

Celebrity, Politics & Public Life

Margaret Mead: Anthropology's Liminal Figure
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Opening Comments from Professor Nancy Lutkehaus, Anthropology

In "Margaret Mead: Anthropology's Liminal Figure," Professor Lutkehaus approaches Margaret Mead as a cultural symbol. Four images of her loom large in the media: she was conceived of as a "new woman" (and later a feminist), an anthropologist, a scientist, and a celebrity. From the beginning, Mead took an active role managing her public image: she hired a publicist in the '20s, and she seemed to save every last clipping about herself. As Neal Gabler pointed out in a previous appearance at this seminar, those who achieve early fame often burn out quickly. Gabler argues that celebrities (and their publicity machines) must concoct and promulgate an engaging narrative to remain in the spotlight. Yet while Mead's private life was not particularly compelling, her fame lasted throughout her life, and she became more and more famous as she grew older. This is strange for most celebrities, and it's almost unheard of for women.

Mead was famous for several reasons: not only was she adept at self-promotion, but she was remarkably quick-witted, which led to regular appearances on popular talk shows. The fact that she was based in New York City made it much easier for her to grab the limelight at a time when adventurous women like Babe Didrickson and Amelia Earhart were paving the way for American female celebrities. Even her choice of Samoa was an excellent (or lucky) pick: Americans were curious about Samoa since it was a new American possession, and its association with both the exotic and the erotic made it very exciting to the general public. Mead's decision to go to Samoa without her husband further fanned the flames of interest and kept her in the headlines when a hurricane caused her to temporarily lose state-side contact. Mead's column in *Redbook* in the '60s and '70s kept her firmly planted in the mainstream and provided her with the opportunity to speak on subjects well outside the bounds of academic anthropology.

In a reversal of the typical celebrity scenario, Mead used her celebrity to keep in touch with her public. In order to keep on top of American social norms, Mead used her speaking engagements for field research. Instead of isolating herself in hotel rooms, she chose to stay with families with adolescents, and she would always collect questions from college campuses and use them to shape her continuing research.

Respondent, Professor Lois Banner, History

Professor Banner had just finished a book on Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict, focussing on gender and sex, and the ways in which these two women came to understand their sexual identities. While Banner approached Mead as a historian and biographer, she observed that Lutkehaus approached Mead as a historian and a theorist – a very tricky balance in the realm of biography.

Banner discussed four different topics:

1. **Mead's celebrity:** she was famous for an incredibly long time. Did her celebrity change over time? What effect did World War II have on her public profile? Mead obviously cherished her celebrity, and it allowed her to cross all kinds of boundaries, but she chafed at the notion that her aggressive and gregarious career somehow made her masculine. Banner encouraged Lutkehaus to explore Mead's private life: she hid a lot of things from her biographers and Banner suggested that it would be easier to understand Mead's celebrity as a reflection of her deep, personal truths.
2. **Attacks from anthropologists:** Mead's academic peers were horribly jealous of her success and attempted to undermine her at every turn.
3. **Gender:** Banner encouraged Lutkehaus to compare Mead's celebrity to that of other famous women, including Eleanor Roosevelt's and Betty Friedan's.
4. **Age:** Mead was greeted with more and more vitriol as she grew older. She was accused of being a sexual maniac (whether it was true or not, Banner could not say), and as she aged her critics became more cruel.

Open Discussion

The primary focus of the discussion was how academics responded to Mead's celebrity. Anthropology Professor Janet Hoskins pointed out that most anthropologists are *not* trained to follow in Mead's footsteps, despite her role in popularizing anthropology.

As Communication Professor Marita Sturken mentioned, Mead did a public service for the profession, but academics (this group included) discuss celebrity as something very foreign to, and clearly less valuable than, the work of the academy.

History Professor Azade-Ayse Rorlich and English Professor Leo Braudy both suggested that academic resentment of Mead was a reaction to Mead's distinctive personal style. The problem for academics was that Mead's personality had overtaken her object of study: her writing style and her voice

became too prominent, especially for anthropologists eager to promote their discipline as a hard science, with a reverence for objectivity and testable laws.

English Professor Emeritus David Eggenschwiler suggested comparing Mead to male celebrities in the hard sciences. Despite Stephen Hawking's success, no one questions his math. Stephen Jay Gould writes in an accessible style and dabbles in social politics, which earns him qualified praise. Carl Sagan, the least revered in this group, was dismissed because of his flirtation with science fiction. Eggenschwiler argued that it's incredibly hard to be an academic and a celebrity, especially if you chose a style unfamiliar to your discipline, and if you begin to mess with ideological matters.

International Relations Professor Jonathan Aronson brought up the example of Jonas Salk, who was loved around the world but despised by the academy. His academic peers were furious that he discovered the polio vaccine – they felt there were several other more highly regarded scientists who deserved the accolades. Eventually, Salk went into AIDS research, in part because he knew that it would galvanize the scientific community into action: he gambled that they weren't about to let him trump them again.

History Professor Vanessa Schwartz commented that “envy” is really not a very interesting answer when we ask why academics respond to academic celebrities the way they do. Schwartz offered an alternative explanation: a clash between two systems. There's a certain democratic principle at work in the world of celebrity – anyone can become a celebrity given the proper chance. But in the world of academe, the system is much more hierarchical, where “genius” is something associated with a singular talent. In academe, respect and accolades are earned, not granted by a fickle public.

According to Schwartz, Mead's position was especially difficult because a lot of her most well known work was about sex, youth and women's issues. Such lowly, feminized topics were not particularly respectable, which made her seem like less of an “expert” in her field than she actually was. Schwartz suggested an intriguing similarity between Mead and other sex specialists like Dr. Ruth, Dr. Joyce Brothers and Betty Friedan: all of them were unsexy women who talk very openly about sex.

Professor Banner mentioned how angry Mead was about being pigeon holed as a sex specialist. Professor Martin Krieger from the School of Policy, Planning and Development reminded us how important sex has become as an object of study in the academy. Mead's contribution here is tremendous: she was able to put anthropology on the map and she challenged the university to take sex seriously.

Professor Braudy suggested that there seems to be a big difference between the way that American academics deal with their brightest stars opposed to how European scholars deal with theirs. While Americans ostracize their own for

going public, continental academics such as Michel Foucault, and even Marie Curie, were allowed to move more freely in the public sphere.

Suggestions for the Paper

- Further historicize Mead's celebrity and the ways it changed through time
- Examine how Mead's private life shaped her public persona
- Compare Mead's celebrity to that of Eleanor Roosevelt, Betty Friedan, Alfred Kinsey, Joyce Brothers, Camille Paglia, Sigmund Freud, Noam Chomsky, and to that of celebrities in hard science, including Linus Pauling
- Describe what her celebrity status allowed her to accomplish
- Examine why a certain field of inquiry (anthropology) suddenly became popular. Why did America call upon empirical social science to understand itself at that time?
- Re-examine the use of the high vs. low culture dichotomy
- Find examples of references to Mead in popular culture
- Further explain how Mead's celebrity affected anthropology