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Popular Culture and the Mass Media in the Service of Politics: The Wounds of Gender Representation

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Abstract. This article identifies and analyzes the phenomenon of gender representation as it impacts on the political application of popular culture and the mass media. Political authorities' social control and political leaders' and candidates' attractiveness are of special concern. For explanatory support, the article employs a "star" of popular music--viz., rock n' roll music from the United States--from the interlude 1956-1957.

The essential feature of popular culture is its mass appeal. Socially constructed narratives and discourses on the qualities of popular culture apart from its mass appeal that influence mass appeal may themselves influence this appeal and seem to be ineluctably part of it. This is a self-reflexive feature of popular culture.

Producers, directors, marketers, distributors, vendors, participants, and consumers--people subsuming one or more of these socially constructed roles--have long engendered the above narratives and discourses. More recently, academics have formally joined this activity and analyzed it as well as been analyzed by it and through it because they are in it. This paper offers a narrative to enjoin a discourse about a process and product of popular culture--the entertainment industry, aka "the show." More specifically, it seeks to elucidate qualities of a musical entertainer and "star" of "the show"--viz., a rock 'n' roller, Richard Penniman, aka Little Richard--and music associated with him that were intrinsic to his mass appeal, to his becoming a "star"--or, following biographer Charles White, a quasi-star--between 1956 and 1957 in the United States (US). This paper posits that social constructions and deconstructions of gender-related qualities significantly induced the mass appeal of Little Richard and that this induction was facilitated through the mass media. This paper further posits that these constructions and deconstructions have constituted a significant element of the attractiveness of (1) other entertainers, (2) the linking of entertainers to political candidates during electoral campaigns and to candidates' and leaders' initiatives seeking support for policies, programs, and Issues, and (3) the attractiveness of the candidates and Issues themselves.

In the US of the 1950s, very rigid constructions of male and female genders were reinforced by popular culture through the interface of pervasive mass media technologies--for the first time including a combination of television, radio, phonographs, and tape recorders employed by mass audience--highly repetitive and increasingly sophisticated marketing strategies and techniques, and very intense social psychological pressures. (Such rigidity and intense social psychological pressures without the new combination of technologies can certainly be found in many other societies, cultures, and era, including other eras in U.S. history.)

In the US of the 1950s, there also was a very broad spectrum of benefits--some more tangible than others--that could be attained through compliance, identification with, and incorporation of appropriate constructions of gender within the variants of majority and minority societies and cultures. One could (1) more likely be accepted and even be popular--interpersonally, by groups, and organizations; (2) achieve other personal, professional, and economic successes; (3) contain attempts at worldwide

1

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Communist domination--the latter allegedly seeking to subvert U.S. strength through attempts at fomenting gender role anomalies; (4) ward off anxieties from hydrogen and atomic bombs and difficult-to-understand technologies as well as a difficult-to-tolerate rates of technological change; and (5) manage guilt, fear, anxiety, nonspecific discomfort, and alienation from not measuring up to the very specifications to which one might attempt to conform. And note that conformity entailed not only in some ways embracing the acceptable but in rejecting the unacceptable in the self and others.

That there were significant pressures--both explicit and implicit--to conform to popular culture's gender constructions and that these pressures presented a human dilemma should be deduced from a number of scientific and humanities research traditions--including, among others, psychology, biopsychology, literary criticism, cultural studies, and gender studies. These traditions have presented a very strong case for the notion of heterogeneous proclivities continually seeking to subvert socially constructed sexual orientation, sexual identity, and gender identity--within, between, and among people. These proclivities subsume the phenomenon of socially constructing self- and other-identities and ideals in the self and in others that are temporally, situationally, and contextually dependent.

This paper posits that entertainers--"stars" of "the show"--always have served--along with other functions--to help resolve the many, complex gender-related dilemmas for individual, group, and mass audience in several ways. These "stars" have included narrators and characters of mythology, legend, history, and other constructions of the past, present, and future that were imparted through communication modes such as chants, the spoken word, song, drawing, sculpture, murder, and dance; later through manuscripts, books, and magazines; and most recently (as of 1956-1957) and often most repetitively through radio, television, and film.

This gender service of the "star" has been and still is manifold. A "star" can gird and support attempts to approach gender ideals--the "star's" attempts and those of others--through vicarious conditioning with the "star's" personification and apotheosis (the staging and representation) of these ideals. The downside of this--from the social control perspective of political authorities--would be that the "star" and some of the "star's" audience members might perceive and be threatened by a significant disparity between the staged gender ideals and the audience's constructed identities of the moment. The result might be a flight from the ideal that might or might not be an escape from freedom.

"Stars" can also gird and support attempts to approach gender ideals through staging and representing the converse of these ideals. This could reassure others that one approached gender ideals more closely than the "star" or at least in not as disparate a fashion as one might seek. Staging and representing of the converse also could reassure the star who might be aware--at least before and after the fact--that one's constructed identities more closely approach gender ideals than the formal performance for which the "star" will be known. (That some "stars" (1) are "stars" more for their lives outside of the formal products of popular culture and (2) strive to render their lives outside of the constraints of formal popular cultures as formal cultural products does not lessen their gender service to the masses or to themselves.)

In addition, the "star's" staging and representing the converse of gender ideals also could be the venue of the star's and others' compliance with, identification with, and incorporation of this converse. These approaches to conforming with the converse of ideals would be socially acceptable because they would be unconscious, imagined, or fantasized without necessarily effecting behavior that would be consistent with the converse--or behavior consistent with the converse would be exhibited in a superficially-

2

seeming, playful, or mocking manner. In essence, complying with the converse could function as a social psychological safety valve.

Of course, the downside of the "star's" representing the converse of gender ideals--from a social control perspective--is that vicarious conditioning might weaken congruence between gender ideals and those of the "star," those who attended a performance to be entertained, and other elements of the "star's" mass audience.

What of individuals, groups, and larger population segments on the social fringe who--at least consciously--experienced no impelling motive to approach gender ideals? They could still perceive appeal in the "star" who represented gender ideals--as an object to be ridiculed, scorned, or copied in a camp manner--and as an object towards which one might conform unconsciously. They also could perceive appeal in the "star" who represented the converse of gender ideals. The converse could be directly authenticating their own identities or providing confirmation of life's inequities that the "star" and the character played by the "star" might experience negative consequences of gender identity noncompliance similar to their own.

I maintain that Little Richard's stardom (or quasi-stardom) was significantly fueled by his representation of the converse of 1950s gender ideals. (Not surprisingly, the greatest television "star" in the US of the 1950s, Milton Berle, also represented the converse through cross-dressing.) In essence, Little Richard was a gender-bender who reinforced and detracted from others' approaching gender ideals. This maximized his appeal among those who desired to and could approach gender ideals, those who desired to but couldn't, and those who didn't desire and either could or couldn't--individuals, groups, and larger population segments that fluctuated moment to moment through the vagaries of socially constructed gender identities.

How was this accomplished? Through an entertainment complex of variables that offered (1) the most masculine of rock n' roll traditions as socially constructed in 1956-1957--a driving bass, drums right on the beat for every beat, a piano beaten and used as a prop as much as played, bluesy sax solos, lyrics that intimated sex; (2) a feminine stage presence that belied the masculine tradition--his short stature, stage name suggesting inferior size, pretty face, cosmetics, androgynous pompadour, baggy suits that left the actual contours of his body to one's imagination, facial expressions that were at once baby-like and leering, and socially inferior status constructed through his being a so-called U.S. Negro; and (3) the signature "whoo-oo-oo"--the sexuality of which was as ambiguous as it was unquestionable.

As mentioned above, stardom could serve to resolve the star's gender dilemmas as well as those of others. The most salient theme of Little Richard's life--as surmised by accounts, including Little Richard interviews, provided by journalists--seems to have been a struggle over constructions of gender identities, not only in the constricted senses of sexual orientation/gender identity/sexual identity, but in the broader senses of superiority versus inferiority, control versus lack of control, the spiritual and the secular, even--following Nietzsche's usage--the Apollonian and the Dionysian. These wounds of gender representation must ineluctably have affected Little Richard's music, stage presence, and "star" value. They most assuredly were reflected in his quitting the entertainment business in 1957 to enroll in a bible college. He had been a "star" for only a year. (And these wounds--more than a fickle public early on, less so afterwards--seem to have generated his many returns to the entertainment business interspersed with succeeding interludes of leaving up to the present.)

3

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

As intimated above, the wounds of gender representation are relevant to other stars in other times--well beyond the constraints of multi-cultural and politically correct Victor/Victorias. For example, Cassandra as constructed from the _Iliad_, _Odyssey_, _Agamemnon_, and the _Aeneid_ had the stardom of narrating the future beyond that of any man, was cursed by the god Apollo never to be believed (this for reneging on a promise to have sex with him), and was killed by a woman to whose husband she (Cassandra) had borne twins. Malcolm X has been constructed as the apotheosis of black manhood and political aggression, but before his religious conversion through the Nation of Islam may have been--according to biographer Bruce Perry--a prostitute catering to older white men. And many lives of the politically famous from Demosthenes to Joan of Arc to Che Guevara can be characterized as masculine overcompensation for real and imagined shortfalls perceived as feminine.

The employing of the "star" as support to help achieve political objectives has a foundation in the basic satisfaction of human need--one being the management of gender constructions. Satisfaction of this gender need can also be provided by the political candidate or leader and ineluctably occurs--varying only in degree. Why? One must point to the inevitability of gender wounds in all of us--as Little Richard sang, "The girl can't help it." We are all that girl. (See Anderson, J.L. (1997). Che Guevara: A revolutionary life. Grove Press; Bergquist, K., & Armstrong, T., Jr. (January 1994). Riot Grrls, Amazons of Rock, and Dyke-Core: Hardcore feminist rock. Hot Wire: The Journal of Women's Music and Culture, 10(1), 18-19; 45; Bodinger de Uriarte, C. (Spring, 1985). Opposition to hegemony in the music of Devo: A simple matter of remembering. Journal of Popular Culture, 18(4), 57-71; Cassandra. http://vanaheim.princeton.edu/Myth/cassandra; Chastagner, C. (May, 1994). Le rock: Entre la marge et la masse. Revue Francaise d'Etudes Americaines, 16(60), 183-191; Gray, J.P. (1980). Rock as a chaos model ritual. Popular Music and Society, 7, 75-83; Holden, S. (June 14, 1998). Rock kings, drag queens: A common strut. The New York Times, pp. AR1; AR31; Kaufmann, W. (1974). Nietzsche: Philosopher, psychologist, antichrist (4th ed.). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Kurtz, H. (1982). Differences in themes in popular music and their relationship to deviance. Popular Music and Society, 7(3), 163-175; Lhamon, W.T., Jr. (1985). Little Richard as a folk performer. Studies in Popular Culture, 8(2), 7-17; Markson, S.L. (1990). Claims-making, quasi-theories, and the social construction of the rock 'n' roll menace. In C.R. Sanders (Ed.). Marginal conventions: Popular culture, mass media, and social deviance. Bowling Green, OH: Popular; Medovoi, L. (1991-1992). Mapping the rebel image: Postmodernism and the masculinist politics of rock in the U.S.A. Cultural Critique, 20, 153-188; Oglesbee, F.W. (1987). Lady as tiger: The female hero in rock. In P. Browne (Ed.). Heroines of popular culture. Bowling Green, OH: Popular; Perry, B. (1991). Malcolm: The life of a man who changed black America. Station Hill Press; Peterson, R.A. (January, 1990). Why 1955? Explaining the advent of rock music. Popular Music, 9(1), 97-116; Shumway, D.R. (Fall, 1991). Rock and roll as a cultural practice. South Atlantic Quarterly, 90(4), 675-707; Warner, C.R. (1992). The role and image of African Americans in rock and roll. In K.J. Bindas (Ed.). America's musical pulse: popular music in twentieth-century society. Westport, CT: Greenwood; White, C. (1994). The life and times of Little Richard: The quasar of rock (Updated). Da Capo Press. (Keywords: Gender, Popular Culture, Politics, Sex.)

4