

# HOLLYWOOD LEFT AND RIGHT



HOW MOVIE STARS  
SHAPED AMERICAN POLITICS

STEVEN J. ROSS

FILM SCHOLARS AWARD FROM THE ACADEMY OF  
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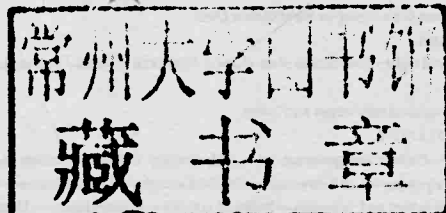
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For  
Linda, Lydia, and Gaby

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## HOLLYWOOD LEFT AND RIGHT



## INTRODUCTION: MOVIE STARS AND POLITICS

Political Hollywood started much earlier than most people realize. In 1918, FBI leaders William J. Burns and J. Edgar Hoover were so worried about the power of movie stars to affect the political consciousness of a nation that they ordered secret agents to maintain close surveillance over suspected Hollywood radicals. Four years later, Bureau agents confirmed their worst fears. "Numerous movie stars," they reported, were taking "an active part in the Red movement in this country" and were hatching a plan to circulate "Communist propaganda . . . via the movies."<sup>1</sup> The Cold War politicians who launched the Red Scare's infamous House Un-American Activities Committee in the late 1940s also feared the power of movie stars to alter the way people thought and acted. They understood that movie audiences were also voters, and they asked themselves: Who would people be more likely to listen to: drab politicians or glamorous stars? What if left-leaning celebrities such as Charlie Chaplin, Humphrey Bogart, Katharine Hepburn, and Edward G. Robinson used their star appeal to promote radical causes, especially Communist causes?

Such fears about radicalism in the movie industry reflect long-standing conventional wisdom that Hollywood has always been a bastion of the

political left. Conventional wisdom, however, is wrong on two counts. First, Hollywood has a longer history of conservatism than liberalism. It was the Republican Party, not the Democratic Party, that established the first political beachhead in Hollywood. Second, and far more surprising, although the Hollywood left has been more numerous and visible, the Hollywood right—led by Louis B. Mayer, George Murphy, Ronald Reagan, Charlton Heston, and Arnold Schwarzenegger—has had a greater impact on American political life. The Hollywood left has been more effective in publicizing and raising funds for various causes. But if we ask who has done more to change the American government, the answer is the Hollywood right. The Hollywood left has the political glitz, but the Hollywood right sought, won, and exercised electoral power.

Can such a counterintuitive argument really be true? What did the Hollywood right achieve to merit such a claim? There have been two foundational changes in twentieth-century U.S. politics. The first was the creation of a welfare state under Franklin D. Roosevelt, a development that established a new relationship between government and the governed and crystallized differences among conservatives, liberals, and radicals. The second was the gradual dismantling of the welfare state that began under a movie star, Ronald Reagan. The conservative revolution of the 1980s could not have happened without the groundwork laid by Louis B. Mayer, his protégé George Murphy, and his protégé Ronald Reagan.

Although movie industry conservatives began wielding power in the 1920s, the Hollywood right did not emerge as a major force in American politics until after the postwar era. Once they did, their impact was tremendous. During the 1950s and early 1960s, Murphy and Reagan used their fame, charm, and communication skills to help build an insurgent grassroots constituency by speaking to conservative groups throughout the nation. The two stars articulated an ideological agenda that called for dismantling the New Deal, returning power to the state and local levels, reducing taxes, and waging war against all foes of American security—Communists in particular. During the mid-1960s, the two former stars designed innovative campaign strategies that drew on their experiences as actors to accomplish what more established politicians like the prickly Barry Goldwater could not do: sell conservatism to a wide range of previously skeptical voters. By making conservatism palatable, Murphy and Reagan helped make the conservative revolution possible.

As Murphy and Reagan demonstrated, movie stars do more than just show us how to dress, look, or love. They teach us how to think and act politically. "If an actor can be influential selling deodorants," Marlon Brando explained just before the 1963 March on Washington, "he can be just as useful selling ideas." Speaking more recently about the relative importance of Washington and Hollywood in the public mind, former-Republican-turned-Democratic Senator Arlen Specter remarked, "Quite candidly, when Hollywood speaks the world listens. Sometimes when Washington speaks, the world snoozes."<sup>2</sup>

Americans have long maintained a love-hate relationship with movie stars. Audiences connect with movie stars at an emotional level and with a sense of intimacy they rarely feel about politicians. We love stars when they remain faithful to our fantasy images of them, but we condemn them when they reveal their flaws or disagree with our politics. The public "choose the stars and then make Gods of them," director William deMille observed in 1935. "They feel a peculiar sense of ownership in these romantic figures they have created—and, of course, an equal sense of outrage in those cases where their idols turn out to have feet of clay."<sup>3</sup>

While there is a long tradition of political activity in Hollywood, there is an equally long-held fear that being too political can destroy a career. When former child star Jackie Cooper returned from World War II, he "was frightened of everything that was tainted with any kind of politics. My mother always said, 'The actor has to stay out of politics—think what you want, vote—but you want Catholics, Jews, Arabs, everyone to go to the box-office, and any way you campaign, you'll lose some box-office.' I think it's true." Jump ahead in time to 1999 and the living room of Arianna Huffington, where actor Billy Baldwin, then president of the Creative Coalition—a group of liberal star activists—was trying to recruit new members. When asked about possible reprisals against outspoken actors, he confessed, "I can't tell you how many famous stars came up to me and said, 'Billy, I'm happy to write you a check, but my agent or my lawyer says I can't appear on stage representing your organization. It might endanger my career.'"<sup>4</sup>

*Hollywood Left and Right* tells an important story that has escaped public attention: the emergence of Hollywood as a vital center of political life and the important role that movie stars played in shaping the course of American politics. My cast of characters features ten activists: five on the left and five on the right. Their stories, told in rough chronological order, reveal how

Hollywood's engagement in politics has been longer, deeper, and more varied than most people would imagine. Each person was either the first or most important practitioner of his or her particular form of activism and each left an important legacy. Alternating between stars on the left and the right, the following nine chapters take us from the early twentieth century to the present. They examine the lives and beliefs of their central characters at the height of their political activism and end when that activism stopped or when they got elected to office, for then they became politicians rather than movie stars.

Whatever their ideological differences, all ten people believed that movie stars had a right and an obligation as citizens to participate in the nation's political life. Yet the ways in which they did so was influenced by the changing structure of the movie industry and by the changing nature of local and national politics. As both evolved over the course of the century, so too did the forms of movie star politics.

The movie industry began as a small-scale business with hundreds of producers, distributors, and exhibitors scattered throughout the country. There was little political engagement by actors and actresses during the early silent era because the star system was still emerging and performers did not want to risk losing their audience by engaging in partisan activities. Charlie Chaplin was the first major star to use movies as an ideological weapon, and he did so in a way that both amused and politicized audiences. A socialist sympathizer who hated joining groups, his films mocked the power and legitimacy of authority figures from the local cop to Adolf Hitler. Because he had complete control over his films (as producer, director, writer, star, and later distributor), Chaplin could make anything he wanted. There was no studio head to tell him what he could or could not do. This left the world's most popular movie star free to put his politics directly on the screen where they could be seen, and perhaps acted upon, by millions of Americans.

The 1920s signaled the rise of a new type of film industry, an oligarchic studio system centered in Los Angeles and financed by some of the largest industrial and financial institutions in the nation. As the studio system known as "Hollywood" matured, so too did the focus of political engagement. With a business-oriented Republican Party dominating the national scene throughout the decade, powerful studio figures such as Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's Louis B. Mayer turned to electoral politics both to meet the needs of his industry and to advance the fortunes of his favored party. More

than any other figure, Mayer was responsible for bringing the Republican Party to Hollywood and Hollywood to the Republican Party. Mayer was not a movie star, but he created stars and pioneered the uses of stardom and media for partisan ends. During his tenure as studio chief and head of the California GOP, he injected showmanship into the party's nominating conventions, showed Republicans how to employ radio more effectively, and inaugurated the first "dirty tricks" campaign by employing fake newsreels in 1934 to defeat Democratic gubernatorial candidate Upton Sinclair. Hollywood Democrats had no one to rival the power of the man who helped swing the 1928 Republican presidential nomination to his good friend Herbert Hoover.

Studio moguls such as Mayer ruled Hollywood politics during the 1920s, but the devastating effects of the Great Depression and the election of the charismatic Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932 prompted many actors and actresses to become politically active, often for the first time. Movie stars such as Edward G. Robinson used their celebrity to draw attention to a wide variety of causes. At a time when the vast majority of the American public preferred to turn a blind eye to the growing dangers of Nazism and fascism, Robinson and dozens of other left stars marched in the streets, organized radio shows, and issued declarations condemning Hitler that attracted international attention. Movie star participation in issue-oriented politics also generated a new era of Hollywood fundraising and giving as Robinson, Gene Kelly, Melvyn Douglas, and others helped bankroll numerous progressive causes.

Concerned about potential audience backlash at the box office, studio heads moved to limit the unprecedented activism of their famous employees. The financial success of the studio system made it possible for actors and actresses to make unprecedented amounts of money, but at the cost of restricting their freedom by tying them to lengthy contracts that gave studio heads the ability to shape a star's image and control his or her offscreen activities. Studios were willing to tolerate some partisan activism, but stars who strayed too far from the political mainstream had their careers cut short, blacklisted or graylisted by fearful industry executives.

The end of the studio system in the late 1940s and early 1950s freed actors and actresses to speak out on a wide range of issues. Just as the Depression and New Deal sparked the rise of the Hollywood left, the Cold War and the Red Scare gave powerful new life to the Hollywood right. The



publicity generated by the House Un-American Activities Committee hastened the rise of the Cold War and Hollywood's Cold Warriors. Led by George Murphy and then by Ronald Reagan, a small number of ideologically driven stars engaged in conservative movement politics. Unlike issue-oriented politics, which focused on a discrete set of problems, movement politics demanded a long-term commitment aimed at restructuring the very foundations of American government.

From the late 1940s to the mid-1960s, Murphy and Reagan joined with conservative groups around the nation in an effort to overturn the most important liberal achievement of the twentieth century, the New Deal state. By reshaping the partisan uses of television and skillfully employing it to sell conservative messages, the two men reshaped American politics for the next five decades. During their political careers, Murphy, who was elected California's senator in 1964, and Reagan, elected governor in 1966, preached the politics of fear and reassurance, of dire foreign threats coupled with reassuring promises to preserve domestic tranquility. Their rivals on the left preached the politics of hope and guilt, of what America could be but how prejudice and selfishness prevented us from realizing those dreams. In the skillful hands of Murphy and especially Reagan, fear and reassurance proved a far greater motivator of voters than hope and guilt.

As the worst excesses of the Red Scare died down, Hollywood leftists became increasingly involved in radical movement politics. Harry Belafonte and Jane Fonda worked hard to challenge what they viewed as dominant systems of power that led to inequality at home and imperialism and war abroad. Beginning in the early 1950s and continuing through the 1980s, the two stars, though acting independently of one another, helped build coalitions that attacked racism, promoted civil rights, opposed the war in Vietnam, and struggled for women's rights and greater social and economic justice. Belafonte served as the most important Hollywood figure in the civil rights movement and as one of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s two closest friends. Likewise, Jane Fonda, perhaps the most reviled star in Hollywood history, worked to change the course of American politics first through the antiwar movement and then as cofounder of the Campaign for Economic Democracy, a progressive organization that called for radical changes in government policies. Fighting on multiple fronts, they both opened production companies and made films that promoted their political agendas.