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Tidying Up with Governmentality

The popular Netflix show *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo* may be a relaxing and harmless pastime for some, but its broad and careless representation of personal lives and private issues has far more impact than one may think. For one, the audience of this show is put under the neoliberal influence of governmentality. Through analyzing *Tidying Up*, we will explore the ways through which governmentality constantly normalizes artificial social norms that emphasize responsibility and self-care so that structural injustices and social issues can be overlooked easily.

Philosopher Michel Foucault argues that whereas sovereignty means strictly enforcing and reinforcing laws to ensure public safety, government is the “manner of disposing things to an end which is ‘convenient’ for each of the things that are to be governed” (95);¹ in other words, self-governing objects are “convenient.” Governmentality, according to Laurie Ouellete, encourages individuals to shape and guide their own conduct with the aim of becoming “the agents of their destinies, who achieve goals of health, happiness, productivity, security and well-being through their individual choices and self-care practices” (77),² an ignorant and problematic mindset that assumes everyone has the choices and opportunities to do well.

¹ Foucault defines and contrasts sovereignty and government from a historical standpoint, and provides motivation (i.e. “convenience”) behind the practices of governmentality. I started the paragraph with a paraphrase of his definition of sovereignty, then followed the short quote with a brief interpretation for the entire quotation.

² Ouellette provides a more detailed and modern definition of governmentality which is more obviously and applicable to our discussion of current popular culture. Her definition here is quoted more completely for consistency and accuracy. Once again I gave a short interpretation of the quote immediately after it.

The idea of self-sufficiency and independence is inherently compelling in a neoliberal society that emphasizes individuality and freedom of the self. To fulfill these ideologies on a more personal level, governmentality is proliferated and diffused at a significant rate through popular media. Take recent Netflix original series *Tidying Up* for example. In the first episode, an initially struggling couple with a messy home found peace and love again when they started organizing their home properly with Kondo's help. The show portrays laziness as the sole cause of the couples' troubles; however, in reality, the underlying issues of their struggles lie in their consuming jobs which proved to be damaging to the relationship. Reality TV shows, or "edutainment" as Ouellette calls them, seek to resolve societal problems by transforming "needy" individuals into responsible and self-enterprising citizens through neglecting the fuller backstories of these people with messy homes, and only conveying the stories of "radical self-love." But as Ann-King calls out, changing one's attitude is not going to change structural differences (Ann-King). By way of seemingly non-political and apparently purely entertaining platforms such as television or news, governmentality deeply roots the values of self-motivation into all individuals in its society.

It is, then, no wonder that *Tidying Up* is highly successful; who wouldn't want to solve all their money and relationship problems by throwing away old clothes? However, we as citizens in this neoliberalist society need to be aware of the ways governmentality affect our conducts and values. We are not only encouraged to be good citizens, but are also taught that not living up to the standards of self-care and responsibility held up by governmentality implies inherent faults in the individuals. In reality, an individual's problems are always more complicated than mere sloth. Looking beyond the tactics of governmentality through all its universality, we can avoid becoming the object in the hands of the government, aware "of what it wants, but ignorant of what is being done to it" (Foucault 100).

Works Cited

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