrity culture. The General Film Company, which dominated the early years of commercial movie making in the United States, did not originally

advertise or even identify its actors. However, audiences demanded information about them and deluged the movie studios with letters requesting their names and biographies. Independent producers lured actors away from General Film with promises of higher salaries, an investment that was quickly paid for with profits reaped by celebrity (DeCordova 1990).

Unlike earlier status groups, celebrities are a creature of capitalism: they involve the commodification of reputation, as noted by Charles E. Hurst (2005:116–22), and the construction of audiences, as emphasized by P. David Marshall (1997). Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (2002:116, 126) argued in the 1940s that celebrities are the product of a "culture industry" that measures its interchangeable starlets solely by their box-office earnings, turning all performances into advertisements. Murray Milner (2005) notes that celebrity is a distinctive form of status in part because it matches the vast scale of modern social organizations and the commodification of mass communications.

One crucial status-promoting institution that emerged in the early 20th century, at the time that Weber was writing about status groups, was the public relations industry. A well-known but widely despised character could pay to have his image burnished (Ewen 1996; Raucher 1968), as tycoon John D. Rockefeller did with film-strips showing him handing out dimes to poor children (Chernow 1998:613–14). Political campaigns began to stage celebrity endorsements in 1924, when Calvin Coolidge's managers brought Broadway actors to the White House for what would later come to be known as a photo opportunity (Tye 1998:78–79). Stars were created by public relations campaigns: the agent for a little-known actress named Rita Hayworth invented a fictitious organization to name her the best-dressed actress in Hollywood, then talked *Look* magazine into planning a layout on her and her clothes, then convinced the Saks department store to lend her a wardrobe for the photo shoot in exchange for her promise to proclaim that she bought all of her clothing at Saks (Gamson 1994:26). Unlike the status groups theorized by Weber, celebrities do not usurp honor on their own; a cadre of professionals, who are generally not themselves celebrities, has emerged to usurp it for them.

Other institutions of the "celebrity-industrial complex" (Orth 2004) emerged in this period as well, such as gossip columns, fan club newsletters, and entertainment-related magazines that offered personal details about actors (Gamson 1994:26–39; Barbas 2001). By the 1980s, newsstands in many parts of the world were plastered with celebrity-focused magazines such as *People Weekly*. In the United States, such magazines came to look staid by comparison with later rivals such as *US Weekly*, *In Touch*, and *Star*. These publications compete to report or invent stories of celebrities' most intimate moments: their relationships and sex scandals, pregnancies and children, weight gain and loss, and struggles with drug and alcohol abuse. The huge market for such information suggests an obsessive fascination with celebrities that both honors them for their distinctiveness (nobody would read such reports about "ordinary" people) and pretends to undermine their distinctiveness (displaying their "feet of clay" to make them appear just like ordinary people). This double-edged attentiveness may distinguish high-status celebrities from earlier high-status groups. According to one recent analysis of late 18th- and early 19th- century Britain, the publicizing of aristocratic peccadillos contributed significantly to the democratic movement against aristocratic privilege (Clark 2003). Today, by contrast, publicizing the peccadillos of celebrities seems to help reinforce their celebrity.

The celebrity role is implicated in an established narrative arc (Gabler 2001). It begins with a compelling personal story about the future celebrity's training, in which

his or her extraordinary characteristics are developed. It generally includes the happenstance of the celebrity's "discovery," then dwells on the celebrity's ascent from triumph to triumph, overcoming challenges of all sorts. In the late 20th century, a new chapter was added to this narrative: the story of the has-been. Out-of-date celebrities live on in the nether-world of reruns and "classic" movies on cable television channels, and oldies stations on the radio. Occasionally, they are hunted down and their washed-up status is mocked with programs that inquire: "Where are they now?" A few celebrities die young and are transformed into cultural icons (James Dean, Che Guevara, Marilyn Monroe), and a few others are able to carry their fame into senescence, sometimes through political careers (Ronald Reagan, John Glenn). Generally, though, celebrity decays with age. It is not routinized into enduring privilege, as in Weber's conception of status. The rate of decay has accelerated over the 20th century. Hollywood used to cultivate movie stars over many years; today, television stars can rise and fall in a single year's programming cycle (Milner 2005:75–76).

A further frontier was reached at the end of the 20th century, when celebrity came to be disassociated from reputations for beauty, talent, or accomplishments (Gabler 1998:156). Andy Warhol famously predicted in the 1960s: "In the future everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes." In 1979, Warhol revised his prediction: "I'm bored with that line. I never use it anymore. My new line is, 'In fifteen minutes everybody will be famous'" (Warhol 1979:48). More than a quarter-century later, Warhol and his first quotation are still famous, but the second quotation seems particularly fitting for the "entertainment glut" (Gitlin 1998) of the current era. Far from erecting barriers to entry, as high-status groups did in the past, celebrity status involves the constant recruitment of new members: "celetoids," as Chris Rojek calls them—"lottery winners, one-hit wonders, stalkers, whistle blowers, sports arena streakers . . . and various other social types who command media attention one day, and are forgotten the next" (Rojek 2001:20–21). The World Wide Web has particularly fueled such phenomena, as evidenced by Internet stars Cindy Margolis and Mahir Cagri, who bypassed the usual gatekeepers of the celebrity industry and became famous through their websites (Gamson 2000).

This type of celebrity, while less esteemed, is far more attainable than movie stardom, and has in effect made fame seem achievable for ordinary people. In certain cases, people use criminality as a means to achieve celebrity, such as violence that establishes street credibility to further a music career (Parnaby and Sacco 2004) or massacres intended to garner media attention (Gibbs and Roche 1999). The already stereotypical route to semicelebrity these days, however, is "reality television," in which nonprofessional actors eagerly divulge their most intimate thoughts and experiences to national audiences. It was probably rare in earlier eras for commoners to aspire to become members of high-status groups; today, by contrast, it seems that just about everybody wants to be famous.

The following sections outline four aspects of celebrity status that have mushroomed in importance over the past century, contradicting Weber's prediction of the demise of status groups. At the same time, these four aspects of celebrity fit the general outlines of Weber's analysis: the formation of a high-status group, not simply high-status individuals such as heroes or charismatic leaders; the usurpation of "honor," such that lower-status groups acknowledge the superiority of high-status groups; the monopolization of economic niches, in this case the niche of fame; and the pursuit of legal privilege, which celebrities have only just begun. We treat these aspects of status under the headings of interpersonal privilege (how we act when we

meet celebrities), normative privilege (how many of us want to imitate celebrities), economic privilege (how celebrity is lucrative), and legal privilege (how celebrities claim special rights). Within each of these sections, celebrity status is compared with earlier status hierarchies.

CELEBRITY IN PERSON: INTERACTIONAL PRIVILEGE

Old-style status elites—nobility and old money—generally keep to themselves. Perhaps we academics went to college with their children. We probably pass them in the first-class section of airplanes on the way to our coach seats, or we see them driving expensive cars from exclusive communities to exclusive vacation spots. But how can we tell them from the just plain rich? What markers of status set them apart? Since the unveiling of "WASP" styles a quarter-century ago (Birnbach 1980) and the subsequent mass marketing of khakis and loafers, old status cannot be identified easily by clothing. In the United States, at least, their accents are probably not so distinct as the famous faux-British lockjaw caricatured by Jim Backus's upper-class character, Thurston Howell III, on the 1960s television show *Gilligan's Island*. And we are not curious to find out how many generations our acquaintances' money goes back. This form of status hardly registers in our psyches. By contrast, we recall every instant that we—and our relatives and friends—spent near a celebrity. Sometimes, we let ourselves relish these memories. This and other indented passages in this article come from the personal experiences of the co-authors, and are intended as illustrations of each of the four aspects of celebrity status that we discuss in this article:

> My sisters and I laughed to ourselves as we heard the nearby waiters gossip about famous guests at our Caribbean resort. Honestly, I hadn't heard of several of the people they mentioned, but you never know just who might show up. A couple days later, on Christmas Eve, as a chef chopped and grilled "Japanese" food at our dinner table, my sister leaned over to me and whispered through clenched teeth, "That's Danny Partridge!" Knowing for a fact that my sister has never seen "The Partridge Family," the 1970s television show, I scoffed. Minutes later, when the man she identified took his toddler to the bathroom, she turned to me again and told me about how she had seen the actor Danny Bonaduce on the VH-1 cable television channel, detailing his addiction to drugs and his rivalry with fellow "Partridge Family" star David Cassidy. The Bonaduce family left dinner early, smiling and saying that Santa Claus would be coming soon, and as soon as they were out the door, the entire restaurant, staff included, was abuzz. Of course, one of the first things that my sister and I did when we got back home was to check on the Internet so that she could prove herself right. Even without ever seeing the television show that made him famous, we still had our celebrity encounter.

Sociologists, even sociologists who study celebrity, are not immune to its presence. Celebrities, live and in person, get most folks' pulses pounding, their palms sweating, their minds racing to calculate whether it would be cool or gauche to approach them, to mention the obvious fact that we recognize them, that we know far more about them than they know about us, and that this makes them seem infinitely superior to us (Ferris 2004). Celebrities were once ordinary humans like us, but they no longer

are. The privileges that we grant them in person help to reinforce their superior status.

The primary interpersonal privilege of celebrity is attention. Celebrities matter to the rest of us, even if we would have no interest in them were they not celebrities. The most mundane experiences of celebrities' lives attract attention, not just by fans but also by anyone who happens to recognize their fame. Players on a successful college basketball team, for instance, develop a "glorified self" through the attention that they receive on and off campus. Without this attention, they would just be everyday college students, only taller (Adler and Adler 1989). A study of students' relationships with celebrities found that ordinary people "seek out further information about celebrities' lives for vicarious pleasure" (Leets, de Becker, and Giles 1995:114). All this attention and information turns celebrities into "intimate strangers" (Schickel 1985), persons with whom we have unilateral "parasocial" relationships (Giles 2000:128; Horton and Wohl 1956). A neurological study found that celebrities—both their image and their printed name—trigger dedicated fast-access memory cells in the brain, at least among a sample of eight epileptics in Los Angeles who had sensors implanted in their brains to track seizures (Quian Quiroga et al. 2005).

When a celebrity deigns to interact with ordinary people, we consider ourselves honored. Even if the interaction is unpleasant, even if it reinforces the status differential, celebrity status may rub off in a small way on the inferior party. The retelling of the incident can generate respect among one's friends and family, and is likely to remain part of one's conversational repertoire for many years. Stories abound of individuals who will make gargantuan efforts to have the kind of contact with celebrities that could prove to be the highlight of their lives. In a disturbing study, Benedict (1998) describes one such category, female "groupies," whose goal is to be available for sex at the beck and call of professional athletes. Even contact at a distance, such as attendance at a crowded concert, can stir intense feelings of personal attachment (Vermorel and Vermorel 1985). The popular desire to share space with celebrities leads restauranteurs, hoteliers, and shop owners to offer special privileges to celebrities, in hopes that their establishment will develop a reputation for attracting celebrities.

Status has its drawbacks, including the isolation that comes from the spotlight. If celebrities are allotted more than their fair share of esteem, they also lose the ability to go about their daily lives without having to deal with the expressions of fandom described above, in addition to the intrusive companionship of photographers (Howe 2005). In response, celebrities create new social networks open only to those with similar experiences (Alberoni 1972). Celebrities may live in gated communities, travel via private transportation, separate themselves from passers-by with bodyguards, and socialize only with fellow elites. The actress Janet Leigh, for example, peppers her autobiography with lists of the celebrities she dined with, talked with, or attended functions with during the height of her career. Occasions are marked by the other famous actors and actresses who shared particular moments with her (Leigh 1984). Through these social settings, celebrities develop a form of endogamy: they tend to enter into romantic relationships with other celebrities. The ultimate celebrity couple of the late 20th century, Posh and Becks, admitted as much. English soccer star David Beckham writes about his wife, singer Victoria Adams Beckham: "I'd be lying if I didn't admit that being a pop star was part of the attraction. That did it for me and likewise, the fact that I was good at my job was part of the attraction for her. We were both successful and could relate to each other as equals" (Beckham 2000:25). Beckham also describes how he met his future wife, noting casually that he

turned to her band manager for an introduction. The access he needed to approach the pop star was granted to him by virtue of his celebrity status.

BEING LIKE MIKE: NORMATIVE PRIVILEGE

> "The Rachel," a hairstyle born of the television show "Friends," was so pervasive in the 1990s that I never actually saw it on a television. I did not need to. I was living in a co-ed dormitory and thoroughly inundated by posters and pictures of The Rachel. Visiting the bathroom of a male friend's suite, I looked up at the mirror and encountered not my own pale reflection but that of... The Rachel. There she was in all her shaggy, honey-haired glory staring fetchingly back at me from beside the mirror. Being a recent transfer to a college where I knew no one, I did what any forlorn 19-year-old would do to improve their social life. I went and tried to get myself that damn haircut. Unfortunately, I was not only new to town but economically challenged. So I sought The Rachel at a bargain haircut chain where I was served by a monster named Jo-ette. Jo-ette smoked compulsively for the duration of our hair-cutting session. The scissors wielded by her nicotine-stained fingers encountered a flowing mass of long locks acquired while attending an accredited hippie commune, and wreaked stylistic havoc. I walked out that day with a coif much more closely resembling another, far less prestigious mane trend—that of the mullet. I wanted to be the girl that guys looked at because something about her reminded them of that really hot girl on "Friends." Instead, I was that girl that guys looked at because something about her reminded them of their cousin Billy-Bob from the sticks.

Celebrities are the new role models. In the words of one advertising campaign, we want to "be like Mike." (The reference is to basketball star Michael Jordan, one of the world's most successfully marketed celebrity spokespeople of the late 20th century (Andrews 2001).) Status elites have long attracted mimics and poseurs: for many centuries, governments enacted and enforced a wide range of sumptuary laws designed in part to keep lower-status individuals from clothing and carrying themselves in manners befitting only to high-status individuals (Hunt 1996). But in the era of celebrity status, mimicry is routine and encouraged. We envy and desire the clichés of the elite, their clothing and their cars—aspects of their life conduct, to use Weber's term, that are obtainable, if sometimes in low-budget facsimiles. The attribute that is imitated can include suicide, whose rate increases following celebrity incidents (Stack 1987); cancer screening (Larson et al. 2005); dieting (Mooney, Farley, and Strugnell 2004); or "dress, hairstyle, speech, activities, and any other social behavioral patterns" that youths as young as 10 years old associate with pop stars (Raviv et al. 1996:632). A glut of media outlets reports on celebrities' body and fashion styles, sometimes offering price and purchasing information to assist imitative consumption. One chilling example of celebrity imitation is witnessed in the documentary television program, "I Want a Famous Face," in which young adults undergo plastic surgery, often multiple procedures, in an effort to look more like their celebrity idols. The program's website insists that the subjects in the series paid for the surgery on their own.

Celebrities are taken as authorities on a wide variety of subjects. Their advice on beauty and fashion, in particular, appears to be worth considerable space in magazines and on television talk shows, despite the fact that their own appearance

is frequently the work of professional consultants and stylists. Celebrities are often taken as authorities on other subjects, too, from religion to politics. The Church of Scientology, for example, offers special accommodations for celebrity adherents, calculating that their participation will encourage others to join (Frantz 1998; Sappell and Welkos 1990). Indeed, celebrity is sometimes considered a new form of religion, providing transcendence of the mundane and epic morality tales (Rojek 2001:51–99). Celebrity status is increasingly transferred into the political arena as well (Marks and Fischer 2002; Mukherjee 2004). "Just because they are entertainment figures with a huge following, interviewers often ask them about the state of world peace, their position on the Middle East, the environment, presidential politics, and so on. This trend to treat celebrities with an unusual amount of deference in public debate has led to an unusual celebrity political system where stars have become major politicos" (West and Orman 2003:116). Celebrities are accorded the chance to speak publicly about political issues, whereas experts on the issues, not to mention average citizens, have far less chance of gaining access to the media. Some celebrities exploit their status brazenly, even self-righteously, to call attention to issues that they are passionate about. The actress Susan Sarandon, for example, said: "If my privacy is going to be invaded and I'm going to be treated as a commodity, I might as well take advantage of it" (Brownstein 1990:11). Celebrity participation in a political cause, like any elite support, can shift the focus of a movement, as documented in a case study where "local leadership, claims, and concerns were overshadowed as celebrities effectively reframed movements into more consensual, less controversial, and ultimately less disruptive affairs" (Meyer and Gamson 1995:201). Finally, there is a growing list of celebrities—such as actor Arnold Schwarzenegger in the United States and cricketer Imran Khan in Pakistan—who have used their fame to catapult into the electoral process itself.

Scholars have sometimes associated the normative aspect of celebrity with charisma, Weber's residual category of authority relations, in which followers obey a leader not for traditional or rational-bureaucratic reasons but through a personal acceptance of the leader's "exceptional powers or qualities" (1978:241). According to Weber, charisma ultimately cannot be institutionalized; it fades into paternalistic or rational-bureaucratic authority (1978:246–54, 1121–48). Nonrational charisma would seem to coexist uneasily with the rational economic activity that Weber associated with capitalism, if we presume that Weber intended to make a holistic argument about rationalization in all spheres of life. However, more recent scholars such as Edward Shils (1982) have suggested that charisma may be institutionalized in occupations that appear to be transcendental because they play a prominent role in ordering the social world. Shils gives the example of the U.S. Supreme Court, which is identified in surveys of the American population as one of the highest-status occupations in the country, and that represents for Shils the transcendent property of justice (Shils 1982:134). The same surveys identify actors and directors with only middling levels of prestige, well below judges and even sociologists (Hauser and Warren 1997:260–61). Nevertheless, fans and nonfans alike treat celebrities as quasi-magical figures (Rojek 2001).

At the same time, many people remain cynical about celebrity authority (Gamson 1994). Almost all of us treat celebrities with status deference in person, but many of us smirk with feelings of superiority at the few who go so far as to impersonate Elvis Presley on a regular basis (Fraser and Brown 2002). Billions of people around the world followed the story of Princess Diana's marriage, separation, and death, whether we wanted to or not, but not all of us were personally grief-stricken by her demise

(Brown, Basil, and Bocarnea 2003). The variability of celebrity influence suggests that the rituals marking contemporary status hierarchies are not as consistent as Weber suggested they were for old-status groups. Weber implied that the usurpation of honor by high-status groups translates into a set of practices that are recognized and practiced by everybody within a community. By contrast, the ways in which we acknowledge celebrity status appear to be more a matter of lifestyle choices than of tradition. Perhaps this may change as celebrity ages into a status system that more resembles old-status aristocracies. Alternatively, the celebrity system's rapid turnover may prevent the system from gelling into tradition. Partial and selective followings may be built-in to a system that offers so many celebrities to choose among. Celebrities compete for their status position by wooing lower-status fans—a far cry from Weber's image of status competition, in which honor was to be gained only by impressing high-status insiders. To be sure, major celebrities are generally vetted by high-status insiders before they are presented to the public. But the insiders are never able to guess or shape public tastes perfectly, and the low-status public ultimately sets the level of a celebrity's status (De Vany 2004).

CELEBRITY SWAG: ECONOMIC PRIVILEGES

> Occasionally I watch "Inside Edition," eating take-out food on the couch and pretending to be shocked at the excess of glamor and information. I'm not proud of it, but who can resist? So one day I was tuning in for Oscar coverage—I try to keep up—and saw a segment on something called "swag bags." Apparently attendees at star-studded awards shows are given baskets of extravagant freebies. Bottom-feeders in the celebrity food chain get modest collections of high-tech gadgets and expensive body-care products and fancy olive oils, but the top of the line can include coupons for free laser eye surgery, a huge high-definition television, and a fancy banquet for dozens of your closest friends. The uber-blond "news" anchoress perkily announced that the swag bag was worth an estimated $35,000, which is somewhat more than I make each year as a sociology graduate student. This phenomenon is only a few years old, but it has developed into a thriving industry with "product placement" advertising companies competing to give away the most desirable goodies at awards shows and even some celebrity weddings, in hopes that the public will learn about these products through unpaid advertising in the tabloids and associate them with the good life. The practice has morphed into "luxury lodge" tents set up outside awards shows and after-show parties, where approved celebrities can grab as much free stuff as they want—or almost as much as they want, in the case of teen star Lindsay Lohan, whom I saw on a celebrity news show being cut off after taking two fistfuls of "designer" sunglasses from one booth. She laughed and walked off with her free glasses, though she can probably afford to buy her own, given her $7,500,000 paycheck for the 2005 film, "Herbie: Fully Loaded." "It's like Christmas time," says Samantha Haft, co-founder of one of the companies that produces swag bags for awards shows. "I'd imagine that even the richest person in the world still celebrates Christmas and still gets excited by being gifted and being appreciated." I know I would.

Like Weber's old high-status groups, which maintained their style of life by monopolizing particular economic niches, celebrity status also maintains itself through

the exploitation of economic benefits. However, celebrity status has become its own niche: fame is lucrative. This form of status translates directly into financial benefit. The hottest celebrities are among the highest wage earners in the world, with annual incomes—not including stock options, profit-sharing, limited partnerships, and other ownership arrangements—in the millions of dollars. Several dozen movie stars earn $5 million for a few months' work on a single film; perhaps 100 professional athletes earn $5 million or more for a single season's "play." By way of comparison, approximately 1,000 corporate executives in the United States alone earn $5 million or more per year, though much of this comes from stock options, blurring the line between wage labor and ownership of the means of production.[4]

Celebrity status has become increasingly lucrative over time. In the mid 20th century, top celebrities earned a small fraction of the income generated by their performance. As "free agent" systems broke down the studio system in Hollywood and the "reserve clause" in North American professional sports leagues in the 1960s and 1970s, celebrities were able to offer their services to the highest bidder, and top salaries skyrocketed. In 1962, for example, Elizabeth Taylor became the first actress to make a million dollars in a single film, earning approximately $1,800,000 for her role in "Cleopatra." In 2003, Julia Roberts became the first actress to earn $25,000,000 in a single film ("Mona Lisa Smile")—more than twice as much as Cleopatra when adjusted for inflation. In 1966, the baseball player Willie Mays earned a record $130,000 per year; in 2000, the top-paid player, Alex Rodriguez, signed a 10-year contract worth $25,200,000 per year, more than 30 times as much as Mays when adjusted for inflation.

Far from melting down status hierarchies, as Weber suggested, capitalism appears to demand them, for example, through celebrity sponsorship of commercial products and services. Endorsement contracts and other ancillary activities can earn far more than the income from a celebrity's primary occupation (Cowen 2000). The study of marketing has developed sophisticated methods to measure celebrity status (Knott and St. James 2004; Pornpitakpan 2003), generating the celebrity-derivative industry of advisors to negotiators of endorsement contracts. Celebrity has become such a financial boon that capitalists, professionals, and others seek out public relations advice to boost their visibility and increase their incomes (Rein, Kotler, and Stoller 1997). There are celebrity businesspeople, celebrity attorneys, celebrity doctors, all of whom charge extra because of their high profiles.

Celebrity also generates indirect economic benefits through the exclusive networks to which it offers entry. Like old-style elites who socialized in exclusive clubs, celebrities today are invited to social events and admitted to institutions that allow them to make friends with other elites. These ties can help celebrities gain access to special professional services, such as high-end real-estate agents or financial managers, who will help them to make money. They may also gain access to potentially lucrative invitation-only investment opportunities, such as hedge funds and private equity funds, which multiplied in the last decade of the 20th century.

And then there are the swag bags, plus innumerable "comps" (complimentary items) that celebrities receive for free in exchange for implied endorsement. Status has its perks.

[4]In 2004, the average compensation of chief executive officers at 2,000 of the largest companies in the United States included $711,000 in base salary, just over $1 million in bonuses, and approximately $4 million in stock options (Board Analyst 2005). The world's 100th best-paid celebrity earned $1.5 million (Kafka 2005), and the 50th best-paid athlete earned $15 million (Badenhausen 2004).

THE RIGHT OF PUBLICITY: LEGAL PRIVILEGES

> Last summer my sisters and I applied to be on "The Amazing Race," a "reality" television show where contestants race around the world. We made our application video and filled out the questionnaire, which asked us things like "What most excites you about traveling?" and "Do you get sea, air, or car sick? If yes, please state which." On the final pages of the application were several large paragraphs of legalese, including this catchy sentence: "By submitting this application, I hereby consent to the recording, and use and reuse by the Producers . . . of my voice, actions, likeness, name, appearance and biographical material (collectively 'Likeness') in any and all media now known or hereafter devised, worldwide, in perpetuity, in any and all versions now known or hereafter devised (including digitized versions) in, or in connection with, the Program." As it happens, I am an attorney who specializes in intellectual property rights, so I knew exactly what we were signing away: our right of publicity. In other words, the producers of the show could use our images without paying us a dime. They even specified the right to alter our images as they saw fit, without our permission. If we had won the show's grand prize of one million dollars, the deal would have been worth it. And then, having earned our cameo spot in the roster of minor celebrities, we might have been able to profit from the right of publicity in our next entertainment contract. Unfortunately, we didn't even get called for an interview, so our right of publicity is still worth what "The Amazing Race" paid for it: nothing.

According to Weber, high-status groups are granted legal privileges, once their social and economic privileges have been stable for a period of time. Celebrity status has achieved significant economic privileges for less than a century, and the growth of these privileges in the late 20th century does not present an image of stability so much as change. However, in keeping with Weber's expectations, celebrity status has begun to seek and win legal privileges under the rubric of the "the right of publicity": "the right of each person to control and profit from the publicity values which he [sic] has created or purchased" (Nimmer 1954:216).

The right of publicity was first recognized as a form of property in 1953, in a New York case pitting two chewing-gum manufacturers against one another (Haelan Laboratories 1953). Both companies included baseball cards with their gum, at a time when card collecting was becoming big business. The court ruled that baseball players had a right to the publicity value of their photograph, and that they could sell this right exclusively to a single gum manufacturer if they wished. Prior to this time, "no one apparently needed the law's protection to become famous" (Grandpre 2001:103).

Since the mid 20th century, the right of publicity has expanded to include not just the likeness but also the image, name, and identity of the celebrity. The right of publicity has been recognized in most U.S. states (McCarthy 2000:§6; Peles 2004:328). Several states, such as California, Indiana, Nevada, and Tennessee—Elvis Presley's home—grant postmortem rights of publicity as well (Webner and Lindquist 2004:174). Outside of the United States, however, few jurisdictions recognize celebrities' right of publicity. Only in 2002 did English courts take a step in this direction, when race-car driver Eddie Irvine was determined to have a right not to have his image altered in a way that made it appear as though he endorsed the defendant's radio station (Bryniczka 2004; Edmund Irvine 2002). Elsewhere in western

Europe, celebrities enjoy only the more limited protection of the right to privacy, and this can be overridden by the public's right to information (Markesinis et al. 2004).

Even in the United States, the right of publicity has its limits. Courts generally interpret the constitutional guarantee of freedom of speech to allow the publication of nasty comments and unflattering photographs of celebrities. Under the legal doctrine of "fair use," news media, satires, and even novels are given special permission to use celebrities' images and names without permission. Since celebrities are public figures, their claims of defamation must meet a more stringent standard than other people's, including proving "actual malice" on the part of the defendant. Indeed, celebrities' fame can sometimes count against them: in a recent case, professional golfer Tiger Woods was deemed to have plenty of opportunities to earn money aside from the sale of paintings that an artist had made of him without authorization (ETW Corporation 2003; Sloan 2005).

Beyond the right of publicity, celebrities also enjoy informal legal privileges in criminal procedures. When celebrities are victims, law enforcement agencies may be more likely to pursue their cases vigorously. When they are defendants, their privilege is mixed: on one hand, law enforcement agencies may make extra efforts to make a public example out of them (Robinson 1998). On the other hand, the police and court officials generally treat celebrities more respectfully than other defendants, and "celebrity status affords the defendant an opportunity to present the case to the public, with the help of the media, before going to trial" (Reidy 2004:304). Plus, celebrities seem to get away with illegal acts that would not be tolerated if they were committed by other people, such as trashing hotel rooms, picking fights, or consuming controlled substances in public places. The legal order has not yet been formally transformed to permit this celebrity-status behavior, but an informal double-standard may have emerged that smirks and winks at celebrity hijinks.

CONCLUSIONS

Celebrity status is big business, and the academic study of celebrity is itself a growing industry. Our article relies on this scholarly literature to document and analyze four aspects of celebrity status: the interactional privilege that makes brushes with celebrities memorable; the normative privilege that generates respect for celebrities and their ideas; the economic privilege that brings fortunes to celebrities; and the legal privilege that states are beginning to recognize. Our contribution to this literature, aside from the collation and categorization of this sprawling field, is to highlight the effect of celebrity status on academics. By this we mean not just that academics can be as star-struck as anybody else, though our indented illustrations provide anecdotal evidence that at least some sociologists are vulnerable to the influence of celebrity status. Rather, we mean that the rise of celebrity challenges a core tenet of modern social science, namely, the decline of status systems.

If celebrity is indeed a status group, then the theory of status has been wrong for a century. Weber famously predicted that status hierarchies would disappear as the logic of capitalism rationalized all sectors of economic activity, leaving high-status groups with no material basis for their claims to superiority. Since Weber's time, status groups have continued to be treated primarily as modern hangovers from premodern times, remnants of aristocratic, patriarchal, racial, or other forms of status that have been reduced in importance in recent generations but still ensure some measure of privilege. Disconfirmations of this approach—the emergence of new

status-like groups that have no roots in the premodern period—are usually analyzed by way of analogy with old-status groups, such as Weber's discussion of occupational groups and Mills' identification of a "power elite" that socializes and intermarries just as aristocracies did in earlier times. "Celebrity status systems are much less stable than more traditional status systems," Milner (2005:75) writes, but his theory of status relations, developed from the study of the traditional caste system in India, "helps us to understand why." Contemporary status groups, in this view, do not undermine but rather corroborate the analysis of premodern status groups.

This article proposes, by contrast, that celebrity status fundamentally contradicts Weber's analysis of status, in two ways. First, it contradicts the downward trajectory of status groups that Weber projected into the future. Second, it contradicts the genealogy of status groups that Weber projected into the past, the slow inbreeding of honor over multiple generations.

To make this case, we have tried to show that celebrity status fits Weber's definition of a status group. Both involve the usurpation of honor. Both involve interpersonal rituals of deference between status groups and solidarity within the high-status group. Both involve normative patterns of mimicry. Both grant economic benefits that are particular to the high-status group. Both enact special legal privileges for the high-status group, though for celebrities this development is still in its early days. The ultimate stage of status hierarchy, according to Weber, is ethnicization through putatively biological distinctions among status groups. Although celebrities' children may retain some portion of their parents' status, it seems unlikely that celebrity status will ever reach this stage, since the celebrity industry requires a constant supply of new recruits, rather than erecting barriers to entry.

But if celebrity status fits Weber's category of status, it is also quite distinct. Celebrity is status on speed. It develops quickly, not over generations as in Weber's theory. It decays quickly, rather than accumulating over the years. It is a form of status that serves the interests of capitalism, rather than defending economic niches that capitalism is destined to conquer. Over the course of the 20th century, while Weber's examples of status faded into the history books, celebrity status has conquered huge swaths of the world's consciousness. From ambitious beginnings in New York and southern California, celebrity status is recognized and replicated across the planet. Pop stars are generated even by cultural movements that are hostile to globalization. Starting with professional performers—actors, singers, and athletes—celebrity status has now spread to many fields of endeavor, including religion and politics. Even sociologists may feel the tug of celebrity on occasion, much as we claim to be inoculated by our insight.

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