

# The campaign to keep Paris Hilton in jail: nothing healthy about it

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9 June 2007

The pious outrage Thursday over heiress Paris Hilton's "early release" from jail in Los Angeles, accusations of "special treatment" and the vindictive demands that she receive "justice," i.e., punishment, have nothing healthy or progressive about them—as the images of Hilton being taken in handcuffs to court Friday morning and from there, sobbing, back to prison should indicate.

In the first place, one only has to consider those campaigning for her continued imprisonment. The Rev. Al Sharpton, former FBI informer and demagogue, had plans to come to Los Angeles to protest this case of "celebrity injustice" in front of Hilton's house and, coincidentally, flocks of photographers.

A host of Los Angeles politicians, on a daily basis utterly indifferent to the conditions of the poor, seized the opportunity of Hilton's release to posture as the champions of equal justice. County supervisor Don Knabe told the Associated Press, "What transpired here is outrageous." Her early release, he said, "gives the impression of ... celebrity justice being handed out." Los Angeles City Attorney Rocky Delgadillo, the prosecutor in Hilton's case, pontificated, "We cannot tolerate a two-tiered jail system where the rich and powerful receive special treatment."

What hypocrisy! In a country where Wall Street swindlers and Washington war criminals not only go scot-free, but are routinely celebrated by the media! Hilton, it should be remembered, is guilty of driving with a suspended license.

The cable television news shows Thursday were consumed by pundits expressing their indignation over Hilton's release to house arrest for the remainder of her sentence. One of the few voices of reason was well-known attorney Mark Geragos, who appeared on the Larry King program on CNN Thursday evening.

Geragos pointed out that due to the horrific overcrowding in Los Angeles County jails, many non-violent offenders are released early—some 200,000 in recent years, according to an item on CBS News.

"In fact," Geragos noted, "she did about double to triple what anybody else would have done ... I've had one [client] within the last week who literally turned themselves in, took the bus ride and were released right from county jail onto the electronic monitoring and then was released from that in six days ... So when people say Paris was getting special treatment, I say, yes. She got double or triple what everybody else in LA County gets."

Along the same lines, attorney Leonard Levine told the *Washington Post* that the overcrowding in the Los Angeles County jail system—25,000 prisoners in a space for 12,000—results in thousands of non-violent offenders serving only 10 percent of their sentences (which was Hilton's situation). "She did as much as a normal person would have done," he commented.

Friday morning, on orders of the judge in the case, who complained that papers concerning her early release on medical grounds had never been delivered to him, Hilton was brought by police car to the court.

Following her appearance, according to the Associated Press, Hilton "was escorted out ... screaming and crying and sent back to jail ... after a judge ruled that she must serve out her entire 45-day sentence behind bars rather than in her Hollywood Hills home. 'It's not right!' shouted the weeping Hilton, who violated her parole in a reckless driving case. 'Mom!' she called out to her mother in the audience."

Is this justice served? One can only feel sympathy for the young woman and contempt for the authorities in this case.

There are many unhealthy aspects to this whole

business. In the first place, the Paris Hilton celebrity phenomenon was a product of the foul media-entertainment apparatus in the US and a generally diseased social climate. Under healthier circumstances, Hilton's "bad girl" antics would have been of concern only to her family and close friends.

As conditions have worsened in the US for millions, as social mobility has declined and as real-life opportunities have dried up, the need to live vicariously through celebrities—athletes, supermodels, film stars, etc.—has grown exponentially. Great numbers of Americans pursue imaginary lives through their idols and project their fantasies onto the objects of their fascination.

At the same time, this is a highly volatile and fluid relationship. The same processes breeding vicarious living, i.e., stunted *real lives*, also produce resentment, jealousy and even rage, of a generally unformed and even anti-social variety. This is not, for the most part, a class-conscious rejection of the celebrity's status and the very need for celebrities. Hostility toward such figures is often linked with envy.

All of this is played upon by the media for its own cynical purposes, both to sell its products and to divert attention from genuinely pressing issues. The media plays on the public's worship of celebrities and, when the latter stumble, leads the way in "teaching them a lesson" and "cutting them down to size."

Hilton is a particular case. She is one of the first celebrities whose coverage has been generally negative from the outset. She has chosen to play, or more accurately, the media has fitted her out for the part of the spoiled, obnoxious, rich brat, only interested in parties and clothes and headlines.

These processes are complex and don't work themselves out as the result of any pre-arranged plan, but it's worth noting that Hilton's time in the limelight has coincided with the deepening of popular discontent with the war in Iraq, corporate corruption, official moves toward a police state and the destruction of secure jobs on a mass scale.

To help retard the development of a *rational* opposition to the current political and social state of affairs, the media cultivates an artificial hostility toward *much easier* targets. A seething but politically confused population is fed victims, sacrificial lambs, so to speak, while the real criminals go about their

business.

The aim, conscious or otherwise, is to make sorting out what is actually taking place in the country more difficult by encouraging a facile and undemanding (and perhaps temporarily cathartic) outrage against a Paris Hilton or some other such figure. The population is intended to feel, falsely, that its cause has been served and blows have been delivered against the rich and powerful, when all that's happened is a young woman guilty of a misdemeanor has gone to jail for a month or more.

Anyone who falls for the supposed 'egalitarian' aims of the campaign to keep Hilton in prison is fooling himself or herself.



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