

# The case for pretty people earning the big fat bucks

Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie have reportedly sold pictures of their baby twins for \$15 million. Yet every day, homeless people wander the streets of America. How is such gross injustice possible? What is wrong with America that we are so obsessed with fame? Isn't this an example of the unjust and morally depraved society that America has become?

Nope. Not even close.

We're a free country, and when you let people live in freedom, this is what happens. Inequality. Unconventional lifestyle decisions. People wondering what's gone wrong with the world. In fact, pretty people making a gazillion dollars selling their baby pictures show just what is right with America. Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie are poster children for economic freedom, popular culture, and thumbing your nose at social critics.

First, let's concede right away that life is horribly unfair. People with the right combination of genes, talent, opportunity and dumb luck are going to have a lot more money, fame and status than the rest of us slobs.

Pitt and Jolie are astonishingly attractive, and had the aptitude and the training to develop very successful careers in the entertainment industry. Jolie had an additional leg up because of her actor father. She had help not just from nature, but nurture too. That is absolutely and completely unfair. So what?

Celebrities get rich by filling a human need. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, I have to assume that if millions of people want to trade some of their hard-earned money for pictures of Brad and Angelina's kids, it's not because they are morally flawed or that America is obsessed and depraved. Celebrity baby pictures must be meeting a need of my fellow citizens.

Some of it is probably biological. We're respond to stories, it's one of the things that makes us human. We are a "what if" species, an animal that likes to imagine how things might be different. We then act those imaginings out in art and ritual.

We're drawn to stories because our brain chemistry finds them very compelling. Films are simply humanity's latest attempt to gratify that primal urge. People who can act convincingly in a film provide an experience most of us are eager to seek



OPINION

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out and enjoy.

But it's not just watching compelling performances that comes into play here. Much of what motivates celebrity adoration is reflected fame.

We all want to leave our mark, to have a sense

that our lives matter. Interaction of any sort with people whose lives affect millions amplifies, for a short time, the sense of our own impact on the world.

But doesn't the fact of mega-rich pretty people living in the same society with a poverty-stricken underclass indicate that something is fundamentally wrong with our country? Isn't that fundamentally unjust? Again, the answer is no. Unfair? Sure. But unjust? That's a very different story line.

First, it implies that there's some connection with the rich being rich and the poor being poor. That's a natural conclusion to draw, but it happens to be wrong. In a free society, people become rich through trade, with other people giving them something in a mutually beneficial exchange. Wealth isn't simply sitting around to be found and redistributed. It's created through the actions of individual human beings.

As long as the exchange is voluntary, there isn't any connection between some people being rich and others being poor. If there were, communism would have eliminated poverty a long time ago. Chronic poverty in America is the result of fifty years of wrongheaded policy driven more by a misguided sense of fairness and guilt than anything that would actually end poverty. It is not the result of there being too many rich people.

If you think it's wrong for pretty actors to be worth millions, here's all that has to happen to make them regular shmoes. People can simply stop paying attention to them. That's all. They can stop going to their movies and leave "People" at the checkout stand.

Will that ever happen? Not while people are allowed to make their own decisions in the pursuit of happiness. Between the cultural criticism of the Right and the economic criticism of the Left, I wonder how much longer that will be.

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