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**Political Celebrities, from the Early Modern Age to  
Present Times**

**A comparative historical analysis of the “publicization” of private life  
by political figures**

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## Riassunto

Oggi l'osservazione dello scenario politico internazionale porta al riconoscimento di un fenomeno reiterato, ovvero la frequente condivisione, da parte dei candidati, della loro vita privata con i loro *followers*, attraverso i vari social media. Quest'azione, che di per sé potrebbe sembrare banale, nasconde in realtà un complesso sistema di manipolazione dell'opinione pubblica, attraverso la creazione di legami affettivi con l'elettorato, offrendo un'immagine idealizzata di sé che dia allo spettatore l'illusione di una somiglianza tra se stesso e il candidato. La percezione di "vicinanza" è infatti l'elemento alla base della creazione di rapporti empatici, una risorsa estremamente potente in ambito politico, vista la molto più stabile "fidelizzazione" dell'elettorato che ne deriva.

Effettuando un'analisi storica induttiva, è possibile individuare l'origine di questo processo nel fenomeno di Età Moderna delle *celebrità*, ovvero individui che riuscirono ad ottenere un successo personale senza precedenti grazie alla "pubblicizzazione" della propria vita privata. Il concetto differisce dalla fama ordinaria proprio per l'impareggiabile interesse, da parte delle masse, verso l'individuo in quanto persona, piuttosto che per le sue opere o gesta. Il processo, col tempo, acquisì connotati politici nel momento in cui aspiranti leader si resero conto del potenziale offerto dal fenomeno della celebrità, dando inizio ad una prassi che da allora non si è più arrestata.

Riflettendo sul contesto, l'origine del fenomeno non poteva che essere in Età Moderna, a causa dei numerosi profondi cambiamenti sociali, politici e tecnologici che avvennero nel corso di quell'era, particolarmente nei suoi ultimi decenni – momento in cui si manifestarono le prime celebrità. Nell'osservazione di queste metamorfosi, gli scritti di diversi storici e sociologi – primi fra tutti Habermas, Weber, Bell e Lilti – sono stati analizzati alla ricerca dei vari processi che hanno permesso un passaggio dalla monarchia assoluta alla progressiva inclusione del popolo nel processo decisionale.

Infatti, il principale prerequisito per la nascita delle celebrità è proprio l'espressione da parte del pubblico delle proprie preferenze, inizialmente puramente in termini di interessi privati e poi in termini di voto. Infatti, per giungere alle celebrità politiche, è stato necessario raggiungere un contesto almeno proto-democratico, come quello creatosi nella Francia e negli Stati Uniti post-rivoluzionari a fine '700. Tra i vari fattori che portarono, con i secoli, a questi radicali cambiamenti sociali ed alla presa di coscienza da parte del pubblico del suo potere nei meccanismi elettivi, vi furono aspetti puramente concettuali e aspetti più concreti.

Tra i primi, si possono annoverare le grandi scoperte geografiche, anche con il loro valore simbolico di superamento delle Colonne d'Ercole, le grandi invenzioni di Età Moderna e l'ampliamento dell'offerta nei mercati, con tutti i prodotti d'oltreoceano. Le riforme religiose furono sicuramente anch'esse importanti, come delle rivoluzioni ideologiche portatrici di cambiamento. Si consideri, inoltre, la nascita delle basi concettuali del capitalismo e della globalizzazione.

I fattori più concreti si collegano naturalmente a questi principi, includendo per esempio l'arricchimento della classe mercantile (e quindi la nascita di una classe media) grazie alle tratte d'oltre oceano. Un elemento che è insieme causa ed effetto dei cambiamenti sociali, oltre ad essere fondamentale per il fenomeno delle celebrità in sé, è la nascita di nuovi media. Infatti la creazione e lo sviluppo delle reti di comunicazione fu un fattore fondamentale sia, in prima istanza, per l'emancipazione del pubblico, sia, successivamente, per l'interesse di quello stesso pubblico nei confronti dei suoi idoli.

L'invenzione della stampa, attraverso la quale fu possibile una graduale alfabetizzazione, permise la generazione di diversi media, tra i quali le riviste, strumento chiave per l'espressione della classe borghese. Le riviste offrivano contenuti politici, ma si occupavano anche della cronaca mondana, raccontando con dovizia di particolari le attività delle celebrità, contribuendo ad amplificare la loro notorietà. Vanno menzionate anche le lettere, sia in quanto strumento di comunicazione per eccellenza, tassello chiave nello sviluppo di reti globali, sia come mezzo di connessione tra il pubblico e le celebrità.

È in questo contesto completamente nuovo che, nella seconda metà del 1700, il pubblico francese comincia a nutrire un interesse diverso, quasi morboso alle volte, per le vite private di alcuni artisti del momento, primi fra tutti Voltaire e Rousseau. Beneficiari della loro fama senza pari, in più di un'occasione espressero però la loro sofferenza per questa condizione, rendendosi conto di come ormai la loro popolarità non derivasse dalle loro opere o idee, ma dalla loro popolarità stessa: erano famosi per essere famosi. La devozione della massa si traduceva in piccole manifestazioni – l'acquisto di incisioni e busti raffiguranti la celebrità, la calca per vedere l'idolo seduto in un caffè, le visite e le missive alla sua casa – e grandi manifestazioni, come l'incoronazione laica di Voltaire e l'apoteosi e sepoltura nel Pantheon parigino di entrambi i filosofi.

Di lì a breve si manifestarono i primi casi di celebrità politica: individui che, compreso questo nuovo fenomeno, decisero di offrire la propria vita privata al pubblico in cambio di acclamazione popolare e riconoscimento politico. Due casi di studio sono stati riportati per dimostrare le varie forme di celebrità politica in Età Moderna, George Washington e Napoleone Bonaparte.

Washington è stato realisticamente una delle celebrità politiche più amate di sempre, se non il primo in assoluto. Sia in vita sia, ancor di più, dopo la sua morte, è stato paragonato ad un eroe biblico, il Mosè americano che ha portato il suo popolo alla liberazione. L'interesse del pubblico si manifestò nei modi già citati: articoli sulla sua vita privata, acquisto massiccio di effigi, dediche in poesia e prosa, ritratti e statue. Significativamente, Washington non aveva pressoché rivali (in termini di celebrità) sulla scena pubblica americana, il che aiuta a spiegare la sua popolarità titanica: l'assenza di concorrenza per una celebrità ne sancisce quasi matematicamente il trionfo. La sua manipolazione dell'opinione pubblica non fu però orientata a mire personali – essendo tra l'altro Washington estremamente modesto e quasi timido – bensì alla consacrazione della figura del Presidente in assoluto.

Abbastanza diverso il caso di Napoleone, che combinò, fin dal principio della sua estremamente ambiziosa carriera, tecniche da celebrità (mostrandosi persino come un uomo comune alle volte) con tecniche più tradizionali, che lo facevano apparire come il connubio vivente tra la virtù classica e l'innovazione tardo-settecentesca. Il suo supporto popolare si concretizzò, dopo il colpo di stato del novembre 1799, nel plebiscito che, nonostante fosse stato almeno in parte manipolato, espresse un sincero vasto appoggio delle masse. Questo supporto andò scemando durante la dittatura, ma fu rapidamente riconquistato, con un ritorno alle strategie di celebrità, durante i Cento Giorni e, soprattutto, *post mortem* grazie al *Memoriale di Sant'Elena*, composto per riconsegnare alla Storia un'immagine positiva di sé.

Passando dai primissimi anni del 1800 al presente, le differenze sono chiaramente numerose, prima fra tutte l'avvento della democrazia. Infatti, il lungo processo iniziato in Età Moderna si è pienamente realizzato nel corso dei due secoli successivi ed offre oggi un mondo in cui, almeno *pro forma*, la quasi totalità degli stati presenta un regime democratico. In questo contesto, l'espressione popolare è ancora più importante e i politici necessitano, molto più che in passato, di ottenere l'appoggio degli

elettori. Le trasformazioni non riguardano solo il contesto socio-politico, ma anche l'altro elemento chiave nell'equazione della celebrità, ovvero i media. Oggi, la comunicazione è globale, rapida come mai prima, permeata nelle vite dei singoli individui e talmente sfaccettata da aver praticamente generato una società digitale parallela.

Nel cyber spazio gli attori si muovono principalmente attraverso i social network, il media principale (sia per la sua potenza, sia per la sua ubiquità) della realtà attuale. Il potenziale dei social media risiede nella quantità di pubblico fidelizzato, per cui popolarità significa influenza, come dimostrato dall'assalto a Capitol Hill negli US, da parte dei *followers* del Presidente uscente Donald Trump.

Oggi, come in Età Moderna, il fenomeno celebrità nasce privo di connotati politici. Gli individui che, nei primi anni 2000, intuirono il potenziale di internet, grazie alla resa pubblica della loro vita privata, riuscirono a catturare l'interesse e l'affetto di milioni di followers: nacquero così gli influencer. Il concetto di influencer, pressoché parallelo a quello storico di celebrità, rappresenta sostanzialmente l'accezione digitale di quest'ultime e conta, tra i grandi nomi, figure come Chiara Ferragni, le Kardashian e Gordon Ramsay. Circa un decennio dopo, il pubblico ha interiorizzato il concetto di questa nuova accezione della celebrità e ormai sono migliaia gli aspiranti influencer, specializzati negli ambiti più disparati. Come precedentemente accennato, l'assenza di competizione genera un successo impareggiabile e quindi i primi influencer giovano di benefici (economici e di popolarità) neanche lontanamente comparabili agli influencer di seconda generazione.

Se il fenomeno degli influencer è quindi ormai riconosciuto, non si può dire lo stesso per la più recente ondata di celebrità politiche (altresì definibili come influencer politici), ovvero di quei candidati che creano legami adamantini con l'elettorato attraverso la condivisione della propria vita privata sui social media. Due casi di studio contemporanei sono stati analizzati per osservare similitudini e differenze: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez e Matteo Salvini.

La Rappresentante al Congresso del Distretto di New York, Ocasio-Cortez, o in breve AOC, come lei stessa spesso si firma, è una giovane politica Americana di sinistra. La sua immagine politica è pressoché indistinguibile da quella privata, come iconicamente rappresentato dall'uso di un unico profilo Twitter (la sua piattaforma di punta) sia per gli aspetti personali, sia per quelli ufficiali. AOC non manca mai di mostrare le sue umili origini, i suoi ideali progressisti ed emancipatori, la sua famiglia e la sua vita privata; tutto ciò viene mostrato nei suoi tweet o in occasioni meno ordinarie, come nel documentario (in onda su Netflix) che racconta la sua ascesa al Congresso, *Knock Down the House*. Vicina ai giovani Americani e ai loro interessi, in due occasioni ha trasmesso il videogioco più popolare del momento (*Among Us*) sulla piattaforma di streaming più seguita al mondo, Twitch. Anche nelle sue partecipazioni mondane, Ocasio-Cortez è sempre attivamente impegnata nel dimostrarsi simile e vicina ai giovani Americani e il successo della sua strategia di comunicazione è stato dimostrato dalla schiacciante vittoria alle elezioni per il Congresso.

Molto diverso nel target e negli ideali politici, il leader italiano della Lega Matteo Salvini adotta però simili strategie per ottenere il suo consenso politico. La sua parabola del successo politico (attualmente in calo dopo l'apice delle ultime Europee) è stata nutrita da costanti strategie di celebrità, che hanno portato la Lega da un modestissimo partito regionale a diventare primo partito in Italia alle elezioni del 2019. Il suo social network di riferimento è Facebook, nel quale, attraverso le frequentissime live streaming, gli elettori possono vedere il leader nel contesto privato della sua casa, con la sua famiglia. Salvini punta molto sui propri legami familiari, i propri hobby, il proprio amore per la cucina e i prodotti italiani e la sua passione calcistica. Alcuni di questi valori si collegano ai suoi ideali puramente politici, altri ad un'immagine di "italianità" tradizionale; è anche grazie alla

seconda che Salvini ha ottenuto una coesione nazionale negli elettori della Lega, spostando gli elementi discriminatori con cui la Lega tradizionalmente bersagliava il Meridione italiano verso gli immigrati.

Attualmente, gli influencer politici sono relativamente pochi, motivo per cui coloro che fanno uso della pratica di pubblicizzazione della propria vita tendono a spiccare notevolmente su tutti gli altri candidati. Realisticamente, col tempo, sempre più politici si adatteranno ai social network, come già avvenuto in passato col graduale adattamento delle varie classi politiche ai nuovi media e la situazione si stabilizzerà fino all'arrivo di un nuovo media.

Ciò che è certo è che la celebrità politica come fenomeno è innegabilmente un frutto dei regimi democratici, ma è tuttavia una minaccia agli stessi. Questo perché l'affezione del pubblico verso un individuo permette allo stesso di raggiungere il potere, il che può comportare una monopolizzazione di quello stesso potere da parte del beniamino delle folle, come accaduto negli anni '20 con i totalitarismi di matrice fascista e comunista. In sostanza, la celebrità politica è un nemico del Costituzionalismo, in quanto, attraverso questa manipolazione dell'opinione pubblica, che nella maggior parte dei casi sembra essere inconsapevole del proprio sfruttamento, le celebrità possono cancellare il secolare processo di democratizzazione, ritornando dalla *Rule of Law* alla *Rule of Men*.

## Introduction

“From these things it is evident, then, that the city belongs among the things that exist by nature, and that man is by nature a political animal.”

-Aristotle

Social media are together undeniable actors and scene for a massively high percentage of our everyday life, and the cyberspace tends to follow, intertwine and even overlap with concrete reality in a constant unstoppable flow. Contemporary reality is constantly reshaping, down to its very foundations, in a daily transformation that keeps giving space to cyber-reality, and the traditional society tries to adapt to this sociological changes, happening at unprecedented speed. Governmental organizations have been trying to tame this always-changing parallel dimension for years now, in the attempt to apply their secularized legislation to platforms that are ruled on a global scale by the personal beliefs of their creators, all coming from dangerously uniform first-world capitalistic cultural backgrounds. Significantly, as traditional state entities and emblems of power try to put their ruling and control on social networks – in some cases to prevent crimes, in other cases to maintain the strongest possible control on them – these same entities keep evolving, becoming more “slippery”.

In October 2021, Mark Zuckerberg, owner of the vast majority of the most popular social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Whatsapp, Skype, just to mention the most prominent), has announced a significant change in the company, with a rebranding under the new name of Meta (Meta 2021). This new name suggests, as even stated by the same Zuckerberg, a projection into a new dimension of reality, the metaverse, a term originally created by the fantascientific writer Stephenson in the book “Snow Crash” (Stephenson 2007), indicating a shared virtual reality in which people interact through digitally created avatars. If governmental authorities had already issues in dealing with the digital world of social networks, a completely immaterial virtual parallel reality seems something even more impactful. Indeed, there are many voices that, since the announcement of the project, have already expressed their doubts and concerns on the nature of it, fearing its power to avoid real world jurisdiction (Roose 2021).

If this preamble may seem extraneous to political or historical analysis, the reality is exactly the opposite. Social networks, independently from the positive or negative connotation that they can be given, are in fact a revolutionary shockwave for the social structure of the whole world. Not necessarily in terms of an alteration of social roles, but rather as re-constructors of the social tissue, with its relations and interactions. There is a plethora of studies concerning the new dangers that the current social media society is having on people, being it the risk of isolation (G. Hülür 2020), an utter change in the development of human relations for the newer, more digitalized generations (J. Nesi 2018), or the possibility of being excluded from the job market (Sharone 2017). These cases are just some of the examples of profound and risky structural changes that society is undertaking, as a proof of how vast the issue is. If history is obviously connected to societal evolution, politics deserves a more profound analysis in order to show its bonds.

For what concerns politics, unprecedented episodes offered by the advent of the cyberspace are not less important than the societal changes mentioned up to this point. Many cases, national or international, could be mentioned to express how much social networks have changed the relation with power or with politicians themselves. Among all of them, probably the most significant appears

to be the 2021 assault of Capitol Hill and its consequences (Britannica 2022). The use of social networks in this event is of fundamental importance for two main reasons. It was thanks to social media that former President Donald Trump spoke to the rioters storming the public palace, and, before that, through those same platforms that he ignited the spirits of his supporters. Furthermore, social media were also theatre of a parallel “trial” after the conclusion of the episode, since the world managed to assist to the very first *ad personam* mass ban from the almost entirety of main digital platforms. The point here is to highlight, once again, the complete societal restructure that has happened since social networks became so popular in everyday life, but at the same time to show how they can become powerful and exploitable by influential figures.

This risk is indeed profoundly connected to the virtual reach of an individual. In this new dual reality, some voices happen to be heard more than others, with all the advantages (and in some case, the disadvantages) that this larger public can offer. This privilege is gained in more ways: by having a larger number of followers due to the interesting content that is offered, by surfing the tidal wave of popular trends or, simply, by spending money to sponsor a person’s posts.

Aristotle believed in an omnipresence of politics in human life, but he never would have imagined how much this would become true in the current state of events, during the age of mass media. Now more than ever, politics has become not only an activity for the individual, but also a ubiquitous background, especially in the cyberspace. Trump’s case is probably one of the most extreme manifestations of the phenomenon, being him – at the time – the leader of arguably the first national power in the whole world, but one should not forget of the myriads of other lesser figures that now populate the virtual, as well as the real world political debate.

Indeed, if politicians have been already active for decades among “old-generation” media, such as television or newspapers, in the last years their presence has extended (in different manners and intensities) to the new generation of media, mostly social networks, substantially making those politicians some of the most prominent protagonists of the metaverse.

Since the cyberspace has reached an unprecedented level of permeability in everyone’s life, this consequently allows politicians to reach virtually anyone, even those who would otherwise be uninterested in the debate. This phenomenon is significant especially when thinking of the undecided elector, who is now solicited also in his “private” virtual space, let alone all the more traditional stimuli coming from ads, electoral billboards and TV programs. Of course, all of this multilateral contact is profitable also for the already convinced electors, who are now retained through the constant interaction (Jenkins 2006).

In some case, this contact does not happen through explicit posts or monologues of political propaganda, but rather through apparently ordinary content, such as personal photos or chatty interactions in a live streaming. However, this is actually much more than pointless conversation: the process of sharing personal life experiences and casual conversing with the electorate is, in reality, an extremely effective bonding strategy, aimed at creating empathy with the people, who eventually will feel almost as they know personally and trust their interlocutor. This very passage is substantial, not only to understand the purpose of this thesis, but to enter in the cyberspace mind-set regarding interactions in general.

In fact, the creation of empathic relations with online viewers seems not to be studied or considered enough in contemporary political studies. However, its importance is widely supported by scholars dealing with another kind of protagonists of the cyberspace: “influencers” (Glucksman 2017, Petersen 2020, Nouri 2018, Chen Lou 2019, Nayoung Jung 2021), that is “a person with the ability to influence



potential buyers of a product or service by promoting or recommending the items on social media” (Oxford Learner’s Dictionary, 2021). Being influencers clearly not political figures, but rather a marketing and sociological entity, the parallelism may seem not to be suitable, but there are two reasons to believe that they are actually closely connected.

Firstly, if there is quite a consistent literature in favor of recognising the instrumentalization of empathy by these marketing actors, in order to create a feeling of personal connection with the viewer – and all of this shall be thoroughly analysed in the second part of this thesis – there is, instead, very few in favor of the recognition of a similar process, with similar aims, in the current political world. Since both phenomena share a consistent number of features, as it shall be better expanded in the course of this work, the abundance of one group of sources can be important to fill the absence of the other.

Of course this does not mean that there is a complete absence of political studies on the topic. The issue arises when, in some cases, studies only focus on the personalization of the political discourse, bringing it closer to everyday life of people (Jenkins 2006), while in others, scholars recognise the politicians’ act of trying to build empathy (Lewinstein 2019; L. Cervi 2020), but fail to recognise a larger framework of a rationally organised strategy, where these two fundamental factors concerning the evolution of popular participation collide. This new aspect of political discourse is substantially the soul of the comparison influencers-politicians, and, as said before, it shall be thoroughly analysed in Chapter II.

Moreover, the analogy with influencers seems even more solid when thinking of politics as, essentially, “marketing campaigns for people”. This definition may seem naïve and oversimplifying: electoral campaigns are clearly aimed at “selling a product” – that being the politician aspiring to be elected – but the evolution of the political debate in the last decades has created a substantial difference with the past, which gives a new meaning to this analogy. If, decades ago, political campaign was limited to a certain period of time, before elections for example, and candidates had a relatively small window to clearly state their objectives and ideals, now the situation is much more different.

Mediatic and social evolution has created a new reality, in which politicians act a permanent campaign, as pioneeristically stated in the 1980s by the American presidential adviser Blumenthal. The point of this observation is that, since the electoral campaign is now endless, its purpose is not merely to win elections (in which case, as per tradition, it would conclude with the exit polls), but to generate an almost everlasting bond between the electorate and the candidate. In other words, political campaign now has the objective of truly selling a product, the politician as an individual, virtually even outside their mandate. Interestingly, Blumenthal saw new media as one of the foremost preconditions for permanent campaign (Blumenthal 1980), and with the development of social networks his vision seems even more accurate.

These initial reasonings are those which sparked in me the desire to research more on the topic, to fully understand the implication of this practice acted by political candidates. Moreover, all of the aforementioned observations are, substantially, sociological concepts, but the path that this work is planning is mainly historical, for two reasons above all. The first is that, in the study of a political phenomenon like this is, noting relatively few occurrences in the present is not enough to determine its existence as a trend. Instead, through the use of the historical method, individuating previous manifestations and, most importantly, confirming through data that they share the same nature and

purpose with the current ones, can scientifically determine the existence of an historical process, leading to the current shape of events.

Secondly, apart from confirming the trend in itself, history allows to give credit to the hypothesis, by confirming its existence in the course of events in order to determine its nature and features, so that they can be compared with the new occurrences and shapes of the phenomenon. For these reasons, the research and the type of work that shall be conducted in this paper shall not be just historical, but, specifically, a comparative historical process, aimed at determining at which point politicians began to share their life to create an empathy bond with the population, as well as understanding through which sociological mechanisms this happened.

Concerning this very last statement, it has to be mentioned that, for how historically oriented this thesis shall be, it cannot be completely separated from sociology. This almost Weberian approach is not a conceptual aprioristic statement, but rather a necessity generated from the study of the chosen sources. Both in the observation of the past and the present, and in the latter more than the former, looking at society, its members, their natural tendencies and their relations seems a necessity, in order to understand the reasons behind the studied phenomenon and the way it transformed. Having thus completed an introduction on the methodological background of the thesis, the historical exploration begins, looking for the spring that generated the whole process.

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By beginning the research from the chosen case studies inductively, a debate from 2019 concerning the – at the time – Minister of the Intern Matteo Salvini was significant. The *querelle* arose from some photos portraying Salvini shirtless, partying on a beach; many voices criticised the claimed indecency of the images, considering the outfit inappropriate and too intimately private for a public figure. Among these voices, one of the most notable was Agnese Moro, daughter of the former Italian politician and jurist Aldo Moro. Agnese Moro shared her childhood memories of going to the beach with her father, who would wear suit and tie even in that occasion, claiming that, being a representative of the Italian Republic, he must always show decorum (Canettieri 2019).

This episode may seem to show that sharing personal, more intimate moments has become a tendency only in the last few decades, but in reality, it is the opposite. Aldo Moro, but also other past-generation politicians that were mentioned in the article, effectively showed fractions of their private life to the public (in this case, going to the beach with their families), with the idea of a decorous public image being the only true difference with Salvini's case. On the contrary, in a certain way, the desire to maintain a professional persona in the photos, despite being in probably one of the most informal contexts possible, could be interpreted as a sign of the awareness of the publicization of their private life. In this view, the formalization of an otherwise intimate moment would make it an impactful message for the public coming in contact with the photo of Moro, thus demonstrating that the institutional role also extended to the bits of private life to which the public was participating as a spectator.

This very last portion is clearly hypothetical, but the fact that, with a different concept of the public persona, the private life sharing existed also in the second half of the previous century remains. This leads to the consideration that the origin of the phenomenon has to be found further back in time. So the investigation continued, and, surely, the first half of the twentieth century were not different. On the contrary, the 1920s showed the heaviest signs of a personalization of political leaders.

Indeed, during the period of totalitarian regimes, from the 1920s to the half of the century – with the end of World War II – these peculiar forms of government were extremely reliant on the supposedly intimate relation between the population and the dictators. To be precise, Hitler and Mussolini (and Stalin, to a lesser extent) based not only their ascend to power, but also the subsequent legitimation and control over the dictatorship machine, on an unprecedented large-scale approval by the people. This process of building strong personal empathic support was possible, in particular, thanks to the use of the technique that was already mentioned several times: they frequently showed supposedly private moments of their life, to demonstrate their love for the nation and its values, or the lifestyle they were trying to promote through personal driven propaganda (Melograni 1976; Sabbatucci 2008; Yourman 1939).

In this context more than in any other, it is clear how sharing private moments for a political leading figure can accomplish different purposes; for instance, it presents the celebrity as a person that shares habits and the lifestyle of the people, conceptually closing the gap between the top and the bottom of the hierarchy. Differently from other historical manifestation of the phenomenon, although, totalitarian regimes had a consistently unique feature in their manipulation of the public through their personal storytelling that deserves attention.

The shared personal moments, indeed, often had not only the purpose of getting the dictator closer to the people, portraying him at work or in a familiar context, but they also had to be didactic in their representation. Mussolini, just to mention one of the totalitarian dictators, in more than one occasion showed himself hard working, both on the fields and in his office, apparently unbothered by fatigue, giving the example to all fascist Italians. Of course, this didactical behaviour had sense only in the new way of life that the regime was trying to convey. In fact, totalitarian regimes in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century shared the unique feature of trying to shape personal life of the individuals living in that state (G. Sabbatucci 2008); in the aforementioned Italian case, for example, Mussolini focused on physical strength and hard labour, which he conveyed through the moments he carefully shared with the public. The unique characteristic of this type of propaganda was, indeed, its double nature, of sharing to bond and to give the example.

Having observed the period of totalitarisms, it seems clear how the use of personal influence was already extremely rooted in political exploitation of popular support, therefore the research continues. The second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century may not show examples as prominent as the 1920s and '30s, but it surely offers some notable figures, object of a fervent personal interest by the people, that in more than one occasion even transcended national boundaries. In different manners, also in this period, these great figures managed to enjoy the fruits of this interest, by nurturing their support, carried by the personal charismatic magnetism.

Being in a certain sense close between them, in their attempt to unify their nations, Otto von Bismarck (Frankel 2003) and Garibaldi (H. R. Marraro 1943) both share significant traits in their cult of the individual among the public. These two celebrities are, although, slightly different from those mentioned up to this point (and forward). Indeed, neither of them was a political actor trying to obtain the highest title of leader of their nation, although they are not alien from the mechanisms of exploiting personal support to obtain their goals. Bismarck, for instance, managed to take advantage of his image of a national hero in order to reconquer his place in politics, after Kaiser Wilhelm II attempted to exclude him from his powerful position, following the emperor's rise to the throne. Bismarck pressed popular and political movements, igniting writers and populist leaders, in order to push the dissatisfaction towards the crown in his favour, up to the point of his eventual political restoration (Frankel 2003).

Garibaldi, on the other hand, is a unique case that deserves a slightly more in depth analysis. Historian Lucy Riall has thoroughly analysed the historical figure of Garibaldi in her work *Garibaldi, Invention of a Hero*. Through the book, it is possible to discover a possibly new interpretation on the life of this Italian national icon, who perfectly fits the scenery of instrumentalization of personal life experience to increase national and international support. The case looks, although, peculiar because it was not Garibaldi himself to lead this attempt of “celebrification” of his public persona in the first place, but rather Mazzini, leader of the republican revolutionary movement *Giovine Italia*. Mazzini needed a charismatic hero that could lead the Italian peoples into a revolutionary movement, a figure that could sum up the bright ideals of nationalism, bravery on the battlefield and republican ideals, and Garibaldi perfectly fitted this role.

The adaptation and idealization of Garibaldi’s person and his military successes began immediately after his victories in South America, in particular after the Uruguayan adventures in the 1840s; the propaganda kept rising consistently in the following years, thanks to Mazzini’s work, not only in Italy, but also in most of Europe and in the United States. After the very brief episode of the Roman Republic, despite the rupture with Mazzini, many others, such as Dwight or Dumas, kept the cult of celebrity for Garibaldi alive, once again consistently even outside of Italy. Of course, after 1861, with the military expedition in Sicily against the Bourbon crown, and the eventual unification of Italy, Garibaldi’s myth grew even more, with a significant rise in the production of fictional data, created to envelop his figure in legend (Riall 2007).

His international success was, for these reasons, extremely significant at the time, which could appear strange, when comparing it to the current low international popularity of Garibaldi, when confronted with other celebrities of his time. The propaganda campaign led to his consistent popularity in the US – partly motivated by the wrong image of Garibaldi being a protestant hero, due to him being a fervent anticlerical and anti-Catholic – which even evolved into the historically debated episode of Lincoln requiring his aid in the American Civil War, to lead the northerner army (H. R. Marraro 1943). This very significant historical case study of political celebrity may surprise due to the much more “innocent” and action-devoted image of Garibaldi that has arrived to us today, which depends by an incorrect iconography that was transmitted with the decades, ignoring or covering the enormous trail of data showing an active manipulation of his public persona.

With this in mind, an overview of the second part of the 1800 seems concluded, thus it is necessary to continue the research in the previous historical period. It is, indeed, with the beginning of the 1800 that the gold vein, which has been followed up to this point, finds its source. The process of political celebrities begins in the final tranche of the Early Modern Age, mostly in the arch between 1700 and the early 1800, being it the period in which several preconditions that had been accumulating for decades, if not centuries, fully realized. Before expanding this last statement on the reasons behind the importance of Early Modern Age, it is however important to give a clear and well-delineated definition of the subject of this research: what is a celebrity?

To understand this historical concept, Antoine Lilti’s definition in “The Invention of Celebrity” will be pivotal. Starting from the already stated concept of the inversion of public and private spheres for celebrities, Lilti focuses on the key aspect of the conception that the others have of a person, distinguishing two traditional elements, glory and reputation. Glory comes after death; it could be even defined as a laic beatification: prominent figures, artists, national heroes become consecrated as object of honour and respect for the achievements they conquered in life. Reputation, instead, is a much more personal feature, that stems from the subjective opinion of an individual or a community regarding a member of their group (Lilti 2017). Clearly, anyone has a reputation, but being it limited

to the personal contacts of an individual, it will always have a lesser scope than glory, for a public figure.

This being said, Lilti debates that, in the Early Modern period, a third new form of relation emerges, and that is celebrity. Celebrity works in an unprecedented way, becoming some sort of fusion between glory and reputation, but developing even new characteristics that make it unique. Celebrity is, first of all, only limited to famous and influential people. It substantially coincides with glory in life, in the sense that a substantial sanctification – if not even deification – happens when the person is still alive, and this shall be observed in detail when watching at the unprecedented celebrations that were reserved to Washington and Napoleon. For what concerns reputation, celebrity alters even that original concept, in the sense that it operates as if the mass of people taking interest in celebrities' life knew them, despite they could have even never seen that individual in person.

As partially stated before, celebrity develops also some new traits. Firstly, celebrity leverages upwards all the social differences that may occur among public figures object of the phenomenon: “During the sometimes short period of their notoriety, actors and politicians, writers and the protagonists of fleeting news items are treated on the same level, like the stars of a media spectacle” (*ibid.*). Up to this point, the only type of celebrities that has been mentioned is political celebrities, military officials or political figures attempting to pave their way to the highest seats in the command of the nation, but, clearly, this was not the only type of celebrity that existed. On the contrary, the historical phenomenon realistically began with Rousseau, an intellectual and a writer, not a general or a candidate, but this shall be later explained in detail in Chapter I.

The second unique feature is an aspect that has been dealt with several times in this work, despite, up to this point, out of the original context of its initial conceptualization: the large interest of the public in the private life of the celebrity. When thinking of glory and reputation, this is clearly a new aspect, because none of the above was ever connected to this very new specific situation. Glory was obviously related only to the public image of the hero, it had nothing in common with personal life in the very first place. Reputation, in a similar manner, sparked from the personal contacts and opinions of people already living in the personal space of that specific individual, therefore an active research for that involvement would be meaningless (*ibid.*).

In a closing statement, Lilti clarifies how these three categorization of social relations are, obviously, an exaggerated schematization of reality, in which labels are not adamant, but often blurry or partially overlapped. Despite this, the simplification and distinction of glory, reputation and celebrity serves the purpose of individuating the features of a new phenomenon, and to give it a conceptual basis. This introductory section on the concept of celebrity shall be, as partly anticipated, completed in the introduction to the first Chapter of the thesis, comparing Lilti's idea with other significant scholars. Having concluded the definition, it is necessary to point out the reason why this happened in Modern period, and the reason why this era is therefore so important for the present work.

*A posteriori*, the individuation of the origin in Early Modern Age should not surprise, because, by observing the nature of celebrity cult, it is clear how it is a process not only media-related, but media-dependent. After all, without mass media it would be impossible to create all of the necessary connections between the population and the personal life of their idol. For this reason, nothing but Early Modern Age could have been the starting point, being it not only the historical period in which mass media were invented in the first place, but also being an overall moment of massive transformation for society as a whole.

Indeed, the monumental importance of Modern Age in this research stems from two fundamental radical changes that happened between the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century: media revolution and social revolution. The relation between the two factors could be seen as a cause-effect one, being the transformation of media one of the factors that initially led to a social revolution (Benjamin 2020). However, in this work, their value in terms of preconditions for the phenomenon object of the study shall be equivalent, with no hierarchical relation between the two. Indeed, without both fundamental elements of mass media, able to allow large-scale communication, and a vast public getting interested in the private life of public figures, history would have not taken the course that this work is trying to analyse.

As a matter of fact, media revolution, as shall be later expanded in Chapter I, was fundamental for a social transformation because it created ways for the Third State to participate to public life (Bell 2020; Morgan 2010, 2019). The possibility to be informed, to create clubs, even to produce media, were all factors that led to a substantial emancipation of the burgeoises, extending the political debate to the middle class (Bell 2020). For what concerns this paper, Modern Age media were even more determinant, since it was exactly with the advent of new forms of art and communication that the general public had the possibility to satisfy their curiosity for celebrities' personal life (Lilti 2017). This shall again be better explained later, observing in detail the different type of media that allowed this connection.

If the transformation and creation of media was important in instrumental terms, Modern Age social revolution was fundamental in terms of agency for the phenomenon at issue, because it gave a public for celebrities to appeal (Lilti 2017). The Modern political leaders object of this observation, based their power on the idea of massive popular support to guarantee it, being it an effective support guaranteed by a democratic system – as in the Washington's case – or a more formal one, as in the case of the Napoleonian plebiscites. Without the concept of people that was substantially generated in this historical era, or the growing importance that the middle class managed to conquer in the age of revolutions, this whole element would be lacking from the equation.

It is important to notice that, although, the depiction of the people that this thesis is trying to convey is not an image of a mass of sheep, only existing to glorify the new heroes. A fundamental element in the background of this thesis (even in the simple use of the term “public”) is of course Habermas, not simply for his work, but also for the echoes it had in subsequent literature. According to his view, the social revolution that happened during Early Modern Age brought to light a new larger class of people in the political debate, capable of decision-making through collective thought, thus generating the preconditions and prototype of democratic society (Habermas 1992; Calhoun 1992).

This being said, however, Habermas idea will not be acritically taken for granted. Indeed, the design of a completely rational popular entity seems outdated and imperfect, and does not fit this work for more than one reason. Firstly, as explained by some of his scholars, Habermas himself accepted several critiques on his conception of people and adapted it with the years (Garnham 2007). Secondly, the whole phenomenon of political celebrity is partly based on some degree of manipulation of the public opinion, after all.

As shall be later explained, regarding Napoleon probably more than anyone else, the process of adapting to the rising interest by the general public was, essentially, nothing more than a propaganda instrument, despite less direct and canonical than others. With this in mind, the concept of a purely rational popular entity would be utterly incorrect, but, at the same time, the people cannot be reduced to pure irrationality and blind support. In an Aristotelic manner, an intermediate ideology best fits the

situation. In this sense, Antoine Lilti's position on Habermas seems key in solving the possible impasse that seems to be presenting, simultaneously expressing the ideological belief that also accompanies this thesis:

What I have tried to do is to acknowledge and identify a major transformation linked to the emergence of one or more publics, but while critically interrogating the definition of the public sphere which many historians borrowed from Habermas. It seemed to me too rationalist, too normative, too heavily founded on the idea of the public sphere as a space of critical discussion and a site for the exchange of viewpoints of increasing generality. It seems to me that you must also consider the public sphere as a space where emotions are shared, capable of encompassing literature, the arts, but also spectacle, entertainment, mediatic flux (Lilti 2019).

Quoting Lilti in merit to the founding ideological elements behind this thesis seems emblematical. Despite this work is not attempting to trace blindly Lilti's ideas, his importance for celebrity studies is undeniable, being him not only one of the most influential historians to work on the idea of "celebrities" in general, but also one of the shapers of the concept itself in the first place. For this reason, this work owes much to Lilti's work and to the scholars that followed his path of historical analysis of the great figures of Modern Age.

In merit of the period on which Lilti worked, the comparative analysis that shall be completed in the next chapters will focus only on the Early Modern Age phase of the phenomenon of political celebrity, for what concerns the past, without taking in considerations all the intermediate occurrences (from the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> Century, to the end of the millennium) that were before mentioned. This choice mainly stems from two reasons.

The first, merely practical, is connected to the extreme difficulty that a task so wide would represent: tracking all the main political celebrities, even by only focusing on one or few figures for each fifty years, would require a titanic effort. The second, more personal, is connected to the approach I wish to give to this research. Observing under a magnifying lens few specific case studies, at the head and the tail of the historical phenomenon, allows, in my opinion, a larger spectrum of investigation and an attention to the way different aspects have changed that could otherwise be lost, in case of a larger sample of case studies.

The historical comparison shall be realised through two macro-chapters. The first shall introduce the concept of celebrity in Modern Age, by specifically observing the instruments through which it happened, its sociological preconditions during Early Modern times and its consequences, its historical value, and the shape it had before it became a political concept. The dichotomy shall continue with the presentation of two case studies, to observe also possible differences in the early forms of the phenomenon, with two geographically and partly also politically distant occurrences, despite the many similarities: George Washington and Napoleon Bonaparte. Both cases shall be thoroughly analysed, operating a qualitative selection of historical sources.

The second chapter, instead, will be focused on the current reality of political debate, initially introducing the cyberspace and its actors, empathy studies, a reflection on the evolution of the social space, both for politicians and electors. Then, to give concrete shape to the hypothesis, another dichotomy of political celebrities shall be observed, once again geographically and politically different: the United States Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Italian leader of Lega Matteo Salvini.

The sources used to conduct this analysis will be several. For what concerns the Early Modern Age section, historical sources shall occupy the vast majority of the list, focusing especially on the work

of scholars who have observed history under the speculum of celebrities, most notably Lilti, Weber and Bell. This qualitative type of research shall be occasionally sided by sociological studies, as partly anticipated, and by primary sources, in order to have a complete representation of the framework in which figures such as Napoleon or Washington flourished as political leaders.

Regarding current times, the analysis shall be slightly different for what concerns sources. The issue is connected to the difficulty of using a purely historical approach for two currently politically active object of study, but also to the necessity of introducing social media in the equation. The nature of social media, used as a resonance chamber in present times, is significantly different from any media used in the past by political celebrities, both because of its unique feature of simulating real society and for its ubiquitous presence. For this reason, qualitative instruments of research on the nature of social media will be necessary to introduce the new forms of celebrity, together with psychological studies on the implications of personal sharing on the cyberspace. Concerning the observation of present celebrities, a quantitative approach to sources shall be used as well, in order to note the amount and type of use of social networks by the subjects.



# Chapter I

## I.I – Early Modern Age and the Origin of Celebrities.

“While many can pursue their dreams in solitude, other dreams are like great storms blowing hundreds, even thousands of dreams apart in their wake. Dreams breathe life into men and can cage them in suffering. Men live and die by their dreams. But long after they have been abandoned they still smolder deep in men’s hearts. Some see nothing more than life and death. They are dead, for they have no dreams.”

-Griffith (*Berserk*, by K. Miura)

“The universal is a people, a group of individuals in general, an existent whole, the universal force. It is of insurmountable strength against the individual, and is his necessity and the power oppressing him. And the strength that each one has in his being-recognized is that of a people. This strength, however, is effective only insofar as it is united into a unity, only as will. The universal will is the will as that of all and each, but as will it is simply this Self alone. The activity of the universal is a unity. The universal will has to gather itself into this unity. It has first to constitute itself as a universal will, out of the will of individuals, so that this appears as the principle and element.”

-G. W. F. Hegel

In the introduction, through an inductive approach, starting from the current reality and the observation of the new form of political celebrities, a backward analysis of Modern History allowed to identify the Early Modern Age as the starting point of the whole process. What was substantially put in practice is a sort of *pars destruens* of the latest manifestations of the process, to recognise its prototypical form. Now, in a Baconian manner, a deductive reconstruction will be operated, beginning from the Early Modern Age, in order to analyse in depth the different aspects that were mentioned up to this point, in the attempt to systematically explain the processes behind celebrity as a socio-historical phenomenon.

In this schematization of the causes, it could be even possible to make a further historical distinction. Indeed, if political celebrities substantially developed around the first century of Modern Age – it was exactly during this time span that the historical preconditions reached an unprecedented stage of maturity – it could be said that it was during Early Modern Age that the processes that eventually led to these preconditions developed. In other words, if Modern Age generated the prerequisites, Early Modern Age generated the foundation of the prerequisites. However, this involuntary sort of a word pun should not create the incorrect idea of a conceptual chaos of historical matryoshkas in the following chapter. The only purpose of this clarification is to explain the reason why the historical observation shall begin with processes that date back to the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, to show what led to those fundamental aspects that, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries, fully bloomed in the necessary context for celebrities.

A fundamental addendum is, moreover, still necessary. In order to represent and discuss historical trends and concepts, a certain degree of simplification is necessary. Firstly, since the process taken in consideration is geographically circumscribed between Western Europe and the United States, these will be the main areas of interest of the following socio-historical study. Secondly, when a process will be presented as something that developed during Early Modern Age, for instance, this will naturally be a simplification, that tends to circumscribe indicatively an element to an historical period; it is obvious that historical processes and concepts are by nature something lacking a marked beginning or end, and that, for this reason, may actually partially overlap with the beginning of Modern Age. So, having justified the use of schematizations that could otherwise have appeared naïve or excessively simplistic, and having explained the reasons behind the analysis of some key aspect of the Early Modern Age that will follow, the historical observation can begin.

Almost symbolically, the beginning of the *pars costruens* can be exactly the discovery of America by Columbus, the conventional start of the Early Modern Age. In reality, the focus is not merely America, but the whole process that profoundly marked the first part of the Early Modern Age, the Age of Explorations. These voyages had an enormous impact on a plethora of aspects of the world as it was conceived and organised. Apart from the several very concrete aspects that will soon be observed, an undeniably important conceptual feature was connected to the ideological value of the adventure into the unknown.

The Pillars of Hercules were not the end of the world anymore, the other side of the ocean was there to be explored, known in its deepest details, experienced first-hand, thus realising the first fundamental steps that led to the abandonment of the Aristotelic conception of the World as a flat table at the centre of a limited micro-universe. The Age of Explorations was not only a moment of geographical expansion, but also mental expansion, and this can be seen as the very beginning of the great ideological revolutions that happened during the Early Modern Age. In a certain way, it is iconic that the story of Doctor Faustus, the man who craved knowledge up to the point of sacrificing his own soul to the Devil, was published during this period, the era of discovery and thirst for knowledge.

Clearly, explorations were not mere philosophical and philanthropist adventures, on the contrary, they were driven from the contrasts and the possibility to prevail on others, more than anything else. At the end of 1400, several obstacles to intercontinental trade and travels had risen, such as the strong grip over Middle-Eastern trades by the Ottoman Empire, the fall of the Mongol Empire, with consequential renewed risks in following the central Asian route after the end of the *Pax Mongolica* (Lamar 1992), and the beginning of the isolationism policy of *haijin*, in Ming's China (Mancall 2006). The possibility for European monarchies to regain a spotlight in international trade was too enticing to be ignored, so enormous investments were destined to the development of fleets, capable to explore the New World. Clearly, some states were more successful than others in exploiting the new technologies and discoveries to sail across the ocean; indeed, it is possible to say that the Age of Exploration marked a golden century for the Spanish and Portuguese monarchies.

Simply speaking of "trade" probably is not enough to grasp the numerous possibilities that were offered by transoceanic travel. Since most of these aspects are connected with the future transformations of society, the most prominent ones will now be analysed. First, as partially expressed so far, new routes meant the possibility to link European markets with the already known Asian markets, offering already appreciated products, that were cut off with the closing of the routes taken up to this point. New unexplored lands meant, although, much more, since new products and goods were now available and they were extremely appealing: spices, coffee, chocolate, exotic fruits, materials to colour clothes, the gift of tea by China and Japan, were just some of the new entries in

the European markets. Ironically, among all the unknown goods that were now shipped to the Old Continent, tea, chocolate and coffee were, in a sense, pivotal in the generation of a new bourgeois public sphere, but before expanding this, some other observations are necessary.

Discovering these new lands was of course not a completely pacific experience: on the contrary, as we know, the contact between the Native Americans and the Spanish *conquistadores* was all but pacific, just to mention one case. Explorations meant for European kingdoms a chance to become empires, extending their power and jurisdiction over far but profitable new territories. The Age of Exploration was, indeed, also a period of violence and clash, with the beginning of Colonialism and the Slave Route, mostly from Africa towards Europe and the colonies of the new continent, America. Without focusing in detail on how colonies were established or how the institutions of Colonialism affected natives' lives, a focal point has to be highlighted from this passage, since it is one other fundamental precondition that eventually led to those changes that are necessary to this thesis. Being colonial empires naturally characterized by enormous distances between the core of the European empire and the colonies, across different continents, travels and transoceanic media were improved even more, in order to facilitate communication between the two parts.

Lastly, it is impossible not to mention a third factor that makes the Age of Explorations fundamental for the preconditions of this work, and that is the complex and prolonged process that led to the enrichment and growing importance of the merchant class. This had more than one consequence. First, more products and more demand made richer those who were willing to invest and participate into intercontinental trade, which – in a long process that lasted few centuries – contributed to the creation of a middle class of bourgeois. Second, the opening to intercontinental trade made the limited choice of the local productions less interesting; this aspect in particular could be seen as one of the several processes that contributed to the generation of globalization, together with many other changes (in large part connected to the aforementioned explorations) that happened during the Early Modern Age. The consideration of globalization as a process that began long before the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and proceeded in steps is, indeed, not new, and is at the core of transformationalism (C. Cerreti 2019).

Up to this point, numerous turning points of the Early Modern Age have been mentioned, all connected to the Age of Explorations. In the attempt to categorize them under a unique banner, they can be defined as socio-economic factors, necessary preconditions to realize the social revolution that led to the birth of a public. Although, in order to have the most complete scenario possible, before passing to the Habermasian analysis of the genesis of the public sphere, another introductory passage is necessary. Indeed, as it was already stated in the introduction, social revolution in Modern Age was possible especially thanks to a mediatic revolution that had developed in Early Modern period. So, realising a substantial evolution from the events of the Age of Discovery mentioned so far, the most significant instruments and innovations of this same period will now be observed, in the attempt to explain how they influenced global circulation of information.

The evolution of media is a focal point for this whole thesis: if the historical factors that led to a decisive social transformation are important as preconditions for the advent of celebrities, since they acted a structural change in the public, media are a transversal feature that works both as a precondition and as an element of the phenomenon in itself. Indeed, despite the media taken in consideration are obviously the same, the spotlight of the different sources will be put rather on the social importance of that media, or in its instrumentalization by celebrities to bolster their popularity. The two views do not exclude each other, but rather enrich the discourse in a dual perspective, focusing on different features and consequences, so there will not be exclusive choices in the use of sources.

Among all Modern media-generator instruments, the most important is, without any doubts, print. Already in its very first appearance, Gutenberg's masterpiece of invention showed immediately the revolutionary power it had, being it the instrument through which Martin Luther opposed the apparently untouchable secularized power of the Roman Catholic Church. The print was an equalizing instrument, capable of delivering the gift of reading and expression to commoners, but at the same time acting as a magnifying glass in the hands of those seeking influence. "Striking changes in the world of print were making it possible for men and women from the most ordinary backgrounds to have unprecedented fame" (Bell 2020), explains historian David Bell, in the introduction to the phenomenon of celebrities in Early Modern Age. Of course, the development of celebrities is not the only practical consequence of print's popularity, so a more in depth explanation will now be conducted.

The importance of prints lays, indeed, also in its versatility, since several different media, each one with its different degree of importance and impact in the historical process, managed to see the light through this instrument. One of the most important one for this thesis is undoubtedly the novel: this form of fiction became increasingly popular thanks to a gradual process of increased alphabetization of the middle class. Its recognised importance stems from different points of view, according to the various schools of thought, but there is one element that is common to the majority of prominent ideologists behind this thesis, and that is the publicization of a (fictional) private life. Novels traditionally tell the adventures, thoughts, life, emotions of a character whose life events are shared with the reader, who inevitably gets involved in the vicissitudes of that character. This fictional relation that is built mostly functions through empathy, since the reader recognizes thoughts and events that may be easily understood, or that have been even first-hand experienced in his life. Lilti is one of the scholars that, more than any other, highlights this key element:

This mixture of curiosity and empathy in the eighteenth century was found in a fast-growing literary genre, the novel, and in particular the love story, whose success accompanied the nascent culture of celebrity. Readers learned, in *Pamela* or in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, to be excited by the life of characters who resembled them, who recounted in detail their daily life and their emotional ups and downs. At the same time, the most celebrated individuals of the period became true public persons whose lives were recounted like serialized novels (Lilti 2017).

The emotional sphere here is more important than one may think, and the novel was a key element in this period of discovery of a Self. The exploration of emotions and a personal dimension (that, of course, kept growing up to the point it became the essence of Romanticism, at the beginning of Modern Age) were key factors behind the research for other people's life experience, to find similarities and bonds. When reading of celebrities' personal moments, the public could do nothing but empathize with a person that appeared so distant, but was at the same time so close in their personal intimate sphere.

It is exactly on this strong bond between the novel and the sharing of a person's private emotional sphere that Habermas focuses, when dealing with some of the passages that led to transformations of the public sphere. To be precise, he recognizes the enormous importance of sharing privacy with a public in general, particularly focusing on how this generated a completely new relation between the writer and the reader, as already said, thanks to the changes that had happened in the overall relation of people with their own psyche and emotions. Habermas focuses especially on a unique form of novel, that is epistolary novel (Habermas 1992), and this is significant: letters are, indeed, another colossally important written document that became extremely popular in the course of the Early Modern Age. If novels managed to create personal bonds with fictional characters, letters were

instead direct sources written by real people, whose personal experiences could struck the reader much more effectively.

Interestingly, letters are not excluded from the list of printed products examined so far, since, once again thanks also to Habermas, we discover that it was common in the Early Modern period for private letters to be printed and published, when they seemed to bring a valuable enough message or they merely appeared admirable in style: “An idiomatic expression current at the time described the well composed letter as ‘pretty enough to print’” (*ibid.*).

Strictly connected to the stated importance of letters, especially the ones published in order to proliferate collective thoughts on life and society (Braidà 2009), is the expansion of the infosphere in Early Modern Age. The term “infosphere” was created by the expert of informational studies Floridi, in order to define the semantic space constituted by the entirety of documents, agents and their operations (Floridi 2020). This very wide concept substantially includes all aspects of information, not only in terms of messages per se, but also considering who is simultaneously sending and receiving the message, and the channel through which this exchange happens.

Letters had an enormous importance in the development of this huge reality in the very first place, since the Early Modern Age was characterised, as expressed before, by a profound necessity to interconnect global markets, empires and religious missionaries (Parker 2012). Worldwide webs of information were one of the most important elements in the generation of a globalised world, deeply interconnected much before the invention of internet and fast travel. This shows the fundamental importance of the structural changes ignited by the aforementioned Age of Explorations, and gives at the same time arguments in favour of the hypothesis of globalization as a process with its roots into Early Modern Age.

The Stanford University has developed a project entirely focused on the importance of letters, and it is called “the Republic of Letters”. The purpose of the project is not only to study the effective connections of the large net of correspondence that intertwined Europe and North America, but also to visually represent these links, through the Mapping of the Republic of Letters, a multimedia map available online, created for an effective comprehension of the history of this fundamental media (Stanford Humanities Center, consulted in 2022).

The excursus on the main Early Modern forms of media, especially printed ones, would not be acceptable without a third, fundamental media: journals. As novels and letters, journals function as a factor both in the equation of the emancipation of the public, as prerequisites, and as an instrumental part of the celebrity phenomenon, being platforms that allow a spotlight on the private life of the VIP. The focus on the first aspect is the most important, in a first phase of analysis, in order to first complete the background of Modern social structural changes. By the way, the main source for this argumentation is once again Habermas, who analyses the historical *iter* of the press, an institution that was to become pivotal for the development of a critic thought by the population, during the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century in particular (Habermas 1992).

During the course of the Early Modern Age, journals grew in number and readers exponentially, relatively soon developing their nature of critical instruments to allow the publisher the expression of his point of view on society as a whole, or rather on specific aspects of that geo-historical reality (Bell 2020). It is significant how also great scholars who lived during these great changes noted the fundamental value of newspapers already when the social transformation was in act. Kant, for example, targeted the whole current of Enlightenment as a process of emancipation for “those who read”, meaning journals’ readers in particular, and, even more explicitly, Hegel defined the action of

reading the newspaper in the morning as the modern equivalent of saying a prayer (see Lilti 2017, p.82).

Interestingly, journals were strongly connected with a social place that was indirectly anticipated at the beginning of the chapter: indeed, newspapers were usually read aloud to a group of people, thus becoming tools to initiate or forage discussion, and these social meetings often happened in a very specific place, cafes. As said before, coffee, tea and chocolate soon gained an added social value, since the places created for their consumption – that is cafes, obviously – became with time one of the most important meeting point for the middle class to discuss about politics, society and much more. The importance of this places, not for their strictly functional purpose, but for the added social value, can be emblematically seen in the case of the Milanese journal “Il Caffè” (literally meaning “coffee”), published by the Verri brothers, in cooperation, among others, with the Italian intellectual Cesare Beccaria, between 1764 and 1766, created to express open-minded and progressive ideas.

Before passing to the social value of these media in detail, the list of the fundamental communication instruments of the Early Modern Age can be shortly expanded with another very popular new tool, engravings. The sources mentioned up to this point are indeed all written, but images had, obviously, a strong impact as well. Engravings, probably more than traditional visual works, such as paintings, were an extremely powerful instrument of “celebrification” of a public figure, since they represented, in a relatively cheap and easily marketable product, the image of an illustrious person that could now be a virtual guest of any house. All of these elements, together with other media such as poetry, sculpture or biography, contributed to the creation of empathic bonds between celebrities and the ordinary people, thus generating what scholars define “emotional regimes”, a term expressing the unprecedented impact of feelings and personal thoughts onto society and therefore history, happening during Modern times (Reddy 2011; Scheer 2012).

What has been said so far had the purpose of reconstructing the preconditions leading to the major social changes that developed in Early Modern Age. A study in particular will be analysed to sum them up and that is “The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere” by Habermas. As partly anticipated in the introduction, his point of view will not be uncritically taken for granted, because of the adjustments he himself made to his work during the years, the critiques that the original project had received and the attempt to overcome a completely rational idea of the public. However, being substantially Habermas the creator of the concept of “public” or “public sphere” in the meaning used in this thesis, and recognizing the undeniable value that the work has had overall, an excursus on Habermas seems profitable, to observe how Early Modern factors affected the bourgeois middle class and made it a public for celebrities.

First of all, the concept of public is fundamental for its role as “carrier of a public opinion” (Habermas 1992), and the importance of the opinion of the people is indispensable for two reasons. On a more general scale, in an absolute monarchic system the people is not required to have an opinion in general, having no power over the choice of the sovereign, whose power descends from the divine realm. With this in mind, the acquisition of this power for the masses symbolizes a point of no return for the long path towards democracy. On a more specific scale, instead, focusing on what strictly pertains to this thesis in particular, celebrities were such because of a choice made by the public; no power of choice meant the impossibility for the phenomenon to develop in the very first place, so the origin of public opinion marks the first step towards the birth of celebrities.

This at the same time circumscribes the purpose of Habermas in the thesis: The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere goes into profound detail, through the observation of several

logical implications, into the research of the multiple meanings of the word “public”, its role within the familiar institution and many other concepts, but the only aspects that truly are to be taken here are those concerning the Early Modern transformation of the bourgeois class, in a socio-political sense. By the way, when speaking of public and people, it is implied that these two terms mostly refer to bourgeoisies, being they, differently from poorer social groups, more or less economically self-sufficient and alphabetised, and effectively part of the rational political discourse.

In the research of the causes of the process that led to bourgeois emancipation, Habermas substantially distinguishes, from an old pre-mercantilistic phase, a new capitalistic and international trade-based reality, in which the State had growing financial needs. This situation accelerated mercantilistic policies themselves, that at the same time increased once again the State’s financial demand, up to the point in which it became almost dependent on taxes (*ibid.*, p.17). The passage to Mercantilism was core, because in the gradual domino effect that led to the creation of administrative institutions to control taxation within the state, what actually happened was a de-personalization of the State, from its substantial adherence to the figure of the Prince (being he himself the ruler for divine will), to the State becoming an ensemble of a-personal institutions.

In this sense, Schmitt’s idea of the structural essence of the Modern state as an entity based on the legacy of religion should not surprise (Schmitt 2005). What effectively happens is a passage from a rule legitimated by God, to a laic sacredness of the State institutions, with the main difference of the importance shifting from a single personal figure to an impersonal system, whose representatives should be chosen because of their merit, by the decision of a conscientious public. Incidentally, the ironic effect of these changes is that, after this long and complicated process of de-personalization, the now “free” public will act a re-personification of the public role through the support of political celebrities, effectively.

Economic factors are fundamental for Habermas in the development of the public sphere, up to the point that, in more than one occasion, the new political system is simply referred to as a capitalist system. Mercantilism, for how important, is although not the only core element; indeed soon the readers are presented with the second one, the press. This chapter has already anticipated the fundamental importance of journals, among other media, in the process of development of unprecedented social modifications. As partly stated before, their value is mostly dependant from the wide thought-provocative content they offered, and the huge opportunity they gave to the publishers of expressing their critical thought, especially on social matters.

From this point on, Habermas analyses different other tools and social gatherings that, in his opinion, marked the beginning of a new path for Europe. For instance, another already mentioned element is the café, as the most popular social place, that in the book is firstly observed in the English manifestation of tearooms. Novels have also a significant spotlight in this research for the social-evolutionary media, as once again already stated, but – for the last factor – a tool that had not been mentioned yet is upheld, and that is theatre. The value of theatre is double, because it is indeed a form of art, and in this way, it is similar to novels, but at the same time, the fruition of spectacles implies a social event. Moreover, Habermas highlights that before the historical period taken in consideration, in the German case in particular, theatre was not a “public” media, but it was strictly related to the court and the palace; the evolution of this fruition is in his opinion an emblematic passage manifesting the importance of this media.

The reason why Habermas can be considered one of the most prominent scholars concerning the study of the major social changes that happened in Early Modern times is to be found in the closing

observations of this analysis. Indeed, all of the elements mentioned so far, in some cases with a geo-specific connotation, in some others in general, are fundamental to reach the final definition of the new conception of the State by the public, stemming from the changes in mentality that developed thanks to those factors:

A political consciousness developed in the public sphere of civil society which, in opposition to absolute sovereignty, articulated the concept of and demand for general and abstract laws and which ultimately came to assert itself (i.e. public opinions) as the only legitimate source of this law. [...] The bourgeois public's critical public debate took place in principle without regard to all pre-existing social and political rank and in accord to universal rules. These rules, because they remained strictly external to the individuals as such, secured space for the development of these individuals' interiority. (Habermas 1992)

What substantially happens is a three-step transformation that ultimately leads to the modern State. First, the de-personification allows to develop abstract laws, and sacredness and untouchability shift from the individual to the institutions and the Constitution of the state. The development of faith into these universal and aprioristic rules (the core of the process that led to the formalization of human rights, in the following centuries) gave space to the opening of a personal dimension for the individual bourgeoisies, who now could consciously reflect on their condition and the possibility to improve it. It was at this point, according to Habermas, that the capitalistic mentality prevailed, and single members of the public desired for the first time to influence politics for their own benefit as a community:

As soon as privatized individuals in their capacity as human beings ceased to communicate merely about their subjectivity but rather in their capacity as property-owners desired to influence public power in their common interest, the humanity of the literary public sphere served to increase the effectiveness of the public sphere in the political realm. (*ibid.*)

In a closing observation on Habermas, the picture he presents in the end is the one of a structurally organized group, conscious of its rights and objectives, moving into politics after a rational economic-driven discourse. Clearly, this vision has flaws as long as it is taken as an immutable paradigm representing all bourgeoisies in the world. If, instead, we look at Habermas' work as an indicative schematization giving a very satisfying approximation of a long and complex process, that took centuries to develop, and some aspects that may be too reductive (such as a completely economic-driven reason behind the political inclusion, at the end) get expanded, the result is a thorough useful socio-historical instrument that allows to better understand Early Modern Age, especially in Europe. Not only this, but realistically there is no social analysis of the Early Modern period, formulated in the last thirty years, that can completely avoid walking on the path set by Habermas, so ignoring or vilifying his work would be meaningless.

There is one last factor, concerning the fundamental cultural aspects of this era, that has not been completely explained yet, despite being partly anticipated by some elements. During Early Modern Age, intertwining to the aforementioned social changes and some other macro-ideologies that are to be explained, a process of discovery of the Self was actuated. In reality, it was not simply discovery, but the origin of a profound attention for one's individuality, in a much larger sense, that included the roots of self-care and ambition; for simplicity, this trend will be now called "individualism".

The necessity of specifying that the term individualism is being adopted in an almost conventional way, comes from the fact that, when it was first created in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, it originally had three main meanings, also quite different among themselves. "First, the idealistic doctrine with equalitarian implications of the rights of man, or what may be called political liberalism; secondly,



the anti-statist, largely utilitarian doctrine of laissez faire, or economic liberalism; thirdly, the aristocratic cult of individuality, or Romantic individualism” (Stewart 1962). These connotations were mostly negative, implicating a negative affirmation of the self over the prosperity of the collective or even society as a whole, but during the course of the same 1800s it begun losing this derogatory meaning and started being used in a more neutral or even positive sense, as the one that is being currently used in this thesis.

The focus lays, indeed, on the positive process of attention towards a person’s needs that, in Modern times, led to the development of human rights, and to the process of a unique form of affirmation of talented individuals above the masses, once again typical of Early Modern and Modern Age. Celebrities managed to affirm themselves also for this overall predisposition of society to pay more attention to single persons, and this trend can be demonstrated, just to give an example, by the transformation of theatre happening during this period. The larger fruition of theatrical performances and the attention that the press – above all other media – started posing on troupes, created a structural transformation of the world behind the stage. The “stars” were now given much more space, benefits and money in comparison to those surrounding them in the scene, since they were those dragging the public to the theatre and were therefore the soul of the performance and the business. The public wanted to see only the best performers, and the overall development of individualism is partly to connect to this new state of mind (Lilti 2017).

Individualism, indeed, despite having roots that get lost in time, in the Western ancestry of the Ancient Greek world, actually develops anew during Early Modern times. The origin of the word comes from the Saint-Simonians, a socialist religious, political and social group that developed in France in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Saint-Simon himself originally criticised the new social tendencies of attention towards the self, stemming from Enlightenment, as a menace to society; after his death, these concepts were summed up in the term individualism, thus the original negative meaning (Stewart 1962). Scholars from most Western nations opposed this growing social trend, except German ones, who instead philosophically thrived of this importance given to individuals, as emblematically showed by Hegel and its colossal legacy.

All the rest of the opposition to the concept gradually loosened, since individualistic ideals were positively seen features in three extremely popular Modern ideological macro-currents: Romanticism, political and economic liberalism, and Protestantism. For all of these three ideologies, attention towards the Self did not mean isolation from society, but consciousness of one’s thoughts and feelings, affirmation of rights, potential to fulfil ambitions, a chance to live a better life, the renounce to impositions coming from above: all extremely positive and revolutionary tools for a brighter future. Individualism changed in meaning, from a term characterizing a society dominated by selfish interest to one denoting the ideal of the free individual and his development (see *ibid.*, p. 86).

Taking, therefore, in mind all of these contextual premises for celebrities, and having obtained a satisfying explanation on the way public opinion was formed in the very first place, it is possible to have an answer to the question on why was Early Modern Age so important. Substantially, as demonstrated by the observation of several social and cultural aspects, Early Modern times are the only possible background in which the phenomenon could have developed in the first place. Nevertheless, it is time to explain how celebrities developed from these premises.

The phenomenon of celebrity did not start as a political trend, despite it has to be mentioned that the relation between public and celebrities, whether they came from the world of arts or politics, substantially maintained the same features. The only significant difference, when dealing with the process through a very generic overview, is that political celebrities consecrated their image as above-ordinary people through electoral support, thus obtaining leading roles within their country. However, since political cases will be observed in detail in their respective case studies, to better introduce celebrities as historical figures, it is now time for an overview of the prototypical form of the phenomenon, in the realm of artists.

Lilti's work, as anticipated, will be the starting point of the whole excursus, especially because other scholars, such as Bell, tended to gloss over the apolitical beginning of the phenomenon, focusing especially on country leaders and aspirers to such title. Since, by doing so, a complete understanding of the scenario would be hard, a brief introduction on the first cases of celebrities in Europe will now be operated.

Despite celebrities were undeniably not a phenomenon exclusively geo-localized into France, it must be recognised that it was an extremely important theatre for the development of the whole phenomenon, in all of its forms. Indeed, the very first cases of celebrity were strictly involved with the Enlightenment, and two figures above all traced the furrow for others to come: Voltaire and Rousseau. Voltaire was, realistically the very first celebrity, having he even gained the nickname of "the most famous man in Europe". The beginning of his unique fame was obviously connected to his works, but, already in the embryonic stage of the process, there was a personal dimension that was hard to ignore.

Having moved to Ferney, after the exile, Voltaire's house became almost an indispensable stop for visitors from across Europe, who were greeted with a peculiar ceremony – between a theatrical performance and the simulation of a court party – where they would tell anecdotes and praise their host (Cronk 2012). This ritual already presented more than one feature concerning the interest of a vast public towards Voltaire's persona, rather than his works, as partly confirmed by the occasional intolerance of the philosopher himself towards visits that he deemed inappropriate, due to their interest in following the "tradition", rather than being sincerely interested into his company, in his eyes treating him almost as a circus attraction (Lilti 2017).

Voltaire was conscious of his popularity and did not hesitate to occasionally instrumentalize it to boost his popularity, especially through journals, which he openly accused of publishing some of his personal letters, for instance, but at the same time taking advantage of their use of his name for "advertisement". What is pivotal in Voltaire's case was the huge popularity of his physical self, over just his name: we can indeed observe not only the marketing of his busts in general, but even an exponential growth of this production after 1760 (Desnoiresterres 1994), thus becoming a real economic case. Busts were of course not the only form of the public's interest for his image, as demonstrated by the wide collection of painting, images, engravings, all commissioned or sold on large scale, in order to satisfy the enormous demand for tokens to demonstrate this hardly sacred devotion to the philosopher.

The "almost voyeuristic" interest of the public and the celebration of such curiosity undoubtedly reached their peak with a key episode: the crowning at the Comédie Française. "Voltaire attended the production of his tragedy *Irène* and in front of a wildly excited audience his bust was crowned with laurels, while an actor recited poetry in his honor." (Lilti 2017). This moment marked a point of no return, a substantial sanctification of a person with no lineage, a writer and a philosopher treated like

no artist before in the history of the West. Indeed, as Lilti specifies, this was surely not the first time in recorded history in which an outstanding artist got crowned with laurel (Lilti quotes the case of Petrarch, crowned by the representative of the king, Robert of Naples), but never before it has been commoners to act this ritual. Voltaire was consecrated, but by the people, the same public that had been taking interest in his private life up to the point of developing an unprecedented relation with him.

Interestingly, when studying celebrities of the past there is a fundamental element that is impossible to be compared with currently living ones, and that is the reaction of the world to their death. For all Modern Age celebrities, both political and not, the moment of death triggers an enormous reaction, that often coincides with a process of sanctification that surpasses all ceremonies that may have been celebrated during their lives. Voltaire was not immune to this practice, as shown by a much greater ceremony than the one at the Comédie Française. Indeed, in 1791, his spoils were moved to the Pantheon, with an unprecedented public tribute to a great man, almost treated as a royal, if not more, since historians and sources contemporary to the event were not hesitant to define the funeral as the apotheosis of Voltaire.

Furthermore, a substantially contemporaneous case is the one of Rousseau, who can be a meaningful object of study because of the many similarities with Voltaire regarding the context of their lives and their experience of celebrity, to highlight the possible differences in this very early forms of the phenomenon. Indeed, before going into detail on Rousseau's life and his interactions with the public, there is a fundamental discrepancy with the other cases quoted so far that has to be mentioned, and that is the fact that Rousseau is among the first celebrities to oppose this role. He despised all of the very personal attentions he received, and made it clear in several of his public and private works, being so flustered by this condition that Lilti even speaks of paranoid delirium of the writer, when dealing with his fame (see Lilti 2017, p. 166).

The value of his experience lays, above all, in this aspect of not accepting his fate of celebrity: when thinking of the multilateral benefits of fame, one may think that all celebrities actively attempted to build their success, but some of them were celebrated not only without their active pursuit of it, but even against their will. After all, for how much Rousseau hated being a celebrity, his public image was definitively positive and appreciated, but this was not always the case. The persona of Marie Antoinette, for example, was emblematic in the sense of a “negative celebrity”, a person whose private life was object of hateful interest by the population, up to the point of even affecting the overall image of the crown (Bell 2020). This being said, it is noteworthy to analyse Rousseau's experience more in detail.

After very unfruitful attempts to affirm as a writer or a diplomat, Rousseau's success exploded in the academic world with the publication of the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, which even received the prize of the Académie de Dijon. For more or less a decade, this success remained although limited to the cultural world, up until a much larger public was reached through some of his new publications: *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, which soon became one of the best sellers of its period, and the strongly impactful duo of *Émile* and the *Social Contract*. Parallel to his works, his popularity was boosted by the condemnation by the Paris parliament in 1762, deeming *Émile* scandalous, and ordering the burning of all copies of the book and the arrest of Rousseau (see Lilti 2017, p.167-8; Arnold 2014).

His exile marked the apex of his notoriety and, in a certain way, even contributed to it. Indeed, when the writer reached England, British journals kept writing about him, seeing him as a potential symbol of the unjust French political ideology and regime, thus substantially actuating a soft-core propaganda

campaign. Interestingly, the British news were not dealing only with Rousseau's ideas, on the contrary, the focus was massively put on very personal aspects of his life, ranging from his clothes, to his speech manner, even to narrate the moment in which he lost his dog, and, of course, the moment in which the pet was found again (Brock 2006).

After the waters in France calmed down, Rousseau managed to return, but his mere appearance was enough to ignite the population, who chanted his name, devoured any possible news concerning his most simple actions, and kept demanding tokens to cultivate their devotion to this man. The Parisian authorities, wanting to avoid popular upheavals and a re-attempt to commit scandals acted by the writer, discouraged his presence in public places, which ironically had the opposite effect on his popularity. The rarer an item is, the more it is wanted, and the company of the most wanted celebrity in Paris was embellished by his desire not to be such, and his consequent retreat from the public scene.

Rousseau's fame was almost a never-ending crescendo that remained stable even with his death. Lilti sums up the conclusive chapter of the writer's life expressing how the interest for his works was more fervent than ever after his depart, as demonstrated by the great interest for the publication of the "Confessions", then the collection of his complete work, and the eventual apotheosis, with the conduction of the body in the Pantheon, in 1794. Probably even more than Voltaire, Rousseau's fame did not end with his death, on the contrary, he and his works kept being a vivid topic for decades to come, consecrating his role as one of the most significant early examples of celebrities.

The striking value of Rousseau's experience lays in his auto-analysis of celebrity, expressed through the "Confessions" first and the "Dialogues" later. These two works have been studied for decades and by a plethora of scholars, because of the profound reflections the writer and philosopher made about himself, his relation with the public, and France in general. These aspects do not pertain the aim of this thesis, so they will not be explored in detail, but there is a part of the "Confessions" that is worth mentioning, and that is Rousseau's perception of the new structure of society.

Scholar Whitney Arnold opens her analysis of Rousseau's relation with celebrity with an anecdote from the "Confessions", telling the meeting between the writer and a sculptor who wanted to realize a bust of him. Through her translation, it is possible to read: "I found him very zealous to do me many small services, to meddle very much in my little affairs. But beyond that I doubt that any of my writings has been in the small number of books he has read in his life" (Arnold 2014). This realization is key because it rips open the veil of the background of celebrity, a world where people become famous because of their fame, and their merits, works, ideas, actions, can get lost and just leave the empty vessel of popularity.

This was mostly possible thanks to the outstanding power of new media, that gave so much space to images and news to obscure, with these formal aspects, the substance that gained popularity to a person in the first place. Moreover, the perceived life of a celebrity often differs from the true personal experience of that individual, and this was one of the side effects that anguished Rousseau the most. One of the main purposes of the "Confessions" is, indeed, the attempt to convey his true self, an autobiography to overcome the frills of the public's perceived image of Jean-Jacques. In the end, as it is possible to understand from a confrontation of the two texts, his relation with celebrity was not completely negative, but rather an initially desired experience, embittered by the consciousness of the impossibility to actually convey his true self to the public (*ibid.*).

Voltaire and Rousseau were two of the earliest and most popular manifestations of this new historical phenomenon, but, clearly, they were not the only cases. From the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century, more and more

names happened to pass under the magnifying glass of the public interest, and in relatively few time some of these celebrities understood that influence could translate into political power. Considering these first examples of political celebrities, one could think that their origin is actually much more ancient than Modern times, but that would be a mistake.

Indeed, great names such as Caesar, Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan (notably, all of them based their rise to power on great military success, as Washington and Napoleon will do as well) have surely left their mark on History, but their influence did not come from public recognition. As it was largely demonstrated in this chapter, never before this stage of Early Modern Age had the public had so much decisional power, and their political influence happened to be often based on the interest for the leader's life. The fundamental difference that must be traced, when dealing with political celebrities, is indeed between charisma and popularity.

As a matter of fact, there are obviously similarities between the two. In the shortest possible definition, celebrities have charisma, but not all charismatic leaders are celebrities. A more detailed excursus is however profitable, since, in several cases, studies on celebrities tend to give a significant space to charisma in their background analysis. This is the case of Bell, for example, who actually focuses the entirety of his work *Men on horsebacks* on the notion of charisma, manifested through notable celebrities of the Early Modern Age.

Bell reminds how charismatic figures had always been looked at with attention within their state, especially if that state was a democratic one: a magnetic influential figure was often feared to be a potential dictator, as proven by Julius Caesar, just to give an example. This comes from the enormous revolutionary potential that is innate in an individual capable of winning the support of the masses (Bell 2020). Bell substantially isolates 18<sup>th</sup> Century charismatic leaders (the first celebrities) among all other historical cases, because of all the new social characteristics that were seen so far to make them unique, and shows how exactly because of the aforementioned revolutionary spirit, capable of cancelling old norms or creating new ones, these leaders contributed to create a bicentennial age of massive changes.

This idea of charisma as a “revolutionary force” is a direct quote from Weber (Weber 1947), who devoted a large portion of his studies and several works to the observation of this leader's feature, in its connotation and consequences. His idea of charisma is almost a Dionysian power, capable of making the followers lose their selves, becoming one with their guides and their design, in an almost ecstatic extracorporeal experience. “By linking charisma and ecstasy, Weber implies the elemental and daemonic character of the concept; it represents a state of being beyond reason and self-control” (Dow 1978).

Dow Jr. uses the tragedy *The Bacchae* as a metaphor of what happens under the magnetic influence of a charismatic leader, who, in his explanation of Weber's vision, effectively becomes a god, whose influence makes the people act in his will, as the Maenads supposedly ripped apart Pentheus. Weber's conception is surely radical, entangled in the realm of sacred in a panistic Greek sense, a dimension of losing one's self to the flames of natural instinct and ecstasy, although it may not be completely far from the reality of some dictatorial regimes, as we now may know, conscious of the horrors perpetrated by the Nazi regime, just to mention one case.

Overall, Weber's definition may seem excessive, but it actually fits quite well the idea of political figures that is at the base of this thesis. Indeed, apart from the cause and the nature attributed to charisma as a divine force, its revolutionary potential is a fact, and it is demonstrated by the capacity of charismatic leaders to firmly shape a new form of state, both in democratic regimes (such as

Washington) or as dictatorial ones (such as Napoleon). Moreover, Weber partly anticipates some features of celebrity – being clearly far from the formal definition of the concept – mostly in the sense of seeing in the popular acclaimed leaders as powerful not because of formal charges, but because of the support they received in the very first place. In *Politics as a Vocation*, leading political figures are even seen as one of the three fundamental elements of Power, and presented as such:

There is the authority of the extraordinary and personal gift of grace (charisma), the absolutely personal devotion and personal confidence in revelation, heroism, or other qualities of individual leadership. This is 'charismatic' domination, as exercised by the prophet or - in the field of politics - by the elected warlord, the plebiscitarian ruler, the great demagogue, or the political party leader. [...] Devotion to the charisma of the prophet, or the leader in war, or to the great demagogue in the ecclesia or in parliament, means that the leader is personally recognized as the innerly 'called' leader of men. Men do not obey him by virtue of tradition or statute, but because they believe in him (Weber 1946).

Being Bell one of the most prominent sources of this research, and Weber one of the principal scholars to inspire his work in the conceptual background – apart from his enormous contribution to political studies in general – the observation of the interconnections between their focus of charisma and celebrity is obviously fundamental. This being said, a further in detail research for the connections between these two macro and micro groups of categorization of historical figures would not be equally profitable, being this not the object of the thesis. Moreover, the purpose of this very last tranche of analysis was only to avoid possible misinterpretations in the comparison of Early Modern charismatic leaders with their past kindred leaders.

Political celebrities uniquely distinguished themselves because of their capacity to understand the enormous social changes that had happened and to manipulate them in their favour. Despite this, before going into detail onto the two case studies, an third Early Modern political celebrity has to be mentioned, being this a special case. Rapidly mentioned in this chapter, when dealing with the cases of negative celebrities, Marie Antoinette was one of the very first cases of political celebrities, but even in this category, she deserves a special connotation and some in depths explanations.

Indeed, she is, first of all, the only woman in this list of great figures of the past. This is due to the obvious largely masculine (and realistically masculinist) world that politics has been up until recent times, despite being still uneven in the feminine representation. However, there is another reason behind this solitude on the spotlight, and that regards the almost unique hate that the French people directed towards Louis XVI's wife, famous in history for being one of the less appreciated queens worldwide, especially in Early Modern Age.

Another unique aspect of Marie Antoinette has been already mentioned, and it is her markedly negative connotation of celebrity, despite in a different manner from Rousseau: the philosopher deeply suffered his condition, but at least the attentions he received from the public were positive. Marie Antoinette instead had a double-sided negative experience, suffering from her notoriety, but receiving adverse attention at the same time. Lastly, her role of political celebrity is different from other cases because she was not a charismatic figure who manipulated notoriety to obtain political power, but an already reigning individual, who found herself under unprecedented personal attention from the public.

“These works [historical studies, a/n] show the intensity of the hatred aroused by the ‘villainous queen’, attacks that grew ever more virulent, culminating during the Revolution in a veritable political and pornographic delirium. Infidel, lesbian, and incestuous, the queen was the embodiment of every fantasy” (Lilti 2017). Marie Antoinette's notoriety was defined by her role, which possibly even

worsened her negative fame. Indeed, attacking her – or, probably in a slight lesser extent – her husband, meant attacking the monarchy as an institution, and at the same time, defending the crown meant, for the adversaries of the Crown, defending the absolute immoral figure that Marie Antoinette was. The attacks had indeed different natures, ranging from misogyny, to anti-monarchism, to the crown-loyal subjects deeming a royal couple incapable of giving an heir to the nation, unworthy of their reign. All of these factors were substantially amplified after the fall of the Bastille, when the crown's grip on police, and therefore censorship, reduced by a large portion; thus, dozens of pamphlets and even short books, denouncing the lascivious life of the queen started circulating freely (*ibid.*, p.245).

In honesty, it has to be mentioned the fact that part of the discredit towards Marie Antoinette stemmed from her scarce adherence to the Versailles way-of-life. Indeed, mostly because of her personal nature – despite, probably, the fact that she was raised in a slightly different royal context, in Austria, and was still extremely young at the time of her crowning as French queen – she had extreme difficulties in following the French royal etiquette. The numerous infractions of the secularized protocols and practices, especially her impatience towards the physical disconnection with the rest of the court (she was mentioned to leave the throne to go speak with guests, for example), were considered, at the time, to be among the factors that eroded the overall faith towards monarchy in general, and eventually contributed to the ignition of the Revolution (Meilhan 1790). Of course, the lack of faith in the crown that was generated this way operated a substantial rebound of opposition to the queen, since an increase in doubts on monarchy in general amplified the opposition, which increased the doubts again, in a continuous growth, up to the eventual revolutionary outbreak.

Marie Antoinette's case is a further demonstration of the variety of forms of celebrity in general and political celebrity in particular. The phenomenon was not monolithic, but adapted to different contexts, personalities, geographical realities and historical periods according to the individual. All of the cases that were observed in this chapter come from substantially the same period and the same place, and yet they present many differences among them, still maintaining the overall features that allow scholars to distinguish a common process. In order to really delve into the beginning of active and conscious political celebrity, it is now time to study a geographically distant example from the French cases, yet being this case one of the most important ones in the shaping of the phenomenon in its institutional form: the case of George Washington.

## I.II – George Washington, a modern biblical hero.

An interesting pattern that tends to manifest and reproduce in the history of political celebrity is the frequent juxtaposition of the leader with previous celebrities. The phenomenon clearly does not begin in the late 1700s, a context in which it is simply re-enacted, but has roots in the Renaissance cult of the past, and study of classical authors, most prominently Plutarch (Pade 2007). For what concerns celebrities, it is generally frequent the comparison with Caesar, especially for those figures who were rapidly gaining influence and aiming to the crown or the presidency, and Napoleon, more than anyone else, was timelessly object of this metaphor. Louverture, on the other hand, was called “the Spartacus of the Caribbean”, and, centuries later, Lenin will be often cited in comparison to new generation of communist leaders. In this background, in order to fully understand the approach to the figure of George Washington as a political celebrity, one must remember that his recurring paragon was none other than Moses.

The fact that a biblical hero was chosen, the “least human” comparison possible in a sense, simultaneously explains already the degree of devotion that the American people had for the first president and the consequent extremely powerful superstructure that was built on this celebrity. The causes and manifestations through which this very specific occurrence of political celebrity manifested will be thoroughly explained later in the chapter, but first a concurrent issue must be explicated. Indeed, the choice of such an extraordinary comparison is almost a symptom of a great difficulty for nowadays-academic analysis of Washington: the extreme mystification of his true historical self.

Scholar Robert P. Hay, whose work “George Washington: American Moses” largely focuses on this recurrent juxtaposition between the two figures, even introduces his paper with these words: “What George Washington was really like we will never know. Long before his death in 1799, he had become so enveloped in myth and legend that not even his contemporaries could discern his true, unadorned visage.” (Hay 1969). This already strong affirmation on the impossibility of a completely valid historical study is, if possible, reinforced by these words: “Assuming that it were possible at this late date to solve the riddle -to see the man whole- that knowledge would not be so valuable as an understanding of the legendary Washington and the psychological reason for his having been created” (*ibid.*). The unattainability of going over the public and idealize image of Washington is apparently an impassable wall, as also testified by the scholar Marcus Cunliffe, who, in the failed attempt to overcome this impasse, eventually surrendered, writing “The man *is* the monument; the monument *is* America” (Cunliffe 1958).

In the decades that have followed these studies and have led to the current knowledge of the historical figure, the situation has slightly improved, but the aura of mysticism still seems to be characterizing the historical figure of Washington. Contemporary historians as well seem to confirm the uniqueness of this figure, superior to the ordinary man (Wood 1992; Shogan 2001), and even happen to question how much of his life was effectively manipulated in the historical telling.

Celebrity mystification continues to tightly envelop Washington’s life, and if that was not enough, his role as the first President of the United States almost overlaps to his existence as a human being, thus complicating severely the separation of institutional and private life, and the overall study of the subject. In a certain way, this issue may be converted into an instrument, by using all of the data concerning the idealization to wonder why so much superstructure was needed. Indeed, celebrity is a phenomenon that, per definition, requires some degree of myth-construction, but in no case



mentioned so far did this entangle so much with the historical data, to the point of severely complicating the reconstruction. Washington is a substantially unique case in this and, for this reason, constitutes an important object of study.

A reason for his fame is suggested by some historians, who put the accent on the socio-political situation of the American colonies in their struggle to free themselves from the British rule. In the starting condition of being a colony, Americans were substantially part of a heavily paternalistic system with the King as the *pater familias*. After the revolution, they needed a saviour, a figure that could fill that void of a leader, the father of their new nation, and Washington served exactly that purpose (McConville 2006; Nelson 2014).

Moreover, in the passage from an ancient form of government, the colonial rule of the British monarchy, the American people fully devoted to the new state they envisioned, a democratic republic, more or less explicitly giving it sacred connotations. The reasons behind this could be various. Surely, the profound religiosity of the Americans is important, and the Protestant soul of this feeling may also be significant, together with those a-geographical processes of state formation that were mentioned in the previous chapter. A unique certain answer would be surreal, and possibly the reasons are multiple and interdependent. Clearly, one must not take for granted that these processes happened in a complete awareness of the American people. On the contrary, most likely this was an unconscious process that developed during the years, in a condition that required believing in an almost supernatural essence behind the Nation and its leader in the need for certainty and support.

All of these hypotheses have at least a percentage of speculation in them, but they also all contain elements of truth. The ideological vacuum existed, Americans had a unique relation with religion, the ideological sanctification of the state forms have been demonstrated, and it is nowadays still possible to observe the profound, almost sacred, relation that the United States have with their flag and the symbols of their nation. Being the purpose of this chapter not to find complete answers to these etiological questions, but rather to simply highlight the presence of these causing factors, the exploration of the reasons behind the President's apotheosis will not be investigated further. However, if the causes behind the birth of a celebrity may be blurry and mysterious by nature, a much more concrete element that can be analysed are the agents who fuelled it.

Indeed, there were several writers that, more than any other, constructed the public image of George Washington – up to the point of allowing his apotheosis to begin already during his life – through a very idealized process of personal life sharing, thus fuelling the celebrity phenomenon with mythical imagery from the very beginning. Before diving into the chronological development of Washington as a celebrity, one of these authors must be cited, to give an idea of the level of artificial creation of the myth. Among the various biographers, indeed, the most significant was undoubtedly Reverend Mason Locke Weems of Dumfries, whose biography of the president, published shortly after his death, contributed the most to an everlasting popular image of Washington.

Travelling and writing for all his life across the country, Weems had published several moralist and patriotic works against the vices that had to be avoided by the virtuous Americans, and the good paths to follow; later, he focused mostly on the heroes of the Revolution, telling their strongly idealised lives, focusing especially on Washington. He saw that the American people yearned to know more about the man that everyone loved, and was ready to give the public what they desired (Weems 1837).

What is significant is that entire portions of the book were completely invented, especially dialogues; despite this, the biography was so appreciated that it became a best-seller in a blink, reaching the ninth reprint in just six years. The heavily adapted anecdotal telling presented not only a virtuous and

exemplar President and, before that, General, but the idealized telling reached back to the very beginning of Washington adult's life, thus offering the public an all-rounded celebrity, whose entire life experience was presented as if it was made to guide the American people (Bell 2020).

Weems' case is clearly the most notable case of celebrity construction in this case, because of both the amount of idealization and the popularity of his work. His emblematic value makes him worthy of being isolated by other media-producers, to express the uniqueness of Washington's published private image. For what concerns the others, they will be mentioned in the course of the chronological analysis that will follow, having now highlighted part of the anomaly in this case study. These features mentioned so far are, however, not the only reasons to define Washington's case particular.

Indeed, Washington's path to celebrity presented other factors worthy of being mentioned. As a matter of fact, from the earliest moment of his appearance under the spotlight as supreme military leader of the American forces in July 1775, he was constantly invested by massive attention by the American people, who named ships after him and his wife, gave his name to new-borns, required thousands of tokens of their devotion, such as portraits, engraving, biographical writings and so on (Bell 2020; Furstenberg 2006). Although, Washington spent all of his existence in reluctance to this attention, being only in extremely rare cases advocate of his own celebrity. In a way, this clearly reminds of Rousseau, but there are few differences.

Washington had more benefits in being so unilaterally beloved by the population, overall, and at the same time was not opposing the celebrity phenomenon in its entirety, but rather mitigating the morbid attention of the media towards his person. His case lacks the severe internal struggle of being unable to convey his true self, as it happened with Rousseau. According to the original sources, the first president was rather disturbed by the exaggerated degree of personal attention he was receiving, since he seems to have been conscious of the first symptoms of celebrity culture around him; he wanted to preserve his image of a military and a man devoted to the Republic, before anything (Lilti 2017).

The media depicting him in this very early period of his life as a public figure were mostly visual reproductions of his person (as already said, portraits, engravings etcetera) and, most importantly, poems and songs in his honour. These "poetic outbreaks" tended, of course, to increase in number and intensity when major events during the War of Independence happened under Washington's guide. This was the case, for example, of the crossing of the Delaware River, followed by the victory in Trenton. The effective military successes of Washington, compared to the celebrated image of the military hero, are often object of critical observations by historians, but by now their observation will be postponed to later in the chapter.

As partly anticipated, during his life Washington attempted to keep his glorification under control, but this did not prevent the proliferation of articles, paeans, songs and much more, all celebrating in an increased frequency the challenges of the super-human Washington, virtuous, strong, masculine, divinely talented, created to rule and win on the battlefield (Bell 2020). At this point, Bell conducts a very detailed analysis of these sources, partly in the attempt to find the origin of such a strong myth.

How far did the cult of Washington extend? Given its dependence on print media, its scope was at least partly circumscribed by the limits of literacy and by the circulation of printed matter. Since American printing presses were heavily concentrated in northern urban areas with close to universal white adult male literacy (these areas had, at the time, the highest literacy rates in the world), this cult of a rural southerner ironically looked strongest in northern cities. [...] Evidence as to the cult's impact on ordinary people also comes largely from literate men and women whose letters and diaries have survived. This material, too, is largely white, northern, and urban (*ibid.*).

This introduction already gives a context to the origin of the sources' production. Rather literate Northern Americans, living in cities, may appear as almost a restricted pool. Despite this, the fact that visual media existed and brought Washington in the lives of less elite Americans must be taken in consideration. Moreover, these urban groups were not so restricted after all, so the celebrative printed materials did not reach the propagandistic or sensationalistic numbers that were reported in some sources of the time but were still quite popular. This although does not fully explain the reason why a celebrity, apparently like many others, did gain such an impactful popularity on the public.

The reason why Bell retains Washington gained this unprecedented success is connected to the phenomenon of celebrity itself. In Europe, and especially in France, there have been so many notable figures gathering attention among media – politicians, novelists, philosophers, poets, actors – that their number was enough to balance their presence in those same media, thus amortizing the impact of their individual popularity. In the newly born United States of America, instead, already at its embryonic stage during the Revolution, there was an extremely lower number of celebrities, so that when Washington – and, to a minor extent, the other heroes of independence – hit the newspaper, there was substantially none other to share the spotlight with them, thus they polarised all of the public's attention.

He truly was uncontested on the scene, and the sum of this aspect with the massive increase in political and military power that Washington gained after 1776, raised quite consistent doubts among some American intellectuals. At the end of that year, Washington was given by vote extraordinary powers for six months, gaining the chance to raise money, supplies, and men if he deemed necessary (*ibid.*, p. 62) and, the year after, the idea to even increase these powers circulated.

It should not surprise that his opponents began fearing a Caesar-like dictatorial regime to come, and among them, John Adam was probably the most prominent one. He had substantially grasped the mechanisms of celebrity in the hand of a political figure, and feared an overthrow of the yet to fully realize republican dream, being he a supporter of a moderate republic, guided by laws rather than men. He therefore accused the Americans of idolatry and veneration towards Washington, in the attempt to prevent an irreversible commitment towards the personalization of power, and many after him followed on these same remarks.

These fears may appear logical, if not even an announced tragedy to the eyes of someone who does not know enough of George Washington, while those who dealt enough with this figure may see that Adam's words were completely unfounded. Indeed, Washington did never actually consider becoming a dictator, and this may be partially demonstrated by his reticence to the attentions he was given. On the contrary, being he a fervent republican supporter, in the occasions in which he found himself following the way of the celebrity, his purpose was actually to catalyse the public's passion into support to the Republic. This point shows once again the peculiarity of Washington as a political celebrity, since he manipulated his popularity not for his own benefit, but for the glory and stability of his role as President, almost to leave an untouchable legacy for his successors to come.

Between 1777 and 1781, Washington saw some defeats on the field, despite the American victories of the generals Greene and Morgan, eventually paved the way to the conclusion of the war with the American independence (*ibid.*, p. 65). The critics that Washington received, especially at the beginning, were not few, but they did not hit the news as much as the positive image of the man: it seemed like the sacred name of George Washington was stainless, and of course, the American victory did nothing but boost his state of celebrity. His popularity kept growing steadily, his birthday even became some sort of a national festivity, newspaper and writers chanted without end

Washington's glory, up to the point that this notoriety reached the French officials who fought on the American side against the British, and the other European visitors. The expansion of the cult of Washington thus reached the "outside world", and grew even more in the recoil back to America, with all the newly interested Europeans coming to the US to see Washington.

In the insecure panorama of the United States of mid 1780s, Washington managed once again to use his popularity to obtain the purpose he desired: a peaceful and prosper American Republic. The context was one of multiple sources of internal instability, mainly stemming from issues on missing payments to the soldiers and subsequent protests. In some rare cases, an attempt of a political coup was averted, and the unsatisfied military often vehemently protested in the cities, reaching some episodes of violent confrontation, together with an overall dissatisfaction towards the Constitution. Meanwhile the critics on Washington's idolatry by the American people continued, brought on by Adams and others. In this context, feeling to have dishonoured his country, Washington decided to retire to his hometown, in the astonishment of the American public.

These oppositions were although not enough to truly deteriorate Washington's image. From the sources of the time, indeed, it is possible to notice how the overall feeling of appreciation by the American people continued strong, as it is possible to understand, just to give an example, from the definitively not impartial words that were dedicated to the President from gazettes of the 1780s. For instance, in *The Political Intelligence and New-Jersey Advertiser* it is possible to read a testimony from the point of view of the soldiers at the orders of Washington:

The principal officers of the army in town, assembled at Fraunces's tavern, to take a final leave of the illustrious, gracious and much loved Commander General WASHINGTON. The passions of human nature were never more tenderly agitated, than in this interesting and distressful scene. His excellency having filled a glass of wine, thus addressed his brave fellow soldiers: - With an heart full of love and gratitude, I will now take leave of you: I most devoutly wish, that your latter days may be as prosperous and happy, as you former ones have been glorious and honourable (*The Political Intelligence and New-Jersey Advertiser* 1783).

Eventually, though, despite his original desire for retirement, he took part to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787, and was soon after chosen as its president (see Bell 2020, p.73). In the choice of the President of the Republic, the preferences were silently verging towards Washington from the very beginning, being he the only man capable to represent all of the American people, because of both his public image and the devotion demonstrated by the population. Under these premises, in 1789, George Washington was elected first President of the United States of America, with a consequent – for how impossible it may seem, considering how high it was already – ulterior rise in popularity.

This increase was due to mainly two factors. The first, almost obvious, was the large interest of newspapers and artists, who now celebrated the hero who represented the whole nation, and the images used were now, more than ever, religiously inspired and echoing superhuman greatness. The second factor was connected to a new wave of writings concerning the private life of Washington: in 1790 his first extensive biography was published, by the hands of Jedidiah Morse. He focused, in an unprecedented way, on the private life of the President, which he thought was as exemplary as his public actions (Morse 1790). As it was already largely demonstrated by this document, the focus on the mundane and ordinary private actions of a celebrity give a unique fuel to the attachment of the public, since they show how close the celebrity is and allow the formation of empathic bonds, the key of the whole phenomenon.

The second presidential mandate corresponded to a new phase in the political scenario of the United States. Indeed, parties developed from the embryonic forms of the two main political ideologies present at the time, the Federalists – which Washington eventually supported – guided by Hamilton, and the Democratic-Republicans, guided by Jefferson. For the first time, Washington experienced a decrease in his popularity, since his political opponents were now firmer than ever in their critiques to the president’s policies and even his personal figure, always in fear of a dictatorial horizon. It would be exaggerated to define this period as an actual crack in Washington’s monumental celebrity, but it is important to show how, for the first time, the voice of dissent was slightly louder, and he felt the change (Lilti 2017).

The positivity of his public image was once again confirmed with his death, in 1799, in which case it was definitively consecrated. For how his glory shone over the nation during his life, so his death casted a dull shadow over everything; there was possibly no American town or city that did not host a gathering of people, reunited to pray for the president’s soul or to dedicate him eulogies. By taking the newspaper “General Advertiser” as example, it is possible to see how substantially every line of text that is not reporting an announcement is inherent to the former President’s death: letters, prayers, poetry, news, all revolves around the death of this colossal American idol (General Advertiser 1799).

It is interesting to see the more sober, but equally devoted homages to Washington that were given by masonic lodges, as it is possible to observe from another newspaper of the time. Indeed, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September 1799 a lodge in honour of Washington was created in South Kingstown, in the state of Rhode Island, and the Providence Journal reports on the inaugural ceremony. The *iter* consisted of a procession, an eulogy to the President and “Brother”, followed by a formal dinner in which the initial and conclusive toasts were entirely devoted to Washington, who was honoured as a man, a mason, a general and a president, with recurrent references by the journalist to the great pathos of the moment (The Providence Journal 1799).

As the new wave of biographies begun circulating – over Weems, John Marshall and Jared Sparks, just to mention two cases, participated to the phenomenon of mystified biographies – other works began the consecration of one of the most beloved celebrities in history, and the most important among them is probably the painting by David Edwin. He portrayed the President ascending to heaven, surrounded by angels and blessed by divine light, and was soon followed by other painters who worked on the same page in heavily sacred-oriented representations. Washington’s image was now, more than ever, the image of a divine figure, no more a human: never had the term “apotheosis” fit more the public reaction to the death of a celebrity.

This aura of sacredness was largely connected to the face that Washington managed to convey to the public during the years, avoiding as much as possible the publicity of his private life experience and always maintaining an austere and institutional look in his portraits. An iconic quote by Hawthorne is very frequently cited to express the general public feeling when thinking of Washington, both in his life and after death: “Did anybody ever see Washington nude? It is inconceivable. He had no nakedness, but imagine that he was born with his clothes on, and his hair powdered, and made a stately bow on his first appearance in the world” (Hawthorne 1876).

Another recurring topic when dealing with scholars observing the celebrity of Washington is the difference between his fame and his actual merits. Clearly, his divine intellect and superhuman strength and virtue are exaggerations generated by the boosted opinion that circulated, but the debate concerns the much more realistic military capabilities of Washington.

Nothing destined him to play such a role: only moderately cultivated, of normal intelligence but nothing special, he was not a great military strategist. His achievements during the Seven Years' War against the French and their Native American allies did not allow him to be employed by the regular British Army, as he wanted to be. Even during the War of Independence, the principal victories could not be credited to him, beyond the successful but limited Princeton operations at the beginning of the conflict (Lilti 2017)

What we understand is a persistent manipulation of the public image of the first President, who, already before his political career, happened to be glorified for merits he did not really have, mostly as a product of his celebrity, whose positivity was enough to upgrade Washington's flaws as virtues. Moreover, for how inconsistent the critiques were when compared to the positive response, it must be mentioned that exactly because of the colossal public appreciation for Washington, some Americans happened to suffer the constant adulation, and would publicly express their disapproval with the phrase "Damn George Washington!" (Mayo 1959).

It is obvious that a person's reputation cannot be completely positive, there will always be someone not to take part to the beatification, but this occurrence is meaningful because it directly stems from the popularity of the celebrity. These are, in other words, other very early manifestations of awareness of the celebrity phenomenon: people tired of seeing the same person under the spotlight repeatedly, who end up developing negative feelings exactly because of this omnipresence.

However, in an ideal measurement of the appreciation of celebrities, posing Marie Antoinette as the absolute worst case, in which every aspect of the queen was hated and fake news to discredit her circulated freely, Washington would most realistically be on the opposite pole, being his positive image so strong to even cover his potential mistakes or flaws. As it was demonstrated, his case presented several uniqueness, due to the geographical, political and ideological context of the North American scenario, and it is for this reason one of the most notable examples of political celebrity in Early Modern Age.

The rare cases of opposition to his positive image of celebrity had almost no impact, and if they even had a result during Washington's life, they were *de facto* cancelled after the death of the president, whose apotheosis was massive and unopposed. With his absence, there was substantially no one to limit the use of his private life to increase the popularity and the homages, and the inexact biographies that proliferated in the very early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century are together proof of this and a massive obstacle to correct historical analysis. With this in mind, it is important to notice the amount of differences that will manifest when comparing Washington to a substantially contemporary celebrity that had many differences with him, despite the supposedly several similarities: Napoleon Bonaparte.

### I.III – Napoleon Bonaparte, French Caesar.

As anticipated in the previous chapter, the comparison of a celebrity is almost a focal point in its historical analysis, since it demonstrates the public metabolization of the political figures in their times and the period right after their death. The images evoked in these juxtapositions tend to reveal, especially when reiterated, the overall opinion of the celebrity, by referring to more positive or negative previous historical figures. Indeed, the paragon with Caesar, already in the title, was mostly chosen to express the public opinion of Napoleon, particularly by his contemporaries: a dictator, coming from a military background, who overthrew the republic and gave life to an expansive empire. The proximity of their lives hides, although, a more significant element of connection, which lays in Bonaparte's propaganda strategy, concerning the bonds with the past.

Interestingly, Napoleon's celebrity campaign involved, in more than one occasion, his relation with classical models, especially Roman emperors. The image of himself that he attempted to convey was, indeed, the image of the *homo novus*, who was effectively a vessel of the classical virtue, simultaneously overcoming the flaws and limitations of the past figures through a modern mentality. Thus, Napoleon presented himself as the human sum of these two dimensions and the vessel of harmony and peace.

The critique of the past emblematically happened through the rejection of the titles of *Augustus* and *Germanicus*, which the *Institut* intended to bestow on him. The choice was justified by the desire to take the distance from the Emperors, whose "several crimes" had led Rome to devastation (Bonaparte 1865). Interestingly, the only two Roman leaders that Napoleon deemed worthy of being honoured without revision – and therefore being suitable metaphors for him – were Diocletian and Caesar, who he believed were capable of unifying civil and military merits in their reign (A. Fierro 1995).

A peculiar aspect of Napoleon's approach to celebrity is that this was not the only case of self-induced juxtaposition with leaders from the past. In fact, probably even more than Caesar, Napoleon felt a unique bond of admiration, almost like a disciple trying to overcome his master, in Frederick II of Prussia, and in more than one occasion, the comparison between the two stemmed from Bonaparte himself. The focal point of said felt proximity laid in the multifaceted essence of the Prussian king, who, allegedly by his own words, defined himself a philosopher, a king, a warrior, a legislator and a father (Delogu 2017; Morrissey 2013). Napoleon too believed to be a versatile genius, and attempted to convey this image of himself during the years, particularly at the beginning and at the end of his life as a celebrity, from the ranks of the military, to the exile in Saint Helena.

Coming from probably one of the most beloved political celebrities ever – Washington – Napoleon's relation with the external perceivers of his popularity clearly appears as different. Apart from the internal dissent, which is a natural condition from which not even Washington was immune, Napoleon faced much more extra-national opposition, clearly because of his marked aggressive expansionism. Just to make an idea of how much Napoleon weighed on European politics, one must remember that the new military and political order of Europe – as well as the birth of the bearing states of Netherlands – was almost entirely generated by the will to avoid any possible new attempt by Napoleon to extend his reach in the Old Continent.

The in detail progressive evolution of the telling of Napoleon's celebrity will be analysed in the course of this chapter, chronologically observing the most prominent reactions to the growing notoriety of the military genius from Corsica. By now, the focus will be put on the numerous differences between the two Early Modern case studies, Washington and him, on a more general level. Indeed, a very first

gap between the two has been noticed already in the perceived image of the celebrities, but this point can be further expanded.

Indeed, the clearly different opinion of the two stems mainly from the “role” that the two interpreted, in the eyes of the public. Among the different political celebrities that appeared in history, a leitmotiv can be traced, by linking their perceived image to almost a theatre mask, a fixed role with very specific connotations that simplifies the external perception of them. In the case of Washington, for example, his perceived character was a revolutionary mythic hero who lives for the sake of his country, so that it can become a free and independent nation.

This schematization of celebrities mainly derives from the observation of the external sources dealing with the real person and the idealized representations that were made, by contemporaries and successive generations: in the case of Washington, his representation as a biblical figure clearly echoes his absolute virtue, together with the recurrent images of patriotic symbols surrounding him in his representations. Apart probably from the British, the overall public opinion of him, both inside and outside the United States, could not be negative, seen these absolutely positive elements that made him a devoted founding father of his newly born nation.

Napoleon’s role was much different, and this partly connects with the menace he represented for other European nations. If Washington’s rise to power substantially involved two nations, the United States where he was a hero and England where he was an enemy (with the partial extension of the French positive image), Napoleon’s expansion involved the French role as a successful leader, but also as a dictator; at the same time, however, the image of a dangerous enemy, as perceived by the other European nations, was present as well.

Moreover, if the United States used to be a colony, and they thus managed to free themselves from oppression and gain independence, France was a republic – a condition that was painfully conquered with the Revolution and the following years of unrest – that was “laid back” to a condition of monarchy once again. The purpose of this digression is to show how, independently from the propaganda and positive echoes of Napoleon’s military glory, his image could probably never compete with the positivity of Washington in the very first place, due to the different ways they reached power and the relation they had with their political surroundings.

This introduction can give the mistaken image of a largely negative historical legacy of Napoleon as a celebrity, but this was definitively not the case. The cult of Napoleon, which spontaneously flourished for years after his death, was later reinforced by Napoleon III in the second half of 1800, in order to strengthen his popular support through the appeal of the past glory of his grandfather. The fact that after the end of his reign the interest for this celebrity did not end clearly gives a sign of how much of the historical interest was genuine.

This natural attraction of people from all over the world to Napoleon is testified also by History of Philosophy, since the unique importance given to Napoleon by Hegel, the man that changed forever the German approach to metaphysics and philosophy in general, can be taken as a symbol of the complex and constructive relation of the public with this celebrity, several years after his death. Starting with the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the attention to Napoleon probably lost some of the political intentions that drove it in the previous years, but the French Emperor remained an icon, and reached even pop culture, appearing, just to mention a case, next to Bugs Bunny in a Looney Tunes episode.

Napoleon was not a negative celebrity, but rather a much more complex case than Washington, and the fact that the French emperor was considered a romantic hero, among the many other roles he



interpreted, perfectly summarizes his many different facets as a celebrity. Admired, hated, feared, respected, idolized, Napoleon was capable of generating remarkably strong feelings in those who entered in contact with him, thus becoming a worthy case study for the earliest manifestations of political celebrity in history.

His case is significant in this term because, probably even more than Washington, he understood the implications of the recent societal transformations and managed to use the new instruments he had to magnify his image. Napoleon was, in fact, object of academic study also for his capacity of understanding the value of adapting the past to the necessities of the present, substantially operating, during the course of his rise to power, a constant synthesis of classical imagery and ideals into his tangible person. The whole essence of his propaganda could be summed up in the respect of tradition, with innovation as the goal (Morrissey 2013).

As it will be shown in the course of the chapter, probably the highest point of his understanding (and manipulation) of the celebrity phenomenon that was developing around him, was reached during the exile at Saint Helena. However, this was far from being a late aspect of his life, since signs of this comprehension already manifested during the earliest moments of his career, obviously accompanied by the tangible successes of his military campaigns. This was effectively summed up by Lilti in his introduction to Napoleon's case:

It goes without saying that the prestige of the emperor [...] owed a great deal to battles won and order restored, to the efficiency of his propaganda and his police, to his capacity to end the Revolution without totally betraying it. Nevertheless, Napoleon's renown was based on another form of notoriety and on collective bonding, which was not the renown of glory and power but that of modern celebrity (Lilti 2017).

Looking into the path that led to his popularity, Napoleon's fame started in a more canonical, non-celebrity way. He studied in a French military academy in Corsica and quickly ascended the ranks thanks to his innate capacities as a strategist, up to the point he became commander of the Army of Italy at only 26 years of age; there, he demonstrated his military genius with an apparently never ending series of military victories, that led the Austrians to the negotiation table with France, just one year later, in 1797 (Bell 2020). This was the moment in which the process of celebrity building began, with a tidal wave of appraisal and popularity for the young general, whose engravings began circulating in France and Italy, together with poems, theatrical works and similar other type of media that have been repeatedly observed so far, in the course of the thesis. It was exactly during these three years at the head of the Army of Italy that Napoleon began thinking of his future as the consecration of his ideals of glory, and began massively fuelling the fame he was object of (*ibid.*).

This is one of the main differences between Napoleon and Washington: if the latter tended to keep the public attention towards himself as low as possible, the former did the exact opposite, constantly fuelling the fire of celebrity as much as he could. There were mainly three reasons for this difference, two related to the distance between the figures, and one more instrumental. The first reasons lays in the simple – but not unworthy of being mentioned – ideological dissimilarity between Washington and Napoleon. The American general was extremely more modest, and valued his privacy up to the point of attempting a complete retirement after the revolution was completed. The French one, instead, was burning by the fire of ambition, attempting to reach as high as he could. The second difference was in a way consequential to this: if Washington was a fervent republican, interested in the sake and prosperity of the new democracy more than anything else, and saw his fame as an instrument to maintain this, Napoleon aimed for an empire with him at the head, a completely self-centric vision of the French state.

For what concerns the instrumental reason behind Napoleon's fuel to his celebrity, it was a context-dependant factor that was realistically generated by his understanding of the French situation after the revolution. Indeed, in the tumultuous period of the First Republic and the years of Terror, among the great names that happened to become popular on the Parisian scene, Robespierre was, similarly to Napoleon, often questioned about his possible mires to overthrow the republic and take power. Bell observes how Napoleon seemed to show consciousness of the unsuccessful results in the adoption of a denial strategy, as operated to Robespierre, when accused to having dictatorial mires, and therefore adapted to these accusations with a certainly peculiar strategy:

Bonaparte also knew very well that Robespierre had tried to deflect such attacks by presenting himself as an individual stripped of all individuality—the pure vessel of the Revolution. But rather than adopt a similar strategy, Bonaparte did the precise opposite and engaged in what the French call a *surenchère*: overbidding. In his propaganda, he presented himself not merely as superior but as an individual whose unique qualities were so extraordinary that a single human body could barely contain them. He presented himself as so massively superior to and different from other humans that the ordinary rules did not apply to him. The French might not trust ordinary humans, even talented ones, with excessive personal power, he implied, but they could trust him. I cannot say whether Bonaparte pursued this strategy consciously. But his superb political instincts led him directly to it. (*ibid.*, p. 109-110).

*A posteriori*, Napoleon's strategy seemed to be effective: in the arch of four years, from the very beginning of his successful military career, he managed to obtain enough momentum, in the instrumentalization of his public persona, to succeed in a coup d'état and come to power. His propaganda was multifaceted, and articulated among the most popular media available. The first media was probably the portrait, painted by Gros, representing a young Napoleon, the day after the Battle of Arcole, in 1796. The portrait, representing the general in an only apparently casual moment, has actually a conscious background of classical heroic imagery, elaborated to appear as ordinary as possible, in the active attempt to bring Napoleon close to everyone watching the painting (Delogu 2019).

Substantially parallel to the portrait, both in time and in the ideological background behind the representation, was Ugo Foscolo's tribute to the general, representing in *Ode a Bonaparte liberatore* an example of virtue and classical imagery: Bonaparte was symbolically portrayed as a blond hero leading the soldiers to the liberation of Italy, majestic and fearsome on the battlefield against the defeated Austrian troops (Foscolo 1797). The language is typical of the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century literary trend of concretizing ideal virtue into a man, in this case Napoleon, celebrated as the symbol of freedom from the foreign oppressor, and concretization of classical values. This idealization is noticeable, among the other aspects, in the incorrect description of his hair as blonde, which is used as a way to visually reconnect Bonaparte to the traditional image of the fighting hero, such as Achilles, just to mention one example, to convey canonical beauty and virtue (Delogu 2017; Mascilli Migliorini 2001).

However, the painting (and all the other portraits that appeared soon after) was, clearly, nothing but the first instrument he used, and many others rapidly followed. Indeed a feature that marks Napoleonic studies, even before the formulation of celebrity as a process, is the recognition of a marked multimedia approach in his omnipresent propaganda (Dwiver 2008; Hanley 2005). It must be highlighted, moreover, how the importance of Napoleon in the study of celebrities is undeniable, since if other figures, such as Washington, were more passively object of the attention of the others, as partly anticipated, Bonaparte was the main actor behind his own success, and this propagandistic instruments were his most powerful instrument (Criscuolo 1997).

Among the other media, journals were pivotal in his strategy. Two newspapers were published by the army of Italy, one for the soldiers and one for the public; at the same time, in France, a group that counted his brothers among the other members published a journal completely focused on him and his manipulated image (Bell 2020). Theatre was, in a sense, a wide source of inspiration for Napoleon's approach to propaganda. In more than one occasion, as reported by Bell, Bonaparte tended to create perfectly orchestrated scenes that would more or less explicitly depict him as a hero or even a destined-to-be monarch. For example, a case is cited in which, during a speech for the Bastille Day 1797, a soldier stepped out of the ranks to interrupt Napoleon, saying that he had saved France and it was now time for him to save the Republic. Similarly, the construction of a virtual court in Italy, in front of which he would have dined, significantly echoed the Versailles manners for kings to eat (see *ibid.*, p. 110).

More than that, Napoleon utilised spoils of war from the Italian missions in a very peculiar way. For example, when Italian gold and statues, or spoils from the Austrian army were sent back to France, engravings or leaflets marking Napoleon's name would always accompany them, so that it would be impossible at that point to forget who was the responsible for that riches (Dziewanowski 1945). Manipulation of information was a constant element of his propaganda, from these very early stages up to Saint Helena, and when it concerned his physical or psychological self, Napoleon tended to accompany this manipulation with the myth construction of his figure, on the trail of classical heroes. This ranged from the fake news concerning his blonde hair, up to the very creation of the apparently oxymoron of Mars Pacifier, used as a metaphor for his self, a warlord capable of bringing peace and harmony through his actions (Delogu 2019).

All of these instruments of celebrity generation were destined for the whole French (and, to a lesser extent, European) public, but there was a portion of Napoleonic propaganda that was targeted to a very specific part of that public: the army. Bonaparte had ambitions aiming for the head of the state, but during his rise, he still was a soldier, and it was exactly from that context that a large part of his authority came from. For this reason, from the very beginning he cultivated a special relation with his army, in order to grow a devotion from his subordinates. This behaviour concretized into the aforementioned propagandistic journal only for the soldiers, for example. He was extremely careful to keep the camps and the goods destined to the soldiers in the best condition possible, not only to keep the morale high, but also to remark as frequently as possible that these improvements happened under his command. He was generous in distributing honours, often under the form of concrete objects, such as decorated swords, and never feared to walk among the soldiers and help them with their tasks. Later, when he will become Emperor, he would carefully redesign the uniform of his soldiers, to make them as splendid as he could, so that his austere outfit would stand out even more (Bell 2020; Dziewanowski 1945).

What is significant in the Napoleonic propaganda machine is the rapidity in which it developed. In 1798, Bonaparte's popularity was probably at its apex, after just two years since his promotion as commander of the Italian army. It was in this context of uncontrollable notoriety that the Directory, the organ holder of the executive power in the French Republic, asked Napoleon to the conquest of Egypt. In the reasons behind this there are more than one hypothesis, most of them converge towards the idea that the desire was to partake the general from the adulating public, sending him to a distant (and realistically ruinous) mission.

Whatever the reasoning was, Napoleon obtained in relatively small time his victory also in Egypt, taking a trophy that was realistically more cultural (the rebirth in Egyptology and the finding of the Rosetta's Stone, just to give two examples) than military, since the peace treaty with the Ottoman

Empire probably showed already in the first place signals of fragility. During his absence, France precipitated in a deep state of turmoil, after the breaking of the peace with Austria, on whose side now also the Russian Empire militated, and the Directory showed the incapacity to keep the republic under control.

In this context, Napoleon came back from Egypt, avoiding the encounter with the British fleet, and was greeted as a hero and the chaos solver by the French people. Toasts and songs celebrated the return of the Emperor in the French taverns, gazettes amplified the popular enthusiasm and crowds of people gathered in front of his house hoping to see him from the windows (Aulard 1902; Gotteri 2001).

His initial design was to substitute the Directory with three consuls – him, Sieyès and Ducos – and the project aimed at a peaceful and legal transition into this, with the approval of the Parliament, seen the moment of crisis. If initially everything seemed to flow in the right direction, the Parliament eventually opposed this reform, and the final response was the coup d'état. The plebiscite that followed was a confirm of Napoleon's understanding of the mechanics of celebrity.

Even in the simple announcement of Napoleon's investment as a consul, before the plebiscitary acclamation, it was possible to notice the large support that the soon to be emperor enjoyed in the public opinion. Reporting on the decree of the Senate that marked the beginning of Bonaparte's charge as a consul, the Providence Gazette reported that:

A statue of Peace, holding in one hand the laurel of victory, and in the other the decree of the Senate, shall attest to posterity the gratitude of the nation. [Moreover] The Senate shall carry to the Consul the expression of the confidence; love and admiration of the French people (J. Carter 1802).

The language is adulatory, and depicts the overwhelming support of the public, even being a foreign gazette. This is clearly just one among the many documents of the time that attest a large support of the Consul Bonaparte, with a popularity so strong to even cross national boundaries.

Despite the enormous propaganda, which operated through so many different media and agents, significantly influenced the vote of the French people, Napoleon formally gave the (illusory) power of choice to the public itself, to demonstrate how he was no dictator, but a saviour wanted by the people. This is the essence of political celebrity: having built so much empathy with the public in the previous years, through a constant manipulation of Napoleon's image and supposedly private life, brings them naturally to the choice of the celebrity as a worthy leader, not recognising how the whole process was an artefact manipulation of perceived image and preferences.

Bonaparte soon revealed his role as a much less democratic leader as he would represent himself, enforcing from the very beginning heavy censorship and a strict control of the news circulating in France. Meanwhile, he constantly kept fuelling the propaganda machine, maintaining and even increasing the classical aura around his image (from "hero" to "demi-god") and the general appraising of his figure and his extraordinary capabilities. Moreover, the true design of his political project manifested when, in 1802 he modified the constitution so he would become consul for life and eventually, two years later, he directly changed his title into Emperor.

This second wave of propaganda is worthy of a brief more in detail speculation, for the purpose of this thesis. In substance, the celebrity-type propaganda that was constructed from 1796 to 1799 had the purpose of showing a Napoleon close to the people, on some occasions, and almost godlike and superhuman, in other cases. These two cases may appear in contrast, but completed each other, since they simultaneously managed to build that fundamental empathy, and showed Bonaparte as the

perfect possible leader. After he effectively reached power, the first type of propaganda sources tended to decrease its frequency, to leave almost total space to his divine representation. One must consider that the explicit recognition of the importance of empathy-building is obviously modern, and at the time Napoleon benefitted from the intuition of some of these mechanisms, obviously lacking a complete scheme of action, for which reason it should not surprise that he missed an organic and long-lasting use of this technique.

Although, it is possible that the switch in propaganda style was perfectly conscious, and Napoleon had actively decided to only focus on his process of divinization, having in a way already obtained the type of popular support he needed through celebrity-type media representation. A proof of this can be the fact that, after his exile to Saint Helena, the empathic character telling will commence anew, as it will be shown later in the chapter. Whatever the real reasoning behind this speculative analysis was, it is certain that the propaganda machine never stopped, through different forms and manifestations, but always covering as many media as possible, especially images.

Indeed, two paintings passed to history from the two phases of life consul and later emperor: the first was the portrait by Jacques-Louis David of Napoleon crossing the Alps, and the second was the one by Jean-Auguste-Dominic Ingres, depicting Emperor Napoleon on his throne. The imagery was extremely careful in both paintings, showing a strong, undaunted, romantic military hero, and later a fierce, potent emperor, exhibiting the icons of his power.

It should be mentioned that, despite all of these recurrent mentions to propaganda and the path that erased once again the republic in France, Napoleon was genuinely beloved by the large part of the public, especially during the initial period of his government, as it can be understood by sources outside the reach of the censorship control, such as private letters (Bell 2020). Moreover, with the years, he managed to magnetize the appraisal of European and American intellectuals as well, who praised his victories and successes. Bonaparte knew that his success was mostly tied to his victories, and he would remain a beloved hero if he kept winning on the battlefield. It was in the attempt to overcome this possible flaw that he pursued the path of traditional monarchy, where his power would be formally recognized as divinely anointed.

Bonaparte was attempting what Max Weber called the “routinization of charisma”—to take the authority inherent in the bond between a charismatic individual and his followers and transfer it to a stable institution—in this case the newborn French Empire. [...] But in Bonaparte’s case the process failed. The legitimacy of his regime depended too intimately on his personal appeal and his victories. (*ibid.*)

From the Empire’s foundation onwards, Napoleon’s path to success actually became a descent to failure. He surely was still a military genius, but the enemies started becoming too many and his objectives too distant, as shown by the disastrous Iberic and Russian campaigns. Exiled to the Elba Island, Bonaparte may have appeared as an icon of the past, but he was still hungry for more. A new wave of propaganda slithered through France, once again, as multifaceted and diversified as possible, so that everyone could hear that Napoleon was coming back from his prison. The French public reaction was increasingly positive:

The alteration in France's attitude was reflected in Figaro, in which the news of the landing was headlined as ‘L'Antropophage débarqua a Antibes.’ The 5th of March, ‘L'usurpateur a Nice’; on the 8th, ‘Bonaparte a Grenoble’; on the 14th, ‘Napoleon 'a Lyon’; on the 17th, ‘L'Empereur a Fontainebleau’; on the 18th, ‘Sa Majeste Imperiale est entree a Paris hier soir.’ (Dziewanowski 1945)

The One Hundred Days that followed were quite different from the long government that Napoleon held for the previous fifteen years, and in a way, this had a positive mark on the memoirs of the

French, who tended to secularise this very last portion of more liberal and constructive reign, rather than the precedent dictatorial regime, strangled by censorship. Despite the overall internal success of the renewed Napoleonic reign, the eventual military defeat was much more violent than the previous, and the French Icarus was exiled in the faraway island of Saint Helena, under British control.

Saint Helena marks a final, fundamental passage for the celebrity Napoleon. At this point, the man had no hope of coming back to Europe, therefore he focused on a very last fundamental propaganda objective: consecrate his reign and his life in front of History. With most of the celebrities seen so far, it was possible to witness an apotheosis after death, a large, if not even national grievance, with the consecration of the lifelong process between the great figure and the public. Napoleon substantially knew that this possibility was almost precluded to him, and probably feared being forgotten even more than being disrespected after death. For these reasons, and probably also others that we are personally and historically precluded to know, he began a complex process of restoration of his image, so that, despite his fell and exile, he could at least try to redeem his image before the defeat, to be remembered in the future as a hero.

Before introducing the work that was co-managed by Bonaparte himself, another fundamental primary source must be mentioned, an Italian piece of poetry that anticipated the restorative spirit of Napoleon's image after the exile: *Il Cinque Maggio* by Alessandro Manzoni. The poet represents Napoleon as the sum of all the virtuous values typical of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, re-establishing his image of *Mars pacifier* capable of bringing order through war, in the tumultuous passage to the next century: "Due secoli, / l'un contro l'altro armato, / sommessi a lui si volsero, / come aspettando il fato; / ei fe' silenzio, ed arbitro / s'assise in mezzo a lor" (Manzoni 1821). Moreover, Napoleon's image is cleansed of his negative aura through the use of the Christian moral, since Manzoni clearly sees in the fallen emperor a sign of the Divine Providence's will (Delogu 2017).

The ode was composed almost immediately after Napoleon's death, and collected a vastly positive response. The work that more than anyone else was, although, responsible for the restoration of Napoleon's image was to be published few time later, and to observe its composition it is necessary to take a step back and carefully observe Bonaparte's last days, during the exile.

The way he embarked on this last journey is pivotal, because once again – and probably more than ever in his life – Napoleon decided to use his personal life experience and thoughts to conquer for the very last time the heart of those who read about him. The key figure in this passage was the writer Emmanuel de Las Cases, who carefully documented Napoleon's life and thoughts in the extremely important work that the *Mémorial de Sainte-Hélène*. The importance of this biography lays in several factors; first of all, it simply was one of the most complete historical sources on the life of Bonaparte, but at the same time it held an incomparable value in the study of his propaganda. Indeed, especially for celebrity studies as the present document, the observation of the telling that Las Cases and the same Napoleon offer can help understanding not only his historical figure, but also the principles that evolved into the celebrity phenomenon in general. This happens in several ways.

The *Mémorial* is evocative because of a combination of two tones: the classic epic tone of triumphal and victorious military glory; and a new tone, that of everyday heroism, which culminates in the fallen emperor's determined, almost laughable, resistance to the bullying and humiliations of the English authorities. [...] In this dual tonality we can hear the registers of heroic glory and that of celebrity. The first is found in the discourse of praise, the second in the personal account of day-to-day existence. (Lilti 2017)

Bonaparte comes back to the earliest form of his propaganda, a fusion of mythic exaltation and ordinary images that strikes people's empathy, in order to construct a double-knotted relation with the reader. The feeling of proximity that one could have with Napoleon, by reading the *Mémorial*, is reinforced by another key aspect, and that is the writing style of Las Cases.

There was, nonetheless, a subtle displacement which led to this admiration, a tone typical of glory, of gratitude, a matter of both political legitimacy and personal choice, and, finally, love ("I loved Napoleon"), the assertion of a sentimental bond between affection and passion that did not accord with the traditional themes of heroism. And in fact, the account of daily life at Saint Helena was far from the account of an heroic emperor. Las Cases transformed the private man, Napoleon, into an intimate spectacle: he showed the emperor from the perspective of a friend in exile who was close to him and who not only admired but loved him. The 1822 preface written for the first edition of the *Mémorial* emphasizes the transfer from admiration to love, from glory to intimacy (*ibid.*)

Through Las Cases' perspective, the reader is capable of realizing that lingering desire that arises from reading the biography: living with Napoleon, sharing his presence in ordinary contexts, as good old friends. The outcome is a celebrity mechanism so powerful, that is no surprise that Bonaparte's legacy managed to remain positive in history, consecrating his role as a beloved political celebrity. In this sense, the study of Rousseau, done by the two minds behind the biography, was fundamental. Rousseau's experience showed how the relation between public and writer had changed during Early Modern Age, and that to satisfy the people's desires what had to be presented was not a sterile biography, but a personal, close documentation by the eyes of a friendly figure, so that the readers could empathize with the celebrity.

The fundamental value of the *Mémorial* lays in its role of voltaic key in the construction of the Napoleonic legend: all the conquests, myth building, discoveries, innovations that happened under the guide and then the rule of Napoleon would have been lost into oblivion, if it were not for this very conclusive but indispensable work. It is thanks to these volumes that, after Napoleon's death, his ashes were returned from Saint Helena and buried under the dome of the Invalides, as a memento for the whole France and the world (J. D. Carter 1939).

## Chapter II

### II.I – The Age of Mass Media and the Structural Evolution of Celebrity.

“C'è il coatto che parla alla pancia, ma l'intellettuale è più snob  
In base al tuo pubblico scegli un bel personaggio, l'Italia è una grande sitcom”<sup>1</sup>

-Willie Peyote

“Inevitably we construct ourselves. Let me explain. I enter this house and immediately I become what I have to become, what I can become: I construct myself. That is, I present myself to you in a form suitable to the relationship I wish to achieve with you. And, of course, you do the same with me.”

-L. Pirandello

Two centuries divide the current reality described in this chapter by the last moments of Napoleon's life, observed in the previous page. Interestingly, the last twenty years bear a number of structural changes that is almost equivalent with those happening in the previous ca. 200 years. In a sense, observing directly the two extremes of the timeline seems more interesting (and straight to the point) rather than reconstructing meticulously every step that led to this new reality, but gradual studies of the transition phases will be conducted nonetheless in the course of the chapter, when needed.

Some of the key aspects that originated during the course of Early Modern Age fully developed, others gained completely new forms, and some others are on the verge of disappearing. By looking at the preconditions of celebrity, the structural transformation of the public has fully evolved into a widely distributed system of democracies – at least formally – among countries of the world. This means that the power of decision lays, by the rule of law, in the hand of the people, in the majority of the countries.

For this reason, the importance of gaining the favour of the masses has become fundamental, much more than in the late 1700s. Reality is, although, not always so rosy: many factors heavily influence or even directly cancel this decisional power, ranging from colossal multinational companies possessing enough political and economic power to interfere with politics, to authoritarian regimes that keep pseudo-democratic institutions only for formality, leaving no actual choice to the people.

Today the public votes, but most importantly it consumes. Nowadays it is not rare to hear about mass consumption society, referring to a world in which the majority of families in a country enjoys the benefits of a large productivity, consuming more and more diversely (Matsuyama 2002). Being this an historical-political analysis, the economic aspect of mass consumption may appear off topic, but this is far from being true. In the Present, as partly anticipated in the introduction, selling a product

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<sup>1</sup> The song does not have an official English translation and contains some words that are difficult to translate literally. In order not to lose the metrics and the expressivity, I left it in the original format and I will explain the quote here. “The chav speaks to people's fears, while the intellectual is more snob / Create your own character according to your public, Italy is a great sit-com”.



and looking for personal influence frequently present the same scenario, especially in the marketing process.

Despite this concept will be expanded in the course of the chapter, mentioning it this early is fundamental to understand one of the causes behind the massive expansion of the other key factor for the development of celebrities, apart from social transformation: media. If the first generation of public media was fundamental for the major changes that happened in the course of Early Modern Age, the recent and current changes that regard the media dimension are, if not more important, at least much wider in their reach, up to the point that present times can be defined as the Mass Media Age. Media are now more in number, more incisive, they ignore social and economic hierarchies and transcend boundaries, but – most importantly – they are all extremely interconnected, thus generating a new dimension of converging information that lays on the backbone of the World Wide Web.

Information is an extremely powerful instrument and simultaneously constitutes cause and effect for the media. Media owners and manipulators have a double-edged sword in the emission of news to the public. Firstly, releasing information means deciding how to present the facts. If the ideal journalist should always present facts in the most objective way, the reality is often largely different from that scenario, with an alarmingly increasing rate of manipulated news that circulate every day, artificially modified to deviate the public opinion towards ideas shared by the owner of the medium. This is clear in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict begun in the early 2022, in which information tends to polarize into anti-Russian or pro-Russian, up to the point of seeing literally opposite news in two different countries, concerning the same event. Information and disinformation seem to be valued almost at the same level, as long as the result is achieved.

Secondly, in a sense following this trend of thriving disinformation, it could be said that, in present times, releasing information is almost more important than the information *per se*. Media owners tend to prioritize the economic gains of having their media broadcasted, listened or read, up to the point of releasing unintentionally fake news more and more frequently, due to lack of fact-checking. Just to mention an example, still concerning the case of the Russian-Ukrainian war, several Italian news sources showed, on the 22 of April 2022, a frame from a post-apocalyptic board game called *Blackout 1.0* from 2015, mistakenly presenting it as the internal map of the bunker in the steel mill Azovstal (Galluzzi 2022). This is just a single case the degeneration of informative media, but it is not even the worst-case scenario.

Indeed, other than unintentional cases, there are two more worrying scenarios: clickbaiting and intentional fake news. “Clickbait” is an internet neologism, meaning “content whose main purpose is to attract attention and encourage visitors to click on a link to a particular web page” (Oxford Learner’s Dictionary 2021). The clickbait is the emblem of the aforementioned tendency of caring more for clout than the quality of information, since it mostly manifests in alarming, heavily misleading or allusive titles, which often seem to present a very different kind of information than the one actually written in the article or the video.

This phenomenon is dangerous because clickbaits tend to almost overlap to fake news, in their attempt of sounding as sensationalistic as possible just to catch the attention of the reader, who may often refuse to effectively consume the media and understand the reality behind it, thus only absorbing the fake and manipulated information conveyed by the title. Plain fake news are, in a sense, simpler, since they are direct means of disinformation, created for spreading panic or manipulating the public opinion. As George Orwell wrote in 1984, “Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past”.

As partly anticipated in the Early Modern Age analysis, media tend to naturally converge and link to each other, creating a strong connection that covers multiple spheres of communication and reaches as many targets as possible. The Mass Media Age is, indeed, by nature multimedia, and information tends to follow all of the channels available, permeating different social and age groups. Being multimedia is a fundamental feature for branding and advertising, up to the point that it becomes indispensable for the profit of a company:

Successful brands are built by exploiting multiple contacts between the brand and the consumer. [...] The experience should not be contained within a single media platform, but should extend across as many media as possible. Brand extension builds on audience interest in particular content to bring them into contact again and again with an associated brand (Jenkins 2006).

Jenkins wrote his book about media convergence already more than 15 years ago, but the idea of a constant presence of the product in everyone's life – through massive multimedia advertisement campaign – was already present. In the same page, following these lines, Jenkins expands the discourse, introducing the marketing strategies of the Coca-Cola Company and Saatchi & Saatchi, whose advertisement ideals focused on the creation of “lovemarks”, a series of targeted ads through which the company simulated care for their customers, as if they were almost friends. Thus, they managed to instil in the consumer the idea that the product they were presented was more than just a good, but a personal token of love. The purpose is not simply to evoke memories and positive feelings, but to connect the public to the product, so that the empathic link would increase the desire for the consumption of said good (*ibid.*, p.70).

It should really not surprise that the marketing mechanisms have evolved into exactly the same technique of celebrity building that was created more than two centuries before, since empathy seem not to have equals in the creation of favourable images in the public's mind. The sole significant difference is that companies are selling a product (an object or an experience), something that inevitably will not be sentient, for how much its surroundings are romanticized. This is the reason why, in more than one occasion, in the course of the thesis, electoral campaigns have been presented as marketing for people, because the way both strategies are conducted today is substantially the same. This parallelism is highlighted, among the others, by the same Jenkins, later in his work:

Candidates may build their base on the Internet, but they need television to win elections. It's the difference between a push medium (where messages go out to the public whether they seek them or not) and a pull medium (which serves those with an active interest in seeking out information on a particular topic). The internet reaches the hard core, television the undecided (*ibid.*, p. 224).

Affirming that multimedia advertisement is important to keep a presence of the product in every moment of the consumer's life is even reductive, in the observation of political campaigns. In this last case, multimedia means different types of connections, each one with its own purpose: convincing the undecided or strengthening the already existing bonds with current electors. A prototype of this line of thought was visible already in the propaganda system of Napoleon, whose strategies aimed altogether at enforcing his positive relation with the army and convincing the French people of his worth as a leader.

Human and technological progress has led to the enforcement of these marketing strategies in several ways, first of all (for how simple it may sound) the creation of new media. After all, a larger and more diversified net of contact between content-creator and content-receiver gives much more opportunities for communication and interaction (Lilti 2017). More recent audio-visual media, such as television, Youtube videos, live streamings of any sort, are all extremely successful in the creation of “parasocial interaction”, a type of personal bonding that manifests when there is an illusion of

friendship or intimacy, which happens by watching a performer or generally a content creator (Nouri 2018).

In this carnival of media, where a constant storm of information and advertisements permanently surrounds the individual, one medium is probably worthy of a deep analysis more than any other, and that is social networks. Indeed, social networks are extremely recent in their creation (despite the effective dates may slightly differ, it could be conventionally said that they appeared as a mass phenomenon in the early 2000s), but have already heavily affected many aspects of the “real” life, as anticipated in the introduction. At this point of the thesis, a more profound study of their importance is necessary, because they act as the main media for content creators – especially political ones – to personally connect to their audience, so they are substantially the main instrument for celebrity building. Moreover, due to their utmost ease in access and use, and to the fact that they are virtually always in our pocket, social networks are probably the most pervasive medium to currently exist.

Other than pure communication instrumentalism, social networks own another adamantine tie that connects them to celebrities and that is individualism. It is difficult to clearly identify the starting point in history of the development of individualism as a mass trend, meaning with the term an increase of the individuals’ attention towards their self, and a parallel attempt to impose on, or at least differentiate oneself from the others. Some scholars have tackled part of the same concept under the term of *narcissism*, underlying the psychological aspect and the most negative shape of the phenomenon (Cambell and Twenge 2009), but, for the purpose of this work, the wider sense of individualism best fits the purpose.

Surely, the Early Modern and Modern Age had their importance in this process – as already anticipated in Chapter I – being this the period in which movements such as Enlightenment or Romanticism developed, with their colossal attention to the individual’s ego and self-worth, with very concrete consequences, such as the creation of the first official documents mentioning human rights.

Interestingly, individualism, despite being an apparently socio-cultural process, may actually have its roots deep into socio-economic processes, mostly the effects of capitalism on the shaping of mentalities. Several crossed studies have shown how capitalistic societies around the globe tend to favour self-centrism, with the highest records of systematic egocentrism in American Corporate Capitalism. In concrete terms, this means very hierarchical social conditions that tend to privilege (in a wide sense, not purely economic) the individual who prevails on others (S. H. Schwartz 2007).

Social networks bloomed in a world that was showing the first heavy signs of this translation towards the individual, an aspect that surely contributed to the idea of creating platforms for the mere purpose of sharing one’s personal life and peeping on the others’. However, it must be recognised that social media were also amplifiers of that same phenomenon, creating a snowballing society of morbid egocentrism, where the practice of being appreciated for sharing life bites generates more sharing to maintain the flow of appreciation. In this sense, social networks are simultaneously cause and effect of this capitalistic mass individualism, but they are not the only symptom that allows this diagnosis of the current global condition.

Indeed, brands (the most important agents of global capitalism) have shaped and nurtured the attention for oneself through a long process that manifests especially in advertisement. Being the individuals so predominant and having all of their preferences and a purchasing power to fulfil them, companies have developed a progressively larger choice of all different products, in an ever-enlarging selection of goods and services to buy. Offering more products, as different as possible, translates into the message of giving instruments to manifest individualism.

The public is invited to affirm its uniqueness in any possible way; in concrete, the public is led to buy as many things as possible, to show through clothes, accessories, tattoos, experiences and much more their personality. The affirmation of one's ego, which is substantially a positive process per se, is exasperated by a constant marketing campaign that gives the illusion of buying as the only possible way to express oneself. Individuals search for individuals, and for this reason everything tends to polarize in the direction of giving as much space as possible to people, being them real or fictional.

Indeed, the rise for individualism as an empathic process may be seen among the reasons behind the increasing success of series over films: a longer product needs more characters, whose personality can be expanded much more than in a movie, in which only the protagonist has usually enough space to be considered a personality. More characters mean more empathic bonds for the viewer, but at the same time more episodes mean a larger consumption and, therefore, larger income for the producers.

The same discourse can be applied to the mainstream Japanese world of animated shows and comics, in which dozens of characters surround the protagonist, often each one with a unique power or quirk, to enhance even more the uniqueness of each individual, with the same consequences as above both for the public and the producers. Indeed, brands thrive from this diversity of stimuli offered to the public, creating gadgets, costumes, accessories and so on: products that can be bought to affirm one's tastes as a response for the consumption of cinematic or animated media.

If the power of choice is a privilege and is, after all, a naturally positive feature of a capitalistic system, its excess becomes an issue: the paradox of choice. Psychologist Barry Schwartz first expressed the problem in the book *The Paradox of Choice – Why More Is Less*, in which the scholar expresses how the current overflowing of choice, present on global markets, *de facto* cancels the advantage of giving alternatives to the consumers, by creating in them anxiety and unease due to the exaggeration in this marketing of extremely similar, yet different, possibilities (B. Schwartz 2004). In a Freudian sense of the term, the paradox of choice is a perversion of individualism, since in order to satisfy each single personal preferences to increase profits, companies actually decrease the desire for consumers to try new products and experiences, so they devoid the phenomenon of its quintessential feature.

These aspects are worth mentioning because they strictly connect with some features of the present times that were mentioned up to this point, in the course of the chapter. Indeed, taking in consideration that every company tends to follow the scheme of redundancy through as many media as possible, and considering also the fact that all of these advertisements enact a hyper-diversification of products in the attempt to captivate any possible shade of preference, the result is an oversaturation of information, filled with redundancy and repetitiveness.

Receiving dozens of similar inputs for a plethora of different products per minute tires the internet user, who rapidly reaches a point of rupture, where he or she loses interest in the product or even in the media that presents it. In the same way, since the attention span and the time necessary to bore the viewer constantly decrease, this consequentially generates progressively shorter ads, so that brands manage to reach the audience also through their much shorter tolerance.

Once again, the whole discourse is important for this project because the same thing substantially happens in politics. The time needed for a "new face" to enter the circle of the "same old politicians" is progressively shorter; a candidate must be fast in profiting from his popularity, or the consequence will be a descendant curve of interest. Moreover, the whole process of political campaigns is, in a way, faster: pre-elections strategies still include the more traditional long monologues to the electors, but have progressively shifted towards short videos and posts, compact enough to be successful on social media.

This is the reason why Twitter has become so important in political propaganda, since it forces users to sum up in no more than 280 characters a message to convey. Clearly, a complex political message or connection with the electorate would be impossible in the space of more or less a sentence, so the consequence is a natural oversimplification and “slogonization” of the political discourse, in the worst cases bearing the same implications of the aforementioned clickbaits: misunderstandings, biases and misinformation.

Clearly, this process is not purely political. “Internet niche celebrities” thrive from the capability of synthesizing – and in most cases oversimplifying or even ridiculing – any content on social networks. As long as an individual knows how to convey their message and do this in the form of content appropriate to that social network they are using, that person could virtually become an internet micro-celebrity. This last definition, slightly different definition from the more general “celebrity” seen so far, is important because there are effectively differences between the macro concept and its micro cyber-manifestation: not all popular internet content creators are true celebrities, despite most celebrities gain their status from social media.

A definition that could diversify a generic micro-celebrity from a true celebrity is a useful tool in analytic terms, since more or less the same parameters can – and will – be applied in political analysis, to differentiate an average contemporary politician to a successful political celebrity. The perfect sample for micro-celebrities could be a youtuber who only publishes edited videos of any content. The importance of edited videos will be clearer later in the paper, in the observation of the value of live streams to build empathy with the public; for the moment, the study of micro-celebrities will be brought on. In the Italian case, probably the home cook Benedetta Rossi from the channel *In cucina con Benedetta* would fit the role of internet micro-celebrity accordingly.

Benedetta has been among the most popular Italian youtubers for years now, having conquered repeatedly the record of most seen food blogger among the Italian creators on the platform and even reaching the most seen channel of all Italian Youtube in August 2020 (Colombo 2020). She has also expanded her popularity outside the video platform, having published numerous cookbooks, but her content is extremely food-related, with very rare exceptions to the original purpose of her channel. This is important because, for how popular Benedetta may be, as long as she maintains this very content-related strategy for her videos, she will possibly never gain the “rounder” success of a celebrity who shares their personal life.

The reason for this is not in any way connected to the type of content created or to the ideal target of the channel, but rather to the form of the connection between the youtuber and her followers. It has been now widely explicated how the fundamental aspect of celebrity-building lays in the sharing of private life experiences, simulating a personal relation with the viewer, who feels almost as a friend of the content creator he or she is watching. Remaining on the same platform and the same content category, that is food bloggers, the cases of Giorgione or Max Mariola (two Italian home cooks who both operate in the Gambero Rosso network) present a much stronger celebrity potential, despite they have definitively less views than Benedetta. Indeed, both of them often share life-bites and include their family and friends in the videos, creating a comfortable and almost familiar environment for their viewers, differently from the strictly on-topic videos of Benedetta’s channel.

Respecting the comparative historical soul of this work, it could be said that this situation traces the diversification that Lilti drew between reputation and celebrity. The success of Benedetta is substantially based on a reputation system, in which she is professionally known and appreciated for her work, without any “intrusion” in her personal life. In parallel, Max Mariola, for instance, is

simultaneously appreciated and known for his cooking skills and the relation he has with his family and loved ones, or makes the follower smile – as if he was a friend – when he cooks with his son or his mother. What substantially happens is a partial readjustment of the same parameters identified by Lilti, applied to a historically much different context.

The case just explained is clearly an example and could be expanded on other platforms, with other content creators and other categories of conveyed messages, but the substance would remain the same. At the same time, this is far from being a purely Italian phenomenon, since it completely revolves around the media internet, with the global reach it has; for these reasons, other examples would be redundant for now, since the focal point of the analysis has been once again highlighted, and that is the importance of private life sharing. This process has become so fundamental, especially for advertisement (in a wide sense), that, around the last 20 years, some internet users who had a profound personal understanding of the mechanics of celebrity have created a new career that completely revolves on it: influencers.

The figure of the influencer, very often mentioned nowadays, is fundamental in the research for modern forms of celebrity, because it literally embraces all of the features that a celebrity has had for the previous two centuries, with only a formal difference in the much more economic-oriented purpose. We know for a fact, from Rousseau's memories, for example, how Early Modern celebrities appreciated the economic gains of their popularity, but, in a certain way, contemporary influencers are much more reliant on that aspect.

The difference is, although, overall slight, and for this reason it could be said that the two figures substantially represent two stages of the same concept. Obviously, political celebrities, in the social networks era, could be even defined as influencers advertising themselves, as partly anticipated in the course of the thesis. To show how these parallelisms are coherent and to better understand the implications of this new manifestation of celebrity, before passing to the political world, the concept of influencers will be now expanded as much as necessary. Firstly, it is necessary to give a thorough definition of them.

Social media influencers represent a new type of independent, third-party endorsers who shape an audience's attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media channels [...] Social media influencers promote brands through their personal lives, making them relatable to the average consumer [...] Through their candidness and openness with consumers, influencers have high social clout and credibility (Glucksman 2017).

The instrument of relatable marketing is essentially another way to define empathic discourses, as it will be soon further analysed; the key aspect in Glucksman's analysis is although the one mentioned in the last line, concerning the credibility of the influencer. Indeed, the consumer's trust is one of the most important consequences of the feeling of proximity to the influencer, rather than the star: "Contrary to celebrities or public figures who are well-known via traditional media, social media influencers are 'regular people' who have become 'online celebrities' by creating and posting content on social media" (Chen Lou 2019).<sup>2</sup>

The feeling of proximity is pivotal in the whole relation: if several studies have demonstrated how the consumer sees the influencer as a peer, and for this reason tends to believe more to these words rather than the ones in canonical ads (Nayoung Jung 2021), the reality is exactly the opposite. In a way, influencers thrive from this grey line of effectively being ordinary people who happen to speak

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<sup>2</sup> . The use of the term *celebrity* in this quote is meant to represent the more mundane meaning of the term, which, to avoid confusion, will be used as *star* or *VIP* outside quotations.

to a virtual public, despite it must be understood that from the moment they begin their careers as marketing faces they effectively cease to be an ordinary consumer, and act at the exact same level of those distant VIPs the public does not trust.

Proximity to the consumer is indeed a very slippery concept, since an effective contact happens – when influencers interact with their followers – but, simultaneously, what is more frequent is the illusion of proximity, which is often not perceived as a false superstructure by the public. Notably, this whole process would be impossible without the use of social media, which constantly acts as a tool to “narrow the gap” between the content creator and the content receiver (Nouri 2018), in practice amplifying and condensing the process that was observed during Early Modern Age. Indeed, if the contact is undeniably multimedia, social networks effectively constitute the largest percentage of all used media, and realistically are also the most impactful instruments in comparison to the others.

Apart from these conceptual features concerning the relation of proximity, there are some behavioural features shared by influencers, which are substantially required to breach the wall of ordinary content creators and reach effectively the public. Influencers are substantially marketing actors, so they must show *confidence* to present their knowledge and opinion as trustworthy; notably, this confidence tends to pass to their followers, who absorb the message and reproduce it in their interactions. As already anticipated, influencers also benefit from an aura of *authenticity*, mostly stemming from the aforementioned image of being an ordinary consumer. Lastly, the third fundamental pillar is probably as ancient as the feeling of closeness, and it is *interactivity*: joking, interacting and speaking to the followers differentiate influencers from both ordinary stars and brands at the same time, making them a successful middle point between the two (see Glucksman 2017, p.80).

Another characteristic of influencers that could not be immediately realised, despite its pivotal importance, is their target audience. Indeed, it could be even said that an influencer without a public is not even an influencer, as substantially any role that implies a confrontation or relation with the others. If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?

Online celebrities appeal to a common reference group. ‘Reference group’ is defined as a person/group of people who serve as a reference to an individual in forming values and attitudes, and in so doing provide consumers with a reference in their purchasing decisions (Nouri 2018).

The reference group is interesting in more than one level of analysis. Firstly, it substantially identifies all of the potential audience for the marketing of a product or several products, and could be seen as the initial sample of users that the influencer attempts to reach in the path to celebrity. For how various the list of sponsored products may be, an influencer will realistically always follow at least a path of similarity among the recommended products.

The reference group undergoes some sort of loyalty process to the influencer, becoming interested with time to the person, rather than only the product; despite so, it would be strange for the audience to keep following their favourite influencers in case of a complete change in topic. Moreover, a fashion influencer (for instance) will ideally attract people interested in clothes, jewels or accessories, and simultaneously will rarely pass to a completely different category of products, in which he or she may appear incompetent or that will not appeal the loyal followers. In this sense, the reference group partly shapes the influencer, who tends to focus on the topics he or she shares with the targeted public.

Furthermore, the concept of “reference group” will manifest, under a slightly different form, in the political celebrities audience. An interesting feature of the national and international political discourse, indeed, is once again connected to a sort of process of applying marketing rule to the electoral campaign, namely creating a character, a mask even, that best fits the desires and interest of

a large portion of the population, in order to win their support. Shifting alliances are clearly not a recent phenomenon, but they mutated in the Mass Media Age, adapting as many other aspects of life to the new world we live in.

In practice, those politicians who truly understand the mechanisms of celebrity and the importance of creating a very precise connection to the interests of the individuals among the electorate, are capable of creating the same loyalty of influencers in substantially the same manner: individuating a target portion of the general public, showing the personal characteristics and ideas that they appreciate, and eventually profit from their extremely personal and tight bond.

This is one of the key passages in the parallelism between influencers and politicians, since the observation of a reference group and the subsequent cultivation of the relation with them through empathy instruments is what generates stainless political devotion. The parallelism will although be completed later, since it is necessary to list a third element of the reference group (common to both the marketing and political aspects of the phenomenon) to complete the picture.

Reference groups are indeed fundamental because of their bond to the celebrity, that, being perceived as a mutual, is wholeheartedly defended in moments of distress. “When online entertainers become the subject of controversy in the media, their fans and followers are quick to become involved” explains scholar Petersen introducing a study aimed at observing the various degrees and manifestation of aggression by the followers, in case of a “menace” to their reference celebrity (Petersen 2020). The advantages of this observed practice are, of course, all for the celebrity, who in the worst cases develops a personal army of followers ready to act in defence of their idol, the attack to Capitol Hill being probably one of the most concrete meanings of the term. Trump’s case is pivotal because it shows the worst possible scenarios of this harmful individualization and celebrification of politics: a former president who opposes the democratic passage of power through his personal troops of internet adepts.

Then again, a leitmotiv that connects the phenomenon of celebrity from its very early manifestations to the current ones is the idea of empathy, already mentioned in several occasions during the course of the thesis, but that still was not thoroughly explained. Before completing the excursus on influencers, it is therefore necessary to spend few words on the nature of empathic bonds.

Empathy is often divided into two subcategories: affective empathy and cognitive empathy. *Affective empathy* is defined as an individual’s ability to experience an emotional response in reaction to another individual’s observed feelings, while *cognitive empathy* is associated with an individual’s ability to comprehend and understand an individual’s feelings without necessarily experiencing an emotional reaction (*ibid.*).

Affective empathy is probably the aspect that more pertains this analysis, since it is exactly from the sharing of feeling that the aforementioned episodes of “crusading” in honour of the influencer happen. Petersen, after a deep observation of several psychological studies, presents a very compact and precise picture of the generation of empathic bonds, observing how these are alimeted by the feeling of being similar to the other person and noting a significant increase in empathic feelings with more attractive and expressive people (*ibid.*). The first observation does not surprise when thinking of the largely mentioned feeling of perceived similarity, but the second one deserves more attention. Despite a good look definitively helps the influencer, it would be incorrect to define attractiveness as an undeniable factor for influencers, especially political ones, who benefit much more from the life-sharing aspect rather than merely good presentation.



Accordingly, the most important elements have been highlighted, and it is no surprise that they almost exactly match the same aspects that were seen in Early Modern Age: personal life sharing, parallel building of empathic bonds, feeling of proximity to the public due to context, and casual approach to marketing (the last one being the only main difference with the first celebrities). Some example could nothing but expand this historical comparison, to see how these aspects are put in practice around the world. Interestingly, for how geographically and contextually different influencers can be, they always share a very similar *modus operandi*, for which reason it was possible to distinguish the common features in such a net way.

Among all influencers around the world, one of the most notable example could be the one of the Kardashian family. The family was originally composed by the parents, Robert Kardashian and Kris Jenner, their daughters and son Kourtney, Kim, Khloé, and Rob, and was later “expanded” after the divorce of the parents and Kris’ remarriage with Caitlyn Jenner; in the second marriage, two daughters entered the scene, Kendall and Kylie. Interestingly, the Kardashians-Jenners represents one of the most extreme cases of contemporary celebrity, since substantially every member of the two families is an influencer of first rank, reaching unthinkable levels of popularity around the globe, but the most interesting part is that their fame is substantially self-generated and alimented. Studies and newspapers have criticised them for being probably the most notable example of people who are famous for being famous (King 2019; Dumitrescu 2019). Despite this apparent inconsistency for their fame, they all share billions of followers on the main social media platforms, and have been protagonists of several reality television shows since 2007, which all depict their personal life, thus creating adamantine bonds with their followers.

The importance of fame stemming purely from the wise instrumentalization of a person’s private life can be seen in another global level influencer and business-woman, Chiara Ferragni. Being one of the figures that contributed to create the concept of “influencer” in the first place, Chiara Ferragni begun her personal fashion blog in 2009, *The Blonde Salad*, which constantly nurtured her fame, up to the point of making her one of the most prominent fashion figures on the global scenario. Having become global ambassador for international brands such as Pantene, testimonial for Swarovski and many others, having been chosen as model by Mattel for a unique version of Barbie, she has received also global recognitions of her celebrity and value as a business-woman, such as the recognition by Forbes as the most important fashion influencer in the world (O'Connor 2017). Once again, the phenomenon of snowballing celebrity has had its importance also in this case study, since, with time, more and more of Chiara Ferragni’s personal life has been shared with the public, being her extremely active instagram prophile one of the most followed worldwide, and being she the protagonist, together with her family, of a recent reality show called *I Ferragnez*, as well as guest in many digital or social events.

Influencing and modern celebrity is not only feminine and fashion related. After the American case of the Kardashians and the Italian case of Ferragni, another notable example could be the case of British chef Gordon Ramsay. Awarded during his life with a total of 16 Michelin stars, the chef soon became worldwide popular thanks to several British television shows, such as *Hell’s Kitchen* and *Ramsay’s Kitchen Nightmares*, later to reach the American networks as a judge of the talent show *Masterchef*. Simultaneously, Ramsay has always been very active on social media and owns a Youtube channel where he cooks from his home, often with the participation of his son and daughters. These television appearances may appear to be an incorrect example of celebrity-building media, but this is not the case. Indeed, almost the totality of the programs hosted by Ramsay never fail to depict him in an almost intimate context, where the public can see the chef with no filters, enter his kitchen, listen to his explanations and even see his family members partake in the cooking, in the Youtube videos. The

recipe for success (pun word intended) is still the same: the consumption of the content makes the user feel close to Gordon, who is always eager to respond to any tag he receives on mainstream social media.

All of these colossuses of influencing managed to create the phenomenon in the first place, in a certain sense, being them among the first worldwide users to unconsciously adapt the celebrity model to the Mass Media Age, with a wise use of the given instruments and a career thriving also from low competition. In the early 2000s, indeed, the understanding of multimedia as a source to apply these principles was not as widespread as it is today, when much more individuals are conscious of the phenomenon of influencing and use figures as the one just mentioned as a model to actively try to shape their career as an internet celebrity.

As a matter of fact, today there are hundreds, if not thousands of influencers worldwide, all boasting extremely high numbers of followers and treating very different topics. This “second wave”, although, sees much more competition, and its protagonists realistically encounter more difficulties in becoming a huge global celebrity, when compared to those who reached their position after almost a decade of activity. The Early Modern case of Washington demonstrates how important it is, for the high results of an individual celebrity, the absence of other rivals under the spotlight, in which case only the most prominent manage to rise to the top.

The new wave of influencers offers a profusion of content creators that focus on a plethora of different aspects, in some cases choosing extremely specific types of content, in order to find a space in an area that was not explored much. Some examples will be briefly cited, just to give an idea of the colossal range that is covered by these figures.

The Korean singer and k-pop idol Jennie Ruby Jane, with almost 67 millions followers on Instagram, fashion and make-up influencer. The Command Zone, a Magic the Gathering (trading card game) American podcast and content creator group, counting barely 540000 subscribers on Youtube, is probably one of the largest influencers dealing with said card game. French swimsuit model Elisabeth Rioux, with 1.6 million followers on Instagram, is a travel influencer, partly focusing on the aspect of travelling with young children. South African influencer Shandon Larenty, with 595000 followers on Instagram, is a content creator who focuses almost entirely on the preservation of wildlife.

The list and topics could continue, but the concept will not change: influencers are now extremely frequent, and there is virtually no scope that is not covered. Moreover, all cases mentioned have some relation with earnings, in a wide sense that ranges from the sponsor of products created by the same influencer, to experiences of commercial partners, to the promotion of initiatives and campaigns to which the viewer is invited to participate.

These data are fundamental to introduce the condition of political celebrities. In fact it could be said, to schematize the historic analysis, that a new form of celebrity as a phenomenon has begun with the understanding of the potential of internet during the first decade of the 2000s. In the 2010s, it was possible to assist to the blooming of those figures who managed to captivate their audiences and profit from it (such as the cases of the Kardashians, Chiara Ferragni and Gordon Ramsay).

Thus the term “influencer” was formulated and the concept became massively widespread, up to the point of generating the tidal wave of the second generation of influencers, those who were appealed by the opportunities and were conscious of the ways to conquer the public. Politicians worldwide were substantially unaware to this new approach to celebrity (or at least there were no notable case)

up until the global recognition of the phenomenon in the 2010s, and were still reliant to the previous generation of mass media, mostly television, to nurture their celebrity.

During the past decade, although, something changed, and the debate rapidly and consistently extended also to social networks, but this does not mean that politicians had already reached the stage of being “political influencers”, at least not all of them. Indeed, if the majority of politicians effectively debate, quarrel or show themselves on social networks, this does not mean that they also share their personal lives in a systematic way, as influencers do. Relatively few politicians, although, enact this practice, and they are the real protagonists of the current historical period of analysis. Interestingly, as anticipated just above, since these political actors see substantially no competition in celebrity, the new generation of political influencers tends to have extraordinary electoral results, and benefits from a consistent popularity among the public.

The political analysts that criticize the use of some politicians’ social media page as if it was a daily blog, in which food pictures are shared or where mundane and ordinary videos are posted by said politicians, fail to understand the enormous value this content has. The instruments have been the same since Early Modern Age, they simply adapted to the media and to the daily activities done by the average person, and they still hold that unparalleled value of distance-cutters between the public and the politician.

In this sense, the historical analysis made by Lilti can, once again, be used as a carbon copy to observe how the Early Modern Age and the present substantially differ only in the context. According to the scholar, indeed, from the union of celebrity and politics was generated popularity (Lilti 2017), in other words the essence of Early Modern political celebrity. In the present, several scholars use the term “celebrity politicians” to identify the current form of the phenomenon, using the term *celebrity* in the meaning of VIP or star (Streets 2004; Wood, Corbett e Flinders 2016). As it will be better explained in the course of the next chapter, the expression is not ideal, since by only focusing on the similarity to stars, scholars fail to underline the private life element, which is instead fundamental. For this reason, in the attempt to complete the juxtaposition, it could be said that, in the present, from the union of celebrity and politics, political influencers are born.

As in the Early Modern section of this thesis two case studies were presented, to show the articulation of the first form of political celebrity, this section shall, in the same way, offer two very different case studies, to observe how extremely distant people, referring to extremely diversified electorates, managed to win an equally large national consensus through the use of celebrity techniques and empathic bonds. The first case will be the US democratic representative for New York's 14th congressional district Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez; the second will be the Italian leader of Lega Matteo Salvini.

## II.II – Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a millennial in Congress.

The study of celebrity in its original historical context is a relatively easy task when comparing it to the observation of present times. Said ease comes not from the quality of the topics (which, instead, were demonstrated to be extremely multifaceted and multidisciplinary), but rather from the abundance of sources dealing with said concept and its manifestations. For an academic study, a larger sample of scholars dealing with an historical phenomenon guarantees a higher number of case studies, examples, and manifestations of it, thus researches in that field benefit from a larger academic support.

For the current section of the thesis, although, said abundance of sources changes significantly, as partly anticipated, when affirming that current social studies fail to see the historical-political component of present celebrities and historical studies fail to mention the current manifestations of the process. In practical terms, the main complication that is generated by the absence of this type of studies is the lack of largely accredited case studies to demonstrate how political celebrity manifests in the present era.

For this reason, the choice of the two new case studies stems almost entirely from personal observation of popular politicians currently active on the electoral scene, and it is justified from the application of the parameters of “celebrity measurement” that Early Modern Age historians have applied to figures such as Washington and Napoleon. In order to show how Early Modern celebrities have not disappeared, but have simply evolved, the choice of this two case studies was made in order to analyse two of the most efficient politicians in the use of these empathy strategies, in their respective much different context. The diversity between the two is a milestone in the research, since it shows how celebrity is not ideologically dependent to any political orientation, but adapts to cultures and ideas behind it.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is an emblematical case, and her extremely popular acronym AOC is already a significant proof of this. The nickname was, firstly, chosen by the Congresswoman herself as almost a trademark, as demonstrated by the fact that it is her nickname on Twitter, a platform that is fundamental in the approach with the public, in the US in general, and particularly for her. The simplicity of the acronym reminds of the nicknames that are chosen online in blogs or videogames: it is brief, and possibly more informal than a name-surname formula that would probably remind more of a traditional older politician. As it will be shown in the course of the chapter, AOC values significantly her proximity to younger electors (which, as it could be said, represent the main portion of public she is trying to reach, despite obviously not the only one), and, simply the way she is being referred to, marks already a significant distance from other politicians.

The choice of “millennial” in the title, as one of her defining features, has indeed a double nature: she is canonically one of them in terms of age, but, mostly, this is the way she presents herself to the public. The term *millennial* is an internet neologism indicating “a person reaching young adulthood in the early 21st century” (Oxford Learner’s Dictionary 2021), to be precise, people born between 1981 and the first half of 1990s. The slang was born to differentiate those individuals who could not identify with the “too young” people born from the end of the millennium onwards (the so called *Gen Z*), nor the “too old”, born between the end of World War II and the mid 60s (*baby boomers*) and from late 60s to 1980 (*Gen X*). In a certain sense, the feeling of rupture with the past is quintessential in the millennial generation, and for this reason, AOC seems to personally represent the whole feeling of innovation and renewal.

Before going into detail into her celebrity-building strategies, it is necessary to spend a few words on who is Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, in order to facilitate the understanding and contextualization of her political career. Ocasio-Cortez was born in 1989 in New York, from a family of Puerto Rican heritage. She has been a US representative of the 14<sup>th</sup> congressional district for New York since 2019, as a member of the Democratic Party. Before her political baptism, she double-majored at the Boston University in international relations and economics, she has been an activist for a long time, and has always publicly supported egalitarian and ecologically sustainable politics.

Her career as a politician begun in 2017, when she started her political campaign for the 2018 New York's 14th congressional district elections (Grigoryan, Suetzl 2019). From the very beginning of her campaign, apart from more traditional political campaign instruments (particularly a marked and frequent personal contact of the Congresswoman with the electorate), the use of social networks was a pivotal strategy for her. Two studies, more than any others, helped in the observation of this phenomenon, utilising quantitative sources to analyse the use of social media by AOC, before and after her election. Following, the two methodologies of inquiry will be briefly explicated.

In the categorization of the Congresswoman's tweets, Lewinstein identifies three main topics in the tweets: *District Oriented*, concerning her area of pertinence, namely New York's 14<sup>th</sup> district, the Bronx and Queens; *National Agenda*, which clearly regard national interest of the US; lastly, the most important for the purpose of this work, *Extraneous* tweets, concerning private matters, feminist or motivational tweets, or that generally regard non-political issues (Lewinstein 2019).

The use of this very last category is fundamental because extraneous tweets are the essence of personal life sharing, and thus celebrity-building. As it was partly demonstrated with Early Modern Age cases, events happening in the private life of the celebrity were not the only part that interested the public: images of the person, their thoughts, their past experiences, their ideals were all extremely important elements in the construction of the adamantine bond that nurtures the phenomenon object of this study, that interestingly can all be found in said extraneous category. It is significant to observe how AOC does not relegate these type of tweets to another unofficial account, how most of other politicians do (*ibid.*, page 23), but she keeps them as an integrant part of her political account, almost to suggest that there is effectively not a caesure between her personal thoughts and experiences, and her role as a politician.

For the other analytical source, operated by Jacuinde, the categorization of the tweets' content is not exactly the same, but essentially very similar. In this case, the background for the categories derives from the observation of the types of framing used in media according to Gamson and Lash (1983), who identify eight categories (metaphors, exemplars, catchphrases, depictions, visual images, roots, consequences, and appeals to principle), and the integration of this categories with the more recent study of Holbert, who instead uses a more generic framing of roots, consequences and appeals to principle (Holbert, et al. 2007). The final categorization operated in the study offers eleven frames in which AOC's tweets were categorized, ranging from metaphors to slogans, but most important including the category "stories", which marks personal telling by the politician, together with some parallel labels that combine personal anecdotes with other elements (Jacuinde 2019).

The samples of tweets concern a period before the election and one after. In the initial phase, both studies note a remarkable percentage of tweets that concerns Ocasio-Cortez's personal life: Lewinstein identifies that 24% of tweets out of a sample of 221 fall in the category of Extraneous tweets, while Jacuinde counts a solid 20% out of 50 examined tweets. The numbers are already significantly high, if considering that Twitter acted as the main channel for any communication and

messages of political campaign for the candidate, but the numbers were even to improve after the election.

Since being elected [...] she [Ocasio-Cortez] had nearly doubled the proportion of tweets that fall under the Extraneous category, utilizing personal anecdotes, inspirational messages, feminist actions and insights, and calls for progressive leadership that connect with her audience and set her apart from strictly policy-oriented politician Twitter accounts (Lewinstein 2019).

The data shows a significant improvement of the non-political content, especially in the largest sample: Lewinstein notices a rise in Extraneous topics that reaches the striking number of 43% of 369 tweets, while Jacuinde's analysis demonstrates a more modest rise (despite being nonetheless an increase) of 22% out of 50 tweets. In this sense, probably the much larger sample of the firstly mentioned study may be more impactful to understand the improvement of personal life-driven propaganda acted by the politician.

**@AOC on December 1, 2018:** "In my on-boarding to Congress, I get to pick my insurance plan. As a waitress, I had to pay more than TWICE what I'd pay as a member of Congress. It's frustrating that Congressmembers would deny other people affordability that they themselves enjoy. Time for #MedicareForAll." (Ocasio-Cortez, 2018a)

**@AOC on December 29, 2018:** "My mamá taught me how to deal with bullies. When I moved to a new town at a young age, I stuck out for all sorts of reasons: I looked different, I spoke Spanish, my clothes weren't as nice. Bullies don't bother me, but this parent's account touched my heart. People are watching." (Ocasio-Cortez, 2018b)

These two tweets are just an example of the type of communication that is put in practice by AOC: personal anecdotes that convey the message of proximity of the candidate to the average worker, to the minorities, to younger Americans in general. The proposed image is the one of a strong young woman that understands the struggles of the public because she is one of them, and therefore feels relatable to the reader (Jacuinde 2019).

The fact that the path of personal telling was not abandoned after the election may surprise, since the objective has been already reached, but it should not. After all, the data demonstrate an understanding by Representative Ocasio-Cortez of the mechanism of political celebrity, and the support gained by sharing her personal life with the electors is shown to be so important that it was even amplified after the victory. For this reason it is reasonable to think that this persistence has the purpose of extending the public appreciation of AOC throughout the mandate, and possibly even further.

Clearly, the thesis does not aim to give credit entirely to the personal sharing for the Congresswoman's victory, as in Early Modern Age celebrity was not completely dependent on this factor. Success comes from the combination of effective, more traditional political (and in the past examples, also military) strategies, to the constant and methodical use of the personal image of the celebrity. In the case of Ocasio-Cortez, as it will be partly expanded later in the chapter, it is possible to see a profound personal involvement in her electoral community, frequent visits to the electors in their houses and communities, debates against the "old-style" politicians, and others canonical approaches, but it should never be forgotten how much of the personal telling is present, in parallel.

As already anticipated, part of this work's purpose is to connect the dots that fail to see the historical background of political celebrity, and, in this sense, this misunderstanding may come from the use of the term "celebrity" in its more popular meaning of "star". Exactly in this context, more than one study partially covers theoretical background of contemporary political celebrity, but falls in this conceptual mistake.

For instance, in the observation of American politics, a study by scholar Street deals with the world of politicians and stars, individuating two groups, the celebrity *politician*, or CP1, who is initially a candidate that later engages in the world of popular culture to enhance his popularity, and the *celebrity politician*, or CP2, who is an entertainer that later reaches the world of politics (Streets 2004). On the same page, using the same mundane sense of “celebrity”, a study by scholars Wood, Corbett, and Finders focuses on political celebrities as politicians who acts like stars, appear in media as such and are recurrent protagonists of pop references (Wood, Corbett & Flinders 2016).

The failure of this method, which often coincides to the aforementioned use of the term celebrity, lays not in the incorrect observation of the manifestation and consequences of political celebrity, but in the incapability of understanding the causes behind it. In other words, all of these studies are correct in recognising how, once having “won the hearts” of the public, celebrities tend to act like stars, and then fuel their popularity from this process, managing to even create fandoms (Parikh 2012; Rodriguez, Goretti 2020), but they lack the historical process that shows how this popularity mainly stems from the process of empathy-building, through personal life sharing.

Keeping this in mind allows to utilize said research to expand the scope of this analysis, understanding the origin of said phenomena and observing its consequences, but also covering their gaps. Concerning this, the interpretation of Ocasio-Cortez’s hard-core followers as a proper fandom is an interesting point of view, that effectively summarizes the approach of a remarkable portion of the American (and, to a smaller extent, international) public regarding this celebrity. If her political followers tend to identify more as fans rather than electors, they will effectively amplify AOC’s celebrity, in the sense that she will benefit a much larger genuine support than an average politician would. This section is clearly more speculative, and therefore will not see larger space; on the contrary, it is necessary to observe more in detail the instruments of Ocasio-Cortez celebrity-building.

AOC’s presence on Twitter acted as a sort of trampoline for her popularity, and she soon passed to a multimedia approach to expand her positive image. In this operation, a very important source is undoubtedly the documentary *Knock Down the House*, distributed by Netflix in early 2019. The documentary, directed by Rachel Lears, shows the 2018 American congressional primary campaigns of three other women, all candidates for the Democratic Party in different states and districts, Amy Vilela, Cori Bush, Paula Jean Swearengin, but mainly focuses on Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, around who revolves the almost entirety of the work (Lears 2019).

The documentary has undoubtedly a remarkable value of being one of the most complete sources to document the electoral campaign of Ocasio-Cortez, reconstructing the political *iter*, from the idea of her candidacy to the first day in Congress, but simultaneously operates an enormous support to her celebrity-building. The documentary indeed shows how ordinary she is in her daily life and social extraction, including behind-the-scenes footage that never fails to put the politician closer to the emotive perception of the viewer, but at the same time it demonstrates how invested she is in the representation of the public.

What is shown in the documentary can be summed up into two main macro-categories: the ideas and practices behind her approach to the electoral campaign (which could be considered as a source proving the explicit adoption of celebrity-like techniques), and the private moments of AOC (which, instead, can be identified almost as implicit propaganda, contributing to the creation of her popularity among the viewers). To show how the documentary has contributed to her popularity, the two will now be both analysed.

Concerning the first macro-group, the documentary shows how, in the earliest stages of her campaign, Alexandria's brother contributed to the ideological structure of her "political character", suggesting the creation of a "grassroots movement" that had AOC at the centre. This operation was put in practice through a massive involvement of the New York 14<sup>th</sup> district's citizens, with which candidate Ocasio-Cortez came in contact daily: knocking to their doors to personally present herself, chatting with the electors to understand their issues, taking part to projects in schools and communities to become known and simultaneously know the citizens' needs.

Moreover, both in the strategic planning and in the public discourses, Ocasio-Cortez and her team recurrently use some terms or expressions that manifest their ideological background, using the formula "opposing the establishment" more than any other else. This concept of fighting the establishment reaches the apex in the confrontation that, in the last weeks before the elections, naturally rose up with her political adversary, Joe Crowley. In more than one occasion, both behind the scenes and openly, during debates, Ocasio-Cortez criticizes the approach of Crowley to his own campaign, which, in her opinion, was lacking substance and was obsolete, demonstrating how he was a symbol of that establishment they were trying to overthrow. Crowley represents the old-style political class, lacking concrete and personal interaction with the electorate, and being in fact a "professional" politician, rather than a working citizen who candidates to the elections.

This last aspect is fundamental to introduce the other macro-group of scenes: in the other parts of the documentary that were not mentioned so far, a recurrent image that is presented to the viewer is the one of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez as a relatable average person, who, from her personal microcosm, has now decided to enter politics. The very first scenes of the documentary already press significantly on the pedal of emotional proximity, since AOC is shown as she works as a waitress, the job she had before deciding to candidate herself, which she also had to maintain during the whole campaign in order to maintain herself, up to the day in which she moved to Washington. Who could ever feel closer, for the millennial watching the documentary, than a candidate that has to work as a waiter to pay her bills, even during the political campaign?

In a sense, this is no different from the moment in which Napoleon helped his soldiers recharging the cannons, as the humblest private would, despite possessing one of the higher charges in the military and aiming to the rule of France (Bell 2020): perceived proximity nullifies the sensation of being close to a ruler. On the contrary, a politician that does not need to work anymore outside of his role as a representative, far from the electors, as Crowley was, is perceived as a distant entity, thus never posing the threat of emotional competition to a political celebrity.

The working scenes are, however, not the only moments framed into this implicit celebrity-building. In a scene, the troupe is introduced to the Ocasio-Cortez family in their house, and Alexandria's mother shows pictures and videos of the candidate as a child. Her Hispanic heritage is shown as a fundamental part of her essence, and in another scene, she is filmed as she speaks Spanish among members of the New York Puerto Rican community, her family's country of origin. In these cases it is shown how her target is not only the youngers, but also ethnical minorities, the working class in general, and, obviously, women that rebel to a patriarchal vision of life.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez feels even closer to the viewer for the casual and often informal way she speaks. She talks about her insecurities, both on a more serious level, as she prepares for the final polls, and a more casual one, as she jokingly confesses that when she speaks to strangers her voices tends to go higher by several octaves. Moreover, in the very last scene of the documentary, she appears as "ordinary" as ever, as she tears up in seeing the Congress in front of her and she shares



memoires of her father, wondering if he would be proud of her if he was still alive. Having seen the concrete ways in which she is presented, the parallelism with past writers who have contributed to the public's appreciation of political celebrities, such as Las Cases or Weems, naturally rises, demonstrating the consistency of the historical phenomenon of celebrity. Celebrity biographers are among the most important artisans of the politician's popularity, since they manage to show the subject from an external yet close point of view.

A very last element coming from the documentary must be highlighted, before moving to new aspects of this case study, and that is a part of AOC's critique of Crowley's electoral campaign. Indeed, as she highlights the lack of content in his advertising brochure, showing how he substantially presents himself only as an opponent to Trump, without saying what his active policies aim to be, AOC sighs recognising how he is supposedly the fourth most influential Democratic in the US. Observing the difference in her votes in comparison to her rival – she obtained a striking 57.13%, against Crowley's 42.5% (New York Times 2018) – it is clear how she has few to no competition inside her party, and realistically the same could be said of the overall American political scenario. As highlighted in more than one occasion in the course of this thesis, the lack of competitors is always an extremely powerful instrument for the flourishing of political celebrity, and this simultaneously explains Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's popularity and realistically announces even more of it to come in the future.

The multimedia approach of AOC offers, although, even more objects of study, and the next medium used by the politician is probably the most emblematical in observing how much does she values the creation of a profound relation with her younger public. In late November 2020, the Congresswoman has opened her Twitch channel, simply named "AOC". Twitch is a streaming platform in which content creators can interact live with their viewers while recording themselves, in the majority of cases while playing videogames of virtually any type, despite it is not rare to see channels of "just chatting", variety, music and so on.

The platform is one of the most popular worldwide social media, counting weekly an average of 2,571,602 viewers and 89,997 active content creators; furthermore, these numbers are substantially the double of those at the beginning of 2019, proving how the platform has been in a rising popularity wave since the beginning of the global pandemic (Twitch tracker 2021). According to GlobalWebIndex in Q2 2019, Twitch users are approximately 65% male and 35% female. Moreover, the approximated age demographics see a 41% of users in the range of 16-24 years old, a 32% in the range 25-34, a definitively smaller sample of 17% in the range 35-44, and two very small groups of respectively 7% and 3% in the frames 45-54 and 55-64 (Kavanagh 2019).

AOC's presence on Twitch was definitively not constant, since she only streamed on two occasions, on 28<sup>th</sup> November 2020 and 29<sup>th</sup> January 2021 (Twitch, consulted on 23/06/2022). Her connection with the younger public through this media is however fundamental, since she not only managed to bring a politician in charge on a platform that realistically had never hosted one, but she simultaneously managed to present herself in the private space of her home, in a comfort activity that was unbelievably popular at the time: playing Among Us.

This multiplayer social deduction indie game was developed and published by the American company Innersloth, and distributed to the public in June 2018; it is playable on almost every platform, mobile phone included. In the game, up to eight players impersonate some astronauts on a spaceship, knowing that two of them (randomly selected at the start of the game) are actually impostors who can eliminate the other members of the crew. The objective of the crewmates is to deduce who the impostors are and democratically decide to eliminate them, while the impostors will try to covertly

eliminate the crewmates and create chaos in the votes. It was probably also for the simplicity of the game, its possibility to be played on any phone with no specific requirements, and possibly also for the lack of in person social interactions of the pandemic, that the game's popularity skyrocketed, reaching a peak of 60 millions daily players on October 2020 and around 500 millions monthly active players in November of that same year (Curry 2022).

It was exactly in this context of maximum popularity that Ocasio-Cortez decided to stream herself casually playing the game, struggling with the same issues that the other players had in their daily usage of the app, and re-evoking the atmosphere of playing with friends. In her case, although, she did not play with her real friends, but with a group of professional streamers and content creators, well known and appreciated by the American public, who often interact together and own, therefore, the chemistry of a group of friends in the eyes of the viewer. Among these other streamers it is possible to find popular names, such as Pokimane (9,2 millions of followers on Twitch), Valkyrae (3,68 millions followers on Youtube), Disguised Toast (3,66 millions of followers on Youtube), HasanAbi (2 millions followers on Twitch) and others, all with different ranges of popularity that still range in terms of millions of subscribers.

The numbers that have been reported serve the purpose of showing the social impact that this supposedly casual moment in AOC's life had on the global public. The Congresswoman substantially showcased her personality, simulating the private comfort of her private life and interacting with a well-established group, so that the viewer would feel exactly as a good old friend of her, playing a game together. Despite the extreme sporadicity of her Twitch appearance, this surely made an impact on her public image, at least considering how the videos of her streams collected 2,3 millions of visuals for the first occasion, and, on the second occasion, respectively 1,5 millions views for the playthrough of Among Us and 1,3 millions views for the conclusive chatting section (Twitch, consulted on 23/06/2022). Moreover, it has to be considered that several extracts of the streams were later uploaded on Youtube, where millions of other views were collected.

One last major episode of celebrity-like political campaign can be made in the observation of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez as a case study, despite this last one leans more in the direction of stars behaviour, rather than intimacy. This, however, does not come in contrast with the phenomenon of celebrity: as it was possible to see in the case studies of Early Modern Age, political celebrities effectively tend to be seen as emotionally closer entities by the public, but simultaneously they are leaders, and are actively (as Napoleon) or passively (as Washington) elevated by their condition of mere mortals. Obviously, this is not the case with present political celebrities, who instead tend to transform the Early Modern apotheosis in a more practical "starrification", thus acting or attempting to be perceived as stars or VIPs.

In Ocasio-Cortez's case, one of the main occasions in which this strategy was applied was the 2021 Met Gala. Formally called "the Costume Institute Gala" or "the Costume Institute Benefit", Met Gala is a fundraising fashion event organized by Vogue for the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute in New York. The event has a strong international media reach, and is considered as probably the most prominent fashion event globally; actors, singers, and stars of every type participate to display their dresses (in theory, every year with a unique theme) created by world famous designers and stylists.

AOC participated to the event with a long white gala dress, marked by a capital letters red sentence on the back: "Tax the rich". The politician walked the red carpet with the designer of the dress, Aurora James, and, when asked about the phrase, she remarked the message, expressing the importance of

more equal taxation (Lupini 2021). The episode obviously generated a tidal wave of reactions, from the very positive to the very negative, with many different causes and ideologies behind the different responses, but this clearly does not belong to the scope of this thesis. On the contrary, the idea of participating to a globally famous mundane event, maintaining the dual nature of a star (wearing the gala dress and partaking to the red carpet) and a politician (the message and the explanation of it when interviewed) manifests once again the objective of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of being more than a simple politician, aiming at the lifestyle of celebrities.

In light of these argumentations, the observation of the way Congresswoman Ocasio-Cortez interacts with her electors and the American (or even international) public in general has shown, both in general strategies and specific events, how her approach perfectly fits within the frame of contemporary political celebrities. The multimedia parameter is a pivotal element of her interactions, ranging from the daily use of social networks, to the participation of public events, appearance on video platforms and the documentary on Netflix. The vast majority of these cases show a young, extroverted and invested politician, who never forgets her roots and the toll of her generation, thus reducing the feeling of distance caused by her charge, and instead improves the empathic affection of the public through proximity strategies.

The line between her private life and her political role is blurred, and her social media profiles are the major responsible for this, since on her Twitter it is possible to read alongside personal thoughts and political statements, always characterized by a strong personal footprint (Lewinstein 2019). Her understanding of the mechanisms of celebrity seems almost unmatched in the US political scenario, at least inside of her party and among her younger target. Hypothetically speaking, considering the data especially in historical comparison to the celebrities of the past, it should not surprise to see a further rise in popularity of AOC in the following years, and maybe her candidacy to higher charges of the American political system.

The value of the mechanisms of celebrity as objective parameters that horizontally could apply to any politician will be demonstrated by comparing this case study to the next one, an extremely different perspective: Matteo Salvini. The two politicians have, indeed, virtually nothing in common – considering their opposing political views, different backgrounds and targets – except the understanding of the way in which political celebrity works, and the large use of these strategies to win the support of their respective national public, as it will be shown in the next chapter.

### **II.III – Matteo Salvini, from local party leader to national celebrity.**

In retrospective, it could be said that Matteo Salvini was involved in the very first conceptualization of this thesis. Indeed, the thoughts that eventually brought me to understand the historic value of celebrity as a phenomenon that today is more alive than ever, stemmed from a public critique to Salvini, coming from the Governor of Campania, Vincenzo De Luca. In a Facebook live streaming aired on the 19<sup>th</sup> of June 2020, De Luca harshly criticised and personally attacked Salvini. Among the invectives, there was one that deeply resonated within me: De Luca, in order to ridicule his political opponent, mocked him for posting about his dinner on Twitter rather than spending time with his partner (Roncone 2020).

My understanding at the time was that Salvini's posts about his dinner were not what they appeared in surface, but I still lacked the complete understanding behind this. Through specific studies, I understood that the food pictures were not important as such, but in the way they showed his daily life to the public, in the exact same manner as celebrities started connecting to the public in their new unique way in Early Modern Age. From that meditation, the discourse on celebrity expanded, and a methodical reconstruction of the development of the phenomenon, and the comparison between the early manifestations and the current ones has eventually led to this work.

This misinterpretation of Salvini's *modus operandi* is considerably common in the Italian political scene, and, as already anticipated in the course of the thesis, the few that actually understand the process fail to recognize the historical process behind it, which perfectly explains his success. Since most of his political adversaries lack the understanding of the process in the very first place, it is no surprise that Salvini held virtually no real competitor for several years among the other Italian political parties. To thoroughly understand the process that led to his outstanding results, and in order to compare the apex of political popularity (peaked in 2019) to the current situation, it is necessary to start from the beginning of Matteo Salvini's political life, and most importantly to observe how his party has transformed under his leadership.

Born in Milan in 1973, Salvini joins the regional party Lega Nord in 1990; he partakes to two mandates as city councillor in Milan (1993-1998; 2006-2008), and three mandates in the European Parliament (2004-2006, and two consecutive mandates that covered the years 2009-2018). In 2013 he was elected secretary of Lega Nord, and his role was confirmed in 2017, year in which he completely transformed the essence of Lega, from a strictly regionally localised party to an ambitious personalised national one. In 2018, after the elections, he was Minister of the Intern and Vice-Premier in the first mandate of Premier Giuseppe Conte. In 2019, a crisis to which Salvini himself contributed to a large extent, led to the dissolution of the government, and the former Minister lost his charge in the second Conte mandate. Before conducting any other observation that could concern Salvini from the 2018 elections onwards, the transformation of his party is pivotal in signalling the beginning of his political celebrity path, and therefore deserves a more in detail observation.

The original Lega Nord, whose complete name was "Lega Nord for the Independence of Padania", was founded between 1989 and 1991, in the fusion of six separatist political movements from Northern Italy. They envisioned the schism of the Northern Italian regions, united under the new name of *Padania* (in honour to the Pianura Padana, the vast plains area that surrounds Italy's longest river, the Po). Their public appearances were often characterised by the constant remark of their federalists mires, with the frequent use of offensive mottos against Southern Italians and the Italian government: to synthetize the whole process it would be enough to report that "*Roma Ladrona*",

which could be translated into *Rome Thief*, was the official motto of the league (Lega Nord, consulted on 28/06/2022).

Without going into detail in the (not particularly delicate) declarations of the founder and initial secretary of Lega, Umberto Bossi, it should be clear how the party was extremely regionalised, how it did not benefit of any popularity outside its area of pertinence, and, for mainly these two reasons, was not a competitive actor in the Italian national political scene for the entirety of its existence. The situation changed radically after Salvini's secretariat: he completely transformed the face of the party, renewing it to its foundations, starting from the name, that turned into *Lega for Salvini Premier*. Secessionism was abandoned, while keeping the original sovranist soul of the party, but channeling it into a nationalist ideology, characterised by a strong personalism – explicitated even in the name (Cervi, Gil 2020). The racist ideals that, in the original Lega, targeted Southern Italy, were now channelled towards immigrants, with racist and xenophobic recurrent topics to create a united national front (Bobba 2019).

As in the case of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Salvini uses both traditional political techniques and celebrity-like ones. The adoption of a xenophobic language and the constant appeal to values like traditional family or Christianity by Salvini, certainly pertain to the first category, but it must be taken in consideration that these topics have been part of the Italian political discourse for decades. Being these discourses recurrent, particularly among Italian far-right parties, it would be hard to believe that the unprecedented success of Salvini was possible purely because of these factors, considering his uncontested popularity not only in relation to other right-wing groups, but to any other party in 2019 elections. The difference was made by the adoption of celebrity-building techniques, starting in the first half of 2010s, with a significant improvement after 2017.

A central figure in this political revolution was Matteo Salvini's spin-doctor, Luca Morisi. Philosophy Professor at the University of Verona from 2004 to 2015, Morisi defines himself a "digital philosopher" on his Twitter account, and he has been the main architect behind the Lega secretary's political campaign from 2013, as he declares himself:

It is exactly on social media that, in ancient and unsuspected times, happened the passage from the old dimension of Lega to the new one. Already in 2014, when Salvini became secretary, we started nationalising the communication. That is the moment in which all of the potential manifested itself. Practically, a Copernican revolution of Lega, and I can assure that social media were fundamental.<sup>3</sup> (Florio 2021)

If, in Early Modern Age, there were substantially no cases of celebrities or political celebrities who had an entire team to support their popularity mires with statistics of the population or studies that mathematically proved the objects of public appreciation, the same could not be said about contemporary celebrities. Polls and data have become fundamental in the support of celebrity, especially since the process has now been historically proved and understood. Therefore, the union of intuition, experience and an understanding of the "public sphere" requires a significantly more methodical approach, compared to the past, in order to succeed.

The omnipresence of spin-doctors or support teams could seem to weaken the image of the politician as a conscious celebrity, but, in reality, the outcome remains unvaried. If Morisi was the one to have originally understood the mechanisms of celebrity and Salvini was merely benefitting of his council, or if, instead, it was Salvini himself that personally comprehended the phenomenon and just benefits from Morisi's cooperation, the eventual result would be the same: Salvini acting as a political

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<sup>3</sup> Translation by the author.

celebrity. Obviously, the same discourse applies to Ocasio-Cortez, her brother and her team, or to any other contemporary political influencer around the world. For the sake of the argument, and to avoid excessive distinctions, there will be no marked caesuras between political celebrities and their teams, which will be considered as a natural prosecution of the candidate, being him or her the face of the campaign. To support the idea that it would be meaningless to draw a line between spin-doctor and the celebrity, when speaking of who actually made the decisions during the process of popularity-building, it can be logically added that even if the support team had to abandon the politician and switch “client” for any reason, the candidate would have interiorized the concept with time, and could virtually continue on his own to improve celebrity strategies.

Having completed the personal background of Salvini and having closed this parenthesis concerning the methodological approach to the conception of his support team, it is necessary to observe what has been done in practice to obtain this unprecedented results in terms of popularity. Comparing the strategies adopted by Matteo Salvini to those adopted by AOC, it could be said that latter has been proven to appreciate some “explosive” occasional strategies, while the former the former tends to prefer the use of reiterated general mechanisms. For instance, the documentary, the two Twitch live streams or the participation to Met Gala are all specific episodes that peaked the creation of empathic bonds between Ocasio-Cortez and the public, despite it must be recognized how she does not fail to use daily, more ordinary techniques.

Salvini tends to operate almost entirely on the last group of celebrity-building strategies, preferring a constant use of social media to cut the distance with his public, and the reiteration of a same strategy in all the occasions it can be applied. For instance, as it will be better explained later, one of his trademarks used to be wearing pullovers with the name of the city he was visiting that day for the political campaign, and for the first years of his celebrity-building campaign he never lost the possibility to apply this strategy. Nearly all of the interactions by the secretary of Lega happen on social media or are social media-driven, and the popularity of these media in the daily life of the electors is the instrument that, above all, allowed Salvini to become so popular.

Among all social networks, Facebook appears as the most prominent one, probably because of its major popularity in Italy when compared to other social media: the platform counts 35.7 million Italian users out of 60 million inhabitants, and statistics show that most of the Italian users prefers the use of Facebook to stay informed (AGCOM 2019). A study by scholars Bracciale, Andretta and Martella compares the number of Facebook posts and tweets by Salvini to those posted by two of his main political adversaries, Luigi Di Maio (at the time leading figure of Movimento Cinque Stelle) and Matteo Renzi (at the time leader of Partito Democratico), before the 2018 elections. Salvini was largely the first for number of interactions with the public, counting 468 Facebook posts (for a public of over 2 million followers, almost the double of any of the two others politicians) and 740 tweets, against Di Maio’s ratio of 310 posts and 58 tweets, and Renzi’s 88 posts and 109 tweets (Bracciale, Andretta, Martella 2021).

A distinction can be made within Salvini’s interactions, despite the two kinds of relations are very close to each other conceptually, and they sometimes overlap: highly interactive moments with his followers and pure sharing of personal moments (a category that will be called “life-bites” in short). The first category counts one of the most important instrument in Salvini celebrity behaviour, the use of Facebook Live, a feature of the social network that was implemented in 2015, allowing content creators of any sort to effectively interact with their followers, who can comment, react and interact live with the streamer (Cervi, Gil 2020). As partly anticipated, this interactive phenomenon partly overlaps with the category of life-bites: during his live streams, Salvini is at his home, in comfortable

clothes, roaming around his house, occasionally interrupting the dialogue with the followers to speak to his daughter. A lot of intimate details that act as a corollary to his dialogue are seen by the viewers, simultaneously conveying the largely mentioned feeling of closeness and intimacy and operating simple but effective communication with the public.

Clearly, the essence of Facebook Live is exactly the same as Twitch for the case study of AOC: both are streaming platforms that allow interaction, the use of emojis or emotes (substantially, very informal instruments for virtual dialogue), and are based on the concept of directly speaking to the electorate. The main difference lays obviously on the target of the streaming platform, which in a sense explicates who is the electoral target for each politician. Basing an approximate distinction on the age categories that were mentioned in the previous chapter, Facebook is mostly used by Baby boomers and Gen X, while Twitch gathers its public mostly in Millennials and Gen Z: different targets require different media, despite the substance is the same.

The process of personal interaction between Matteo Salvini and the public vastly benefits from his constant presence during public events, manifestations, food fests and similar occasions, all situations of massive public participation to which the politician never refuses to take part. If it could be argued that (as in the previous case study) episodes in which a politician personally shows himself amidst a large public are a traditional political strategy, it must be recognised how celebrity is strictly involved in Salvini's actions even in this case. Indeed, as a movie star, people constantly ask the secretary to take selfies with them, but, more than that, Salvini always has the moment captured by thirds, to later post online albums containing all the pictures he has taken with the public during any event.

In this sense, this repost of the dozens of ordinary photos overcomes the star behaviour, generating a type of interaction that can be seen as pure political influencing. Stars would never care to post basically every selfie they take with their fans, while in this case the political influencer is not eager to show them on his personal profile, demonstrating how, despite being "above" the ordinary people because of his popularity, he still considerably values those moments of interaction, up to the point of meticulously posting an album for every public event.

Between 2018 and 2019, it was launched a very unique contest that happened to be probably the most significant single event involving Salvini as a celebrity: "Vinci Salvini", literally "Win Salvini". The contest had two editions, which lasted for a few months each; the rules implied to simply interact as much as possible to the Facebook posts shared by the leader. The winner of the weekly polls would win a phone call with Salvini in person, together with a photo of the fan personally shared by the politician himself. For the monthly winner the prize was even "higher", since the top fan of the month had the occasion to drink a coffee with Salvini in person; moreover, the meeting would have been recorded and shared on every social media platform, so that everyone could participate to the moment and see Salvini's interest and care for his followers.

The peculiar initiative, promoted by Salvini on his personal profile through a video advertisement that was shared on all platforms, gathered a remarkable success among the electors, that participated from the whole peninsula. By observing the regional origin of the monthly winners, it is possible to notice how widespread the success of the Lega secretary had become after the celebrity-building campaigns. Southern Italians, coming from those regions that were once vilified by Lega Nord and its leaders, were now more than happy to earn their picture with their beloved leader, testifying as a badge their grade of number one fan. Lega's regionalism is now completely surpassed.

The reasoning behind this is slightly complex, since it surely involves the mechanisms of celebrity that are being discussed in this chapter, but it also includes large populist manoeuvres operated by

Salvini and, generally, the Italian far-right (Bracciale, Andretta, Martella 2021; Cervi, Gil 2020). As vastly anticipated in the course of the thesis, the purpose of this work is not to completely address to celebrity the popularity of some successful politicians, but rather to highlight the importance of this phenomenon in parallel to “traditional” political strategies that are frequently already under the scope of mainstream political analysis. For this reason, it is certainly recognised the practical importance that populist and xenophobic propaganda have had on the national appreciation of Lega at the elections, channelling unity through the regions in the distrust for the immigrants, but those aspects will not receive further attention in this work, having already enough analytical space to actually cast a shadow on the equally important celebrity strategies.

Proceeding on the analysis of said celebrity-building, there is one last major strategy that pertains to the realm of participation of the public, despite it being slightly harder to classify due to its peculiarity in term of both traditional political techniques and influencers’ techniques. Salvini was, indeed, famous (especially during the first years of his new approach to politics) for his tradition of wearing clothes related to the place he went to conduct his political campaign, as partly anticipated. This mechanism involved both the use of hoodies with the name of the city he was visiting (printed on the front, in capital letters) and the use of workers’ uniforms when he was in a factory, a workplace or an event involving a precise group of workers.

The conceptual peculiarity of this act lays in the fact that while it is easier to feel close to a person seen in their personal space or clothes (the empathy building strategies that has been shown in more than one occasion now), seeing a politician in a uniform does not necessary convey the message of proximity, since it is clear that in that case the outfit is not personal, but rather a “mask”. Mainly for this reason, it could be thought that this strategy was not the best celebrity-building operation led by the Italian politician. The idea that this technique was not particularly successful is reinforced by the fact that it was substantially abandoned, especially after a significantly criticised episode in which Salvini wore the uniform of the Italian fire fighters. In fact, the fire fighters union denounced Salvini for unauthorized use of the uniform, that, by rule of law, is forbidden to those who do not belong to the order (Tonacci 2019).

For what concerns the life-bites category, instead, the imagery that the politician shares tends to – unsurprisingly – always be a sort of manifesto of the ideological values the far-right appeals to, but also of the Italian heritage in general. The first ideological group is easier to distinguish, and mostly concretizes in the form of pictures of Salvini with his youngest daughter, Mirta. The photos frequently portray the leader having breakfast or a mid-afternoon snack with the child, or show moments of them at the park or in similar father-daughter activities. Clearly, the ideological backbone to which these moments appeal to is the idea of a traditional family, a message that is conveyed despite Salvini is effectively not married, nor the same social media attention is given to the elder son, had from his first marriage, named Federico. An equally as important propagandistic life-bite is the frequently shared Christian spirit of Salvini, who is not eager to show himself to public speeches with a rosary in his hands, appealing to the Christian ethic and its values, or to post his devoted respect of the main Christian festivities during the year.

The second conceptual group is probably not as self-explanatory in the name and deserves an explication. I have defined this category of posts as “general Italian legacy” because they are not connected to any traditional far-right ideology, and can appear as almost stereotypical ways to demonstrate being Italian. More precisely, if the Italian far-right often openly support traditional families, Christian values, or the worker class, there has never been any public propaganda that cites, for example, the pleasure of eating Nutella and bread for breakfast. The point of this observation is



that clearly these group of life-bites has an ideological value behind it, being it not the usual political discourse, but rather a very peculiar way to express a national identity.

The mention of Nutella is not comically exaggerated nor casual, indeed, a very large space in Salvini's posts is given to food: his meals, the fresh vegetables and fruits he takes from his garden, seasonal food, traditional recipes, street food bought during festivals, and Italian products in general. All of these aspects of the food dimension which are, as already said, almost stereotypically Italian, are extremely important in his celebrity-strategies, since they not only convey the frequent feeling of proximity, but have probably also another value because of their "Italianity".

As stated in the beginning of the chapter, Salvini's political strategy involved an abandonment of regionalism to embrace populist nationalism, favouring the passage through the introduction of the distancing from the *foreigner*, especially immigrants. The hypothesis could be that, in the aim of fortifying this newly needed feeling of unity across the peninsula, Salvini aims to gather several aspects of what it is felt to be Italian in his shared life-bites, to let the electorate focus on their common points rather than on the diversity among Northern, Central and Southern Italy. Food culture is embedded in each Italian region, and there is virtually a unified share for the feeling of caring for food and its social and cultural value, independently from the local recipes and ingredients.

A similar background of attempted ideological unity could be seen behind the very last category of "Italian" life-bites, and that is Salvini's passion for soccer, particularly for one of the two historical teams from Lombardy, AC Milan. The politician often shows himself passionate about his beloved team, wearing the official scarf or the t-shirt even when at home in his living room, while watching the game on TV. There is no need to explain how important soccer is in the Italian essence, not only in mere terms of fans and number of soccer teams across the nation, but also in a deep culturally embedded sense, as demonstrated, just to give an example, in the movie *È stata la Mano di Dio*, by the Oscar awarded Italian director Sorrentino, in which Maradona acts almost like a divine apparition for Neapolitans. Apart from this notable artistic example, the value of soccer as a cultural pillar in the Italian heritage is also academically proven by some studies that observe the evolution of this sport as a mass culture phenomenon in the peninsula, and rooting as an almost ritualistic process (Marchesini, Pivato 2022).

The reason behind the choice of this very specific group of empathic sharing to contribute to Salvini's celebrity is clearly hypothetical, but the consequences remain. As a political influencer, Matteo Salvini managed to bring Lega from an extremely localised party, to the third most popular party in the Italian parliamentary elections of 2018 – around 17% of votes – and the most voted in the European parliamentary elections of 2019, with up to 34.3% of the preferences (Il Sole 24 Ore 2018; la Repubblica 2019).

The demonstration of the use of celebrity-building strategies, unparalleled by any other contemporary Italian politician, certifies the classification of the far-right leader as one of the most efficient contemporary political influencers in his electoral context. As already stated, these strategies have been successful also thanks to their combination to more evident instruments of populist propaganda, strategies that have almost operated as a bait for political analysts who failed to see the simultaneous celebrity mechanisms.

It must be said, although, that in the last years, notably after the crisis that has led to the end of the first Conte government and the beginning of Conte *bis*, in which Salvini covered no ministerial role, his popularity has decreased, leaving more space to one the farthest-right Italian parties, Fratelli d'Italia, led by Giorgia Meloni. In May 2022, polls calculated a national appreciation of Lega down

to 15% of the voters, while the more extremist FdL had barely surpassed the 20% soil (Il Foglio 2022). This hemorrhagical loss of consensus may have different reasons, and one of them could be the partial retirement from the public scene of the spin-doctor Morisi, due to an inquiry for use and detention of drugs, operated by the Tribunal of Verona (Foschini, Tonacci 2021).

Whether the sun of Salvini has already set, or if this moment of minor popularity is only about to be overturned by a new wave of appreciation, is hard to imagine, and it is in fact outside the scope of this thesis. On the contrary, his use of the power of political celebrity, through the sharing of his personal life and the manipulation of the public opinion in his favour is quite clear, having observed several different manifestations of his strategies. Having analysed and compared two contemporary case studies, keeping in mind similarities and differences with the case studies from the past, it is now necessary to conclude the historical comparison by finishing the study of the bigger picture, with all the different manifestations of celebrity in history.

## Conclusions

“It’s not enough to be right: you need to also have someone who says that you are.”

-G. Andreotti

The purpose of this work was to create an analytical tool capable of effectively observing contemporary politics. The necessity for such an instrument derives almost entirely from the extreme complexity of the political chessboard in a world of massive globalization and capitalist technocracy. This is a reality in which politics is no more simply constituted by “seen” and “unseen” to the eyes of the public, but there is a third layer of manifest aspects which are, although, misinterpreted, or directly ignored.

Due to the convolution of these concepts and the multimedia ecosystems through which politics operate, a merely political analysis would have been insufficient, since it would have lacked background and in depth analysis. Thus, the necessity of a multilateral approach arises, beginning with history in order to understand the reasons behind the current manifestations of the phenomenon of political celebrity, later exploring sociological concepts in the passage from the past to present, and eventually implementing political analysis with the consideration of mass media and the use and understanding of social networks.

Closing the circle that had opened in the introduction, Aristotle’s idea that all is politics is once again fundamental, since the ever-expanding domain of political campaign effectively covers any aspect of life, included – and especially – private life, and that is the reason behind studies as the present one. Until mundanity will be considered neither political nor academic, the reality of things shall never be thoroughly comprehended. As it will be shown once again in the following lines, *ordinary* translates to *extraordinary* in political campaign, since virtually no distant behaviour coming from a candidate or an aspiring leader, for how professional and technical it is, could ever surpass the success of empathic bonds, developed through the use of an individual’s personal life.

In the understanding of the current manifestations of this VIP-like approach to politics, the beginning of the process was to be found in the Early Modern Age, historical context for the generation of the concept of celebrity itself – especially its political shade – and for the several preconditions that led into that. Comparative historical analysis also serves the fundamental purpose of giving the advantage of a systematic observation of the transformations in the history of celebrity, as it will now be shown.

“In the beginning it was the Word”, and the word was *monarchy*. The Early Modern Age clearly demonstrates its historical importance by being a pivotal passage for the abandonment of absolute monarchy and the beginning of the path towards democracy and constitutionalism, either in its republican or monarchic form. A king or a queen, whose power descends from God and who have been anointed by the highest charges in the clergy, has no reason to be a celebrity in the first place: the people have no need to be emotionally conquered, since the political charge the monarch owns is completely independent by such trivial matters.

Although, this process remained untouched until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, when two major revolutions created an unprecedented shockwave across the whole world: the American independence from the British rule and the French overthrow of the monarchy, both episodes leading into Republics (one more durable than the other). These two events alone could justify an introduction of the thesis

that starts from the Early Modern period: the rebellion to the traditional order that wanted subjects, rather than a people, was the quintessential manifestation of all those preconditions that were later expressed by Habermas, in *the Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. The masses had been gaining consciousness of their role and their importance, and through an increase in alphabetization, the use of new powerful media, and an almost global-wide network of communication the concept of *public* was born. It was not simply a theoretical phenomenon, nor just a growingly larger sentiment of belonging to a state that represented those who lived in it, but rather the practical application of these principles through great revolutions, the unconfutable start of the age of democracy.

The two Revolutions were the emblematic beginning of a new era, in which peoples wanted to be part of the decisional power that had them as the object up to that moment, thus shaping a two-century process that involved gradual democratization and constitutionalism, up until the present. By observing the flow of History, starting from Early Modern times, it is possible to see the fruits of this process, firstly in the numerous other revolutions that made the 19<sup>th</sup> Century a constant turmoil and the first half of Modern Age the effective cradle of democracy. It was thanks to these developments in the conception of the State and politics that the 20<sup>th</sup> Century begun with much more than two Western states as constitutional states, and the process continued to improve in the course of the century.

After World War II, the path towards generalised democracy was sided by another implementation of an Early Modern discourse, that is the conceptualization and development of human rights. Without going into detail into this process, being it not the core of this work, it is still important to mention all of the passages that today formally make almost impossible to re-transform democratic states into autocratic monarchies. Celebrity was born exactly because of the newly acquired importance of the people, whose preferences were now the key to establish governments, and whose vote determined who would have become ruler. For this reason, every step that guarantees more rights and benefits to the public, and simultaneously limits the possibility of a restoration of absolutism, is an affirmation of the importance of said public's decisional power, and therefore leads politicians to the necessity of winning the electors' preferences.

In this sense, virtually nothing has changed from Early Modern Age to the present. Both Napoleon and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez – just as an example – have had the same objective: conquering the heart of the public. Both of them recurred to celebrity strategies to obtain their goal: publicizing their personal life in order to give the impression of being close to the ordinary person, who would have then felt emotionally closer to the political celebrity and eventually support them.

Apart from the methodology of the celebrity-building process, the main difference between the two case studies lays, in this specific comparison, in the way the public expresses its preference. Napoleon's case, indeed, perfectly shows how fragile the democratic structure of France still was, since the public's vote merely served the purpose of legitimating his *coup d'état*, rather than being an actual election. Contemporary political celebrities, also for the reasons expressed above concerning the impossibility for the system to go back to the rule of a single individual, instead rely on legit elections, and therefore the necessity to win the public's favour must pass from a vote (which in most cases are not as heavily manipulated as in Napoleon's case). In the aforementioned case of AOC, it was thanks to the elections that she obtained her charge as a representative in Congress, and unless the American democracy is to fall for some reason in the next decades, it is through elections that any of her possible future charges will be obtained.

By observing the complete process, and not only its two chronological poles, it is easy to notice how it is not necessary to go significantly back to Early Modern Age to find other episodes in which a political celebrity did not simply aim to being elected, but in a Napoleonic style turned his personal approval into a dictatorship. The most notable examples are, without any doubt, the totalitarian regimes that were created in Italy, Germany and Russia between 1920s and '30s (Melograni 1976; Sabbatucci 2008; Yourman 1939), as anticipated in the introduction.

Other episodes are not always so easy to be identified as cases of political celebrity, since the influence of the public opinion – through the publicization of an individual's life and image – often happened to coincide with other more traditional reasons behind a person's success, involving, for example, an high military charge before a golpe, or a leading position within a partisan army before the eventual victory. This hybrid nature could be observed in figures such as Ernesto Che Guevara or Mao Zedong, in both cases celebrities, who although had reached this status after having conquered their place in a leading position, and their rise to power was therefore more traditional. The purpose of this precision is to clarify how there effectively were other political celebrities during the period that goes from 1800 to the earliest 2000s, and there clearly were dictators and charismatic autarchic leaders, but these figures do not always coincide, and going deeply into the issue would require a much larger space.

Going back to the Early Modern period, a fundamental factor that not only allowed emancipation of the public in the first place, but that also amplified the *iter* leading to democracies, favoured the advent of celebrities, and even marked the beginning of globalization as a multi-centenaral process, was the development of mass media. Media allowed more efficient, widespread, and effective communication on virtually any aspect, concretizing in a variety of forms, including, in the Early Modern Age, mainly print, letters, newspaper and gazettes (Delogu, Palmieri 2022). What is fundamental is that mass media were not strictly elitary, on the contrary, they allowed a wider participation and conscience of the literate part of the public, who managed to self-improve its desire for political representation (Habermas 1992).

In this context of new and powerful media, celebrities became both passive and active users of these instruments to connect to the public. Passively, journals wrote about celebrities (being them political or not), pamphlets described them in their public aparitions, portraits were painted and busts sculpted, making their faces popular to those who never saw them in presence, engravings were sold in great numbers, letters from admirers were sent to the celebrities and even published (Bell 2020; Liti 2017, 2019). Actively, those who wanted to improve their knowledge and appreciation by the public would influence newspaper in order to be depicted in a positive light, aspiring leaders would commission paintings portraying them in a more emotionally-striking attire, writers close to the politicians would write about them in order to give to the readers the sensation of being close friends themselves, engravings of the leader would be incentivized as a way to feel almost familiar to the public (Bell 2020; Delogu 2017).

Media are a fundamental element of celebrity, since it is through multilateral and variously shaped communication that an ordinary politician becomes a celebrity. It has to be mentioned, although, that media tend, with time, to become not necessarily obsolete, but at least ordinary. Celebrities need media, but, in order to distinguish themselves from the other competitors, it is necessary for them to use the latest and most popular form of media, one lacking a vast use by rivals and in which, therefore, the user can shine undisturbed and rise above their peers, unbothered by competition. In the Early Modern Age case studies, Washington and Napoleon, it could be said that any medium was substantially new, apart probably from traditional forms of celebration, such as portraits or statues,

despite a difference could be traced as well. For example, observing an artistic representation of Caesar from his times, the dictator would be depicted in a celebrative manner: triumphant, austere, an icon of power; political celebrities were instead represented also in more casual contexts or attires, specifically not to appear too distant from the average observer, who should have instead felt close to them.

With time, all of the other candidates or aspiring leaders tend to adapt to the use of media, especially since these last ones become increasingly common in the daily life of the population, and, in order to reach electors in their daily activities, passing through channels of mass communication becomes a necessity. Despite so, the scenario almost resets when a new medium is invented, and the first to seize the opportunity is usually the one to triumph.

After the boom of a first generation of mass media during Early Modern Age, there was a consistent reduction of the frequency in which new media were created and, therefore, used for celebrity-building purpose, for almost two centuries. A fundamental milestone that deserves attention, in the historical reconstruction of the phenomenon, is although the invention of television in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and its gradual rise in popularity (and affordability) for the average household. This extremely powerful medium clearly offered an enormous possibility to ambitious political celebrities, wanting to conquer the vast public of electors, since it combined the appearance of the candidates to their voices and, most importantly, managed to show them interact with other people. If using “static” media, like print or engravings, allowed to show closeness through more casual contexts of representation, showing a videotape of a person in the flow of action, talking, moving, and even speaking to the watcher, would truly give the feeling of proximity to the public in an unprecedented way.

In the American context, this was the case of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, who was reported to be the first to use television to speak with the American people during elections, thus winning an enormous popular appreciation in response (Rodriguez, Goretti 2020). Similarly, in Italy, Silvio Berlusconi surely owed a considerable part of his success among the electors to his use of this powerful media, which became truly popular in the peninsula during the 1980s (Madonia 2020). Of course, the popularity of TV-using political celebrity is bound to the moment in which television actually became a common good in that country, so the use of the two examples is fundamental to show how even decades could pass, in two different state realities, for a politician to be the first to use this medium.

For present times, the fundamental media are clearly social networks, which do not only facilitate communication and interaction to a previously unthinkable level, but were also created to share personal life in the first place, therefore having substantially no peers in terms of creating personal bonds. Hence the public has the possibility to not only see the politician in a very casual and ordinary context with extreme ease, but with the same simplicity they can talk to said candidate, thus substantially cutting any type of felt distance that was left, and improving the empathic bonds up to a complete new level (Glucksman 2017; Nouri 2018; Petersen 2020). After all, celebrity is based on exactly these two pillars: feeling of proximity and interaction (being it perceived or effective).

For these reason, the term that was chosen to target contemporary political celebrities is “political influencers”, being influencers substantially the contemporary form of celebrities, with a slightly higher orientation towards marketing. Indeed, if the original celebrities (before the development of political interest in the phenomenon) were generally artists who happened to amplify their fame and success through the publicization of their private life, influencers tend to not necessary offer a content,

and focus their empathic-creation strategies to become better marketing agents (Chen Lou 2019; Glucksman 2017; Nayoung Jung 2021).

The case studies from the present, AOC and Matteo Salvini, depict two successful political celebrities who use social media daily and with expertise, and, particularly, make use of probably the most important aspect of social networks in terms of celebrity-building strategies: live streaming. The importance of this media lays in the opportunity it offers to easily communicate with the public, while being simultaneously perceived as almost a mutual, as anticipated above. The understanding of celebrity strategies by these two is also demonstrated by the choice of the preferred social media platform according to the electoral target. Different social networks appeal different portions of the public, according to the type of messages that are possible to be shared on that platform and the way this communication happens, therefore the attention to users' data helps the candidates to choose the media for their campaign, according to the age and occupation of the potential electors. In these cases, Ocasio-Cortez mainly relies on Twitter, and Salvini on Facebook.

The period of time necessary for the development of a new media has significantly decreased in the arc of the last two centuries and a half, and every time a new media appears it is always more immersive and allows a wider possibility of sharing and connection. It is not unrealistic to imagine a further acceleration in this process in the following years, and after the current generations of politicians – that currently still fails to grasp celebrity through the use of social media – will have adapted to this media, the candidates that aim to success via celebrity strategies would adapt to the new inventions and will triumph over their peers, once again.

Having observed how the protagonists of celebrity have transformed and how the media through which they operate have adapted, it would be interesting to observe if the third element of the equation has seen any major change during the course of Modern Age and, particularly, the last twenty years: the public. The distinction of this very circumscribed chronological parenthesis is made necessary by the numerous events and mutations that have made our contemporary hyper-globalized society into a completely unique new reality, compared to the end of the previous century. The early '90s saw the passage from bipolarism to unipolarism with the end of the Cold War, and if the idea of the “end of History” was initially postulated, several events – in a wide range including from 9/11 to the 2022 war in Ukraine – give space to the hypothesis that this crystallization may have been only a perception, and another change in the global system is close (Fukuyama 1992; Best, et al. 2014).

In parallel, technological progress has revolutioned communication and transports, giving to people, but also to goods of any kind, the possibility to reach any place in an increasingly low matter of time (Cerreti, Marconi, Sellari 2019). Virtual communication is obviously also at its apex, with an ever-growing coverage of fast internet connection across the world, sided by a plethora of ways to be informed and connected to virtually anyone, in any place. Among these instruments, as already mentioned, social networks are naturally the most important exchange platforms, and it could be said with no difficulty that they have now become indispensable for humanity.

With all of these colossal (and extremely fast) changes in mind, it could surprise the fact that, realistically, the public has not changed much, for what concerns the phenomenon of celebrity, since its first manifestations in the Early Modern period. In order to thoroughly understand this, it is although necessary to make a premise concerning the nature of political celebrity in general, and how does it relate to democracy. To do that, it is better to begin, once again, from Early Modern Age, precisely in the aftermath of the French Revolution.

The First Republic was indeed scene for a significant ideological clash, concerning the necessity for France not to transition to the rule of a single person, and in this debate, Robespierre was undoubtedly the one that, above all, opposed autocracy. The democratic ideal was so strong that led to an internal fissure in the Jacobin faction, where Robespierre and his rivals mutually accused each other of being excessively popular and of attempting the captivation of the French public for personal interest (Bell 2020). Ironically, such powerful ideals in the Parliament were not equalized by the will of the people, which was fast in supporting Napoleon with his self-constructed divine aura, relatively few years after the beginning of the First Republic. In substance, the mass seemed to appreciate more the rule of a single charismatic leader, despite being him a dictator, rather than a more impersonal democratic guide.

However, this was definitively not just a French experience, since the same exact situation happened in the United States, when the American people reversed its insecurities and need for stability in the mythical paternalistic figure of George Washington. The sake of the American democracy was guaranteed merely by the fact that Washington happened to be modest (or even timid) enough to not aim to full powers, also because of his profound interest for the sake of the Republic (Hay 1969; McConville 2006; Nelson 2014). Therefore, once again, the public leaned in the direction of a magnetic individual, who just happened to firmly oppose the re-transformation of democracy into dictatorship.

With the decades and even centuries, states have changed, both conceptually (with the end of large Empires and the passage to nation-states) and formally (with the largely discussed advent of democracies), and the consequence of this revolution has been a radical transformation of the idea of state itself, becoming almost a Hobbesian abstract identity, rather than the extension of an individual. Despite this, periodically, the public seems to prefer the government of charismatic leaders, especially during periods of crisis, in some cases perfectly knowing that this would lead into a dictatorship.

This is easily proven by the proliferation of political celebrities during national and international crises, with the perfect example being, once again, the period subsequent to the Great War and the Great Depression, with more or less extremist cases of charismatic leaders. This sample includes the totalitarisms that were already mentioned, but also celebrities such as Roosevelt or Churchill, re-elected several times because of their capacities, but also for their undebatable popular support. The cases clearly are not limited to this historical period, since the same situation manifested, just to make another example, in Iran during the '80s, with Ayatollah Khomeini's rise to power. During a moment of heavy internal tension and repression, the Iranian people evaluated the fundamentalist rule of Khomeini as a better alternative to the laic rule wanted by the Shah (Graham 1980).

In substance, the heavy reliance of the public towards political celebrities was not merely limited to the end of a monarchic period, as it was said both for Napoleon and Washington, but virtually any moment of crisis in History could represent an opportunity for charismatic leaders to gain significant support from the population, and polarize this success into a dictatorship or reiterated mandates. The public acclamation, direct product of democracy in the first place, seems to be easily capable of suffocating that same democratic authority, when blinded by the shining light of celebrity, in a moment of difficulty.

This is the real issue of celebrity: a phenomenon generated by democratic vote may end up erasing it, when power is given to those who manipulate the public opinion for their personal mires. More than two centuries of political progress are substantially denaturalised and crippled by the return to the individualistic approach to politics. Even when a political celebrity is not a potential dictator, the fact



that a powerful charge is obtained not because of political ideals or programs, but because of the emotional deceit of the electors' choices through methodical empathic strategies, is a mutilation of the democratic principles themselves. It is not wrong to choose to re-elect a leader that has proven to be valid, but if the parameter of choice is a popularity hollow of pragmatic reasons, then democracy is at risk.

The Early Modern Age marked the beginning of the secularized passage from the Rule of Men to the Rule of Law, but the phenomenon of political celebrity threatens this condition, *de facto* regressing once again to the power of the individuals over the state. This oxymoron of using people's power to eventually overcome it, clashes with the idea of Constitutionalism in the first place: limiting governments in their use of power, through fixed rules to guarantee the existence of a true democracy (Waluchow, Kyritsis 2022).

In minimum sense, Constitutionalism aims to create a system in which every state is a constitutional one, and has therefore an ensemble of explicitly stated norms that bind the governing power to respect some undeniable points. Among these, one of the most important is the limit to absolute power through the tripartite division of legislative, executive and judicial power (*ibid.*). In other words, Constitutionalism believes in a system in which creating laws, enforcing them, and adjudicating under that same law do not pertain to the same figure, but are distributed among different organs in order to guarantee the respect of the democratic power.

In a wider sense, although, Constitutionalism is not a mere statement of these three components of the State, but rather the ideological pillar beneath all of the guarantors of effective popular power, such as human rights – ranging from liberty of expression to the *Habeas corpus* – civil rights, the right to be processed under the law, and all of the other aspects that officially impede the Rule of Men. As partly anticipated when dealing with Early Modern Age, the ideological process was centuries long and involved hundreds of scholars in the process, and it is therefore to be considered as a precious achievement.

Among these scholars, it is important to mention Norberto Bobbio, who has largely analysed and debated the secularized contrast between the two possible principles at the base of the State: Rule of Law and Rule of Men. His minimal definition of democracy depicts it as a power that naturally contrast any form of autocracy (Bobbio 1984, Yturbe 1997). In an expanded version of the definition, Bobbio explains how a true democracy must guarantee a real choice to the electors, who, free from any influence or coercion, consciously make their decision to vote their representatives (Bobbio 1986).

The profound issue of the political celebrity phenomenon lays in its capacity to partly overcome some of these untouchable principles. It is not a massive or violent attack to the rules, as a *coup d'état* could be, but it is still notable how political influencers can generate a partial regress in the secularised Constitutionalism process. The passage from voting a party that should represent the elector's ideals to voting an individual, whose party is barely a personalised attachment (as in the extreme case of Matteo Salvini's Lega), is an effective downgrade of the principle of the depersonalisation of power. From the Rule of Law, democracies tend once again to a Rule of Men, where the individual is at the core of the power relation.

Moreover, since celebrity naturally implies emotional manipulation, it is a natural contradiction to the ideal of decisional independence of the public, stated by Bobbio. The electors are not truly free in their decision, if it was a large-scale psycho-emotional campaign to determine their attachment to the candidate, and therefore their vote. It could be argued that electoral campaigns are based onto

manipulation of opinions in the very first place, and that the electors should know not to trust completely the public face of a politician, but celebrity is much more than that, because it is subtle, more effective, and, most importantly, it is not largely recognised for what it is.

In the light of these more profound implications to the phenomenon, the necessity of a new wave of socio-historical studies arises once again, and this work reiterates its purpose. Not as a presumptuous pioneer, since it has been shown how celebrity has a quite significant backbone of studies, mainly pertaining Early Modern Age, but rather as a humble gusset, connecting current non-political studies to historical observations, in order to demonstrate their fundamental bonds between each other. In the light of these aspects, the hope is to observe a new wave of celebrity studies with multidisciplinary at its core, in order to comprehend and eventually preserve democracy as the untouchable institution it is.

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