

Stars and celebrity

26 January 1999

Dear David Walsh,

Your article on Michael Jordan expressed thoughts about the nature of "stardom" and related issues, similar to ones I have been having.

Recently I have heard several stars proclaim that their success is almost entirely due to their own efforts and that therefore anyone, even people from similar humble backgrounds, can succeed in a similar fashion.

This has been put forward by Billy Connolly, the stand-up comedian and actor, Noel or Liam Gallagher of Oasis fame (I forget which, it might have been both), and last, and probably least, the Spice Girls. Now I would not seek to deny that these people do not possess any real talent--Connolly obviously does, Gallagher brothers some, and the Spice Girls probably have some but keep it well hidden--but this is most definitely not the major factor in their "success". I think that have become so bamboozled by their meteoric rise to fame that they have lost what critical faculties they ever had.

A big part of explaining their "success" is exactly what you pointed out about Jordan: capitalism needs these celebrities in order to inculcate illusions in workers, particularly the youth, that they can also become "stars" and thus escape the barren existence they face in today's conditions.

How much this component is responsible for each star's success may vary. Billy Connolly probably has a fairly unique talent, but he's deluded if he thinks every Glaswegian crane driver with wry sense of humour can achieve his status. On the other hand, the Spice Girls appear to be a totally manufactured product.

The media obsession with celebrities is linked to a fashionable dress sense, to looking young, beautiful and glamorous. I regard the current preoccupation with wearing the right designer clothes as the biggest money-making scam since the invention of the cigarette.

The perverse attitudes being promulgated, especially among the youth, centre around vilifying anyone judged to be out of step with this phoney "cool" culture.

This usually means ridiculing older people who come from a different generation and wear the "wrong" clothes and have old attitudes and opinions, and ways of talking, walking, etc.: they are deemed to be "sad".

A cynical sense of humour is "cool": for example, pretending to believe in racist attitudes is considered hilarious in this perverted outlook. To be zany, without a serious thought in your head, is the acme of being really "cool". People who think at all deeply or seriously about things, are of course "sad" and need to "lighten up."

The media also suggest that having a successful career, a sexual relationship (or several), and lots of money are the prerequisites for happiness. In Britain, in addition to the National Lottery, there is a new TV quiz show called *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?* To which one could reply: "Yes, who does want to be a millionaire?" Many of the people who've won the lottery have discovered that sitting around with pots of money is rather tedious, and they have even gone back to work to try to get some satisfaction out of life. They also have difficulty spending the money because their intellectual horizons are so limited. Once they've decorated their new big house in the latest style--home decorating and DIY being another obsession of today's "culture"--they're clean out of ideas. I'm not blaming people for trying to escape their current situation but the solution lies elsewhere--in the complete economic, social and cultural reshaping of society.

There has been an alarming rise in suicides amongst young males in the 18 to 25 age group. These young men have often lost their footing on the ladder of "success". They haven't been those who struggle to achieve any "success". Rather, they've been flamboyant characters who've probably bought into this success/cool culture I've been discussing: men in steady jobs who've lost their employment and not been able to get re-hired, or men who've split up with their sexual partners and fallen into the now socially stigmatised

role of "sad", lonely partnerless person.

Yours fraternally,

DB



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