

neoliberalism and the realities of reality television

by david grazian

Along with mash-ups and Internet blogging, the meteoric rise of reality television came to define the last decade's pop cultural landscape for millions of Americans. In 2000 the commercial success of two new primetime series—*Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* and *Survivor*—catapulted the reality genre into the entertainment mainstream. (*Millionaire* earned the highest average Nielsen rating among all television series for the

tings in which bikini-clad women devour live crickets for money. Others denigrate the genre with a whiff of snobbery, noting its tastelessness, its prurient lack of wholesome content, and its exploitive attempts to capture the lowest-common-denominator of adolescent-minded audiences. Yet shockingly few critics have attempted to unpack the sociological underpinnings of reality programming as a product of its recent

growth developed in opposition to the Keynesian approaches that shaped U.S. monetary and fiscal policy during the mid-twentieth century, from the New Deal to the postwar era of economic expansion. Neoliberal principles are associated with global free trade and the deregulation of industry, the weakening of union labor, a decline in welfare assistance and social service provision, and the privatization of publicly-owned resources. Although neoliberal ideology has largely dominated the bipartisan consensus that characterizes turn-of-the-century American public policies from Reaganomics to NAFTA to welfare reform to the recent bailout of the nation's banking industry, its influence reached its apogee during the years of the Bush Administration (2001-2009), an era marked by union-busting, rising corporate subsidies, and the deregulation of markets; the unraveling of the social safety net; the outsourcing of governmental functions to the private sector; and the abdication of responsibility on the part of the U.S. federal government to protect New Orleans and other impoverished areas from the ravages of

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1999-2000 season, as did *Survivor* the following season.) In August 2000, the *Survivor* season finale attracted 51.7 million viewers, making it the 13th most-watched television event of the 2000s, bested only by the decade's ten Super Bowls, the 2007 NFC Championship game, and the *Friends* series finale. In 2001 the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences honored the FOX documentary *American High* with its first ever Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Reality Program, and in 2003 the Academy gave its first Emmy for Outstanding Reality-Competition Program to CBS's *The Amazing Race*. Since the 2004-2005 season, FOX's *American Idol* has annually boasted the highest average ratings of any other television program on the air, arguably making it the most popular TV show of the decade.

Critics and snarky audiences deride reality television for the most obvious of reasons, notably its thoroughly contrived presentation of "reality"—the staged theatricality of Donald Trump's "boardroom," the insincerity of bachelorette contestants, the highly orchestrated set-

historical context, the George W. Bush era. In fact, such a reckoning illustrates the extent to which the narrative conventions of reality television echo the most central policymaking paradigm in American politics during the last decade, the neoliberal agenda.

Informed by the free-market theories of the conservative Chicago School of economics and its acolytes, neoliberalism represents a strategy of economic



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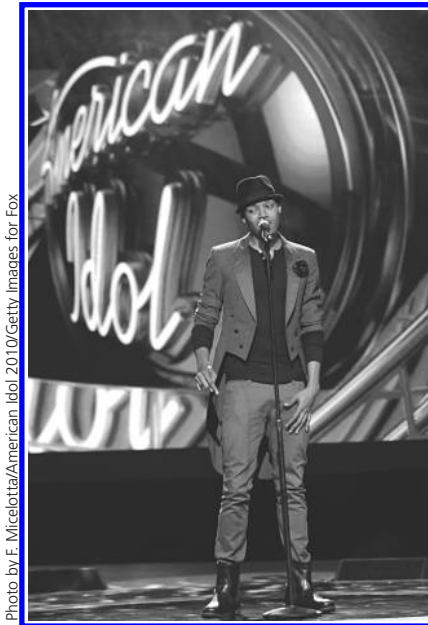


Photo by F. Micelotta/American Idol 2010/Getty Images for Fox

Aspiring Idol Jermaine Sellers made it to 2010's top 20 before getting the boot.

Hurricane Katrina.

At first glance, neoliberal dogma and reality television seem worlds apart—that is, until one considers exactly why the entertainment industry developed the genre in the first place.

Much ink has been spilled about the emergence of reality-based programming as illustrative of the post-modern blurring of boundaries separating fact from fiction. But it bears remembering that TV studios and networks introduced the first generation of reality television shows—notably the law enforcement shows *COPS* and *America's Most Wanted*—in response to the 1988 Writers Guild of America strike. Their goal was to create a form of programming that would be largely immune from union tactics from sit downs to picket lines. Since reality television shows do not rely on traditional scripts, producers avoid the risks and expensive costs associated with hiring unionized writers. By casting amateur participants

willing to work for free, rather than professional actors, producers also avoid paying industry-standard union wages to members of the Screen Actors Guild. These strategies represent more than cost-cutting measures. By hiring mostly non-unionized workers, the studios and networks that produce reality television shield themselves from the collective mobilization of organized labor in the entertainment industries. The union-resistant nature of reality TV was reaffirmed during the 2007 Writers Guild strike, when reality shows were left virtually unaffected even as media production work in more traditional sectors came to an abrupt halt.

Consider also *where* reality television creators produce their shows. They have increasingly taken advantage of the globalization of markets and flexibility of national borders that neoliberal policies make possible. It is no accident, for example, that many seasons of *Survivor* have been shot in Third World countries undergoing rapid economic development, where local authorities regularly relax labor laws, child protections, health codes and environmental regulations in the interests of remaining “business friendly.” These countries include China, Thailand, Panama, and Guatemala—some of the same developing nations in which underpaid and mistreated workers manufacture and export plastic toys, branded sneakers, and other pop cultural ephemera for the international market, all in the name of free trade and *laissez-faire* capitalism. Similarly, recent seasons of *The Amazing Race* have been filmed in China, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, and Malaysia.

Sweatshop laborers who work and live in crowded factory and dormitory spaces in offshore export processing zones in Asia and Latin America share

much in common with reality television actors. On FOX's *Hell's Kitchen* contestants must live on the restaurant/studio premises (and are forbidden to leave unless chaperoned by a supervisor), work extremely long hours performing numbingly repetitive tasks, and subject themselves to constant video surveillance. Contestants on *Survivor* live in rain-drenched shantytowns and literally starve while the world watches yet remains on the couch. Moreover, since reality TV actors are nonunionized workers (like their exploited counterparts in the developing world), they too lack the collective-bargaining power that would otherwise compel their employers to pay them a living wage. In fact, it is rare for reality TV actors or performers to even be identified as workers, which is how studios evade child labor laws on the sets of “family-oriented” reality programs. (On the exploitation of child performers on reality TV, see Hilary Levey's essay featured in this issue.)

While the production of reality television employs neoliberalism's economic principles, the genre's narrative conventions reflect its morals. Competitive programs celebrate the radical right-wing values championed especially by free market Republicans. Both *Survivor* and *The Apprentice* require sixteen or more participants to fiercely compete against one another in winner-take-all contests guaranteed to produce extreme levels of social inequality. Although team members are initially expected to work cooperatively on *Survivor*, they eventually vote their collaborators out of the game in naked displays of individualism and self-interest—it's like the last days of Enron, only with war paint and coconuts.

Meanwhile, programs like *The Apprentice* emphasize the prestige of

celebrity CEOs and the entrepreneurial acumen of wealthy businesspeople—much like the Bush cabinet, which featured former senior executives and board chairmen from Alcoa, CSX, Goldman Sachs, Halliburton, and yes, Enron. Like any flexible corporation undergoing a period of restructuring (especially in an era of increasing unemployment and poverty), audiences expect layoffs at the conclusion of every episode. Participants are encouraged to place their desire to win above personal loyalties, but not their slavish (if rarely reciprocated) devotion to the boss, of course. Most notably, on shows like *The Apprentice* the misdeeds of elite business institutions or their arrogant captains of industry are never challenged or questioned—only the actions of powerless, temporary employees are up for dissection and second-guessing. (Recall that the decade bore witness to the really real collapse of not only Enron but Arthur Andersen, WorldCom, Lehman Brothers, Bear Stearns, Washington Mutual, and count-



Photo by David McNew/Getty Images

Members of the Writers Guild of America during a 2007 strike that focused on the working conditions of scribes for so-called reality programs.

rap producer and impresario Sean “P. Diddy” Combs. Other reality shows simply chronicle the trials and triumphs of sycophantic interns as they labor away at their non-remunerative jobs, gaining valuable experience answering phones and checking names off clipboards at

deregulated labor market.

Although the very design of competitive reality programs like *The Apprentice* or *Hell’s Kitchen* guarantees that nearly all players must lose, such shows inevitably emphasize the moral failings of each contestant just before they are deposed. Typically carried out by all-knowing judges and hosts, this smug moralizing becomes practically unwatchable on programs like *The Biggest Loser*, in which fitness trainers personally criticize the show’s overweight (and typically working-class) contestants for their poor health. In such instances, the contributions of neoliberal federal policy to increased health disparities in the U.S.—notably the continued lack of affordable and universal health care, and cutbacks in welfare payments to indigent mothers and their children—are ignored in favor of arguments that blame the victims of poverty for own misfortune. On reality weight-loss programs, there are no collective solutions to rampant inequalities in wellness and health—say, an organized boycott of inner-city supermarkets that do not sell fresh yet inexpensive pro-

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less other companies operating in deregulated industries.)

Other reality shows feature young people competing for the “opportunity” to work as low-wage service workers or no-wage interns in the glamorous worlds of music, fashion, and magazine publishing. Some of these programs feature literal competitions in which contestants vie for the chance to work as an underling for a celebrity, such as VH1’s *I Want to Work for Diddy* where winners were awarded jobs as personal assistants for

gala events. The MTV reality soap opera *The Hills* portrays the central heroine, Lauren “L.C.” Conrad, happily interning at *Teen Vogue* while assisting high-end fashion designers like Marc Jacobs. Although Conrad’s insanely cushy made-for-TV “internship” does not particularly involve doing much work beyond gossiping with costars and jet-setting to Paris, *The Hills* nevertheless succeeds in seducing young female viewers to seek out fortune, fame, and even romance as exploited and disposable workers in the

duce—only individual moral failures that can be repaired by a belligerent drill sergeant, breaking down the souls of his charges in a televised theater of cruelty that lasts until the season finale.

Perhaps the mirror-image of competitive reality programs like *The Biggest Loser* are home makeover shows in which a TV network rebuilds the house of a family victimized by extreme hardship, whether a natural disaster or debilitating illness. On ABC's *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, charismatic host Ty Pennington grants miracles to the misfortunate. During the 2005-06 season, for example, the show's cast and crew took part in community rebuilding efforts in the Gulf region in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. But while programs like *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* may seem uplifting, their message is no less neoliberal than *The Biggest Loser*: like health care, housing is never a right to be provided to all citizens by the state, but a luxury sporadically granted to the poor by affluent private donors. Notably, home makeover shows rarely spotlight fair housing organizations that lobby state and federal agencies to provide adequate housing to the destitute. Instead, Pennington and Co. rebuild the domiciles of the most telegenic members of the so-called "deserving" poor as acts of corporate charity, just as Bush proposed that privately-run, faith-based community partnerships should replace the role of the federal government in delivering social services to the needy.

Is there hope for reality television? One might recall that the medium's offerings were not always so homogenous. In July 1994 MTV premiered the third season of *The Real World*. Set in a Lombard Street house in San Francisco, the show featured a diverse group of politically

aware youth representing a range of viewpoints and perspectives. Pedro Zamora was a 22-year-old HIV-positive and openly gay AIDS activist; Rachel Campos was a 23-year-old Hispanic-American Republican who volunteered for former U.S. congressman and Secretary of Housing of Urban Development Jack Kemp; Mohammed Bilal was a 24-year-old African-American and Muslim singer-songwriter whose alternative hip-hop group Midnight Voices wedded

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urban rap, jazz, funk, and world beat to a politics of social activism. Along with a Jewish liberal cartoonist, an Asian American medical student, a devout Christian, and an eccentric bike messenger, this dynamic cast helped make the San Francisco season among the most beloved and compelling in the series' history.

Ten years later, the 2004 season of *The Real World* was shot in Philadelphia, and featured seven great-looking but hard-drinking nightclubbing post-adolescents required to build a playground for disadvantaged youth under the supervision of the community-outreach wing of the Philadelphia Soul arena football team. (At least one or two cast members showed up to work hung over on most mornings.) In *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*, pop culture critic Chuck Klosterman quotes a former *Real World* fan who explains her diminished enjoyment of the show without mincing words: "MTV used to pick people for that show who I could relate to. Now they just have these stupid little kids who act like selfish twits."

Now that we have begun yet another decade, perhaps the increased progressive and populist yearnings of the times might not only counter our long-standing neoliberal consensus in American politics, but inspire new and innovative ways to produce entertainment media and popular culture as well. At the very least, I'd settle for more diverse offerings of reality television, particularly a selection of programming devoid of conservative ideology, shameless treacle, and

even, perhaps, live crickets.

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