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Summary

In the wake of a participant's suicide this past year, the cancellation of The Jeremy Kyle Show, *a British daytime television mainstay, has renewed debates in the UK regarding how the poor are presented in the media. This paper looks to position the popular programme within the wider context of economic Austerity, discussing the ideological ramifications of the show's portrayal of its guests within this milieu. Played out before a live and televised audience, the show set itself as a public stage where personal matters are resolved, with the dialogue between the guests' intimate lives and external judgement forming the content of the programme. As such, the programme relied on the poor and vulnerable to populate its schedule, providing them DNA profiling tests and specialised medical care beyond their means in exchange for their participation. The paper discusses the programme's content as a means of delineating social boundaries, specifically demonising Britain's working-class. Jeremy Kyle, as eponymous host, maintained a narrow Neoliberal worldview while acting as a supreme moral arbiter over the lives of his guests. Being portrayed/Identifying himself as/Positioning himself as the sole authority in the show, he proselytised a message of puritanical individualism that was not left unchecked but was in turn validated by his live audience. The paper thus analyses the programme's position as a constructor of the 'legitimate' public: othering the lumpenproletariat in a spectacle that reminds its viewership of the consequent shame that comes from a failure to adjust to the Austerity agenda.*

Keywords: Neoliberalism, Propaganda, Poverty, Social Norms, Othering

INTRODUCTION: POVERTY SAFARI

2019 has been a turbulent year for the United Kingdom, one whose discursive sphere has been dominated by the news of Brexit and all its concomitant political fallout. It also happens to be the same year that one of the country's most watched television programmes, *The Jeremy Kyle Show*, was cut from the ITV television network after fourteen years of its weekday broadcast. To fully understand why this happened we must look at the shifting political climate behind the move, as well as the tragic events that led to its removal from the schedule.

Due to the attendant controversy surrounding the programme, its back catalogue of episodes has been wiped from its broadcaster's archives and as such can no longer be found either on television as reruns, or on any streaming platforms. I have been able to source a dead-stock DVD copy of the programme but, due to it being intentionally edited

for the home DVD market, it neither reflects the programme as it appeared on broadcast television, or how the programme changed over its run.

Cynically it must be noted that the broadcaster's disavowal of the programme in this way prevents closer, more methodologically rigorous attention to the programme's damaging messages at this time. As such, this paper will remain a theoretical review of *The Jeremy Kyle Show* and its themes. I will be making use of sources reporting on its content while using secondary research to elucidate my comments and evince how I have been pushed to these ideas.

Taking the form of a confrontational talk show, *The Jeremy Kyle Show*'s format would be familiar to nearly all television audiences, with its closest counterpart being the US talk show *The Jerry Springer Show*. Played out before both a live and televised audience, the show set itself as a public stage on which to resolve personal matters. The dialogue between the guests' intimate lives and external judgement from the mediating host, Jeremy Kyle, forms the content of the programme. Due to the nature of such subject matter, the show relied on the poor and vulnerable to populate its schedule, often drawing them on-screen by providing them DNA profiling tests and specialised medical care beyond their means.

To receive such help the participants were required to reveal their interpersonal issues for public dissection, with Jeremy Kyle presiding as the supreme moral arbiter over those put before him. Considering this authoritative position, he notably adhered to a narrow Neoliberal worldview, preaching a message of puritanical individualism that was left unchecked by his live audience who further validated it through their mob-like responses.

Consequently, many critics condemned the programme for its gladiatorial content, with a UK court judge directly describing it as "human bear-baiting" (Dowell, 2007). An apt description given that the shows entire entertainment value was seemingly derived from individuals' emotional reactions to the host's verbal denigration of their dysfunction.

In terms of its position as a reality tv programme, *The Jeremy Kyle Show* mostly did away with the compassionate undertones of its forebears, like *The Jerry Springer Show*, instead taking a more disciplinary approach (Palmer, 2003: 132). Rather than drawing attention to the misery of the poor and choosing to give them an emancipatory voice to vocalise their struggles, their narratives were engineered by the programme to fit broader narratives of fecklessness, indiscipline, and dependency. The show repeatedly presented its guests as deserving of their suffering: portraying their situations as anomalies and a direct consequence of their moral failure to adhere to middle-class social mores (Skeggs and Wood, 2008: 570). It must be noted that the concepts of selfhood and responsibility are ideologically constructed (Skeggs and Wood, 2011: 15),

and as such this programme explicitly coded humanity as the product of one's ability to contribute to the nation's economy.

Steadily growing its viewership throughout its run, *The Jeremy Kyle Show* enjoyed an audience of around a million viewers a day ("The Jeremy Kyle Show Axed by ITV After Death of Guest"), existing within a milieu that was becoming increasingly sceptical of all forms of state welfare. Wielding such a draw in viewers, its influence over public discourse was both diffuse and substantial, with studies showing that such pessimistic attitudes were altering how British children interacted and played with one another at school (Marsh and Bishop, 2014: 17).

NEOLIBERALISM: CREATING PERSONAE NON GRATAE

Most often the coding of valid humanity is ensured through a process of 'othering', whereby the rejected individual or group is placed in opposition to the constructed 'legitimate' public (Straszak 2). In *The Jeremy Kyle Show* this dynamic is created through not only its narrative content but its framing. The camera of the programme places the viewer on the side of society, as embodied by the live audience and the authority figure of Jeremy Kyle himself. In this a difference is engendered as the gaze of the viewer is inherently one separate to its subjects, with the guests of the show being physically ostracised and placed centre-stage for the purpose of scrutiny. Making such a spectacle of individuals in this way is an exercise in norm enforcement, censuring those behaviours that do not conform to the self-policing Neoliberal agenda of wider society, while commending those that do. For instance, haranguing the unemployed for their perceived laziness while praising those who explicitly refused the state-welfare they were entitled to.

It has been posited that such blaming of the individual for all social ills first became a respectable assumption in the 1980s under then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (Jones, 2016: 74), the original harbinger of British Neoliberalism. While these thoughts were commonly accepted socially, it was not until after the Financial crisis of 2008 that they became central to the political discourse of the United Kingdom. Unusually then, *The Jeremy Kyle Show* predated the financial crisis in 2008 but was already attempting to provide solutions to it (Hill, 2015: 567).

It is within this context of economic downturn that the show rose to prominence, an element of television that offered a televisual punch to the political bête noire of the day, those in society living on state welfare.

Pandering to the political centre reformed by Thatcherism in the preceding decades, the incumbent British Labour party of the 2000s (the country's largest left-wing political party) had transformed itself into a Neoliberal institution. Their measures for recuperating the economy following this crisis of 2008, however, were not deemed to

have been radical enough. Voters began to look for an alternative and opted for the Conservative party with their platform of economic Austerity in coalition with the more rhetorically subdued Liberal Democrats. While the Liberal Democrat party looked to moderate some of the more severe aspects of Conservative government policy, it was the Austerity agenda that was found to resonate most with voters. As the British Social Attitudes Survey indicates, when the nation's rate of employment and wages are increasing, people generally tend to be more generous in their attitudes towards others (The Economist, 2019). As such, with employment down and wages in a sorry state, the following election in 2015 saw the Conservatives win a comfortable majority that would allow them the freedom to enact their policies to the full extent: repealing the state in the name of "fairness" (Cameron, 2011). Considering this goal, they opted to place the 'chav' myth, as portrayed by *The Jeremy Kyle Show*, at the heart of political discourse (Jones, 2016: 80), dividing the population using an 'us versus them' paradigm which sought to make a national enemy of the workless poor.

Given this political context, it is no surprise that *The Jeremy Kyle Show* became ubiquitous on British daytime television. Culturally validating the political zeitgeist and reflecting it into homes across the nation, it had a profound effect both on how we approach poverty as well as one another. The programme can be understood as Neoliberalism distilled into theatre, at once entertaining people while setting them a behavioural course to follow. For that reason, it has been conceived of as the frontrunner in what is sometimes known as "Austerity television" (Hill, 2015: 568). A set of reality TV shows that served as a technology of Austerity, restricting the social purview by reifying the world in certain Neoliberal terms that render anything beyond them inconceivable and irrational (Hill, 2015: 577). While this ideological message may not be entirely intentional, by placing it within the realm of reality television it has a genuine real-world effect because of the distinct interpenetration of structured narrative into external life.

In viewing the programme like this, as propaganda, it is much easier to recognise the ideological underpinnings of the host's various statements and interactions. From the offset Jeremy Kyle would mould his audience's opinion through his introduction of each guest, setting them each within implied theatrical roles in the pursuit of melodrama (Fitzgerald, 2012: 152). Such a casting of roles, with villains, heroes, and victims maintains and reinforces a moral framework around the guests, and by extension, the audience watching them. These moral narrative frames are used to generalise the participants' behaviour in order to conjure up a communal understanding of accountability in the external audience (Fitzgerald, 2012: 158). Typically, this means blaming individuals for the issues at hand, thereby forwarding the idea that systemic inequalities play no role in the causation of social deprivation. A message further facilitated by the show's highly editorialised nature. As has been revealed in an ongoing House of Commons inquest, the host's active provocation of his guests was intentionally removed from the final cut of the programme ("Jeremy Kyle Show Guests Treated like

Criminal Suspects, MP Claims"), thus reinforcing participants' positions as villains in the televised drama.

A BLACK AND WHITE WORLD: US VERSUS THEM

The programme's overall narrative presented a Manichean reality: reducing the world to a rigid dichotomy between absolute right and absolute wrong. To add a faux-empiricism to the determination of these two moral categories the programme employed the use of drug, paternity and polygraph tests. While the scientific validity of the former two is well founded, the same cannot be said for the latter. The use of polygraph tests (or lie-detector tests as they are more commonly known) to discern the absolute truth in the complex situations presented on the show caused a large share of the controversy surrounding the programme.

While each individual use of a lie-detector was attended by an on-screen disclaimer about their inconsistent level of accuracy, Jeremy Kyle apparently swore by the test and as such treated their outcome as categorical fact (Sweney, 2019). Rather cynically, this hard-line acceptance of polygraph tests as irrefutable evidence was pivotal for *The Jeremy Kyle Show*'s content; Kyle's moral outrage could either be justified by the test results or turned more widely towards those that might be guilty externally beyond the show. As drug use effects polygraph test results, it also had the added benefit of revealing drug problems that may have been otherwise hidden from the host's ire. For these reasons its place in the show became sacrosanct as the spectacular narrative turns it could create were manifold.

The lead spectacle of each episode, however, was what Andrew Tolson described in his analysis of the programme as the host's "harangues" (2013: 274). Harangues, put more simply, are Jeremy Kyle's frequent shouting attacks against the present parties found to be guilty of moral infractions. A spectacularly impolite gesture of aggression that often acts as the narrative denouement of each individual story, an act that concretises the host's authority over the participants as the live audience joins him in these moments through cheering and jeering. The intention of such speech events is to shame those on screen, demarcating social boundaries through the stigmatisation of those deemed inadequate.

The programme itself had an issue with class. Jeremy Kyle himself has experienced many of the issues that have appeared on the show: be it his gambling addiction and subsequent divorce ("Jeremy Kyle's Controversial Talk Show Made Him a Daytime TV Stalwart"), or his third marriage to his children's nanny (Kazi, 2018). He, however, is not the individual on trial. These behaviours remain undiscussed because they jeopardise the binary between him and his guests. As has been noted by Pierre Bourdieu, "the antithesis between culture and bodily pleasure (or our nature) is rooted

in the opposition between the cultivated bourgeoise and 'the people'" (1986: 490). That is to say, class is performative. While Jeremy Kyle and many of his guests' behaviour is not unsimilar, their different abilities to express and conceal this behaviour are dictated by their respective access to economic, social and cultural capital.

The Jeremy Kyle Show, as such, serves as a microcosm for class as negotiated under late capitalism. While the show's guests are willing to participate, they hold little control over how they are portrayed or used, with the show's producers allegedly going as far as to give them outfits to wear on stage (Morris 2019).

The cartoonish character of so many stories on the programme serves to reinforce class stereotypes and dehumanise those living in poverty by presenting them in a freakish manner. This is instanced in stories such as "Have I been having Sex with my Brother?" when a homosexual couple found out via DNA profiling that they were half-siblings, an extremely sensitive trauma that could have remained private had the men been able to finance the test themselves (Barrie 2016), and "I was Trolled on Twitter because of my Teeth!" ("The Jeremy Kyle Show: Gemma Shows Off Her New Teeth", 2019). Ironically, it must be mentioned that this second story about the woman's teeth was a direct result of an earlier appearance on *The Jeremy Kyle Show* itself. In this example, the individual had not received any dental work following a childhood accident that caused significant damage to her teeth. Given that all dentistry services are free of charge for children in the UK this might indicate that the woman was subject to neglect. As an adult, however, such procedures were beyond her financial means, so the show paid for her corrective surgeries and brought her back onto the stage to demonstrate the care they provide their guests.

Crucially, such a case as this concerns the explicitly physical. Due to the nature of how mental health is expressed and treated, the programme could not visually present radical recoveries in the same way they could with physical injuries. As such, the sometimes-poor mental health of guests was downplayed in many cases for the dual purpose of filling the programme's schedule while forwarding the narrative that those issues are a result of an individual's own lack of fortitude (Reynolds, 2019). This worryingly paralleled the government's approach to mental health at the time, with cuts to welfare significantly more likely to discriminate against those with non-physical ailments (Campbell, 2019). As such, the inability of guests to follow the mantra of self-help, be it due to mental illness or otherwise, meant that the only course of action available to them was to be ritually humiliated by the host and his self-described "hard-truths".

Further to this strict adherence to the Neoliberal metanarrative of health, the private sector was presented as the answer to any problem that could not be solved by the individual alone. Excoriating his detractors for accusing him of exploiting his guests, Jeremy Kyle would offer his rebuttal by providing private health care solutions for his guests' issues: his means of ameliorating the humiliation doled out for entertainment

purposes. In this, the private sector became increasingly represented as the only answer to a failing state health service, aptly complementing the ethos of the Conservative party in their pursuit of a privatised economy (Stratton, 2019).

The humiliation of those rendered 'useless' was what popularised the programme. Working as a visual reminder that your lot in life could in fact be worse while redirecting widespread discontent with the state of Britain away from those in power and towards the newly-stereotyped image of the workless poor.

The Jeremy Kyle Show actively normalised Austerity measures, presenting the working class as different to you as the viewer in a manner that looked to hide its classist foundations behind the notion of a classless society. In the pre-welfarist discourse of Neoliberalism one must be sufficiently entrepreneurial to mitigate a reduced level of opportunity (Tolson 2013, 285). The socially excluded are not meant to vocalise their suffering because it may humanise those unfortunate enough to not be favoured in such a system. *The Jeremy Kyle Show* enables this discourse by presenting the voice of the excluded in a warped manner that validates rather than refutes the hegemonic system.

Ultimately, however, it is the show's use of personal trauma to entertain that generated its demise. Appearing on the programme to convince his fiancée he had not been unfaithful to her, Steve Dymond took a polygraph test that found he had lied and had in fact slept with someone. A week after the programme was recorded, he had taken his own life (Taylor 2019). It is this tragic event that finally pushed the programme's broadcaster, ITV, to reconsider *The Jeremy Kyle Show*'s position in their schedule. Under increasing backlash from the public and media regarding their treatment of reality television participants, ITV sought to ringfence their other popular reality production, *Love Island* by ending its daytime flagship that had become too flagrantly unpalatable.

CONCLUSION: A FORMAT RENEWED

The present timing of *The Jeremy Kyle Show*'s cancellation is particularly salient given that it mirrors an overall change in mood currently ongoing in the UK's political discourse. With Brexit looming large on the landscape, welfare cheats and petty fraudsters are no longer the polemic punching bags of British politics that they once were. The new victim of the British political zeitgeist is the foreigner, more specifically the migrant worker.

The highly visible effects of the Conservative party's regime of economic Austerity are found nationwide in the proliferation of food banks (*Trussell Trust*), the massive rise in homelessness (*Shelter*), as well as the increase in the rate of suicide and preventable deaths (Hiam, Dorling, Harrison, and McKee, 2017). An increase that according to the 'Institute for Public Policy Research' amounts to more than 130 000 deaths since 2012 (Helm, 2019). Between 2010 and 2015 direct cuts to welfare amounted to around £30

billion, the equivalent of more than 1% of the UK's Gross Domestic Product (The Economist 2019). Cuts following the 2015 election subsequently increased in severity resulting in over one in five Britons now living in poverty as of this year (Social Metrics Commission, 2019).

Such a scathing reduction in spending has resulted in a cultural shift. The damage wrought by cuts across the nation has made our society recognise that welfare safety nets do not cultivate dependence. As we do not live in a utopia, a level of dependence will always be present within society; ignoring this fact only creates a more divided and unhappy nation.

Denying the existence of class obstructs attempts to confront it openly. Rather than promote dialogue, *The Jeremy Kyle Show* had the converse effect of silencing it. As times changed the programme did not, which consequently has left this ideological behemoth dead in the water. While this has been a cause to rejoice for those protesting its very existence from the start, Jeremy Kyle's career looks to recover with a new programme commissioned for television as early as next year (Rosseinsky, 2019). *The Jeremy Kyle Show* has become a tainted property, but not so much as to taint the man himself.

With the public becoming increasingly cognisant of the government's discriminatory attitude towards poverty the media passed the burden of guilt to the new bogeyman, the European Union. The issue became not the existence of welfare, but of who should be able to access this welfare; not the perceived uselessness of the poor, but that immigrants had taken the country's jobs. As such, Jeremy Kyle's new programme may look to capitalise on this new train of hegemonic thought. A typical assumption being that it will be more like his other television series *The Kyle Files*, a series of current affairs investigations that usually centred around topics enveloped in mass hysteria, ostensibly adding to it.

Through the course of this essay I have described the ways in which *The Jeremy Kyle Show* constructed the concept of the 'legitimate' public and how its parameters are directly tied to, and negotiated by, the socio-political conditions of their time. The programme itself functioned as a means of further narrativizing our world as portrayed by the media, and as such should be understood as an important cultural text in its refraction of the day's status quo.

The Jeremy Kyle Show's complete removal from the archives impedes deeper empirical investigation into the programme presently, pushing us to move more into the discussion of its sociological impact. For content analysis one can turn to Atkinson and Sumnall's paper 'Neo-Liberal Discourse of Substance Use in the UK Reality Show, *The Jeremy Kyle Show*'. Written a year before the programme's cancellation, it holds an important experimental purchase on the series. The authors of the research plot the ways in which those using recreational drugs are stigmatised and 'othered' through the representation of substance users by *The Jeremy Kyle Show*.

Sampling footage over a month-long period, they found that the show overtly problematised drug users: associating them with a narrow set of characteristics such as being jobless and prone to criminality (Atkinson and Sumnall 2018, 19). They were dehumanised by framing their substance use as a rational individual choice while obscuring structural causes found behind such choices (Atkinson and Sumnall 2018, 21). As such, those willing to accept that addiction was their choice were those treated most favourably by both Jeremy Kyle and his audience (Atkinson and Sumnall 2018, 20). Atkinson and Sumnall's content analysis ultimately reveals that *The Jeremy Kyle Show* proselytised a reductionist understanding of substance use, acting as a 'cultural resource' for its viewers to draw on in their own dealings with drug users (2018: 24).

Conceptualising the programme as a cultural resource importantly highlights its very-real effect on society and discourse. The behaviours scrutinised on the show were always shown to be acted out by those from lower socio-economic groups, thereby stigmatising such people and strengthening class boundaries.

Reflecting further on the public response to the programme reveals how entrenched such dim views about the poor were at the time, with the programme only receiving eleven viewer complaints worthy of investigation during a run of over 3300 episodes on TV (Martinson, 2019). What we can now take away from this programme's run is the ease with which reductive arguments are accepted in the public domain. Kyle's childish moral framework regarding social dysfunction made sense to many exactly because it ignored the social dimensions of poverty and offered easy answers to it during pressing economic times. Some might argue that the show's cancellation marks a cultural turning point but with a new Jeremy Kyle programme already commissioned, I would not be so sure.

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