



## City Research Online

### City, University of London Institutional Repository

---

**Citation:** Littler, J. & Couldry, N. (2011). Work, Power and Performance: Analysing the 'reality' game of The Apprentice. *Cultural Sociology*, 5(2), pp. 263-279. doi: 10.1177/1749975510378191

This is the accepted version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version.

---

**Permanent repository link:** <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/4166/>

**Link to published version:** <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975510378191>

**Copyright:** City Research Online aims to make research outputs of City, University of London available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. URLs from City Research Online may be freely distributed and linked to.

**Reuse:** Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

---

---

---

City Research Online:

<http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/>

[publications@city.ac.uk](mailto:publications@city.ac.uk)

---

## **WORK, POWER AND PERFORMANCE:**

### **ANALYSING THE ‘REALITY’ GAME OF *THE APPRENTICE***

**NICK COULDRY AND JO LITTLER**

**7974 words inc reff and notes**

‘In these ways, the social has been diminished; [but] capitalism remains.

Inequality becomes increasingly tied to isolation’. (Sennett 2006: 82)

#### **Introduction**

It has been argued that we face a crisis of ‘the society of formal work’ characterized by endemic instability in the work domain (Beck 2000: 21); and that, at the same time, powerful neoliberal discourses are seeking to eliminate social and collective opposition to that crisis’s consequences (Bourdieu 1998: 95-96). ‘Neoliberalism’ is certainly a contradictory phenomenon, combining an ideology of market freedom with a practice of intensified governmental regulation (Levi-Faur and Jordana 2005). In this article, however, we are concerned not so much with neoliberal policies as with the shift in work-focused norms and values inscribed within neoliberalism and how the lived experience of that shift is refracted in the high-profile ‘reality game’, *The Apprentice* (its UK version). While this programme is hardly a direct reflection of contemporary work, its organization and language naturalises a particular neoliberal view of work, power and

individual responsibility . Analyzing this programme can contribute to our understanding of wider ‘cultures’ of neoliberalism.

The crisis of the contemporary workplace involves much more than increased instability, casualization, and ‘flexibilisation’. There has been a shift in the forms of power and the social bonds which hold the workplace together (Sennett 2006). Organisations at all levels, from boards to sales forces (*cf* Bunting 2004: 36), are required to respond ever more quickly to short-term demands . This tends to undermine older models of bureaucratic power, with a new type of charismatic leader emerging (*cf* Littler 2007) who can front continuous change. This new form of charismatic power can draw on a powerful new tool: one-way command structures enhanced by instant electronic communications, that effect a surveillance-based centralization of functions whilst generating greater employee ‘participation’ (Andrejevic 2004). Whilst new forms of networking and sociality have emerged, trust between employees is reduced, and the successful employee must constantly adapt to ‘change’ in a corporate environment whose authority structures are regularly ‘delayered’, requiring the worker to handle multiples of tasks in a ‘non-linear’ fashion (Hardt and Negri 2005 110-111; Sennett 2006: 49). Self-governance therefore in part replaces the social bonds that previously sustained corporate loyalty (Sennett 2006: 47).

As a result, in a process very different from the crisis of ‘middle-management’ of an earlier generation (Carlsson 1990), the norms of employee performance are being transformed. Not only are work/life boundaries increasingly porous (Beck 2000, Bunting

2004), but ‘success’ becomes redefined in terms of ‘the magic of “being discovered”, which involves luck, self-presentation, image and finding oneself in the right place at the right time’ (Yiannis Gabriel, quoted in Bunting 2004: 154). Inevitably this creates anxieties and the resulting ‘cycle of emotional dependency’ (Bunting 2004: 117) must be translated into workable norms of ‘performance’, the ‘deep’ embodiment of corporate values and commitments within an ‘overwork culture’ (Schor 1992) that must also be ‘fun’.

It is important however to analyse what is omitted from this narrative of work as play’ (Rifkin 2000: 12)<sup>1</sup> in order to politicize contemporary work culture and so, more widely, contribute to the project of ‘defataliz[ing] neoliberalism’ (Bourdieu 1998: 68). The power-play of *The Apprentice*’s reality game offers a useful entry-point for understanding how certain norms of performance at work are being ‘playfully’ naturalized in **a Britain marked by Tony Blair’s New Labour version of Thatcherite market values. Power is portrayed in purely charismatic terms, given the dramatic form in this programme of Sir Alan’s sugar’s combats of verbal aggression [jo, this inserted to address reviewer 3’s comment on page 9]**. At the time of writing, there have been 17 different international versions of *The Apprentice*, with various degrees of popularity: in Finland and Germany, for example, it was cancelled after one series. By contrast, in the US, it reached the ranking of 7<sup>th</sup> most popular primetime programme, and in the UK *The Apprentice* has been so popular that a third series has been moved to the main BBC channel, BBC 1, from BBC2.<sup>2</sup> It is at least suggestive that the format has gained particular popularity in two countries where working hours are so high.<sup>3</sup>

The more interesting issue however is how salient *The Apprentice*'s representations and mediations of work-related norms are for the wider cultures of neoliberalism. Our study is limited in one respect, providing a contextualized analysis of the programme's narrative form, not detailed analysis of the programme's audiences, although in this it is no different from other recent work within the governmentality tradition on media and neoliberalism. We aim however to take debates about the methodology of such analyses one stage further by foregrounding how in *the Apprentice* highly contentious versions of work-norms are not only represented but naturalized in the ritualized form of a 'reality'-game. By presenting the 'reality' of work and business in the form of highly structured entertainment, *The Apprentice* transforms the norms of the neoliberal workplace into taken-for-granted 'common sense'.

### **Some background**

Two preliminary discussions are necessary before we can proceed to our analysis, the first theoretical and methodological, and the second contextual.

#### Theoretical Issues

Any attempt to read particular texts as in some way illuminating wider social and economic processes (especially those as complex as neoliberalism) faces difficult

choices. Foucauldian approaches to ‘governmentality’ – based on Rose’s argument that ‘the government of work now passes through the psychological strivings of each and every individual for fulfillment’ (Rose 1999: 118) – have raised urgent questions about what the new pedagogic trend in reality-based programming in the USA, UK and elsewhere tells us about new ways of managing the social (Ouellette and Hay forthcoming). In so far as programmes such as *The Apprentice* present explicit models of how individuals learn norms of efficiency, prowess, and so on, this approach is clearly useful. But governmentality approaches tend to leave unanswered a number of questions. First, as Judith Butler has asked, through what mechanism exactly is it that individuals are ‘formed’ as subjects (Butler 1997: 1-2)? Second, is agency evacuated by the univocal explanatory logic of governmentality theory and its reduction of subjectivity to ‘effect’? Third, through what mechanisms do general representations of work in reality TV become absorbed into wider culture? Through bypassing such issues, contemporary governmentality theory can make neoliberalism seem both ‘too totalising’ and ‘too easy’ (Grossberg and Miller 2003: 32). Consider Rose’s passing treatment in his discussion of “‘advanced liberal democracies’ of ‘mass media’ as merely ‘pedagogies’, one among ‘a plethora of indirect mechanisms that can translate the goals of political, social, economic authorities into the choices and commitments of individuals, locating them [citizens] into actual or virtual networks of identification through which they may be governed’ (1996: 58, added emphasis). In this simple notion of ‘translation’, governmentality approaches apparently forget one of Foucault’s most crucial insights, that processes of power are inherently unstable and always rely on people’s participation in their own subjectivation (1982: 221).<sup>4</sup> We need to take agency seriously without romanticizing it, which means

acknowledging also the spaces and places where the *unsuccessful* implementation of neoliberal governmentality becomes apparent, so revealing a gap between the neoliberal project and the heterogeneous responses to it, a ‘governmentality gap’ we revisit in our conclusion.

We therefore in our analysis step slightly to one side of governmentality theory, recognizing the force of the questions to which its applications point us , but not accepting, necessarily, all its answers. Instead, we combine this approach with the sensibility of post-Marxist discourse analysis, which enables a consideration of the specific articulations being made in relation to a particular formation of capitalism, whilst avoiding crudely totalizing accounts of culture and society (Hall, 1997). In addition, we advance our analysis in a somewhat different direction by drawing on Nick Couldry’s recent work on reality-based media as ‘media rituals’ (Couldry 2003: chapter 7, **which argues such** formats [ ] naturalise the authority of ‘the media’ as ‘our’ privileged access-point into the constructed totality of ‘the social’ and its ‘reality’ . This in turn, we suggest, enables us to see particular media ‘reality’ games as ways of naturalizing particular norms (here versions of the contemporary shift in work norms) within a format that is ambiguously **offered as ‘just a game’**, yet **at the same time providing** insights into underlying **social** reality. Games such as *the Apprentice* as ideological not through the specific statements they make, but through their privileged enactment of particular norms.<sup>5</sup>

By understanding media ‘reality’-games as fictions whose normative force derives from their underlying claim to track ‘reality’ we can gain insight into the process whereby contemporary media negotiate a work world where, whether by accident or by design, ‘the individualism of self-realization . . . has . . . become an instrument of economic development, spreading standardization, and making lives into fiction – into an emotionally fossilized set of demands under whose consequences individuals today seem more likely to suffer than to prosper’ (Honneth 2004: 474, added emphasis; cf Boltanski and Chiapello 2005).

### The programme’s context

We now turn to interpretative context. Our article focuses on the UK version of *The Apprentice*. The rules of the format are well known: the initial contestants compete, first in groups and in later episodes directly against each other, for the prize of a job with the corporate mogul (in the UK, Sir Alan Sugar) who is also their chief interlocutor in the game’s confrontations. When a group of contestants is on the losing side in a programme’s task, one of them is fired at the end of that programme: the one to be fired is either the losing team leader or one of those who the losing team leader has nominated, the decision being Sir Alan’s.

The original US version, while identical in format, offers a different inflection of neoliberal norms, as we will note in detail below. Indeed, it can be argued that the US version displays a neoliberal ‘contract’ more securely embedded in norms of sociability

as well as long-established entertainment values. In the US version Donald Trump is presented, unambiguously, as a celebrity of fabulous wealth, access to whom is always touched by awe and mutual, if unequal, respect. By contrast, Sir Alan Sugar in the UK version rejects any idea of his celebrity as ‘natural’, emphasizing throughout his hard-won triumph over his upbringing (**his first job was selling vegetables in a market stall**).

**In addition**, the UK version of *The Apprentice* shows more obviously the tensions behind neoliberalism’s impoverishment of the social, **tensions also reflected in** New Labour’s **particular** political translation of international neoliberal doctrine (Hall 2003: 10-24): this is the Britain where more than half of managers were shown in a recent survey to suffer ill-health through overwork (Chartered Management Institute 2006), and a majority of managers saw their belief in the importance of enjoying their work to be at odds with their employers’ view (Chartered Management Institute 2007), while at the very top, the average UK chief executive is paid 100 times more than the average worker in their organisation (*Guardian* 2 October 2006). The UK programme’s myth of ‘hard-won’ celebrity surely has a role in negotiating those tensions.

Not surprisingly perhaps, given these tensions, the broadcasting objective of the UK *Apprentice* was effectively ideological: ‘to bring business to those who might not have thought it was for them’ (Jane Lush, BBC Controller of Entertainment Commissioning, quoted BBC 2005). While the programme is a game, its ‘point’ – in this it is similar to most reality TV (Couldry 2003) - depends on a claim to ‘reality’: ‘[it is] the first entertainment show to have a real point – to show what it really takes to get ahead in

business' (Daisy Goodwin, editorial director **of the programme's production company** Talkback, quoted BBC 2005).

Jane Lush's comment also indicates how *The Apprentice* provides a popular education in what it means to be a contemporary entrepreneurial worker, and the BBC explicitly promotes the programme as part of its educational remit (BBC 2006/7).<sup>6</sup> This is one of the more subtle aspects of the programme: its imbrication in and dramatisation of a specific conjuncture in which the values of the public sector and public education are melded further with private business. The programme fits snugly into a Blairite landscape in which a variety of state schools are, in a variety of ways, being turned over to private corporate interests, whether through the Private Finance Initiative (PFI), City Academies, the channelling of business and enterprise specialist schools, or the more general encouragement of enterprise as a core educational value (Monbiot 2000, Whitfield 2001).

Of all the show's features, it is Sir Alan's arbitrariness and aggressiveness as the programme's celebrity that has excited critical commentary in the UK from business leaders who claim it sets a poor example and fails to represent today's business world, even though Sir Alan remains a very successful businessman (*Guardian* 11 May 2006). There is, in other words, a discursive contest over the realism of the 'corporate reality' being shown on the programme. But this apparent conflict with everyday 'reality', no doubt accentuated for dramatic purposes, does not undermine the programme's normalization, more generally, of a particular type of power - individualised and charismatic – that fits well with the general transformations of corporate life analysed earlier.

Let us now examine how this works in detail. Our commentary in what follows is based on a detailed analysis of Series 2 of the UK programme (BBC2, February- May 2006) and the follow-up programmes, *The Apprentice – You’re Fired* (BBC3), drawing in places on comparisons with Series 1 and 2 of the US programme (2004). All references to UK episodes are to Series 2, unless otherwise noted.

### **The rough and the smooth: *The Apprentice* and chaotic capitalism**

Our starting-point here is that, whilst the neoliberal imperative of rolling back state provision and increasing corporate power is not, globally, either a uniform or even process, it is noteworthy that the US and Britain – where *The Apprentice* has had such audience success - aggressively endorse these trends in contrast with the more ambivalent or reticent politics of other countries: for instance, countries in which a form of social democratic capitalism is more heavily rooted (Sweden, the Netherlands) or where oppositional tactics are prominent (Venezuela and Ecuador) (Brenner 2006; Harvey 2003). The particular contemporary Anglo-American formation of neoliberal corporate capitalism is one which is simultaneously marked by polish and precariousness. The increased power of the financial industries - accumulated thorough asset-stripping, risk assessment, financial gambling and the work of ‘vulture capitalists’ – and the increasing exploitation of employees and the exacerbation of consumer debt have developed alongside ‘a surge in upscale real-estate prices and the turnover of the luxury goods

sector' alongside (Blackburn 2006: 69-70; see also Brenner, 2006, Leys 2001). As Nigel Thrift puts it, this operates as a kind of cultural and political 'squeeze' in which capitalism is pointed in two entirely opposed and closely linked directions, combining trends 'often very close to barbarism with an increasingly sophisticated corporate vanguard' (Thrift 2006: 280). This juxtaposition, Thrift points out, looks increasingly discrepant, desperate and bizarre: while a considerable area of the globe is ravaged by primitive accumulation - by force and enclosure – the US/UK's glossy corporatism seeks to 'activate germs of talent' in increasingly sophisticated ways (Thrift 2006: 283).

Both aspects of this 'chaos' within contemporary Anglo-American capitalism are apparent in *The Apprentice*. Luxury goods are emphasised as highly desirable, as the just deserts and the rewards of each challenge. The availability of the high-end treats such as 'pole position seats on the catwalk' at London fashion week (Series 1, Episode 5) or 'a champagne bar at Vertigo 42, one of the highest buildings in London' (Series 1, Episode 1) as the reward for the winning team at the end of every episode indicates their simultaneous status of hard-to-gain treat and ever-ready possibility. The contestants and viewers are invited to admire objects, property and land owned by Sugar; we are, for example, reminded in Episode 1 that 'He's got his own fleet of executive jets and a Mayfair property portfolio' (and it is notable that Trump has made most of his money through real estate). The fact that there are no safety nets for contestants on the programme is constantly emphasized; indeed, the risk of being cast aside is turned into a source of dramatic excitement and tension ('You're fired!'). (In the Finnish one-off version of *The Apprentice*, the slogan is by contrast 'you're free to leave', nicely hinting

at both social democratic respect and neoliberal individualism).<sup>7</sup> Such tactics dramatise, in heightened form, the current conventions of workplace ranking from performance-related pay to regularised institutional sackings (Enron famously has a ‘rank and yank’ policy under which 15% of its employees were fired each year: Gibney, 2006).

Meanwhile the cultures of work incarnated in the programme encourage people to overcome this precariousness and fashion themselves into successful working agents by, as Thrift would put it, ‘activat[ing their] germs of talent’. The programme enshrines the individualised atomised self as the privileged or meaningful site of work, who must transform herself in accordance with the norms that she has internalised. Contestants are, simultaneously, *assessed* on their ability to assume and effective self-governance at work (what Mitchell Dean terms ‘responsibilization’) and *further educated* in it through the programme’s crash course in working on their working selves (Dean 1999). In Episode 6, for instance, after Sir Alan has told the contestants they will be selling used cars, the voiceover tells us ‘there’s only a few hours to learn about it...So it’s straight into the classroom to learn how to catch a customer’. In a typical episode, there is a short lecture followed by the experiential learning of the task, then extensive feedback and reflection (effectively, a 360 degree review).

*The Apprentice*’s theatrics, through their heightened focus on individualised responses to learning in a highly pressurized context, shows us, entertainingly, what it means to be a successful entrepreneurial worker in contemporary culture. The motivated viewer can also buy the tie-in book published alongside the series, guiding the reader into ‘how to be

an apprentice' (Sugar 2005).<sup>8</sup> However, importantly, the programme also offers narrative pleasure through distancing, particularly in the British version. Its aesthetically polished, quasi-documentary format guides us, as viewers, into the programme from far away, up high over the London skyline, before panning in close to observe these trainee entrepreneurs in their newly-natural habitat. A subtle distinction is created between the smoothness of the visual and narrative frame (with its urbane, *film-noir* photography, slick electronica soundtrack and calmly modulated voiceover) and the foregrounded brashness of its subject (the working-class, rough and ready abruptness of Sir Alan and his exposed, sweating and vulnerable proto-employees). Such **stylised distance might appear to give viewers critical distance from the norms and ideologies embedded in the programme** [ ] but, as we shall see, the narrative framing works, simultaneously, to *naturalise* and *endorse* certain themes and social contexts; and, in doing so, acts to close down the very possibilities it appears to open up.

### **The necessity of 'passion' and the absence of alternative values**

It is worth looking at how the programme works to narrow its frame of possible readings. One means by which neoliberal norms is both worked out and endorsed is through the 'positive' value of passion and through the suppression of any values which might offer potential alternatives to neoliberalism.

'Passion' is the word which contestants on *The Apprentice* use, with emphasis, to defend themselves when they are under maximum pressure:

Michelle: 'I can never be accused of slacking. I'm very very passionate, I'm very focused and committed to what I do . . . I really think I can add value . . . I will deliver very strongly and passionately for your businesses'

Ruth: 'I'll give you the dedication and passion that I've proven through every task and through my career that I can give' (Episode 12)

The term is also important for judging others, as when Ruth praises Syed's 'passion' after being challenged by Sir Alan to defend him when again under attack herself (Episode 9), but rejects Dun in the same episode because he lacks 'passion'. Let us first approach this from the point of view of the individual's values.

What is 'passion'? Passion, we contend, is less a descriptive term (referring to specific types of emotional display , **still less emotional states**) and more **a performative term in Judith Butler's sense** that captures the excessive (and therefore in principle unlimited) commitment to the employer's needs and values, **performative** evidence of which the successful employee is required to provide, **that is, act out**, at all times.

Necessarily the content of 'passion' is abstract since it refers to a continual responsiveness to a hypothetical demand. 'Passion' is what you have to have when, as a respondent in Michael Pusey's recent eloquent study of the experience of the Australian neoliberal economy puts it, 'you give it all you've got and they still want more . . . the

implication [of employers is] that your motivation is inadequate until proven otherwise' (quoted Pusey 2003: 63, added emphasis). This illustrates well what Eva Illouz terms the 'emotional ontology' of contemporary capitalism – the process whereby emotions are reified and detached from the 'emotional glue' of their subjects' lives, and used instead for control in a corporate context (Illouz 2007: 36). Just as **employees of the UK supermarket Asda (part of the Walmart group)** are required to give a 'real smile' to customers however they are feeling (Bunting 2004), so employees are required to show unlimited commitment to employers' values and needs, whatever the limits of their personal situation. Passion, in effect, is 'emotional labour' (Hochschild 1983/2003) ratcheted up and channeled through the individualization demanded by the chaotic neoliberal cultures of the 2000s. The inevitable gap between unceasing demand and the finite resources that each worker has to supply must be filled, notionally, by something - 'passion'.<sup>9</sup>

'Passion' by definition allows no room for the articulation of values that might challenge the values of the employer, because it expresses the absolute internalization of those corporate values. The only place where alternative values to competitive individualism surfaced in *The Apprentice* was in the moments when each episode's loser was driven away in a taxi or reflected in the follow-up shows on BBC3. So Jo (episode 6) said 'I just wanted to be a good person', Samuel (Episode 7) insisted on the value of 'making a reasoned argument' and Dun proclaimed the value of working for the good of the group, not yourself. These moments, however, are readily discountable because spoken by the losers. Rare was a moment when a friend of a loser openly contested, from outside the

game itself, the game's implicit values, as when a friend of Dun (follow-up programme after Episode 9) said 'there's a difference between being a broken man (which Sir Alan, helped by the episode's dramatic direction, had accused Dun of being) and not wanting to work for Sir Alan'. Maybe, he implied, Dun had stopped wanting to win, because he no longer shared the show's values. The rarity of such a challenge exposes the limits of *The Apprentice's* reality game.

### **How *The Apprentice* presents 'the social'**

In this section, we look at how the UK version of *The Apprentice* presents the social world of work. In these terms, the contrast with the US programme is here quite striking, as the norms of interpersonal aggression are presented with so little disguise in the UK programme. Before we look at the detail, it is worth noting one contextual factor, which is that, as Neal Lawson puts it, Britain is 'a poor version of the US' in that '[w]e copy their labour market flexibility, their love of the free market, their worship of business leaders, but have none of the natural resources they are blessed with' (Lawson 2006). As has been widely documented, Britain has attempted to make up for this deficit through marketing itself as a knowledge-economy hub for the creative industries (Leonard 1997; McRobbie 2002; McGuigan 2004). This goes some way to help explain both the *aestheticisation* of the UK *Apprentice* noted earlier (compared with the more 'straightforward', fast reportage style of the US version) and the emphasis in the UK version on a tougher, more aggressive variant of the values of 'meritocracy' and all-out 'dog eat dog' competition.

For the degree of verbal aggression in the UK version of *The Apprentice* is high, whether between contestants or Sir Alan's one-way assaults on contestants in 'the Boardroom'. This aggression takes more than one form, and is often conspicuously 'classed'. Whereas the insistent working-class Sir Alan appears to relish extreme directness and harshness, the multiple job interviews that make up the contest of Episode 11 intensify the mental aggression, even if the interviewers are sometimes softly spoken: as the smoothly spoken Nick Hewer, Sir Alan's adviser throughout the series, commented in the follow-up programme to Episode 11 (*The Apprentice: You're Fired*, BBC3) that Sir Alan's team of interviewers acted more like 'interrogators' than interviewers. This harshness is, of course, something we are familiar with from other reality TV, for example the 'judges' in *Pop Idol/American Idol*: we return to the question of comparison in our conclusion (see also Biressi and Nunn, 2004; Stahl, 2004).

This continuous aggression contrasts sharply with how interpersonal relations are conducted in the US show. While competitive pressures are, of course, intense in the US version also, there is little shouting, either among the contestants or by Donald Trump in 'the Boardroom'. As a consequence, US contestants tend, when challenged, to have some time for reflection before they answer: when they do respond, Trump at least acknowledges what they say as an answer rather than (as Sugar frequently does) throwing it straight back at them as inadequate. Similarly within the contestant teams, we are shown more discussion and deliberation, and fewer obvious attempts to dominate others purely by verbal aggression. Not surprisingly, perhaps, given this greater interpersonal

respect, US contestants are more likely to defend fellow team members, even when under great individual pressure in ‘the Boardroom’. There is, in other words, a higher threshold of sociability (in the US programme, Trump’s advisors sometimes speak to contestants as they monitor them, whereas in the UK show the advisors tend to watch in silence).

Within the social world of the US show there is therefore at least some *prima facie* basis for interpersonal trust.

The absence of any significant basis for interpersonal trust in the UK programme is **reflected in how the UK programme presents relations to power** (for the link between forms of trust and power, see Sennett 2006: 81). [ ] The UK contestants are assumed – at least this is nowhere contested on camera – to accept that the price of being on the show is to face Sir Alan’s verbal aggression in all its unpredictability. **This is therefore a picture of workplace interaction as highly individualized, putting a premium on the ability** to withstand verbal aggression. [ ] Syed’s outstanding ability to endure and even occasionally deflect such aggression is praised by Sir Alan (*The Apprentice: You’re Fired*, following episode 10); indeed the ability to cope with aggression – **instead of being portrayed as a sign of character weakness or as undermining a culture of open debate**, is linked **to what**, as in so many other reality TV shows, **participants call the show’s ‘learning’ experience**: Ansell, who came third overall in series 2, comments (*The Apprentice: You’re Fired*, following episode 11) on how much he learned from having Sir Alan ‘carving into’ him. **Indeed, this is part of the show’s ‘realism’**. In the same discussion a contestant from the first UK series (Saira Khan) justified the hyper-aggressive interviews as representing ‘the culture you’ll be working in’. [ ]

Some challenge to those norms **of aggression and submission** is occasionally implied, **but** simultaneously suppressed by being translated into gender-specific terms: so Sharon is criticized in episode 8 by Sir Alan for her ‘nicey-nicey, teacher approach’ (she had previously worked as a business lecturer). Ruth, the show’s runner-up, who of all the contestants appeared to have the most intense identification with Sir Alan’s persona, lets slip in episode 12 that ‘that bloody man has had me on my knees’. **Not only can such** anger [ ] not be acknowledged within the show’s discourse, **but in the moral economy portrayed by the show, verbal aggression is highlighted as a the key tool by which performance and ability is ultimately assessed.** [ ] At the end of Episode 11 (in effect the second series’ semi-final) Sir Alan confronts Paul. Paul was distinguished for having never been on the losing team in any of the previous programmes’ tasks; as a result, Paul had never appeared until this point before Sir Alan in ‘the Boardroom’. From the perspective of the value of team success, this record would seem to be evidence in Paul’s favour but Sir Alan turns the tables on Paul in an interesting confrontation:

the fact that you’ve won all the tasks doesn’t mean jack shit to me because I haven’t talked with you yet. So you speak to me now, you speak to me now, because, I’m telling you, it’s getting close to that door [pointing at the exit door].

Good work within a group, it is implied, counts for nothing at all beside the ability to satisfy Sir Alan in direct confrontation. **This is a picture of the social dynamics of the workplace in which respect for** [ ] team dynamics **is** inconsequential, and all that

matters is individual combat with **the chief executive on his own terms**, Sir Alan in the boardroom.

### **Charismatic Power**

Implied here **also**, in the programme's **highly individualized** portrayal of work-based sociality, is an exclusively charismatic model of power.<sup>10</sup> It is charisma that does not even adopt a guise of routine rationality. The charismatic basis of this power is never masked, and Sir Alan loses no opportunity to defeat contestants in verbal combat. This is a major difference from the presentation of power in the US show, where Donald Trump does not appear to need to sustain his power through verbal combat and where his social and economic distance from contestants is demonstrated - once and for all - when the winners of the first task visit his extravagant Manhattan penthouse. Impressive wealth is a theme in the UK show also, as we have seen, but what is interesting here is that Trump's power is represented in material form, not enacted through personal performance. The implied links of the US show to established corporate power are correspondingly strong: so the two US teams (US series 1, Episode 1) take the names of quasi-established corporations (Versacorp, Protégé Corporation), whereas in the UK series 2, contestants choose names more suggestive of short-term marketing campaigns that, as it were, still have to persuade their audience (Velocity, Invicta). An interesting point to note here in passing is the 'newness' of corporate power in the UK series: Trump inherited wealth from his father, or belongs to what Michael Useem terms the realm of 'family capitalism' (Useem 1984 : 172-196) whilst Sugar is self-proclaimed hero of the 'meritocratic' age.

While both series are, of course, organized around the affirmation of power, Trump's power is therefore closer to the routinised charisma (Weber 1991) of the established corporate world, whereas Sugar's power remains purely charismatic, and so must be continuously defended against personal challenge.

Some consequences follow from this for the UK show. *First*, all power relationships are shown in personal terms. While Sir Alan has his court of trusted advisers and interviewers, he emphasises that the final decisions will always be his, and his alone: as he puts it, in the final episode 'my instinct is telling me . . .'. We note in passing that this purely personalized version of decision-making bears some resemblance to George W. Bush's reputed reliance on 'instinct', even when making the most complex strategic decisions (Danner 2006: 87, quoting Ron Suskind's work). A psychologist when asked in follow-up to Episode 11 to comment on which of the newly announced finalists has the better chances assesses this principally in terms of their personal relationship with Sir Alan: Ruth, she says, had yet to build a 'personal connection' with Sir Alan, while Michelle is already on 'Sir Alan's radar'. This proved insightful about the final decision, although paradoxically it was Ruth who had the most intensely personal identification with Sir Alan (saying that she 'worshipped him' as someone from whose motivation she could learn (in the follow-up to Episode 10)). *Second*, power is shown to be arbitrary - as when (Episode 10) Sir Alan tells those who have just survived a grueling task that they will be collected at 3:45am the next morning for a flight to an unspecified destination – and **based on** fear. Only rarely is the fear generated by Sir Alan challenged, as when the loser in Episode 7 (Samuel) argues in the follow-up show that fear of Sir Alan distorts the

business decision-making of contestants: another alternative ‘value’ implied but not developed. *Third*, the editorializing of the show emphasizes the moments when fear is generated, placing the viewers in the position of voyeurs of fear. So at the end of Episode 11 when Ruth’s survival is in the balance, following a severe reprimand, Sir Alan keeps her waiting for a few seconds as we watch her face blush, before he tells her she’s through to the final. *Finally*, charismatic power means that the price of failure to impress is individual isolation, as Sennett notes in our opening quotation. At the end of each episode the loser wheels her or his suitcase out of a sidedoor; there is no support structure to fall back on, no team with whom to share the pain of defeat, except through the personal patronage of Sir Alan who says (exceptionally) that he will ‘somewhere down the line’ keep in touch with Ansell ‘to make sure he’s OK’.<sup>11</sup>

Given the format’s consistent presentation of business power as charisma, whether in its pure form (in the UK show) or in routinised form (in the US show), it is perhaps not surprising that in the UK show the imagined world of business is presented as in some respects continuous with the world of media and entertainment. The final challenge that decides the series’ winner (Episode 12) is not a conventional business task but ‘putting on a show’ in the Tower of London at a few day’s notice. It is only superficially surprising that in the follow-up programmes shown on BBC3 the editor of the celebrity magazine *Heat* and a *Sun* journalist (Jane Moore) turn up as ‘experts’. Business culture is increasingly drawing on tabloid discourse to construct an image of itself as ‘democratic’, contemporary and cool (Littler 2007, McGuigan 2006), and the theatrics of *the Apprentice* are part of that shift, **which can be seen as overlapping with the increasing**

**prevalence discussed above of both charismatic power and individualized self-governance in the neoliberal workplace.**

**Conclusion: Reality Television and the closing of the governmentality gap**

We have argued that in the UK version of *The Apprentice* we see one way in which dominant norms of the neoliberal workplace are represented in prominent cultural form. Other comparisons might also be developed, such as the ‘reality’-based games based on singing or dance (**the world wide *Pop Idol* format and the popular UK programme *Strictly Come Dancing***) that present versions of the same norms entangled with a emotional narrative of individual self-transformation with almost utopian connotations (Stahl 2004). We would, however, be cautious about drawing from such textual variations any easy conclusion about how they ‘reflect’ underlying variations in US and UK versions of neoliberalism (cf Jameson 1981: 67). Many contingent factors affect the cultural and political economies of each programme’s production (beyond the scope of this article). Nor, by contrast with overly deterministic governmentality arguments, do we think neoliberal norms can be treated as simple templates that are ‘laid over’ individual behaviour, constraining the emergence of subjects ‘in advance’.

Indeed, the limitations of narrow approaches to governmentality – for all the useful questions to which they alert us – emerge readily when we compare *The Apprentice* to the UK ‘mockumentary’ sitcom *The Office*, which portrayed the working relationships between a group of colleagues in a company in Slough and was also very successful in

the US (BBC, 2001). A large source of the humour of the programme - why it is both funny and resonant - is because it dramatizes the *failure* of such modes of governmentality. In *The Office*, the idea of being empowered through corporate logic doesn't ring true: on the contrary, entrepreneurial self-realisation and the language of business empowerment – particularly as spouted by the lead character and key figure of ridicule, David Brent - is shown to be flagrantly laughable (even if other more 'successful' models of management practice lurk in the background). Neoliberal corporate working discourse is shown to stunt the possibilities of lives, both emotionally and practically, and to be used for banal and narrow ends (i.e. producing profit for a Slough stationary company). As Paul Gilroy puts it, *The Office* was 'the one vital, dynamic place in all of British culture where the language and practice of managerialism were held up to ridicule and the routinization of insecure employment was judged to be immoral and unjust' (Gilroy 2004: 150). The comedy demonstrated that processes of governmentality are not always or necessarily smoothly implemented, precisely the 'governmentality gap' we referred to earlier.

If governmentality (properly understood) still allows for participation and agency, it remains for us to clarify how the reality TV format works to aid the closing down the cultural space of oppositional agency. Mark Andrejevic has persuasively argued that reality TV in general is a sphere in which 'the participation of consumers in the rationalization of their own consumption is sold as empowerment' (Andrejevic 2004:15). In *The Apprentice*, as we have shown, this focus is re-tooled towards labour – it becomes a site where the participation of *workers* in the rationalization of their own work is sold as

empowerment (for both viewer and contestant). The programme educates its viewers (in dramatized form) in how to become ‘empowered’ by struggling within and reproducing the norms of a harsh, unpredictable, precarious, increasingly competitive working climate. As a result, the highly distinctive performance norms of neoliberal business culture are themselves naturalized and objectified as part of ‘the real world out there’. It is here definitively, perhaps, that the iron cage of modernity becomes fully imaginable as the surveillance-enabled ‘glass cage’ (Gabriel 2003) of the contemporary workplace. The format of the ‘reality-game’ is crucial to this achievement, because it is here, within the ambit of television’s wider claim to privileged access to our ‘social reality’ (cf Couldry 2003: chapter 6), that neoliberal norms are reified as ‘rules of the game’. As Series 1’s runner-up put it (already quoted): ‘[it’s] the culture you’ll be working in’. Whether that is true or not is to some extent beside the point, for it is the reification of such claims as ‘rules of the game’ that is an important contribution to the cultures of neoliberalism.

Significant alternatives to the dominant values of the neoliberal market economy are effectively effaced in a ‘reality game’ format based in advance on those values. Any competitor in *The Apprentice* has demonstrably consented to the rules of the game, more or less; protests to the contrary are immediately discountable (or the subject leaves the show). The neoliberal values written into the rules of the game appear as the ‘free’ choices of people, above all the game’s winner, who have, after all, chosen, indeed desired, to enter the game. This process of implicit legitimation operates however within the disclaimable framework of [ ] entertainment that is ‘just a game’ **and** claims to be in tune with a social and economic ‘reality’ [ ] beyond the game’s boundaries.

**In this way, contemporary** ‘reality’-games, with their ambiguous status as entertainment and instruction, **tell us something important about how the ‘culture’ of neoliberalism actually works.** If neoliberal market ideology is implausible when presented as an explicit validation of work’s social organization, **we must remember that** the ‘ritualisation of power’ **often** works as ‘a means to make us forget its operations’ (Couldry 2003: 114, referring to Bloch 1989). **Attention to ritualized versions of the contemporary workplace helpfully supplements the rather [ ] deterministic models [ ]** of governmentality theory, highlighting **a cultural arena where the agency that might contest neoliberal norms is both played with and effectively displaced.**

## **References**

- Andrejevic, Mark (2004) *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched*. Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield.
- BBC (2006) ‘Sir Alan Sugar confirmed for BBC Two’s The Apprentice’, press release, 18 May, available from [www.bbc.co.uk/print/pressoffice/pressreleases/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/print/pressoffice/pressreleases/)
- Beck, U. (2000) *The Brave New World of Work*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Biressi, A. and H. Nunn (2004) *Reality TV: Realism and Revelation*. London: Wallflower Press.
- Blackburn, R. (2006) ‘Finance and the Fourth Dimension’, *New Left Review* 39, 39-70
- Bloch, M. (1989) *Ritual History and Power*. London: The Athlone Press.
- Boltanski, L. and Chiapello, E. (2005) *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Verso.

- Bourdieu, P. (1998) *Acts of Resistance: Against the Tyranny of the Market*. New York: The New Press.
- Brenner, R. (2006) *The Economics of Global Turbulence*. London: Verso.
- Bunting, M. (2004) *Willing Slaves: How the Overwork Culture is Ruling our Lives*. London: Harper Collins.
- Burnett, M. (2007) *Dare to Succeed: How to Survive and Thrive in the Game of Life*. New York: Hyperion.
- Carlsson, M. (1990) *Bad Attitude: The Processed World Anthology*. London: Verso.
- Chartered Management Institute (2006) *The Quality of working Life: Managers' health and well-being* (report authored by Less Worrall and Cary Cooper), March 2006. Executive summary available from [www.managers.org.uk](http://www.managers.org.uk), accessed 5 March 2007.
- Chartered Management Institute (2007) 'Survey reveals disparity between personal and organisational definitions of success', posted under Latest News, [www.managers.org.uk](http://www.managers.org.uk), accessed 5 March 2007.
- Couldry, N. (2003) *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach*. London: Routledge.
- Danner, M. (2006) 'Iraq: the war of the imagination', *New York Review of Books*, 21 December, 81-95.
- Dean, M. (1993) *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society*. London: Sage.
- Foucault, M. (1982) 'The Subject and Power' in Dreyfus and P. Rabinow (eds) *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. University of Chicago Press.
- Gabriel, Y. (2003) 'Glass Palaces and Glass Cages: Organisations in Times of Flexible Work, Fragmented Consumption and Fragile Selves', *Ephemera* 3(3): 166-184. <http://www.ephemeraweb.org/journal/3-3/3-3gabriel.pdf>

- Gibney, A. (dir) (2006) *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room*, Magnolia Pictures.
- Gilroy, P. (2005) *After Empire*. London: Routledge.
- Grossberg, L., T. Miller, J.Packer, 'Interview with Lawrence Grossberg and Toby Miller' in J. Z. Bratich, J. Packer, and C. McCarthy (eds) (2003) *Foucault, Cultural Studies and Governmentality*. New York: SUNY.
- Hall, S. (2005) 'New Labour's Double-shuffle', *Soundings* 24: 10-25
- Hall, S. (1997) 'The Centrality of Culture: Notes on the Cultural Revolution of Our Time' in K. Thompson (ed) *Media and Cultural Regulation*. London: Sage.
- Hardt, M. and A. Negri (2005) *Multitude*. London: Penguin.
- Harvey, D. (2003) *The New Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Honneth, A. (2004) 'Organized Self-Realisation: Some Paradoxes of Individualization', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 7(4): 463-478.
- Hochschild, A. (1983/2003) *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley, LA and London: University of California.
- Illouz, E. (2007) *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Jameson, F. (1981) *The Political Unconscious*. Methuen.
- Lawson, N. (2006) 'A Shameful Report Card', *The Guardian*, 14 February.
- Leonard, M. (1997) *Britain TM: Renewing our Identity*. London: DEMOS.
- Levi-Faur, D. and Jordana, J. (2005) 'Preface: the Making of a New Regulatory Order', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 598: 6-9.

- Leys, C. (2001) *Market-Driven Politics*. London: Verso.
- Littler, J. (2007) 'Celebrity CEOs and the cultural economy of tabloid intimacy' in S. Holmes and S. Redmond, *A Reader in Stardom and Celebrity*. London: Sage.
- McCann, D. (2005) *Working Time Laws: A Global Perspective*. Geneva: International Labour Organisation.
- McGuigan, J. (1996) 'The Politics of Cultural Studies and Cool Capitalism', *Cultural Politics* 2(2) 137-158.
- McGuigan, J. (2004) *Rethinking Cultural Policy*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- McRobbie, A. (2002). 'From Holloway to Hollywood: happiness at work in the new cultural economy?' in P. du Gay and M. Pryke (eds) *Cultural Economy*. London: Sage.
- Monbiot, G. (2000) *The Captive State: The Corporate Takeover of Britain*. Macmillan
- Ouellette, L. and J. Hay, (forthcoming) *Better Living Through Television*, Oxford and MA: Blackwell.
- Pusey, M. (2003) *The Experience of Middle Australia: The Dark Side of Economic Reform*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rifkin, J. (2000) *The Age of Access*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Rose, N. (1996) 'Governing "advanced" liberal democracies' in A. Barry, T. Osborne and N. Rose (eds) *Foucault and Political Reason*. London: UCL Press, pp. 37-64.
- Rose, N. (1999) *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self*. London: Free Association Books.
- Scoble, R. and S. Israel (2006) *Naked Conversations: How Blogs are Changing the Way Businesses Talk with Customers*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley.
- Schor, J. (1992) *The Overworked American*. New York: Basic Books.

- Sennett, R. (2006) *The Culture of the New Capitalism*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Stahl, M. (2004) 'A moment like this: *American Idol* and Narratives of Meritocracy' in C. Washburne and M. Derno (eds) *Bad Music*. New York: Routledge, pp 212-232.
- Stahl, M. (2006) *Reinventing Certainties: Popular Music and American Social Structure*. PhD Thesis, University of California, San Diego.
- Sugar, A. (2005) *The Apprentice: How to get hired not fired*. London: BBC Books.
- Thrift, N. (2006) 'Re-inventing invention: new tendencies in capitalist commodification' *Economy and Society*, 35:2 279-306.
- Useem, M. (1984) *The Inner Circle: Large Corporations and the Rise of Business Political Activity in the US and UK*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Weber, M. (1991) 'The sociology of charismatic authority' in H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds) *From Max Weber*. New edition. London: Routledge, pp. 245-250 and pp. 262-264.
- Whitfield, D. (2001) *Public Service or Corporate Welfare?* London: Pluto Press.
- Wice, H. (2006) 'The real-life business apprentices', *The Independent*, Education Supplement, 6 April pp 4-5.

---

<sup>1</sup> Compare the trend towards individually targeted 'conversational' marketing presented as 'fun' for all concerned (Scoble and Israel 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, Wikipedia is now a useful source for such comparative information. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Apprentice#\\_note-0](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Apprentice#_note-0). Accessed February 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Working hours continue to rise in the US, and the UK remains the only country in the EU with an opt-out from the European Working Time Directive stipulating a maximum 48 hour working week (McCann 2005).

<sup>4</sup> As Foucault writes here: 'Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free [...] individual or collective subjects are faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving,

---

several reactions and diverse comportments may be realised. Where the determining factors saturate the whole there is no relationship of power’.

<sup>5</sup> In our emphasis here on form, there is an echo of Jameson’s notion of ‘the ideology of form’ (1981: 84), but we no space to develop this link here.

<sup>6</sup> The BBC’s 2006/7 Statement of Programme Policy explicitly states that it will, as one of its future priorities, ‘Continue to strengthen the range of popular factual that appeals to younger audiences, for example with factual formats in subject areas such as business (such as *The Apprentice*).’

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/info/statements2006/tv/bbctwo.shtml>. Accessed February 2007.

<sup>7</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Apprentice#\\_note-0](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Apprentice#_note-0). Accessed February 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Compare Mark Burnett’s neo-Darwinian book on ‘the game of life’ (2007).

<sup>9</sup> There is of course more to be said about passion: Matt Stahl’s work (2006) illustrates how the utopian implications of ‘creative’ work combine passion with the need for labour-market flexibility in interesting ways, rather different on the face of it from what we discuss here.

<sup>10</sup> Compare Weber’s (1991) well-known division between traditional, rational and charismatic authority.

<sup>11</sup> *The Apprentice – You’re Fired* Episode 11.