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Imagine All Celebrities Challenging Capitalism: COVID-19 Celebrity Humanitarianism

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and consequent lockdowns and restrictive measures, the levels of anxiety, depression, and precarity soared in an already depleted "bio-proletariat" (Fleming 9). Among the many who have sought to offer people comfort have been celebrities. Gal Gadot and several other celebrities sought to send a message of strength through a rendition of Lennon's song "Imagine," and Madonna shared her political commentary on COVID-19 from her luxurious bath. A similar phenomenon subsequently occurred during the Black Lives Matter protests, with the "I Take Responsibility" celebrity video. However, this essay will argue that these initiatives do not contribute to social change but perpetuate the same injustices. Following the writings of Ilan Kapoor and Anand Giridharadas, it will be argued that these celebrity videos do not challenge the systemic issues revealed by the pandemic, the most prominent ones being the insufficiency of public health systems and the precarity of capitalist economy. It will be shown that "celebrity humanitarianism" not only perpetuates neoliberalism, but also participates in it precisely by drawing attention away from actual change and glossing over the privatization of the commons. As Kapoor argues, this leads to the creation of a post-democratic landscape where self-branded spectacle has replaced public debate and collectivity has been reduced to atomized niche identities which enjoy all the benefits of interpassivity, of relegating their agency to someone else or using agency only to practice consumerism. Ultimately, the essay will explore the idea of withdrawal as a tactic to

challenge capitalism.

Key words: COVID-19, capitalism, neoliberalism, celebrity humanitarianism

Introduction

In 2020, the world witnessed an unexpected and frightening event – the outburst of the COVID-19 virus – which has changed everyday life dramatically. In attempting to understand the magnitude of the crisis, numerous scientists and political figures have offered their viewpoints and advice. However, a significant voice during the pandemic was that of celebrities. This essay will attempt to answer the question of why their voice is relevant and what purpose it serves.

The essay will draw on Ilan Kapoor's and Anand Ghiridaradas's analyses of the interconnectedness between neoliberalism and charity work performed by well-off public figures. As both authors point out, rather than striving to actually improve living conditions, charity work "is produced by late global capitalism to escape its traumatic kernel (inequality, unevenness, social marginalization)" (Kapoor 11). In other words, charity work reproduces the capitalist realist inability to imagine an alternative to capitalism, focusing on cosmetic improvements which gloss over the reality of severe inequalities rather than challenge them. It also reduces citizens to *homines oeconomici* – self-investing entrepreneurs responsible for their own well-being – which are somehow imagined as detached from social conditions. The aim is to show that the celebrity humanitarian response to the COVID-19 pandemic is similarly cosmetic and neoliberal, focusing only on superficial messages of false camaraderie and strength, rather than on the real problems of the pandemic and post-pandemic world. Another, concurrent humanitarian initiative, related to the Black Lives Matter movement, will also be analyzed to demonstrate a similar tendency to avoid heavy topics and systemic problems. Ultimately, a solution will be proposed which, while seeming counterintuitive, has subver-

sive potential. Amidst the urge to act, do, and be enterprising, the option of withdrawal and offering no answer to capitalist demands will be contemplated, which may confound capitalist realism even more than an outright refusal to take action.

A Brief History of Philanthropy

First, a brief history of the idea of humanitarianism and voluntary organizations shall be presented to better understand how the current set-up emerged. The late historian Peter Dobkin Hall draws attention to the fact that the idea of humanitarianism and a clear delimitation of the profit and non-profit sector are in fact quite a modern phenomenon. To describe how these concepts rose to prominence, he drafts a history of philanthropy that reaches back to the very settlement era in America, tracing its roots to the English settlers who brought along the self-governing practices present in England (Hall 33). Since the early colonies were neither populous nor enterprising, the main recipient of any charity was the government, and the foundation of private organizations and trusts was discouraged. However, with the rise of trade and the introduction of the market economy, this system of "mutual responsibility" started to wither away (34).

With rising numbers of poor and uneducated citizens, it was expected of public institutions to procure the funds to support them. However, inspired by the English Enlightenment movement, the Boston minister Cotton Mather called for charitable associations to take on this duty, "advocating 'friendly visiting' of the poor, the use of voluntary associations for mutual support, and philanthropic giving by the rich to relieve the poor and support schools, colleges, and hospitals" (ibid.). Mather's ideas would prove to be a major influence on Benjamin Franklin, who was inspired by the burgeoning associations of new middle class merchants and artisans. Franklin first joined the Freemasons and then successively founded an organization for young men named the Junto ("which served as a model for young men's and mechanics' societies throughout the colonies"); "a volunteer fire company; and

a circulating library—as well as the privately supported academy which eventually became the University of Pennsylvania" (ibid).

However, after the War of Independence, as the newly founded country strove to establish its political institutions, charitable associations were regarded as a threat to the government. For example, in his Farewell Address, George Washington explicitly warned against such associations because they "serve to organize faction, to give it an artificial and extraordinary force; to put in the place of the delegated will of the Nation, the will of a party; often a small but artful and enterprising minority of the community" ("Washington's Farewell Address 1796"). They are likely, he declared, "in the course of time and things, to become potent engines, by which cunning, ambitious and unprincipled men will be enabled to subvert the power of the people, and to usurp for themselves the reins of government; destroying afterwards the very engines which have lifted them to unjust domination" (ibid.).

Charitable associations at the time presented an aporia. There was a disjunction between the idea of individual freedom, which, if associations were banned, citizens had no way of expressing at a level that could be influential, other than at the elections. Yet associations such as these posed the threat of disrupting the equality of all men by giving more power to a small number of people within any association.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the landscape had been completely altered. In the states of New England, the formation of private associations was encouraged by tax exemptions. In most other states, however, the activities of non-profit organizations were restricted, and they were required to prove their "redistributional and noncommercial intent as a condition for tax exemption" (Hall 37). Thus, non-profit organizations flourished in the Northeast and upper Midwest.

Alexis de Tocqueville documented the state of America in the 1830s,

praising the inclination of Americans to form voluntary organizations, but distinguishing between the organizations of wealthy citizens and those formed by ordinary citizens to help each other. Tocqueville points out that "the affluent classes of society have no influence in political affairs. They constitute a private society in the state which has its own tastes and pleasures" (157). The wealthy members of the society "have a hearty dislike of the democratic institutions of their country" (Tocqueville 158). Speculating on the future of such organizations, Tocqueville believed they would turn into "administrators of a vast empire" (565) who exercise their power through private institutions.

Tocqueville's predictions were quite true, as the moneyed elites of the Northeast were able to extend their cultural and political influence, becoming also pools of capital and the place of birth of investment banking. By the 1850s, all suspicion of such associations was gone and the elites turned to them rather than to electoral politics. Thus, "electoral politics became firmly grounded in associational forms, and economic activity was increasingly carried out through incorporated associations, while social life for Americans rich and poor became increasingly defined by participation in religious and secular associations" (Hall 39).

This period also saw the foundation of the private research university, a secular institution whose research was intended to help nation building and the economy. Hall explains that

> the private research university was a capitalist institution in every sense of the word: it sought to amass intellectual capital, by hiring faculty internationally and making huge investments in the libraries, museums, and laboratories essential to carrying out pathbreaking research; financial capital, through aggressive fund-raising, adroit financial management, and the systematic cultivation of relationships with the nation's wealthiest men; and human capital, by issuing degrees that were nationally and internationally recognized and nurturing continuing relationships among alumni after graduation. Perhaps

> most important of all, the private research university sought to create institutional capital, by placing itself in the center of a network of powerful entities essential to national economic, political, social, and cultural integration. (45)

> The same trend continued into the twentieth century, when grant foundations were shaping policies and university research, while by the 1930s corporate donations became tax-deductible. The non-profit sector experienced a boom after the Second World War, when many organizations were founded to take advantage of federal funding and to serve as private agencies for the implementation of government policies. (51)

A similar change in the character of organizations has been noticed by Robert Putnam. Taking the example of bowling, Putnam interprets the decline in performing certain sociable activities as opposed to engaging in pure spectatorship. His analyses point to the concepts of interpassivity and loss of citizenship, which will be discussed below, and indicate that membership in organizations has fully lost its social dimension and is instead, focused on the political and economic facet (148–180). Thus, with the benefits and influence they enjoy, organizations have become " if not extensions of government itself—an intrinsic part of the *organizational field* of public governance" (Hall 53). Organizations have assisted the privatization of public services and the devolution of democratic governance. The same civil institution that was supposed by Tocqueville to be the token of democracy now poses a serious threat to it. It is within such a context that celebrity humanitarianism operates today.

Neoliberalism and Celebrity Humanitarianism

The humanitarian consolidation of the private and the public, as well as the individualization of responsibility, played well with the rise of neoliberal capitalism. Thus, Wendy Brown defines neoliberalism as "an order of normative reason that, when it becomes ascendant, takes shape as a governing rationality extending a specific formulation of economic values, practices,

and metrics to every dimension of human life" (30). In other words, neoliberalism marks a significant shift from the classical liberal viewpoint according to which market metrics cannot, or are not to, govern the social. In neoliberalism, the market logic is extended to all domains of human life, which come to fully conform to neoliberal ideas of competition and self-investment.

Brown argues that neoliberalism is ultimately dangerous because it threatens to erase democracy. This is due to a number of factors. Firstly, while neoliberalism is often presented as inimical to the state, believing it should stay out of economic competition and allow free market mechanisms to do all the work, Srnicek and Williams argue that the state actually plays a key role in neoliberalism. As also mentioned by Brown, unlike classical liberals who firmly believed in the naturalness of markets, neoliberals are aware that markets cannot spontaneously self-regulate. For this reason, the state has been repurposed to create markets and sustain them through defending property rights, enforcing contracts and anti-trust laws, repressing dissenting voices, and maintaining the stability of prices (Srnicek and Williams 53). Consequently, the relationship of the state towards the people changes, since "neoliberalization . . . transforms the state itself into a manager of the nation on the model of a firm" (Brown 35). This move obliterates the political dimension of life, which leads to the disappearance of the idea of citizenship engaging in a public debate for a common purpose. Thus, the idea of the people disappears and is replaced by a set of *homines oeconomici*, always expected to compete and self-invest. *Homo oeconomicus* "cannot think public purposes or common problems in a distinctly political way" (Brown 39). Ultimately, as Brown points out, the final consequence may be a complete loss of democracy.

A similar process is noticed by Ilan Kapoor, who ties the contemporary invasion of the economic into the political with his concept of "celebrity humanitarianism." Kapoor uses this term to denote a contemporary state in which famous philanthropists have taken over the role of democratic institutions purporting to act in the name of the common good, while in reality

only performing charitable acts to increase their own privileges. The term encompasses three different forms of charity work – that done by individual celebrities like Madonna or Angelina Jolie; corporate charity work such as that of Bill Gates or George Soros; and the work of charitable NGOs. While this paper focuses on the charitable work of individual celebrities, Kapoor believes that all three forms are guilty of supporting neoliberal capitalism and avoiding any discussions of systemic problems. Although all the examples that Kapoor analyzes entail some sort of economic advocacy by the celebrities, it will be shown that even instances in which celebrities are trying to offer emotional support share the characteristics of celebrity humanitarianism and are problematic for similar reasons.

Kapoor follows Brown's critique of the conflation of the public and the private, and the transfer of political power to wealthy organizations or individuals. He calls this depoliticization: "the removal of public scrutiny and debate, with the result that issues of social justice are transformed into technocratic matters to be resolved by managers, 'experts', or in this case, humanitarian celebrities" (Kapoor 3). Thus, issues like education, wages, and resources cease to be matters of public interest and are best left to experts to figure them out. As Donini argues, "humanitarian assistance and the globalization of the capitalist model are not unconnected," and charity work serves to gloss over capitalist inequalities (261).

Although it purports to be progressive, celebrity humanitarianism actually conforms to Bill Gates's (1995) idea of friction-free capitalism, the mindset that capitalism is the perfect way of governance and only requires additional tweaks to work better. It puts forth the dubious idea that "the winners," as Anand Ghiridaradas calls them, can be the "partisans of change" (5). On the contrary, "the winners" put themselves in the position of leading social change for the sole purpose of making sure that the changes that occur will not endanger their privileged position. As Ghiridaradas elaborates, "By refusing to risk its way of life, by rejecting the idea that the powerful might

have to sacrifice for the common good, it [today's elite] clings to a set of social arrangements that allow it to monopolize progress and then give symbolic scraps to the forsaken—many of whom wouldn't need the scraps if the society were working right" (ibid.).

Take, for example, George Soros. Soros is hailed as one of the greatest contemporary philanthropists, whose Open Society Foundations give millions of dollars for causes such as human rights, free journalism, and justice. Yet, the main source of Soros's wealth are hedge funds, "private pools of funds that invest in traded instruments (both cash securities and derivatives); can employ leverage through various means, including the use of short positions; and are generally not regulated" (Cole et al. 8). Hedge funds are an opportunistic financial tool, popular for the lack of legal constraints placed upon them and the lack of responsibility entailed, and are managed from tax havens. Ultimately, Kapoor warns that, "since hedge fund managers are interested only in quick, short-term returns, they frequently harm the long-term interests of people, governments, or companies" (9). This happens because hedge fund owners, for example, put pressure on low-performing companies, which have to find ways to improve, which most commonly means lower wages or poor job security, so as not to be bought out. Thus, while Soros is donating for the benefit of citizens, his source of wealth is actually a harsh capitalist instrument that destabilizes the job market and decreases the quality of life, which his do-gooding impulses attempt to cover up.

As the public sphere becomes depoliticized, there is an increase in interpassivity. The term interpassivity was first coined by Robert Pfaller and later picked up by Slavoj Žižek (*The Sublime Object of Ideology* 32–33), in whose interpretation it denotes letting go of a responsibility and giving it to the Other. He uses the example of the Chorus in ancient Greek tragedies – the Chorus is the medium through which the audience expresses its empathy and concern for the hero and even if the audience is not following the show or is engaged in obscene acts, *objectively*, as Žižek points out, they are carry-

ing out their duty of offering compassion to the protagonists. Mark Fisher also uses the term to denote how late capitalist art which purports to criticize capitalism relieves us of the duty to criticize it. Discussing the Pixar animated movie *WALL-E*, Fisher explains how the movie performs our anti-capitalism for us so that we may continue to "consume with impunity" (12). In a similar vein, citizens have given up their role as contributors in decision-making and delegated their duty to technocrats and celebrities. When citizens decide to participate in political processes, it is mostly through donations to various charities. Thus, Kapoor concludes that depoliticization has reduced citizenship to consumerism (72). Arguably, the same phenomenon can be observed in the celebrity response to the COVID-19 crisis.

Celebrities and COVID-19

The year 2020 has brought about the coronavirus pandemic, shaking the capitalist economy to its core. As lockdowns were spreading, the levels of anxiety, depression, and precarity soared in an already depleted "bio-proletariat" (Fleming 9). Numerous workers lost their jobs; others had to find ways to balance working from home and taking care of their children, who were also taking classes from home, and essential workers were overwrought, caring for many patients in undercapacitated facilities. As a token of support for their fellow citizens and of hope for a return to the old normal, many citizens decided to show resilience by engaging in symbolic acts such as clapping their hands on their balconies or playing music for their neighbors. One such occurrence inspired a handful of celebrities to offer their support to the public.

The Hollywood actress Gal Gadot was inspired by a video of an Italian trumpeter playing John Lennon's pacifist anthem "Imagine" on his balcony to create her own version of the song. Gadot, along with a plethora of other celebrities, published the video on 19 March 2020, the same day that Italy surpassed China in the number of COVID-19–related deaths (Gadot).

Another celebrity who also joined the COVID-19 humanitarianism is Madonna. The famous humanitarian shared her ruminations on the on-going crisis from her lavish bathtub ("'A great equalizer'").

While Madonna's video was extravagant, with the singer soaking in pink water strewn with flower petals, Gadot and her fellow celebrities recorded their videos in a DIY fashion, in black and white, with their phones, in their homes or outside in nature. While their down-to-earth approach may be perceived as a gesture of equality, a sign of being one of the people, Kapoor warns that "this performance of the authentic and 'ordinary person', appears as little more than a ploy to ingratiate [themselves] with [their] public, thus once again putting [themselves] at the centre of the story" (25). Moreover, a parallel could be made between the perception of migrants in liberal societies described by Žižek and the view celebrities have about ordinary people.

In his book *Violence*, Žižek takes the example of the Italian author Oriana Fallaci to debunk multiculturalism's latent racism. In her later works, Fallaci openly attacked Islam, believing Europe was too subservient to it, afraid that the assertion of European cultural identity would be perceived as racist. While this stance may be interpreted as racism, Žižek believes it should be looked at from a different point of view. The problem, as Žižek sees it, is that "She failed to see how this 'respect' is a fake, a sign of hidden and patronising racism. In other words, far from simply opposing multiculturalist tolerance, what Fallaci did was to bring out its disavowed core" (*Violence* 115). In a similar way, this celebrity appreciation for common people is a covert sign of privilege and a patronizing relationship towards the masses. "This virus had affected the entire world, everyone, doesn't matter who you are, where you're from, we're all in this together," says Gadot (00:16–00:29), but this is not exactly the case. Similarly, when Madonna claims "we are all in the same boat" (00:52–00:53), this is an obvious untruth. At one point in the video, Madonna states, "What's terrible about it is it's made us all equal in many ways, and what's wonderful about it is that it's made us all equal in many ways"

(00:31–00:39).

Madonna's ambiguous statement comes quite close to what Žižek defines as the core of neoliberal ideology. The neoliberal ideology essentially functions as the Lacanian Thing: the Real, or the core of inequality, simultaneously attracts and repulses; it is the object part of subjects,

> The Lacanian formula for this object is of course *objet petit a*, this point of Real in the very heart of the subject which cannot be symbolized, which is produced as a residue, a remnant, a leftover of every signifying operation, a hard core embodying horrifying *jouissance*, enjoyment, and as such an object which simultaneously attracts and repels us – which divides our desire and thus provokes shame. Our thesis is that it is precisely the question in its obscene dimension, in so far as it aims at the ex-timate kernel, at what is in the subject more than subject, at the object in subject which is constitutive for the subject. (*The Sublime Object of Ideology* 204)

Madonna's statement, coupled with the lavish scenography, depicts this farce of equality, revealing the prospect of the erasure of privilege as an absolute loss of identity and at the same time a source of perverse pleasure, enjoyed from the safety of privilege.

Unsurprisingly, the videos made by these celebrities follow the logic of neoliberal individualization and obfuscate the fact that we are all in this together, yet some are doing better than others. Although made in response to the pandemic, they make no overt statements about the fragility of capitalism, about unemployment, or about precarity, but focus on easily digestible, harmless messages.

"I Take Responsibility"

During the pandemic, the world witnessed another celebrity inspirational video which similarly conforms to a neoliberal logic. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the United States was shaken by another scandal. On May 25, 2020, George Floyd, an African-American man suspected of being in possession of a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill, was pinned to the floor by three police officers and suffocated to death. His murder was just a new addition to an ever-expanding list of black victims of police violence. In 2014, after being stopped in the streets and searched for petty offenses, which often included humiliation and sexual assaults, Eric Garner was murdered on a Staten Island sidewalk. The same year, 18-year-old Michael Brown was gunned down in Ferguson, and in March of 2020, Breonna Taylor was shot and killed in her apartment. Following Floyd's murder, despite the raging pandemic, revolted U.S. citizens hit the streets in nationwide protests under the catchphrase Black Lives Matter. The right-leaning media quickly accused protesters of excessive violence and radical socialism. Yet, as with COVID-19, a set of celebrities also expressed their support for the BLM movement by filming a video entitled "I Take Responsibility." A number of upset celebrities demanded justice for black people and urged everyone to take responsibility "for every unchecked moment," "for every time it was easier to ignore than to call it out for what it was," for "every not so funny joke" (00:11–00:19). In the climax of the video, *Breaking Bad's* Aaron Paul makes a dramatic plea, "And killer cops must be prosecuted, they are murderers. We can turn the tide. It is time to take responsibility. Call out hate. Step up. And take action" (01:43–01:59).

Intriguingly enough, "calling it out for what it is" proves to be very hard for this video. The word "racism" is not mentioned a single time in the video, and the adjective "racist" is uttered only once, when Stanley Tucci disavows "racist hurtful words" (01:00–01:01). It can, however, hardly be said that this phrase accurately depicts the amplitude of violence inflicted on African-Americans by the police. Similarly, while Paul's passionate demand should come across as an invigorating battle-cry, it merely conforms to the

neoliberal ideology. As Kapoor mentioned, it focuses on "photogenic aspects" of the issue, mentioning racism in words, jokes, and stereotypes rather than the brutal reality of murder (3). In truth, the demand is fully in line with the neoliberal idea that individuals are responsible for their own life rather than seeing it as a broader part of the community and web of power.

As Wendy Brown explains it using the term "responsibilization" or "the moral burdening of the entity at the end of the pipeline," the individuals, perceived as human capital which must at all times invest in itself, are detached from the broader community and thus are not instructed to challenge the broader structures (132). Similarly, the video also encourages the individual to self-invest but does not promote leftist messages which challenge the capitalist regime such as the Defund the Police campaign. The video only tackles uncontroversial topics, but does not ask some of the question activists have put forward:

> Why have the police been endowed with the arbitrary capacity to regulate the lives of the racialized poor in US cities? Why do they have expanding and unfettered access to the bodies of poor people in general and poor people of color routinely? How and why are poor people criminalized for occupying public space? Can the problem of police violence actually be solved with the addition of more police (even better trained, more diverse, or better monitored) as many police departments and federal proposals suggest? How have these issues been addressed in other global contexts? And finally, what alternate definitions of security might we imagine? (Camp and Heatherton 2)

Celebrities again champion "safe" and marketable topics, shying away from anything too politically controversial (Kapoor 36).

What is the best response?

In *Violence*, Slavoj Žižek proposes that the proper response to the humanitarian urge to act is withdrawal, as interventions merely conceal the

violence enabling them:

> The threat today is not passivity, but pseudoactivity, the urge to "be active," to "participate," to mask the nothingness of what goes on. People intervene all the time, "do something"; academics participate in meaningless debates, and so on. The truly difficult thing is to step back, to withdraw. Those in power often prefer even a "critical" participation, a dialogue, to silence—just to engage us in "dialogue," to make sure our ominous passivity is broken. (217)

Žižek elaborates by using the example of José Saramago's novel *Seeing* (2004). In this novel, citizens participate in democratic elections, but cast blank votes. Even after the elections are repeated, the majority of votes are blank. This leads the government to suspect a democratic crisis and forces them to take radical, repressive steps. Žižek explains that the ominousness of the citizens' position stems not from rejecting the status quo, which still implies one's intellectual awareness of it and a formulated stance of resistance, but from an unintelligible position outside of the dialectic of acceptance and refusal, which questions the idea of decision-making as a whole.

A similar stance is predicated in Giorgio Agamben's reading of Herman Melville's novella *Bartleby, the Scrivener* (1853), on which Žižek relies as well. In Melville's story, subtitled *A Story of Wall Street*, Bartleby is a legal scribe who one day decides to stop writing. Asked by his employer to perform any task, Bartleby replies with an ominous formula, "I would prefer not to" (12). This utterance excites Agamben, as it embodies pure potentiality.

Following Aristotle, Agamben defines potentiality as "the existence of non-Being, the presence of an absence" (179). Aristotle believed that potentiality does not disappear once it passes into actuality, but is rather fully preserved, an attitude which is different from his predecessors who held that potentiality disappears once it passes into actuality. Agamben notices a strong political charge in the idea of potentiality, which brings about a feeling of con-

tingency that could de-naturalize ossified political structures. If all that exists at the same time possesses the potentiality not to exist, then the whole reality becomes undetermined and opens up a space for freedom. Simultaneously, this move reintroduces potentiality into the past, where the potentiality not to be is now free to erase all traditions.

Such is the move of Bartleby's formula, which withdraws from writing, as well as the law. Bartleby does not overtly refuse the employer's request; he inhabits a queer space between acceptance and refusal, an "abyss of potentiality," from which his unintelligible utterance confounds the norm (Agamben 183). This is why, as Jessica Whyte notes, Bartleby is interesting to Agamben: "in his intransigent passivity, Bartleby eschews both the reduction of politics to a system of rules, which must be copied endlessly, and the revolutionary attempt to found a new constitution, which would be insufficient to break out of the cycle of instrumental violence that sustains the legal order" (109–10). In a similar vein, Žižek argues that any overt disobedience is easily understood by the power structures and coopted as its integral part. What can truly be unsettling is silence.

Agamben believes Bartleby is a Christ-like figure who comes to redeem the potentiality in the past, yet White correctly warns that Bartleby's act is solitary, and as such, has limited repercussions. Yet, his singular act is important, as it drafts a politics of desubjectivation which, if taken up by many, could lead to a refusal of communal identities and works, of "subjectivity produced by the governmental apparatus," and, consequently, to new politics (Whyte 166).

Thus, Bartleby could teach celebrities an important lesson on accepting radical Otherness and abandoning one's own position as a subject of tradition, knowledge, and expertise. In other words, the ethical message of Melville's text is that, in order to create a truly new and more just world, one must not only give up one's privileged position, but one's subjectivity as a whole.

Bartleby's message addresses both celebrities, who rather than urging to intervene, might do better by stepping back and considering the broad context in which their charitable work is being performed, but also the interpassive consumers of this spectacle, whose refusal of it would open venues for new thought. As Žižek also concludes at the end of his book,

> [w]hat is at stake in this "destitution" is precisely the fact that, *the subject no longer presupposes himself as subject*; by accomplishing this he annuls, so to speak, the effects of the act of formal conversion, In other words, he assumes not the existence but the non-existence of the big Other, he accepts the Real in its utter, meaningless idiocy; he keeps open the gap between the Real and its symbolization. The price to be paid for this is that by the same act he also annuls himself as subject, because – and this would be Hegel's last lesson – the subject is subject only in so far as he presupposes himself as absolute through the movement of double reflection. (*The Sublime Object of Ideology* 263)

Conclusion

This essay has attempted to show how the neoliberal capitalist regime is conducive to celebrity humanitarianism, which perfectly aligns with its ideas of responsibilization and individualization. The most privileged ones position themselves as the flagbearers of change, which enables them to safeguard their privilege. In doing so, they are supported by interpassive audiences contaminated with capitalist realism who willingly disavow their democratic duties to fulfill the capitalist claim to individual responsibility.

Ultimately, the essay argues that, regardless of the occasion, most celebrity humanitarian endeavors have in common the fact that they shy away from controversial issues, focusing on increasing the star's brand image and staying in the domain of uncontroversial and bland topics. Unsurprisingly, such an approach cannot yield any meaningful change.

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