

Angelina Jolie Pitt at LSE: Can Actors Be Effective Educators?

Written by W. Alejandro Sanchez

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W. ALEJANDRO SANCHEZ, JUN 2 2016

Angelina Jolie Pitt has been appointed a visiting professor in practice at the Centre for Women, Peace and Security, part of the London School of Economics (LSE). Mrs. Jolie-Pitt's newest distinction has not been without criticism, namely whether this is a LSE publicity stunt. This brings up an interesting issue: the role of Hollywood in IR education.

In addition to Jolie Pitt; Jane Connors, Amnesty International; Madeleine Rees, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom; and Lord William Hague, former UK Foreign Secretary, have also been accepted. A LSE press release explains that the School 'confers the title of Visiting Professor in Practice on persons who have appropriate distinction within their area of (non-academic) practice.' These prominent individuals will be part of the Centre's new MSc program on women, peace and security, a one-year course which starts this Fall. *The Guardian* explains that 'visiting professors [will play] an active part in giving lectures, participating in workshops and undertaking their own research.'

The criticism against LSE's decision to hire Jolie-Pitt focuses on whether it is a marketing ploy by the university to obtain media attention and to foster enrollment. For example, an op-ed in *The Guardian* argues that 'if Professor Jolie Pitt acquired her academic title without a single formal academic qualification, and her fellow amateur's gender insights do not promise to exceed the average gnat's, is it worth investing one year and a lot of money in pointless study?' Apart from her impressive filmography, Jolie Pitt, has had a long standing interest on the issue of refugees and the effects of conflict on civil society. Most notably, in 2012 she was named the Special Envoy of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Prior to this appointment, she was a UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador from 2001-2012. In 2003 she published a book based on her work with refugees. She has also raised awareness about humanitarian crises by producing films. For example, in 2012 she directed 'In The Land of Blood and Honey,' a fictional story which centers in the Bosnian War. More recently, 'First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers', another film that she is directing, addresses the human rights violations of the Khmer Rouge regime.

Hollywood productions, be them TV shows or films, are a standard tool utilized by members of academia when teaching IR courses. Case in point, the author of this post watched films like 'Dr. Strangelove or: How I learned To Stop Worrying and Love The Bomb' and 'Gallipoli' for classes that addressed Mutually Assured Destruction and World War I, respectively. In order to broaden the discussion of what will be the future of humanity, think tanks are looking towards fiction writing and Hollywood for novel ideas and foresights. For example, the Project for the Study of the 21st Century has published a series of fictional short stories where authors muse what the year 2030 will look like. Similarly, the Center for International Maritime Security has also published short stories about future conflicts. Likewise, the Argentine think tank Centro Argentino de Estudios Internacionales recently issued an analysis of the *BBC* television show 'War Room'. Even more, the Atlantic Council created a project called The Art of the Future, which included analyses of the future of warfare. The initiative organized several events in which artists, including comic book publishers and Max Brooks (the author of *World War Z*), interacted with members of the IR community.

Hollywood is an integral part of the IR world, including the jargon that scholars utilize. IR scholars routinely look to fiction for inspiration, to draw parallels and to speculate about the future. Additionally, it is not surprising to find

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Hollywood celebrities that support a plethora of causes: Leonardo DiCaprio is a well-known supporter of the fight against climate change; Emma Watson was appointed UN Women Goodwill Ambassador in 2014; while Actor Sean Penn interviewed Mexican kingpin Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzman. As for Angelina Jolie, her concern for refugees worldwide is unquestionable. The issue is whether this (strong) personal interest on an issue, in addition to some fieldwork, can translate into effective teaching.

Accepting non-academics to enhance a program’s pedigree is standard practice at universities. It is not surprising to find that retired diplomats, military officers or government officials teach seminars focusing on the issues that they worked on throughout their careers. Ultimately, the question is how well Jolie Pitt’s participation will help provide an effective education to LSE students. According to the Centre’s website ‘students will take the core courses [and will] choose further relevant courses from [other] departments.’ In other words, apart from taking classes with the professors in practice, they will also attend regular classes with LSE’s faculty members offering a balance blending scholarship and practitioner.

Angelina Jolie Pitt has not published a plethora of books and essays on peer reviewed journals on the issue of refugees in conflict zones. Nor has she spent decades working for a government or multinational agency that focuses on this issue. However, her own experiences can help graduate students learn more about the status of refugees and post-conflict areas, particularly in Africa, the Balkans and Cambodia. There is nothing wrong with accepting (not “hiring,” as this is an unpaid position) several Professors in Practice, so long as the entire faculty of a Masters program is not staffed exclusively by them. In fact, there is plenty of intellectual wealth to be gained from cross-pollination when it comes to teaching. After all, IR is an interdisciplinary field, where different points of view should be heard.

Certainly, there is a degree of publicity that influenced LSE’s decision to invite Jolie Pitt, but this should not be a reason to stop good intentions; like those of a renowned actress with a strong commitment to raising awareness about refugees.

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About the author:

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