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## **Better Living through Reality TV: Television and Post-Welfare Citizenship [Book Review]**

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**Ouellette, Laurie and James Hay. *Better Living through Reality TV: Television and Post-Welfare Citizenship*. Malden, MA. Wiley - Blackwell, 2008. 264 pp. \$32.95.**

<1> The very first thing I can say about *Better Living Through Reality TV: Television and Post-Welfare Citizenship* is that I cannot wait for the authors to consider adding a Canadian version - more on that later - since they include British reality shows. Admittedly, many of these last shows have been successful enough to lead to Americanized versions. In considering reality television, the Laurie Ouellette (no known relation) and James Hay seem to sacrifice one of the oldest, and currently largely underexamined as such, varieties of the reality television, the game show. This is not to say that "new" game shows such as Deal or No Deal and Who Wants to be a Millionaire are not consider, but rather that the repackaging and repurposing of older game shows - here I am thinking most pointedly about the return of Price is Right to prime-time and the repurposing of Liar's Club and To Tell the Truth - tends to be sacrificed. I mention this not so much as a criticism but as a concept worth reconsidering in light of the findings, for Ouellette and Hay do spend their time very carefully showing that the themes and categories of contemporary reality television provide ample pedagogical (and generally didactic) accompaniments to the neo-liberal politics which seem to dominate North American culture as we reach the end of the second Bush era and approach the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century. As the authors demonstrate, under Bush the system has evolved that the "government [...] not only cooperates with but also facilitates the privatization of care" (48). This entails a "downloading" of state responsibilities onto the individual. However, there also has been a concurrent development of private, for-profit enterprises which have commodified care. What really comes to the fore, then, is the idea - stressed most pointedly by makeover shows, financial rescue shows and even the Survivor-type shows - of a system which espouses the freedom of the individual while actually (and contradictorily) creating a situation in which individuals are really only free to actively govern themselves.

<2> A strong hint to the critical approach taken in the book occurs in the title. What becomes clear through Ouellette and Hay's analyses is that the didacticism of reality shows points one to the realization that the shows attempt to produce a consumer-subject rather than a citizen. Though, they have spread the shows among six categories, thanks to their analysis I have reduced to two: a) risk and reward (Survivor, Apprentice, Jackass, etc.) and intervention and reinvention (Flip this House, Trading Spaces, Pimp My Ride, etc.). Perhaps not surprisingly, the most opportunistic deployment of these techniques can be found in the "intervention and reinvention" genre of reality TV. In the latter regard, Shows such as What not to Wear, Honey We're Killing the Kids and even Nanny 911 teach their female "stars" and their audience that empowerment can be achieved through what amounts to carefully managed consumer choices. In short, we learn time and again that life is a matter of marketing the self (53). This is true of programs in the second category, as well. The major difference, as I see it, could be drawn along gender lines deriving most pointedly from the "feminine face" of the cult of the self (118). Whereas women (overwhelmingly the targets of "intervention and reinvention" shows) are again sold disempowerment in the guise of empowerment, the other shows, usually via competition, reify and reorder the traditional and patriarchal masculine behaviours of risk-taking, ends-over-means and the accumulation of capital, often with women as tokens of exchange, as in The Bachelor, Average Joe, Beauty and the Geek and even The Apprentice.

<3> While I cannot disagree with any of it, I find myself somewhat concerned that the argument boils down to consumerism, if only the sales and marketing of the self. Indeed, Ouellette and Hay conclude that in Reality TV as in contemporary American culture, "choice becomes the ability to choose the best option within a realm of weighted possibilities" (116). My concern

is that considering consumerism as the assumption and as the conclusion does not create a space for debate or for dissent but rather allows the neo-liberal agenda to set the terms and the conditions of any such debate. Here, I am reminded of one of Stuart Hall's provisos: any discourse produces a position from which a) it alone makes sense and b) it makes itself the topic of discussion (202). This, I fear, is what happens with reality TV because it operates on an absolutist version of the economics of opportunity cost. In this case, opportunity cost - or the best alternative not taken - simply does not exist. Therefore viewers and participants are left with the very easy choice between "improvement" or nothing. In *The Rebel Sell*, Heath and Potter repeatedly explain this scenario as the heart of the "prisoner's dilemma." The model works not on a basis of what might be gained but what might be lost; not "I have less" but rather "someone else has more."

<4> This brings me to my original statement about traditional game shows and Canadian reality TV shows. In this first case, current shows, including *Fifth Grader* and *Don't Forget the Lyrics*, repurpose older shows but do add the wrinkle of individual performance to the mix. Given the commodification of performance, it would be interesting to see how Ouellette and Hay would treat these shows. In the case of Canadian shows, I find the mix to be extremely diverse and peculiar in its composition. Some of the outright meanest reality TV shows are among the Canadian cohort. *Style by Jury*, for example, puts an idiosyncratic dresser behind a one-way window and has a jury of random individuals pick apart her appearance with a brutality only matched by some of Gordon Ramsay's famous outbursts. *Canada's Worst Driver* and *Canada's Worst Handyman*, while at some level attempting to help the inept participants spend far more time holding them - and people like them - up to very pointed ridicule. In contrast, Canadian shows such as *Property Virgins* manage to depict gay and lesbian couples as ordinary couples looking for a house. This is at least one thing American shows have yet to accomplish, for as Ouellette and Hay show, US counterparts treat gay and lesbian couples as spectacles or as intruders. Similarly, Canadian gameshow *Love Handles* (now in reruns) revamps *The Newlywed Game* and in a matter-of-fact fashion includes gay and lesbian couples. Finally, at least two Canadian reality shows within the intervention and reinvention category actually advise against consumerist choices. While still teaching self-surveillance and self-enterprise, *Til Debt Do Us Part* always advocates saving over spending. Similarly, the tyrannical host of *At the End of My Leash* teaches terrible pet owners the value of time over toys. Again, it would be interesting to see how Ouellette and Hay would treat these shows and also how American audiences respond to them because some - most famously *Holmes on Homes* - have been exported.

Marc Ouellette

#### Works Cited

Hall, Stuart. *The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power. Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies*. Malden, MA. Wiley-Blackwell, 1996.

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