

A Genre Approach to Celebrity Politics: Global Patterns of Passage from Media to Politics, by Nahuel Ribke, Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan, 2015, 233 pp. £63. ISBN: 978-1-137-40938-6

Nahuel Ribke's monograph addresses the phenomenon of celebrities becoming politicians. He provides examples of film stars, actors, musicians, television presenters and models who have run for electoral office. However, in the final section of the book, Ribke turns his attention to what Chris Rojek has described as 'Celetoids' --- instant celebrities who have emerged from television reality programmes, lottery winners or have been thrust into the public spotlight through scandal. Thus, he is interested in understanding how traditional and instant celebrities have used their para-social forms of connectivity with audiences to launch their political careers.

To frame his analysis, Ribke utilises Pierre Bourdieu's 'Field' theory to analyse, assess and explain how celebrities' attributes in an original field or 'Habitus' (e.g. the entertainment world) can be converted into another public arena (e.g. the sphere of politics) to create a 'surplus value' of connectivity. Therefore, he is interested in the 'alchemical' forms of media exposure and how they take effect within the political realm. For Ribke, 'fields' are not isolated monads, but are interconnected and hierarchical forms of power that can be transferred into other 'fields' of endeavour:

'My basic proposition in this book is that the transition of celebrities to the field of politics is structured upon the same rules that regulate and organise the struggles over hegemonic positions in other fields within the social spectrum.' (p.8)

Consequently, he maps the correlations between the celebrities' generic profiles with their respective political careers. Moreover, as indicated by the book's subtitle, Ribke believes that the iconic processes which determine how a media celebrity transforms into a career politician may reveal a global pattern of political endeavour.

Ribke applies Field theory across a variety of states including Israel, Brazil and Panama, and the United States (US). The first part of the book focuses on the political careers of Israeli fashion models Anastasia Michael and Ori Levi who were elected to the Knesset and Yair Lapid, a television presenter who became the Minister of Finance. Within the second section, Ribke's provides detail on the avant-garde Brazilian musician and composer Gilberto Gil who as an Afro-Brazilian became the Minister of Culture, alongside the Salsa musicians Ruben Blades and Willie Colon who engaged in electoral politics in Panama and the US with disparate results. For instance, Blades (an international artist with a Hollywood film career) became the Panamanian Minister of Culture, while Colon (confined to a largely Hispanic audience) ran unsuccessfully for the US Congress. The third section concerns the rise of US celebrities turned politicians with reference to the Republican and Democratic parties. In the final section on Celetoids, one chapter is devoted to the Argentinean father of a murder victim, Juan Carlos Blumberg, who briefly became a charismatic advocate for tougher criminal convictions and the darling of right-wing politicians. This is compared to example of Jean Wyllys, the winner of the 2005 Brazilian version of *Big Brother*, who was elected as a Federal Deputy for the State of Rio de Janeiro in 2010. In this respect, Ribke provides insights into the processes which delineate the transference of celebrity performances into political capital.

However, there are several flaws within the analysis. These become most evident in Ribke's approach to the celebritization of American politics. First, as the author admits he is most conversant, due to his personal background and academic history, with Israel and Latin

America. However, this does not excuse him from failing to provide a stronger academic logic in deploying a comparative analysis which includes the US. A more effective argument was required to justify the arbitrary choice of case studies beyond the admittedly legitimate position to de-hegemonise the study of Celebrity Politics from its Anglo-Saxon axis.

Second, Ribke's lack of conversance with the US political system, the different types of electoral campaigns, its constellation of political actors, ideological polarities and the respective powers of office means that he gives equal weight to a varying quality of celebrity interventions. Therefore, Clint Eastwood's 1986 campaign to become Mayor of Carmel (which occurred because of Eastwood's frustration with the town's building regulations which stymied his attempt to re-open his family's old restaurant) and Steven Seagal's bizarre attempts to become a 'Martial Arts' ambassador occupy as much space as that which is devoted to President Ronald Reagan and the 'Governator' or Governor of California (from 2003-11) Arnold Schwarzenegger. Most especially, this approach under-estimates Reagan's reactionary forty year political career which was as important to his entrance into the Oval Office as the screen image created for him as a Warner Brothers contract player.

Third, there are inherent limitations concerning the application of Bourdieu's methodology to our understanding of the transference of celebrity attributes from the fields of entertainment to those of politics. With reference to the Republican Right, Ribke considers how John Wayne's (Marion Morrison) personification of patriotism and militarism was deployed into the realm of politics. However, despite his outspoken support for conservative causes and, indeed, his Presidency of the right-wing Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, Wayne never stood for electoral office. Moreover, there needed to be some greater sophistication in the analysis concerning the complexities of Wayne's filmic persona which was invariably border-line psychotic (for instance, his portrayal of Ethan Edwards in John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) which begat Robert De Niro's Travis Bickle in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976)) and how it was received by US audiences wherein the 'Duke' became subject to ridicule as well as veneration (for example, Denis Leary's condemnation of Wayne in his song *Asshole* (1993)).

Moreover, Ribke asks the legitimate question as to why liberal Hollywood film stars have not sought electoral political office for the Democratic Party. In this respect, he concludes that such a political 'space' was undermined by a combination of the oxygen taken away from them by the iconic role of the Kennedys; the 'vulnerable' nature of the filmic characterisations that liberal stars have employed to shape their screen personas; and the problematic consequences that political convictions may have on their career paths. Here, Field theory can only provide an imperfect account of the historical and contemporary trajectories that have determined the political nature of the Hollywood film industry. Most notably, this explanation ignores the long-lasting divisions between left and right which resulted from the House of un-American Activities (HUAC) anti-Communist witch-hunts and the resulting blacklist that have delineated Hollywood's political activism.

Consequently, while Ribke's monograph explains its usage of Field Theory effectively, it makes conspicuous the difficulties of applying Bourdieu's theories across an arbitrary set of case studies. Instead, the principal worth of Ribke's text lies in its provision of a series of well-written, engaging and interesting cases which contain a wealth of useful detail. The focus on the non Anglo-Saxon material is refreshing and means that the book will take its place in an inter-disciplinary literature concerned with the politics of celebrity occurring within the Global South. However, despite the aforementioned reservations, it remains to be said that it would be fascinating to see whether a genre approach to celebrity

politics could account for the outrageous entrance of the property entrepreneur/Celebroid Donald Trump into the Republican Presidential nomination process.

MARK WHEELER

London Metropolitan University (1225 words)

Mark Wheeler is Professor of Political Communications at London Metropolitan University. He has written five books including *Celebrity Politics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013). He has published numerous peer-reviewed articles such as ‘Celebrity Diplomacy: UN Goodwill Ambassadors and Messengers of Peace’, *Celebrity Studies: Special Edition on Celebrity and the Global* and contributed chapters to many edited volumes.

Professor Mark Wheeler,
Professor of Political Communications,
Politics and International Relations,
London Metropolitan University,
TM-216,
Tower Building,
166-220 Holloway Road,
London,
N7 8DB

m.wheeler@londonmet.ac.uk