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## Celebrity and *Schadenfreude*: the cultural economy of fame in freefall

Steve Cross and Jo Littler

### Abstract

This paper explores the popularity of contemporary expressions of delight in celebrity downfall, or *Schadenfreude* towards celebrity culture, and questions to what extent they can be understood as cultural critiques of economic inequality. For just as the economy has its own parables, so do 'cultural' expressions contain parables of normativity about economic life. We argue that *Schadenfreude*'s relationship to 'equality' can be read in terms of social, cultural and economic blockages, and investigate some of the history to this feeling by exploring different arguments over the meaning and status of 'equality' in modern and postmodern societies. This survey of its contested meanings highlights the distinctions which have been made and elided between property and identity, the economic and the cultural, and the political and the private. These genealogies are used to interpret *Schadenfreude*, and to highlight the tension between two different aspects of contemporary subjectivity: 'integrity' and marketability of the self. By drawing on these contested genealogies and theories of equality, we are also arguing that *Schadenfreude* toward celebrity in its most common contemporary form cannot be seen merely as a superstructural phenomenon of a neoliberal base but rather as stitched into and as of a piece with this neoliberal culture. We argue that whilst *Schadenfreude* is able to be articulated in different directions, it overwhelmingly works to express irritation at inequalities but not to change the wider rules of the current social system, and its political economy often actually entails it fuelling inequalities of wealth. In these terms, *Schadenfreude* can be perceived as being intimately related to autistic economic culture and as being able to be perpetuated by coasting on its own status as an autistic response.

**Keywords:** celebrity \* cultural economy \* equality \* *Schadenfreude*

It is fair to say that academic work on celebrity has focused more on processes of identification and longing rather than disidentification and disgust. Celebrities have most often been interrogated as objects of *desire*; the star's specific attributes have been analysed in relation to specific social formations; and the popular contemporary rush towards the media spotlight has been discussed in terms of the ordinarily disempowered searching vicariously for the extraordinary validation that proximity to celebrity brings (Dyer 1987,1998; Holmes and Redmond 2006, 2007; Littler 2003; Marshall 1997). Celebrity, in all these accounts, however methodologically and theoretically divergent they may be, is figured as offering a positive promise, even if that promise is not kept or remains unfulfilled. It is studied as a phenomenon that harnesses the potential of people to dream, that speaks of connections that can be magnified, that creates what we might call 'assemblages of emulation' rather than blind imitation.

A widespread popular hostility to celebrities undoubtedly exists. It emerges 'outside', or between the cracks, of 'professionally'-produced media culture (everyday banter, email jokes, bitchy blogs), but also within those not-so hallowed spaces themselves (snide comments in newspaper columns, 'revealing insights' in magazines devoted to celebrity lives). From all these various locations one particularly graphic motif

is repeated again and again: the taking of pleasure in celebrity misfortune. Whether mocking Michael Jackson's fall from grace, breathlessly reporting Lindsay Lohan's losses or eagerly observing Britney's meltdowns, the act of gleefully watching or pushing celebrities from their pedestals has become a major cultural trope. The vastly increased speed of the adulation/abjection cycle is exemplified by the case of Susan Boyle, the *Britain's Got Talent 2009* contestant and favourite to win, who went from YouTube darling (100 million hits worldwide) to 'tragic SuBo' within three or four weeks.

To what extent might these expressions of pleasure in celebrity freefall -- or *Schadenfreude* at celebrity downfalls -- be viewed as intimately linked to contemporary economic formations? A number of commentators have pointed out that the phenomenon of celebrity is indicative of a society with profoundly unequal concentrations of power. For P. David Marshall, celebrity is a site of hegemonic struggle in capitalist democracies between 'overtly public individuals' and those constructed as an undifferentiated mass of 'demographic aggregates' (Marshall 1997: ix). For Jeremy Gilbert celebrity is 'inherent to capitalism from the moment of its earliest emergence', its privileging of individualism and faciality as palpable in the Roman Empire as today (Gilbert 2003). For Nick Couldry the mediated zones of celebrity culture offer spaces of recognition gravitated towards by the powerless: and so the 'hidden injuries of media power' are tied to broader injustices of financial poverty and cultural neglect (Couldry 2001). In these terms the gross inequalities between the 'ordinary civilian' and the 'extraordinary celebrity' speak of the social and financial divides between rich and poor, haves and have-nots.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, the proliferation of celebrity discourse over the past two decades can be understood (although this is a point rarely made) in relation to a broader context of the rise of neoliberal capitalism and its savagely widening global disparities of wealth and power.

This paper examines the currency of such expressions of pleasure in celebrity loss and asks how they operate in relation to neo-liberalism. It argues that *Schadenfreude* represents a negative capacity in socially affective relations, one that *desires* equality, but is primarily unable to think it as anything other than 'leveling through humiliation'. We consider this impasse on several, interrelated levels: social, cultural, political and economic. To begin with, we outline the nature of *Schadenfreude*'s impasse by considering its affective and emotional life. Secondly, we explore the paradoxical centrality and disavowal of equality to the modern 'social imaginary', in particular the contradictory tendencies of rejecting ideas of economic equality whilst embracing the idea of 'equality of condition'. Thirdly, we explore how this impasse correlates with the cultural-political economy of celebrity, its tabloid lives and its turnover of stars. By considering popular pleasure towards celebrity pain on these different levels, the paper aims to demonstrate that contemporary manifestations of *Schadenfreude* can best be understood in relation to the production of a 'subject of capitalism' (Skeggs, 2004:64) in which particular subjective propensities are imbricated with differential logics of property and value. As Skeggs notes, 'capitalism works for the preparation of an individual who might be: endowed with an ultimately self-interested rationality, *convinced of the principle of equality*, [and] *dedicated to the concept of private property*' (64, our italics). In this article, we argue that *Schadenfreude* toward celebrities operates at the intersection between such contradictory elements of subjectivised desire which themselves have complex genealogies. In this sense, the paper mobilizes Deleuze and Guattari's model of

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<sup>1</sup> 'Civilian' is the term used by celebrities for 'non-celebrity' members of the public.

a political economy of the psyche – thus moving away from notions of *Schadenfreude* as an ahistorical or universal feature of the ‘human condition’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1977/2004, 1980/2004).

In this paper, then, our argument is that this particular reading of *Schadenfreude* as a type of ‘blockage’ or cultural paralysis also needs to be read in broader terms of its interrelation with other types of economy beyond that of an individualized ethical or moral economy. What is its relationship to wider social, political and economic ecologies? We are interested in how *Schadenfreude* towards celebrities has predominantly come to emerge, and be encoded, and *why*, by considering its longer-standing discursive genealogies. For it is not simply performed by a few ‘bad’, transgressive or deluded subjects (see Hills 2002: 8-11) but is a component in a complex affective assemblage - itself formed in relation to particular economies and conceptions of equality – in which most people reading this work, like its authors, have participated.

### ***Schadenfreude’s affective and emotional life***

In *Celebrity and Power* P. David Marshall draws our attention to the importance of the affective and emotional intensities circulating around celebrity culture. Marshall argues that the affective domain has important social implications, focusing his discussion on the proximity of politics and affect in the adulation of charismatic leaders. What is of particular relevance for our discussion here, however, is how he describes these flows of affect. He argues that ‘there are public forms of subjectivity that are privileged in contemporary culture because they are connected to particular ends and interests in the organisation of power’ (Marshall 1997: 203; see also Hesmondhalgh 2005: 122). This is a useful formulation to help us consider the existence and prominence of *Schadenfreude* towards celebrity in popular culture because we might understand it as one such culturally privileged ‘public form of subjectivity’: a form in which a particular set of feelings towards celebrities are encouraged and travel across public and private domains.

A related means of grasping how such public forms of subjectivity work can be borrowed from Sara Ahmed’s conceptualisation of ‘the sociality of emotion’. Ahmed proposes ‘an analysis of affective economies, where feelings do not reside in subjects or objects, but are produced as effects of circulation’ (Ahmed 2004: 8).<sup>2</sup> Putting these terms together, we might describe *Schadenfreude* as a collectively constructed feeling produced through circulation. This is illustrated for example by the British-based sardonic gossip email newsletter and associated website *Popbitch*, which often features stories about celebrities who have been heckled or attacked by ‘the public’ for the enjoyment of its readers. One recent newsletter gleefully related how British TV star Alan Davies was kicked by a member of the public; another recounted how *Harry Potter* star Daniel

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<sup>2</sup> Here Ahmed follows one convention in cultural studies / the humanities of using ‘economies’ as a descriptive term to indicate the circulation of something other than money. (If we apply this to the recent growth of analysis of ‘the economy’ using other frames of reference than that of neoclassical economic theory, or, in Fullbrook’s terms ‘post-autistic’ economics, then such work in these terms functions to analyse economic economies, or economies of economics.)

Radcliffe 'spent at least one of his schooldays locked in a cupboard as fellow pupils shouted "magic yourself out of that, Potter!").<sup>3</sup> In the case of *Popbitch*, a collective feeling of *Schadenfreude* towards celebrities is generated on a routinised basis.

But is *Schadenfreude* an emotion or an affect? The classic distinction between these two terms is drawn from psychoanalysis, where it is used to distinguish between the first and third person's representation of feeling (in other words, affect is a state witnessed by an external observer). Recent critical theorists of affect including Brian Massumi have argued that emotion requires a subject, whereas affect does not: emotion indicates feeling given form and function, but affect remains 'unformed and unstructured' (in Ngai 2005: 25; see also Massumi 1995). Similarly, for Lawrence Grossberg, it is a contentless state of psychic energy (Grossberg 1997: 145-165). In our case, *Schadenfreude* has a specific object: the celebrity in question. It is also sometimes given 'form' - for example, through the carefully crafted joke at the celebrity's expense. In these cases, *Schadenfreude* can be classified as an emotion structured through an individual subjectivity. Its function, however, is less clear; and it is not always 'strongly structured', shading as it does into a more diffuse, 'transindividual' affective economy of resentment. In this case, *Schadenfreude* would seem to cleave more closely to the status of an affect. Indeed, the relationship between a subjectively meaningful or self-defining 'emotion' and connection to a transindividual affective assemblage is invariably blurred or even precarious in the occurrence of *Schadenfreude*.<sup>4</sup>

In these terms, *Schadenfreude* is what Simone Ngai calls an 'ugly feeling'. Ngai's work argues that 'bad' emotions, like envy, paranoia and irritation, can be thought of as existing *in-between* emotions and affects, as mediations between the aesthetic and the political that act as knotted or condensed 'interpretations of predicaments'. Ngai is interested in the possibility of recuperating such negative feelings 'for their critical productivity'. In this way she follows in the recent tradition of theorists such as Wendy Brown, and, like Brown, she counsels against the danger of romanticising them. As Paulo Virno warns, such 'sentiments of disenchantment' which once marked a radical distance and alienation from exploited labour – like anxiety, distraction and cynicism – have, in post-Fordist/ late capitalist societies, become 'the very lubricants of the economic system which they came into being to oppose' (Ngai 2005: 4).

If they are no longer 'radical', how, then, are these 'ugly feelings' positioned in contemporary culture? Ngai suggests that they often play an ambivalent social role. She points out that they are mainly 'canonically minor,' opposed to the high drama of hatred or passion, and conducts a careful analysis of the workings of these minor emotions across various literary texts. Most interestingly for our discussion here, Ngai concludes that the very 'weakness' of these canonically marginal feelings structures what they can do. She argues that

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.popbitch.com/home/category/latest-issue/> Accessed 24 April 2009

<sup>4</sup> If relationship to the celebrity is experienced through the subjectivising property of 'emotion', the relationship can become 'personal' and take on a 'pathological' quality marked by forms of over-identification or fantasies of personal familiarity. In its pathological over-investment however adulation is equally prone to reversal as the obsessive fan morphs into the murderous stalker. This operative intensification of the more depersonalised economy of affect in relation to celebrity nonetheless highlights something of affect's own disavowed negative potential; a potential that is manifest in *Schadenfreude*.

[ ] the unsuitability of these weakly intentional feelings for forceful or unambiguous action is precisely what amplifies their power to diagnose situations, and *situations marked by blocked or thwarted action in particular*. (Ngai 28) [our italics]

This interpretation of minor ugly feelings as diagnosing ‘situations marked by blocked or thwarted action’ is particularly applicable to *Schadenfreude* in relation to celebrity downfall. The enjoyment of celebrity misfortune or humiliation fulfils a specific cultural function precisely because it offers vicarious pleasure in the witnessing of the powerful being made less powerful; it is an attempt to address or deal with a severe imbalance of power.

But acknowledging its ‘diagnostic’ quality and role also raises questions about its effectiveness, its ethical status and the diversity of uses to which it is put. To take the issues of ethics and diverse uses first, it is important to point out that the meaning of *Schadenfreude* and how it can be mobilised is neither guaranteed nor fixed. In his book-length study of the subject, *When bad things happen to other people*, John Portmann argues that *Schadenfreude* most often appears in minor situations of suffering where it tends to be of a comic nature, ‘help[ing] us withstand the difficulties of living’ (41). By contrast, he argues, responses to more serious suffering tend to get couched in abstract, Kantian terms of justice. Portmann’s study is primarily concerned with the degree to which *Schadenfreude* given its proximity to both comedy and malice, can be said to have a more properly ethical basis.

Portmann’s analysis, which draws heavily on John Rawls’s concern with the ethical potentialities of envy, is useful in that, by avoiding any simple blanket moral castigation of the subject, it is able to highlight and provide a more variegated account of its sources and manifestations. Yet, the formal abstraction of Portmann’s schema is less helpful on the question of ‘effectiveness’ or at understanding what *Schadenfreude* actually *does* in relation to that ‘equality’ towards which it gestures. Here it is useful to return to Ngai’s understanding of *Schadenfreude* as acting primarily ‘to diagnose a situation marked by blocked [and] thwarted action’. For in one significant sense, the scale and the form of contemporary manifestations of *Schadenfreude* in relation to celebrity can appear to bespeak a social imaginary that is profoundly limited. These manifestations do not appear to offer a substantial or ongoing challenge to the structural inequalities so roundly personified by the ‘celebrity-class’. They appear unable to regard the notion of equality as anything other than the experience of leveling through personal humiliation. In these terms, *Schadenfreude* can be understood as a kind of ‘individualised’ outlet for thwarted desires of equality.

This is not to say that *Schadenfreude* might not be articulated in a number of different directions. As Lawrence Grossberg has pointed out in a discussion of affective charges in popular culture, the link between cynicism and wider forms of social cruelty is not guaranteed, and similarly neither is the link between *Schadenfreude* and wider forms of social cruelty (Grossberg 1992: 153). So, for example, Charlie Brooker’s caustic journalism in his BBC TV show *Screenwipe* extends his hatred of celebrity privilege into an excavation of the media processes which create or augment such privilege. Similarly, it is perfectly possible to imagine that the *Schadenfreude* of a blogger or tabloid-reader

might co-exist with political activism, because *Schadenfreude*, like any other subjective propensity can be articulated in different directions. Nonetheless, we aim to show that it is inflected, produced and encoded by both long-term discursive genealogies and contemporary neoliberal discourses of ‘meritocracy’. In the next section, to explore this issue in more depth, we consider *Schadenfreude*’s relationship to social economies; and in particular, because of its dependence on the theme of ‘levelling’, we pay attention to the extent to which it can be thought to address the issue of *equality*. This section is a fairly lengthy discussion of the different ‘languages’ of equality, which we discuss in order to help understand the social processes that are productive of *Schadenfreude*, in which equality figures as both desire and as foreclosed possibility.

### **The Persistence of Equality: consciousness and social being**

‘...relations of community and equality are themselves but a never ending settling of accounts’ (Ranciere, 1995: 65)

Equality ‘as a concrete social and political demand’ has tended to be thought of as ‘the child of the great revolutions’ (Callinicos, 2000:20). However, what constitutes ‘equality’, and how demands rooted in ideas of equality might be made within the broadly liberal polities that emerged from the ‘great revolutions’ needs to be explored if we are to understand issues of its potentiality, persistence and ‘thwartedness’.

The classic account of the form of equality that emerged out of the (‘bourgeois’) revolutions is delineated in Marx’s work. In *On the Jewish Question*, Marx sketches the contours of a particular type of relationship between the post-revolutionary citizen, the state and civil society. The essay comprises a critique of Bruno Bauer’s polemic *The Jewish Question* in which Bauer argues that, with the abolition of the religious character of the state, the formal opposition between *particular* identities (Jew and Christian in his polemic) would be abolished and that particularity within the secular state is therefore dissolved into a formal and universal ‘equality’.

Marx sees in Bauer’s argument a key problem which relates directly to the way sociality is experienced in liberal capitalist states. As he argues, ‘particularities’ (of wealth, status or condition) are not abolished by ‘political emancipation’, but rather banished to the ‘private’ realm of civil society. Thus, citizens who are formally equal to one another in legal-political terms nonetheless retain their ‘particularities’ within civil society and a firm distinction is retained between (abstract) citizens and (concrete) private individuals. Equality is, therefore, experienced as a ‘property’ of the citizen, and the experience of the self as a ‘communal being’ (as an equal among equals), is, Marx argues, possible only within the ‘phantom’ realm of abstract citizenship. This version of equality, Marx argues, is profoundly disjunctive, contradicted as it is by the parallel experience of profound *economic* inequalities that such an abstract-universal notion of citizenship cannot elide.

Marx’s analysis offers a compelling account of disjuncture and contradiction in the formation of subjectivities through which we can begin to locate the historical specificity of *Schadenfreude*. Something of the powerfully *affective* dimension of this ‘contradictory’ subjective experience can be seen clearly articulated in de Tocqueville’s

1830s account of democratic society in America, which figures ‘equality of condition’ as a ‘fundamental fact’ of emergent democratic society. Here equality and affect are intimately linked. From the quotidian (in which equality ‘daily gives each man in the crowd a host of small enjoyments’) to the grandiloquent (‘men pounce on equality as their booty and cling to it as a precious treasure they fear to have snatched away’) the ‘passion’ for it ‘seeps into every corner of the human heart, expands and fills the whole’ (505). However, crucially, there is again a disjuncture between economic equality and ‘equality of condition’: whilst equality of condition is experienced as ‘booty’ and a ‘precious treasure’ which must be preserved at all costs, wealth itself is experienced as a form of ephemeral ‘circulation’, as a ‘wheel of fate’.. De Tocqueville also notes that ‘I know no other country where love of money has such a grip on men’s hearts or where stronger scorn is expressed for the theory of permanent equality of property ... wealth circulates there with incredible rapidity and experience shows that two successive generations seldom enjoy its favours’ (54). For de Tocqueville, the passionate attachment to equality of condition, ‘scorn’ for equality of property and ‘love of money’ are central to the affective experience of democratic sociality. This affective assemblage, with its paradoxical language of property, is subjectivised in its production of individualities that must bind together elements of *contradictory* desire. As we will demonstrate, *Schadenfreude* comes to be experienced as a leveling process that both compensates for, and enacts, these central tensions.

A further dimension of the centrality of equality to the modern social imaginary is provided by radical democratic theory, which can help us understand more about how *Schadenfreude* functions. Claude Lefort, for example, argues that ‘the democratic revolution’ is not simply a set of political institutions rooted in formal equality (1988: 183). Rather, it is a complex of factors that influence all aspects of the social field whilst having profound consequences in terms of individual modes of subjection. For Lefort, social space and division are always already mediated through discursive modalities particular to an overall type of social form, a form which has a generative dynamic of its own beyond its putative infrastructural determination.

According to Lefort the ‘revolutionary and unprecedented’ feature of democracy lies precisely in the fact that the ‘locus of power becomes an empty place’ (1988:17) which cannot be filled with a single collective agent. This indeterminacy is exacerbated with the emergence of capitalism and its continual upheaval of social and political institutions. Divisions between dominant and subordinate groups in contemporary societies are always potentially fragmentary and antagonistic, and the immediate consequence of this is that ‘natural determination’ is replaced by a purely ‘social society’ in which ‘*any individual or group can be accorded the same status*’ (18, our italics).

In radical democratic theory, the ‘social’ is regarded as an open field of permanent antagonism with the subject of this antagonism figured as a subject of ‘lack’, a subject for whom the plenitude of full self-presence is always thwarted by the agency of an antagonistic ‘Other’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Laclau, 1990). The ‘form’ of democratic society therefore produces and sanctions a proliferation of points of contestation, an

endless staging of conflict on its groundless ground. Demands for 'equality' clearly figure as central within the proliferation of open-ended sites of contestation that make up contemporary sociality but as has frequently been noted these themselves tend to be routed through identity claims and concomitant desires for 'recognition' rather than 'redistribution' (Fraser, 1995 & 2000; McNay, 2007).

We would argue that in its contemporary manifestations *Schadenfreude* to a large extent endorses radical democratic notions of the proliferation of antagonisms and evinces the collapse of a 'natural' order and its replacement with ontological indeterminacy. *Schadenfreude* towards celebrities is significantly different to notions of the temporary reversals of naturalised, hierarchical order in the carnivalesque, for example; its negative affect proliferates across the social field through multiple and ubiquitous forms of mediation that are not delimited by the circumscribed spatial and temporal specificity of 'carnival'.. However, as we will see later on, it can simultaneously function to sediment power relations, rather than to radically disrupt them, and the privilege and position of its targets are 'naturalised' in albeit highly complex and unstable ways.

The work of Ranciere gives us a further language to help understand *Schadenfreude*'s relationship to equality. Ranciere's work is suggestive for its framing of the question of equality in terms of both its persistence as the 'only universal axiom of politics' (Ranciere, 2004:86) and in terms of the profound and persistent opposition that it faces. Tracing the tension between equality and its opponents back to Plato's political philosophy, Ranciere argues that we must distinguish between two discrete logics: that is, the logic of equality (the absolute and unconditional equivalence of any body with any other body) and the logic of police (1995, 1997, 1999, 2004, 2006). By 'police' he means the managed, ordered field of the 'social' and what this field legitimates as its perceptible, 'natural' elements, the places and positions which subjects and identities occupy within it. These can be straightforwardly 'hierarchical' in terms of a law of 'essences' (as in Plato's ordering of the city in *The Republic*) or 'naturalized' in more complex ways through notions of a hierarchy of 'intelligence' or 'merit'. In either case they account for and legitimate rule by the 'best'.

For Ranciere, the essence of demands for equality is not so much to unify as to declassify: to undo the supposed naturalness of 'police' orders and replace it 'with the controversial figure of division.' (1999:30).<sup>5</sup> As Ranciere argues,

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The discourse of equality is something which emerged in the contingent circumstances of the Greek polis:

...ever since Solon had abolished slavery for debt in Athens, all cities had included a mass of poor people who, though unsuited to the practice of law or leadership, were nonetheless present in the city as free men, possessing the common name, the common title of the political community: freedom. (Ranciere, 1995:13)

...a political subject is not a group that ‘becomes aware’ of itself, finds its voice, imposes its weight on society. *It is an operator* that connects and disconnects different areas, regions, identities, functions, and capacities existing in the configuration of a given experience – that is, in the nexus of distributions of the police order and whatever equality is already inscribed there, however fragile and fleeting such inscriptions may be (1999 vi). [our italics]

For Ranciere, subjectivisation does not emerge in awareness of the gap between a ‘political illusion’ and ‘social /economic reality’ (as in Marx’s ‘praxis’). Rather, the egalitarian polemic itself ‘invents’ an always *insubstantial* community ‘determined only by the contingency and resolve of its enactment’ (1994: 87). This cannot simply be reduced to ‘the immateriality of egalitarian communication’ (‘the political’ in Marx). It exists as a permanent possibility which can erupt in ‘heroic’ form in (‘subjectivised’) demands for equivalence to be taken seriously in its case (civil rights movements and feminism being classic instances). Clearly *Schadenfreude* does not achieve ‘subjectivisation’ in Ranciere’s terms: it is neither a demand nor a polemical statement of equal worth and thus not an ‘operator’. But it does evince a much more *dynamic* relationship between subject formation and equality as an inherent possibility than either Marx or radical democratic theory are able to capture, positing as it does a permanent conflict between egalitarian demand and police order which is immanent to politics as such. From our perspective, the transient and highly mobile nature of subjectivisation in its ‘heroic’ or properly ‘political’ mode is subtended with a more diffuse and more quotidian experience that both challenges and reinforces police logics. The leveling desire which in *Schadenfreude* expresses as the cruel laughter of humiliation at the individual *misfortune* of those who have got ‘above’ their station therefore become caught up in new ‘naturalising’ economies of worth and value.

The tension between inequality of property and capacity for political subjectivisation which concerns Ranciere (2006: 95) is also at the core of Etienne Balibar’s argument about the efficacy of ‘equaliberty’, the conflation of equality and liberty which are ‘identical in practice’, precisely because in their declaration in the founding documents of political modernity neither one can exist without the other (Balibar, 1994: xii). Balibar highlights how, historically, liberalism has insisted on the foundational and ‘mutually exclusive’ tension between the two poles of the revolutionary demand, equality and liberty (39). This tension is nowhere more apparent than in the encounter between ‘equaliberty’ and differing conceptions of property and community. Thus for liberalism, ‘liberty’ functions as the guarantor of a right to ‘unconditional private property’ (216) which equality has most often been figured as dangerously antithetical because of its encounter with traditions insisting on the transcendence of this property form and the institution of collective mechanisms for its distribution. Liberalism, which figures the individual as essentially ‘possessive’ (in McPherson’s term) and thus as a subject of the juridical ‘right’ to unlimited property, simultaneously casts property itself as *outside* ‘politics’. As we have seen in de Tocqueville, such liberal discourse enters the domain of subjective experience through its negative attitude towards ‘equality of property’.

‘Politicised’ property has been central to modern understandings of individual *value* either as the subject of private possession or through arguments concerning the equitable allocation of resources. Indeed, if the latter option was frequently decried as adjacent to ‘totalitarianism’ in liberal thought, it has increasingly been foreclosed as a possibility at all. Consequently, the inscription of *individual* value in relation to an aggressively naturalised ‘private’ property is subjectivised through the codes of political economy itself:

Every property [of the person] is inscribed in the codes and equivalences formalised in the knowledge of political economy; every individual is a proprietor and measured by his property insofar as he understands the practical and theoretical science of the exchange of value, or is recognised by it (that is, is himself inscribed in its account books). Individuals...only have a relation to their being or their having by the mediation of this abstract knowledge...(Balibar 2006: 58).

But this ‘mediation’ of the individual is always already a ‘transindividual’ (xii) phenomenon, a sculpting of the interiority of the subject which is a ‘folding’ of the outside in the production of an ‘inner self’ (Deleuze, 1988). In this sense the ‘psyche’ is at the intersection between the materiality of social relations (the ‘inegalitarian weight of bodies’) and the ‘semiotics of power’ (the signifying systems of ideological justification) (Due, 2007:79). The double gesture that inscribes self and others within schemas determined by exchange value means that individual *being* and *having* are always experienced in relation to others and, more precisely, to the *value* of what others have and what they are. Equivalences are therefore always also comparisons of net worth.

However, although exchange values *appear* (as in the broader economy) to be related to transcendental properties which determine value absolutely, their worth is entirely immanent to the vagaries of the market. In terms of the ‘ordinary’ relationship to celebrity our individual worth is therefore experienced as *relative* in comparison to that of the celebrity in so far as the celebrity is thought (like the ‘highflyer’ or the precociously ‘gifted’ individual in other walks of life) to possess properties that are *intrinsically* more valuable; those of a ‘natural’ or hard-won ‘talent’, for example. But this is not the same as the absolute determination of place which is experienced as a *natural* hierarchy of value in pre-modern societies and the relative difference in worth established through exchange value is inherently unstable<sup>6</sup>. The self, for example, is experienced as possessing an ‘intrinsic’ value of its own in a relational sense whereby this is measured against that of the other in a system of presumed meritocratic worth governed by an abstract justice that allots places accordingly. However, the apparent stability of the system of relative ‘meritocratic’ value collapses at the point at which value is shown not to be based on intrinsic worth but that of arbitrary exchange value. The celebrity who is recognized as simply ‘famous for being famous’ for example effectively abolishes the artifice of distance that notions of a meritocratic or intrinsic ‘worth’ must work to

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<sup>6</sup> This instability is the essence of Lefort’s characterisation of the ‘democratic form’.

maintain through continuous performance or display of a distinctive ‘talent’.

In terms of subjective experience, *Schadenfreude* therefore enacts the process of leveling whereby value is reinscribed in the other in line with a radical reappraisal of its supposed ‘intrinsic’ worth. But a full recognition of the arbitrariness of value based only on its *market* rather than its intrinsic worth would radically undermine the self’s belief in its *own* intrinsic worth, which is foundational to modern self-hood. *Schadenfreude*’s revelling in falls from grace is therefore a compensation for the slippage between these systems, underwritten by a righteous and accusatory apportioning of *blame* at the other’s apparently *willed* de-valuation (the drugs, drink or sexual excesses which *destroy* a ‘natural talent’) or at the other’s exposure as ‘talentless’ after all. Even apparently ‘natural’ (rather than volitional) catastrophes such as the signs of ageing or of bodily imperfections serve to reinforce the sense that the properties of the person are *property* in a quite literal sense. Intrinsic and market exchange value blur, as the conception that properties must be maintained and protected in order to retain their value in a system of exchange comes into direct conflict with the somatic limits of the life-span itself. The value of an intrinsic property (such as ‘beauty’) is not tied to the person as such but is a ‘part-property’ alienated from the individual in the temporal continuum of the life-course and of worth only in so far as its upkeep can be guaranteed. An uneasy tension therefore opens up between a sense of self that is underwritten by notions of the inherent integrity of the person and its worth, and the value-giving marketability of discrete aspects of it.

Ranciere argues that

‘One enters the community of one’s equals not by being useful to them but only by being like them. There is no way of being counted one of them without reflecting their own image: an equal is someone whose image is that of an equal.’ (2006:70)

A ‘celebrity’, on the contrary, is experienced as an ‘image’ through the complex mediation of discourses of worth and value which seek to maintain distance through the social fiction of an absolute differential ‘talent’. Even the much-cherished characteristic of celebrity ‘ordinariness’, which appears to announce an equality of condition, underwrites inequality of property at the same time through ‘the merit’ of deserved success. The tension between such performances of being ‘one of us’ and conspicuous displays of wealth is held in check so long as worth is *earned*, and so long as the celebrity functions as an emblem of ‘making it’; in other words, as emblematic of *aspiration*. Losses of wealth, health, looks, career collapses, everyday misfortunes can be celebrated and enjoyed in direct proportion to their apparent deservedness. This is because enjoyment at such leveling poses no challenge to the delicate balance of an economy in which equality is both expected and desired but also feared lest its infinite regress put one’s own property in question.

To conclude this section, we have, in some senses, come full circle from Marx’s position in which formal political equality is illusory in comparison to the ‘real’ positions occupied within ‘civil society’. Attempts to highlight the determinate effectivity of

political ‘form’ themselves require a theorisation of the transindividual subjective consequences of a ‘form’ in which equality is present as permanent but foreclosed possibility. The ‘democratic form’, the ontological insecurity experienced by those for whom power is an ‘empty place’, the exigencies of ‘equaliberty’, and the constitutive effectivity of antagonism are all at odds with what Ranciere describes as ‘post-politics’ (1999; see also Crouch 1994). Furthermore, the neo-liberal order has further closed down the political possibility where politics is understood as the claim to equality against the naturalised order of ‘police’.

‘we are no longer in an age of expert judicial constructions designed to inscribe the irreducible ‘power of the people’ in oligarchic constitutions. This figure of the political and political science is behind us. State power and the power of wealth tendentially unite in sole expert management of monetary and population flows. Together they combine their efforts to reduce the spaces of politics. (2006: 95)

### **Desiring economies: mediating *Schadenfreude***

The sensibility of *Schadenfreude* can be related to both this longer political landscape and to the contemporary cultural conjuncture. In this final section, we explore what is at stake in the business of laughing at celebrity downfall at the present moment in the context of the reduced democratic space of neoliberalism. In more detail, paying particular attention to both the mediation of its contemporary affective dynamic and the economic logic it is bound up with.

Of key importance in contemporary culture, as we have already indicated, is the myth of meritocracy. The dream of unlimited social mobility, that driving narrative of the post-Fordist era, has magnified very tangible and important examples of social movement in order to justify and push forward a system of deregulated flexibilised capitalism that entails a very limited and circumscribed amount of social mobility alongside increasingly stark divides between rich and poor. Thus, as David Harvey puts it, the hallmark of neoliberalism has been ‘the restoration of power to an economic elite [...] in the advanced capitalist countries’ by means of that ‘series of gyrations and chaotic experiments’ which only really converged as a new orthodoxy in the 1990s: the expansion of deep pockets of poverty emerging alongside ‘the rise of extraordinary concentrations of wealth and power, with the top 1% of income earners doubling their share of national income from 6.5 in 1982 to 13 per cent in the UK and rising to 15 in the US’ (Harvey 2005: 21, 16-19, 29-31). Alongside this, as Christopher Holmes Smith has written in his discussion of hip-hop moguls, those that ‘make it’ need ‘the spectacle of the more impoverished masses for they give him the raw material, the literal human canvas, for which, and upon which, his ascent can be made emblematic’ (Holmes Smith, 2003: 85). The cultural desire for meritocracy or ‘making it against the odds’ exists simultaneously with desires for degradation and humiliation of those ‘above themselves’ or deemed to be at the end of their celebrity lives. It is in such a social and political formation that *Schadenfreude* functions: as the flip side of meritocracy whilst imbricated in its logic. For in this framework of understanding, just as people ‘go up’, so too do they ‘fall down’.

The phenomenon of ‘knocking celebrities down’ does not merely resonate *symbolically* with this new meritocratic order, or with the genealogical inconsistencies of the discourse of equality: it also operates as part of political economy through the ‘rise and fall’ of celebrity stock. Taking pleasure in the ‘fall’ of a celebrity, in other words, is not only related to the individual celebrity concerned, but to a larger ‘game’ of celebrity, a wider system of multiple rises and falls in which the ‘death’ (in terms of demise in status and media coverage) of one particular celebrity makes space for the rise of a new one. This structure is dramatized quite literally by the BBC online game *Celebdaq*, an online celebrity stock-exchange game where participants can buy and sell imaginary stock in particular stars (a cross between *Fantasy Football* for celebrity culture and *Nasdaq*).<sup>7</sup> Equally, a ‘fall’ does not need to indicate the ‘death’ of a particular star but rather the death of their current image and the launch of another, a celebrity ‘rebirth’. Laughing at Paris Hilton’s jail sentence, for example, both helps generate further stories about the star and the later ‘re-invention’ of Paris as ‘good citizen’. As P. David Marshall has pointed out, to achieve longevity as a celebrity, the initial limitations of the presented personality must be transgressed. In addition, most internal celebrity narratives themselves also need to contain some element of ‘triumphing over adversity’ (Marshall 1997).

The ‘downslide’ of celebrity therefore enables it to fit into a political-economic cycle: fame, downfall, to potentially be followed by re-invention and the restitution of fame (and from then on: to be repeated). On a broader level *Schadenfreude* works to mobilise celebrity longevity and acts as a means to enable celebrity culture to feed ever more inventively off its own carcass. The phenomenon of celebrity reality TV (like *Celebrity Big Brother* and *I’m a Celebrity, Get Me Out Of Here!*) is a particularly good example here. These programs often play on *Schadenfreude* by encouraging ironic laughter over the ‘washed-up’ nature of the former stars and D-list celebrities who are subjected to various degrees of debasement (whether being made to act as ‘servants’ for other contestants or eating bugs). Watching and laughing at celebrities ‘debase’ themselves, however, serves to pump up their celebrity profile and invent it anew. In terms of the political economy of celebrity, *Schadenfreude* towards ‘failing’ stars is an integral part of the cycle of celebrity culture: it has become part of the raw material of capitalist accumulation that is used to create further celebrity profit.

The popularity of the D-list celebrity is particularly interesting because it is a new cadre of celebrity in which *Schadenfreude* is ‘built-in’ through media commentary to their very persona. Gareth Palmer has suggested that D-List (sometimes termed ‘Z-list’) celebrities are a new phenomena that have risen to prominence over the past few years. The D-list are a mixture of ‘wannabees who never were’ (such as reality TV rejects) and those whose star is deemed to have faded; both groups are depicted as ‘still struggling’ for fame even though their moment has apparently passed. Palmer links the construction of this new subject to a wider ‘meritocratic’ celebrity context including reality TV (through its ‘spectacles of shame’ and celebration of the talent-hungry) and to the decline of deference in its replacement of a ‘privileged peek into high society’ with ‘a new fascination with celebrities from a seemingly classless world’.

Even though the D-list celebrity merely engages what we are all encouraged to do in these individualistic, post-Fordist days – constant self-branding – they are roundly

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/celebdaq/>. Accessed April 2009.

mocked as ‘getting above themselves’, partly because they are often perceived as having relatively low social origin and because they lack ‘proper’ PR. Palmer speculates that ‘perhaps the venom so often directed at D-listers represents revenge for having to ‘kow-tow’ to the demands of the micro-managers employed by the properly famous’. Here, mocking the D-list becomes a way of ramifying class distinction in an ostensibly ‘classless’ realm and an opportunity for journalists to express both their frustration at a wider celebrity ‘system’ and their role within it. Significantly, by presenting the D-list celebrity as dumb or stupid for striving too much, for being ‘misplaced’ and not following the rules, they are being mocked for ‘failing to grasp their true economic value in the system’ (Palmer 2005; see also Dickinson 2008).

The popularity of the desire to see celebrities fall down as well as rise up clearly indicates how this form of *Schadenfreude* is structured through contemporary discourses of meritocracy. It functions as both its flip side (in that people move down as well as up) and as integral to the continuation of its logic (there is a reciprocal and a ‘balancing’ fall for every rise of the ‘wheel of fate’ if there is to be room at the top). But as we have seen in the previous section, contemporary *Schadenfreude* and meritocracy are *not only* structured through the disparities of neo-liberalism (although this is of course crucial) but also, at the very same time, to longer-standing cultural discourses. *Schadenfreude*’s affective desire to seek punishment and levelling can itself help to explain how meritocracy works by sedimenting new logics of ‘police’ order against equality in Ranciere’s terms. It is structured through these modes of being - the very ones we see at work in de Tocqueville’s account of nascent liberal-capitalist sociality - in which we are taught to desire equality of condition but scorn equality of property. *Schadenfreude*, in other words, is in its dominant form an expression not simply of a thwarted desire for equality, but also a state which contains a conservative expression of delight in the uneven landscape of human material resources which it presents as ‘natural’. The emergence of a D-list star is therefore a moment which threatens the logic of ‘meritocratic worth’, highlighting as it does the absolute arbitrariness of exchange value within the system. The idea that ‘anybody can make it’ is central to the logic of ‘equality of condition’ which underpins meritocracy. But the emphasis here is on the active process of ‘making it’ and the ‘anybody’ in the expression is always qualified in terms of its capacities for hard work: ‘anybody can make it *so long as...*’ What the ‘D-lister’ represents is a troubling reversal of emphasis: ‘*anybody* can make it’. Here ‘making it’ appears to involve nothing other than the elevation of an arbitrary ‘anybody’ whose ‘worth’ relates only to its immediate bankability within the ‘celebrity economy’. However, both the trenchant *denunciations* (they are rewarded for ‘nothing’! how dare they!) and the very *generation* of these parodic celebrities specifically *to-be-scoffed-at* works to defuse the systemic limitations it makes apparent.

We can see some of the workings of these discourses in the realm of tabloid culture. Pleasure in celebrity humiliation connects to studies of tabloid culture in two ways: firstly, because demonstrations of *Schadenfreude* towards celebrities feature prominently within tabloid newspapers themselves (think, for example, of the *Daily Mail* or the *National Enquirers*’ propensity for glee in female celebrities looking off-par or in the throes of breakdown); and secondly, because an entire cottage industry of programming in the kind of entertainment-based media that is today often defined as part of the broader domain of ‘tabloid culture’ or as indicative of ‘tabloidisation’ is devoted to

the celebration or dissection of celebrity collapse (Nunn and Biressi 2008: 1-2, Gripsund 2008: 34-44).<sup>8</sup> The Sky One TV programme *50 Best Celebrity Meltdowns*, which ranked celebrity outbursts and breakdowns in terms of how flamboyant and shocking they were deemed to be, is one example of the expansion of this genre.

Tabloids, in a similar way to the carnivalesque, have often been read as launching populist challenges to privilege (Bonner 2005: 86-92). As Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn put it, 'tabloid culture thrives because its rhetoric, attitude and posture (with two fingers stabbing the air in a vulgar salute to high culture and its advocates) consistently speak to the majority of ordinary people and hold our attention' (Biressi and Nunn 2008: 1). For Ian Connell, tabloids bust through the politely acceptable discourse of the bourgeois public sphere. They

break the boundaries that have been drawn between that which can and cannot legitimately be discussed in public, by drawing to their readers' attention that which the bearers of public office have deemed private. [...] They are rude and raucous intrusions into the sphere of rational public discussion and debate. Their contribution is like someone shouting from somewhere near to, but not at, the centre of the action; 'Stuff the sophisticated arguments, the effete excuses and the labyrinthine qualifications – these ba...rds have been caught with their pants down.' (Connell 1992: 74).

In this way, Connell writes, tabloid stories 'bash the "power-bloc" and aim to 'not only [to be] revealing tales, but also tales which set out to teach moral lessons by exposing unworthy and unbecoming actions' (Connell 1992: 74, 77)<sup>9</sup> Tabloids work by articulating as antagonistic the relations between three different groups:

- 1 powerful elites (from which are drawn the tragic heroes and heroines of the tales);
- 2 narrators who are by a variety of means in touch with the goings on of the elites, but who are not at one with them
- 3 the rest of us, the powerless ordinary people on whose behalf the stories are told. (Connell 1992: 81).

Connell's analysis resonates with but also complicates more avowedly populist accounts of the 'anti-establishment pleasures' to be found in tabloids (Hartley 1992; Fiske 1987). However, Connell is not uncritically celebratory, arguing that

In a particular light the stories can be read as the expression of outrage on behalf of the 'have nots'. This can be powerfully and pleasurable engaging. [ ] Like much populist ranting, however, these stories are quite conservative. They are not against privileges being granted, *merely angry that they have been granted to the wrong people* – to 'them' and not 'us', not to 'me'. (Connell 1992: 82; our italics)

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<sup>8</sup> Itself originally an 'industry' rather than an academic term.

<sup>9</sup> Connell cites sex outside marriage, an example which now dates the piece given that celebrities' extra-marital sex is today usually taken as the norm than the exception.

An interest in how these populist and demotic sentiments are channelled to conservative ends is shared by James Carey and Graeme Turner, whose work on the cultural-political economy of tabloid culture has similarly highlighted how boisterous tabloid addresses are often directed towards anti-democratic populism and ‘increased commodification rather than enhanced political enfranchisement’ (Carey 1988; Turner 2006: 499).

This should not, however, blind us to the populist potential (see Laclau 2005) of the tabloid, demonstrated recently in the UK by the *Daily Mirror*’s support for the anti-Iraq war movement (see Freeman 2007). At the same time, studies of tabloid culture and in particular Connell’s salient account provide us with one useful set of references for understanding how *Schadenfreude* or delight at celebrity downfall is mediated. They supply us with an account of how relationships between three sets of groups (‘elite’ celebrities, outraged narrators and ‘ordinary people’) are managed (often, although not always, in the *interests* of the outraged narrators, in the *name* of the ‘ordinary people’). This formation is not confined to tabloids, but is also the province of the ‘highbrow’ or ‘serious’ media. (For instance, in British broadsheet newspaper *The Guardian*, Marina Hyde recently reflected on her ‘increasing *Schadenfreude* dependency’; her sense of glee that Princess Beatrice had her new car stolen and that Ronaldo’s Ferrari was a write-off (Hyde 2009)).

In Ngai’s terms, ugly feelings have a ‘diagnostic’ quality, an ability to express a situation marked by blocked or thwarted action. *Schadenfreude* towards celebrities clearly falls into this zone. It expresses a reaction to the blocks ‘ordinary’ people face in relation to social mobility and recognition and the forms of inequality which are rightly perceived to constitute the celebrity economy. However, at the same time, *Schadenfreude*’s diagnostic basis is profoundly limited. This, as we have seen, is most apparent in the increasingly dominant trend by which *Schadenfreude* is routinely mobilized in ways which appear to critique the celebrity economy but is also central to that very economic turnover of celebrity capitalism that it critiques (as in *Celebrity Big Brother*). However, *Schadenfreude*’s diagnostic basis is also profoundly limited in other fundamental ways. And as we have argued, in order to understand why - as with the economic system ‘itself’ - we need to draw not only on contemporary analyses of divisions of wealth and power under so-called ‘meritocratic’ neoliberalism but also longer historical discourses which can help to contextualize them. For whilst *Schadenfreude* registers the graphic divisions of wealth under neoliberalism, its economy of adulation and abjection is also related to long-standing historical codings of personhood and property which form a ‘subject of capitalism’. Since the advent of industrial capitalism we have been taught to scorn equality of property as much as we have been taught to assume an equality of condition, ‘personhood’ or being. These divergent value systems cohere in our cultural economy, finding both their resonant expression and a dramatic space in which to play out their contradictions in popular delight over celebrity downfall.

In this cultural economy, the reported glamour of the celebrity ‘lifestyle’ (through which massive disparities of wealth are coded) is deemed ‘worthy’ so long as relative notions of intrinsic value, which are mediated through the apparently ‘natural’ (though unequal) apportionments of ‘talent’, ‘beauty’, or ‘charisma’, can be maintained. Tabloid obsessions with ‘meltdowns’, bad behaviours, sudden signs of weight gain, the

appearance of cellulite or visible evidence of ageing all signify a collapse in distance and of the ‘natural fairness’ between these two economies of worth and value. This collapse in distance is necessary to the distinction’s construction: most often linked via discourses of fault and blame to apparent ‘failures’ to maintain the value of those properties deemed worthy of adulation (and therefore of all the rewards of the celebrity ‘lifestyle’). The free floating and ubiquitous feelings of scorn and outrage are therefore subjectivised in highly specific ways. The collapse of the hierarchy of value bespeaks a volitional squandering of individual talent which allows the subject of tabloid mediated *Schadenfreude* to feel justified in its desire for a humiliating levelling, a forfeiture of rewards no longer justified. Scorn and outrage are channeled into specific ‘feelings’ against named individuals whose just desserts underwrite feelings of pleasure at graphic accounts of their misfortune. It is the apportioning of blame for *volitional* misfortune<sup>10</sup> that makes *Schadenfreude* such a powerful instrument in sustaining an economy of worth in which unequal reward is both celebrated and (safely) despised within the same moment.

*Schadenfreude*, then, might be mobilised as a sentiment for progressive social change (ie to actually produce some form of equality of property alongside equality of personhood) but there are powerful historical reasons why it is most often encoded within and reproduced as a more stultified and paralysed form of cultural economy, one which serves to reproduce its own terms. Whilst here might conceivably be some popular, progressive potential in the delight over the demise of figures like NASDAQ chairman and serial fraudster Bernie Madoff, it can only too easily lend itself to propping up a conservative status quo. In the UK, for example, two of the most recent high-profile manifestations of *Schadenfreude* towards celebrities were the MPs expenses scandal and the media storm over radio hosts Jonathan Ross and Russell Brand’s on-air indiscretions. In both cases scorn at celebrity humiliation worked not so much to draw attention to cuts or inadequacies in public provision as to fuel further undermining of the public sector: the media calls for the BBC license fee to be scrapped, and the further deepening of ‘post-democracy’ disillusion with all things political).

Such paralysis resonates with the characterisation of neoclassical economics itself as an ‘autistic’ system by the post-autistic economics movement.<sup>1112</sup> As Edward Fullbrook and others have argued, neoclassical economics as a discipline and practice has been codified in phenomenally blinkered form, from its early template which borrowed from Newtonian physics and worked with the idea of ‘an immutably given human nature’, through its mechanistic nineteenth-century model that envisioned a economic

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<sup>10</sup> Naturally, ‘volitional’ here is itself entirely arbitrary. This might range from classic narrative tropes of talents squandered, getting ‘above oneself’ in acts of hubris that misread the scale of one’s talent, being ‘found out’, or simply being a woman where this is deemed to require a permanent and often contradictory set of vigilances around personal appearance etc.

<sup>11</sup> The post-autistic economic movement began in 2000 when French students created a petition lambasting their curriculum, stating that, instead, they wanted a curriculum based on a pluralistic approach to the subject, and has since influenced a wide range of critical approaches to economics from a variety of viewpoints.

<sup>12</sup> Such paralysis also resonates with David Harvey’s account of how today the political left predominantly exists in a state of ‘cultural paralysis’ at the current recession and of articulating ways beyond the dominance of neoliberal economics (Harvey 2008 ICA talk),

universe which ‘exists in a void rather than an ecosystem’, shaped by the ‘forces of individual agents’, to the resurgent, post-Keynesian neoliberalism of the 1970s (Fullbrook 2007: 14-15). The ‘autistic’ internalism of neoclassical economics justifies itself through a closed system: it is autistic because it cannot position itself in relation to wider social formations or cultural ecologies. In this manner it correlates with the autistically limited nature of the critique of *Schadenfreude* towards celebrities. “Set ‘em up and knock ‘em down” relationships to celebrity gesture towards a levelling impulse between the ‘ordinary’ and ‘extraordinary’. But such relationships not only fail to actually reach this ‘levelling’ process (locating the ‘ordinary’ in a perpetual state of *ressentiment*, and failing to achieve anything like ‘subjectification’ in Ranciere’s terms) but also contribute to the marked *un*-levelling process of creating celebrity and thus of actually widening a celebrity/non-celebrity divide. In these terms *Schadenfreude* towards celebrities overwhelmingly becomes a logic of not only incorporated criticism but, as we have seen, a form of cultural-affective fuel for the longevity of celebrity. And as the process entails a continual looping, as it happens again and again (as institutionalized through magazines like *Closer*, websites like *Popbitch* and programs like *Top 50 Celebrity Meltdowns*) it exemplifies a kind of autistic repetitive system. The narratives of ‘making it’ and ‘losing it’ can be entirely complementary rather than contradictory, imbricated with one another in a cyclical process of rising and falling, like the operation of the mythical ‘wheel of fate’. Indeed, in its subjective apprehension this process is itself experienced as something like fate: as an internalized desiring economy in which adulations and humiliations are routinised and follow apparently inevitable logics: those of ‘life itself’. The very repetitions at work in these economies evince an inability to break with a cycle that is predicated in resentment of the adulation it gives while compelled to offer it again and again, even as it humiliates and seeks to destroy the objects of its adulation.

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