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“Take Responsibility for Yourself”

Judge Judy and the Neoliberal Citizen

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A woman drags her ex-boyfriend to court over an overdue adult movie rental and unpaid loan. A woman is heartbroken when her best friend betrays her and runs her credit. A smooth-talking ex-boyfriend claims money from his ex was a gift. Welcome to Judge Judy, queen of the courtroom program, where judges resolve “real-life” disputes between friends, neighbors, family members, roommates, and lovers on national television. For critics who equate television’s role in democracy with serious news and public affairs, altercations over broken engagements, minor fender benders, carpet stains, unpaid personal loans, and the fate of jointly purchased household appliances may seem like crass entertainment or trivial distractions. But such dismissals overlook the “governmental” nature of courtroom programs like Judge Judy, which gained cultural presence—and a reputation for “zero tolerance when it comes to nonsense”—alongside the neoliberal policies and discourses of the 1990s.¹

Judge Judy took the small claims–based court format from the fringes of commercial syndication to an authoritative place on daytime schedules when it debuted in 1996, the same year the U.S. Telecommunications Act was passed.² While the legislation has been critiqued for its deregulatory ethos as well as its affinity with the broader neoliberal forces behind welfare reform and the privatization of public institutions from the penal system to the post office, the cultural dimensions of these parallels remain less examined.³ There is a tendency within policy studies to take the cultural impact of neoliberalism as self-evident—to presume that the laissez-faire principles codified by the Act will erode democracy in predictable
ways that typically involve the decline of journalism, documentaries, and other "substantial" information formats found unprofitable by the culture industries. While such concerns have some validity, the metaphor of subversion needs to be jettisoned, for it refines untenable cultural hierarchies, and neglects neoliberalism's productive imprint on contemporary television culture and the "idealized" citizen subjectivities that it circulates.

Reality programming is one site where neoliberal approaches to citizenship have in fact materialized on television. From makeover programs (such as What Not to Wear and Trading Spaces) that enlist friends, neighbors, and experts in their quest to teach people how to make "better" decorating and fashion choices, to game shows (like Survivor and Big Brother) that construct community relations in terms of individual competition and self-enterprising, neoliberal constructions of "good citizenship" cut across much popular reality television. The courtroom program is a particularly clear example of this broader trend because it draws from the symbolic authority of the state to promote both the outsourcing of its governmental functions and the subjective requirements of the transition to a neoliberal society. Judge Judy and programs like it do not subvert elitist democratic ideals, then, as much as they construct templates for citizenship that complement the privatization of public life, the collapse of the welfare state, and most important, the discourse of individual choice and personal responsibility.

This chapter situates Judge Judy as a neoliberal technology of everyday citizenship, and shows how it attempts to shape and guide the conduct and choices of lower-income women in particular. As we shall see, Judge Judy draws from and diffuses neoliberal currents by fusing an image of democracy (signified in the opening credits by a gently flapping U.S. flag, stately public courthouse, and gavel-wielding judge) with a privatized approach to conflict management and an intensified government of the self. Judge Judy and programs like it supplant institutions of the state (for instance, social work, law and order, and welfare offices), and using real people caught in the drama of ordinary life as raw material, train TV viewers to function without state assistance or supervision as self-disciplining, self-sufficient, responsible, and risk-averting individuals. In this way, the courtroom subgenre of reality TV exemplifies what James Hay has called a cultural apparatus for "neoliberal forms of governance."  

Neoliberalism and Television Culture

To understand Judge Judy's neoliberal alignments, a brief detour through the concept of neoliberalism is in order. My understanding of neoliberalism begins with political economy and the activism it inspires. From this vantage point, neoliberalism is generally understood as a troubling worldview that promotes the "free" market as the best way to organize every dimension of social life. According to activists Elizabeth Martinez and Arnoldo Garcia, this worldview has generated five trends that have accelerated globally since the 1980s: the "rule" of the market; spending cuts on public services; deregulation (including the deregulation of broadcasting); the privatization of state-owned industries, "usually in the name of efficiency"; and "eliminating the concept of the public good or community and replacing it with individual responsibility." For critics like Robert McChesney, the upshot of neoliberalism and the reforms it has spawned is that a "handful of private interests are permitted to control as much as possible of social life in order to maximize their personal profit."  

While I share these concerns, I have found Foucauldian approaches particularly useful for analyzing the subjective dimensions of neoliberalism that circulate on reality TV. Drawing from Michel Foucault, Nikolas Rose theorizes neoliberalism less as a simple opposition between the market (bad) and welfare state (good) than as a "changing network" of complex power relations. If neoliberal regimes have implemented an "array of measures" aimed at downsizing the welfare state and dismantling the "institutions within which welfare government had isolated and managed their social problems," they still rely on "strategies of government."  

This manifests as various forms of "cultural training" that govern indirectly in the name of "lifestyle maximization," "free choice," and personal responsibility, says Rose. This diffused approach to the "regulation of conduct" escapes association with a clear or top-down agenda, and is instead presented as the individual's "own desire" to achieve optimum happiness and success. As Rose points out, the "enterprising" individual crafted by this discourse has much in common with the choice-making "customer" valorized by neoliberal economics. Both presume "free will," which means that those individuals who fail to thrive under neoliberal conditions can be readily cast as the "author of their own misfortunes."  

Rose makes several additional observations that can help to illuminate neoliberalism's cultural manifestations. First, he contends that the ideal of
citizens working together to fulfill mutual and "national obligations" has
given way to the "ideal of citizens seeking to fulfill and protect themselves
within a variety of micro-moral domains." Second, he observes that the re-
quirements of "good" citizenship have come to include adopting a "pru-
dent" relationship to fate, which includes avoiding "calcuable dangers and
avertable risks." Finally, Rose cites the media as a cultural technology oper-
ating outside "public powers" that works to govern the "capacities, compe-
tencies and wills of subjects," and in so doing, translate the goals of "au-
thorities" into the "choices and commitments of individuals."99

James Hay has extended this argument to television studies specifically.
Because a "neoliberal form of governance assumes that social subjects are
not and should not be subject to direct forms of state control, it therefore
relies on mechanisms for governing at a distance," through the guiding
and shaping of "self-disciplining subjects," Hay explains. Television plays
an important role in this governmental process, he contends, one that is
not limited to sanctioned forms of news and public affairs. In fact, popular
reality TV may be better suited to the indirect, diffuse mode of cultural
governmentality that Hay describes. The court program is an acute and
therefore symptomatic example of popular reality TV's role in mediating,
as Hay puts it, "a kind of state control that values self-sufficiency and a
kind of personal freedom that requires self-discipline."100

While Hay theorizes television's part in bringing neoliberal techniques of
"governmentality" into the home, feminist scholars have shown the ex-
tent to which neoliberal policies intersect with an acceleration of self-help
discourse aimed at women. From advice books on intimate relationships
to self-esteem-building initiatives for welfare mothers, this discourse has
been critiqued for presuming to "solve social problems from crime and
poverty to gender inequality by wagging a social revolution, not against
capitalism, racism and inequality, but against the order of the self and the
way we govern the self."111 As Barbara Cruikshank has pointed out, the so-
lution to women's problems is construed as having the right attitude,
making smart decisions, and taking responsibility for one's life in the
name of personal "empowerment."112 In this sense, self-help is a cultural
manifestation of neoliberalism, a technology of citizenship that encour-
gages women to "evaluate and act" on themselves so that the social workers,
medical establishment, and police "do not have to."113

Judge Judy fuses television, neoliberalism, and self-help discourse in a
governmental address to women living out what feminist philosopher
Nancy Fraser has called the "postsocialist" condition.14 The program pre-

sents the privatized space of the TV courtroom as the most "efficient" way
to resolve microdisputes steeped in the unacknowledged politics of gen-
der, class, and race, but it also classifies those individuals who "waste the
court's time" as risky deviants and self-made victims who create their own
misfortunes by making the "wrong" choices and failing to manage their
lives properly. The imagined TV viewer is the implied beneficiary of this
litany of mistakes, for one's classification as "normal" hinges on both rec-
ognizing the pathos of "others" and internalizing the rules of self-govern-
ment spelled out on the program. The courtroom program has, for pre-
cisely this reason, been institutionally positioned as a moral and educa-
tional corrective to "permissive" entertainment, suggesting that the
discourse of the "public interest" in broadcasting has not been squashed
but rather reconfigured by neoliberal reforms. Indeed, it could be that
television is increasingly pivotal to neoliberal approaches to government
and the citizen subjectivities on which they depend.

"The Cases Are Real, the Rulings Are Final"

Judge Judy is not the first television program to resolve everyday
microconflicts in simulated courtroom settings. The genre can be traced
to 1950s programs like People in Conflict and The Verdict Is Yours. In the
1980s, retired California Superior Court judge Joseph Wapner presided
over The People's Court, while Divorce Court used actors to dramatize
"real" legal proceedings.15 Judge Judy did, however, rework and revitalize
the format, and the program's "no-nonsense" approach to family and
small claims disputes generated notoriety and imitators (examples include
Judge Joe Brown, Judge Mathis, Judge Hatchet, Curtis Court, a revitalized
People's Court, and Moral Court). Well into the new millennium, court-
room programs abound on television, competing with talk shows, game
shows, and soap operas for a predominantly female audience.

On Judge Judy, real-life litigants are offered travel costs and court fees to
present their cases on national television. The price is to drop out of the
public judicial process and submit to the private ruling of Judith (Judy)
Sheindlin. A former New York family court judge, Sheindlin was recruited
for the "tough-love" philosophy she first spelled out in an influential 60
Minutes profile, and later expanded on in her best-selling book Don't Pee
on My Leg and Tell Me It's Raining, which faulted the overcrowded court
system as a lenient bureaucracy that reflects "how far we have strayed from
personal responsibility and old-fashioned discipline." Spotting ratings potential, Larry Lyttle, president of Big Ticket Television, a Viacom company, invited Sheindlin to preside over "real cases with real consequences in a courtroom on television." Called "a swift decision maker with no tolerance for excuses" by the program's publicity, Sheindlin claims to bring to her TV show the same message she advocated in the courts: "Take responsibility for yourself, your actions and the children you've brought into the world." In interviews, she situates Judge Judy as a public service that can solve societal problems by instilling the right attitudes and choices in individuals:

It's a much larger audience. Whatever message I spew—"Take responsibility for your life. If you're a victim, it's your fault. Stop being a victim. Get a grip! You're the one who's supposed to make a direction in your life." All those messages I tried in Family Court to instill in people—primarily women. [The TV show] sounded like something that would not only be fun, but worthwhile as well."

Like other TV judges, Sheindlin now hears noncriminal disputes that rarely exceed several hundred dollars or the equivalent in personal property. While these conflicts often speak to broader social tensions and inequalities, the program's governmental logic frames the cases as "petty squabbles" brought about by the deficiencies of individuals. Sheindlin's courtroom is filled with feuding relations and typically devoid of people who wish to sue businesses, bosses, or at least of all big corporations. This focus makes perfect sense, for the program's impetus as a technology of citizenship is to scrutinize ordinary people who require state mediation of everyday affairs, a process that hinges more on the moral radar Sheindlin claims to have developed in the public court system than on time-consuming democratic processes (she has been known to snap, "I don't have time for beginnings" and "I don't read documents"). While TV viewers are situated outside Sheindlin's disciplinary address to litigants derided as liars, cheats, liars, and "gumbos," their status as "good" citizens presumes the desire to adhere to the neoliberal templates for living she espouses.

While the opening credits promise "real people" involved in "real cases," a male narrator differentiates the program from the public court system with the reminder: "This is Judy's courtroom," where the "decisions are final." Onscreen, Sheindlin plays judge, prosecutor, professional expert, and punctilious moral authority, handling an average of two cases per thirty-minute episode and dispensing justice at "lightning speed," according to the program's publicity. Participants must abide by the program's rules, which include speaking only when spoken to, accepting the authority of the judge ("Just pay attention, I run the show," she tells litigants), and taking humiliating remarks and reprimands without rebuttal or comment ("Are you all nuts" and "I'm smarter than you" are typical examples). More important than the details of any particular case is Sheindlin's swift assessment of the choices and behaviors of the people involved in them. Just as, according to Foucault, the delinquent is characterized not so much by his "acts" as by their life biography, Sheindlin questions litigants about their employment history, marital and parental status, income, drug habits, sexual practices, incarceration record, and past or present "dependency" on public welfare. Such information transcends the evaluation of evidence as the principal means whereby Sheindlin determines who is at fault in the citizenship lesson that accompanies every ruling. Sheindlin is also known to bledle the accents of non-English speakers, accuse litigants of lying and abusing the "system," and order individuals to spit out gum, stand up straight, and "control" bodily functions to her liking. In one episode, a male litigant who denied her accusations of pot smoking was ordered to take a live drug test. Judge Judy thus both duplicates and extends the surveillance of the poor and working class carried out by welfare offices, unemployment centers, and other social services. "Judge Judy is part of the current wave of reality TV in that "real people" (not actors) involved in "authentic" disagreements are used as a selling point to differentiate the show from fictional entertainment. While scripts are not used, reality is, as John Fiske reminds us, "encoded" at every level. The program scour small claims dockets for potentially "interesting" cases; would-be litigants must complete a questionnaire, and only those "actual" disputes that can be situated within the program's logic are presented on television. Oftscreen narration, graphic titles, video replays, and teasers further frame the meaning of the cases by labeling the litigants, characterizing their purportedly real motivations to viewers and highlighting scenes from the program that reiterate Sheindlin's governmental authority. Due to increased competition for conflicts among the growing cadre of courtroom programs, viewers are now invited to bypass the courts altogether and submit their everyday disputes directly to Judge Judy. On-air solicitations like "Are You in a Family Dispute? Call Judy" promise an efficient, private alternative to public mediation of conflicts—and yet,
individuals who accept the invitations are ultimately held responsible for their "mistakes" on cases like "The Making of a Family Tragedy."

Judge Judy's focus on everyday domestic conflicts has led some critics to denounce the courtroom program as a new twist on the sensational "lowbrow" daytime talk show. Yet Sheindlin insists that her program is a somber alternative to the participatory, carnivalesque atmosphere of the genre it now rivals in the ratings. Indeed, the court setting and overtly disciplinary address of the Judge Judy program "code" it in distinct ways that are easily distinguishable to TV viewers. Sheindlin's strict demeanor and authoritative place on the bench are accentuated by camerawork that magnifies her power by filming her from below. The silence of the studio audience, the drab, institutional-like setting of the simulated courtroom, and the presence of a uniformed bailiff also separate the court program from talk shows, a format that feminist scholars have characterized as a tentative space for oppressed groups (women, people of color, and the working classes) to discuss the politics of everyday life. Jane Shattuc, for example, sees talk shows as an offshoot of the social movements of the 1960s to a certain extent that they draw from (but also commercially exploit) identity politics, consciousness-raising techniques, and an awareness that the "personal is political." For Sonia Livingstone and Peter Lunt, talk shows offer a counterpart to the white, male, bourgeois-dominated sphere of "serious" news and public affairs; talk shows provide a popular forum that enables women in particular to participate, however haltingly, in democratic processes. Of course, talk shows also operate with their own disciplinary dynamics, as Janice Peck has shown. Relying on psychosocial experts (such as health workers, therapists, or self-help gurus), talk shows present a "televised talking cure" that "manages conflict and crisis" by folding women's personal stories into a "confessional" discourse and "therapeutic" narratives, she contends.

As Mimi White has observed in her analysis of Divorce Court, court programs reconfigure the confessional/therapeutic orientation of the talk show in subtle, but important ways: "To the extent that the couple no longer confesses with ease, the injunction to confess must be enforced through the agencies of the . . . legal establishment." On Judge Judy, the authority represented by the simulated courtroom setting is often enlisted to "force" such confessions. Sheindlin claims that her past experience as a frustrated state official has enabled her to "see through the hull" ("She can always tell if you're lying. All she has to do is make eye contact," reported USA Today). Litigants who refuse to "confess" to suspected actions have been subjected to live background checks, but more often than not Sheindlin simply discounts "false" confessions and replaces the version of events offered by the litigant with an expert interpretation gleaned through biographical information as much as "evidence."

Court programs also magnify the disciplinary logic present on the talk show by disallowing audience participation, controlling the flow of personal revelations, and fusing the therapeutic ethos of the "clinic" with the surveillance of the welfare office and the authoritative signifiers of law and order. This distinction, as much as the absence of the carnivalesque, is what has allowed courtroom programs to be institutionally positioned as a cultural corrective to "tabloid" television. Judge Judy is the "antithesis of Jerry Springer," insists Sheindlin. "Jerry Springer encourages people to throw off their filthiest laundry, to misbehave. I scrupulously avoid doing that. I cut them off." The television industry has also been quick to assert that courtroom television "educates" as well as entertains—a claim to public service that is rarely made of most popular reality formats. Big Ticket's Larry Lyttle
maintains that courtroom programs function as a positive moral force because unlike on talk shows, where "conflicts are aired and tossed around," a court show like Judge Judy "ends with a decision that someone was right and someone was wrong."

WCHS-TV in Charleston, West Virginia, similarly praises the program's "unique ability to act as a true moral compass for people seeking guidance, insight and resolution." Characterizing the courtroom genre as a technology of citizenship that can temper the "effects" of fictional television, one TV judge explained in an interview that America's been looking at soap operas for going on 50 some years, and they legitimize the most back-stabbing, low-down, sleazy behavior. That's gotten to be acceptable behavior... . We find ourselves confronted with a lot of soap-opera behavior in our courtrooms. And we resolve them and say, no, we know you may have seen this, but it's not right.

Privatizing Justice, Stigmatizing "Dependency"

Judge Judy's claim to facilitate "justice at lightning speed" boldly implies that commercial television can resolve problems faster and more efficiently than the public sector. In this sense, the program affirms neoliberal rationales for "outsourcing" state-owned institutions and services. Judge Judy also complements neoliberal policies by conveying the impression that democracy (exemplified by the justice system) is overrun by individuals embroiled in petty conflicts and troubles of their own making. If the program feeds off of real-life microdisputes, Sheindlin chastises litigants for failing to govern their "selves" and their personal affairs. In addition to lecturing guests about their personal history, she often accuses participants of "wasting the court's time," conveying the idea that "normal" citizens do not depend on the supervision of the judiciary or any public institution for that matter. People who rely on professional judges (including TV judges) to mediate everyday problems are cast as inadequate individuals who lack the capacity or, worse, desire to function as self-reliant and personally responsible citizens.

On Judge Judy, citizenship lessons are often directed at people who reject marriage, the nuclear family, and traditional values; unmarried couples who live together are of particular concern. While Sheindlin (who is divorced) does not condemn such behavior as moral misconduct, she does present rules and procedures for navigating modern relationships, which include getting personal loans in writing, not "living together for more than one year without a wedding band," and not "purchasing homes, cars, boats or animals with romantic partners outside of wedlock." On Judge Judy, individuals are told that they must impose these rules on themselves—both for their own protection and because, as Sheindlin explains, there is "no court of people living together. It's up to you to be smart. Plan for the eventualities before you set up housekeeping." When former lovers dispute an unpaid car loan, Sheindlin takes the disagreement as an opportunity to explain the dos and don'ts of cohabitation without marriage. Sheindlin finds the couple incompatible and "irreparable," and rules that it was an "error of judgment" for them to share an apartment together. This judgment is tied to a broader failure of appropriate citizenship when Sheindlin lectures the pair for then asking the courts to resolve a domestic property dispute. "You're not married—there is a different set of rules for people who choose to live together without marriage," she asserts, reiterating that people who stray from state-sanctioned conventions have a particular duty to monitor their own affairs. If the idealized citizen-subject constructed by Judge Judy complements the choice-making neoliberal customer discussed by Rose, that individual is also a self-supporting worker. People who receive any form of public assistance are cast as deviants in particular need of citizenship lessons. The advice they receive evokes Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon's observation that welfare has become cloaked in stigmatizing discourse of "dependency" that presumes gender, class, and racial parity. As Fraser and Gordon point out, women (including single mothers) are now held accountable to the white, middle-class, male work ethic, even as they lack the advantages and resources to perform as traditionally male breadwinners. While this marks a shift away from the patronizing assumption that all women are helpless and therefore "naturally" dependent on men or, in their absence, the state, it conceals the structural inequalities that lower-income women in particular continue to face. On Judge Judy, all women are presumed to be capable of supporting themselves and their children financially; accepting welfare is construed not as a reflection of gender or economic inequality but as a character flaw. Women are routinely asked to disclose their past or present reliance on government "handouts," and those who admit to receiving benefits are subsequently marked as irresponsible and lazy individuals who "choose" not to work for a living. Welfare recipients are also constructed as morally unsound citizens who cheat.
taxpayers, as was the case in an episode where Sheindlin demanded to know whether an unmarried woman with three children by the same father had "avoided" marriage merely to qualify for welfare benefits. In another episode, an unemployed twenty-something mother being sued by her baby's would-be adoptive parents was scolded for relying on public assistance to raise the child she had decided not to give up for adoption. While adoption law doesn't allow adoptive parents to reclaim monetary "gifts" to birth mothers, Sheindlin stressed the woman's "moral" obligation to repay them. Presuming that the mother had chosen poverty, Sheindlin also sternly advised her to get a job and "not have more babies she can't take care of," Judge Judy's disdain for so-called welfare dependency extends to charity and other forms of assistance. If individuals are told to take care of themselves and their families, empathy and social responsibility for others are discouraged. "No good deed goes unpunished," Sheindlin advised a family friend who took in a homeless woman who had spent some time in jail. At the societal and community level, the public good is cast in neoliberal terms, as a system of individual responsibilities and rewards.

According to Rose, neoliberal citizens are conceived of as private individuals who must ensure their own well-being through risk management strategies and prudent "acts of choice." Judge Judy instills this template for citizenship by discouraging personal contact with deviant and allegedly risky individuals, and by instructing women to make "smart" choices to avoid "victimization." The program functions as a "panoptic" device to the extent that it classifies and surveils individuals deemed unsavory and dangerous. This same point has also been made of reality-based crime shows like Cops and America's Most Wanted. Sheindlin contends that criminals are largely unreformable, and Judge Judy extends this philosophy to people who are not official criminals but are nonetheless judged to possess amoral tendencies, psychological imbalances, drug addictions, and other character flaws. The more pressing message, however, is that all citizens must take personal responsibility for protecting themselves from con artists, "manipulators," abusers, and other risky individuals. In this sense, one of the program's most important governmental roles is to instruct TV viewers how to detect and avoid the risks that certain individuals are shown to represent.

Since the litigants on Judge Judy are introduced by name and occupation—this information also appears in onscreen titles—viewers know that individuals cast as risky are often working-class men who drive trucks, wait on tables, enter data, do construction, or perform low-paying forms of customer service. If female welfare recipients are cast as irresponsible nonworkers, men lacking middle-class occupations and salaries are routinely scorned for "choosing" a life of poverty, as was the case when Sheindlin lectured a middle-aged male Wal-Mart cashier for failing to obtain more lucrative employment. In the adoption episode mentioned above, a similar evaluation of male employment was tied to a failure of citizenship. The infant's father, who had worked on and off as a gas station attendant but was currently unemployed, was characterized as a personal failure and societal menace, not just because he refused to admit "personal moral responsibility" to repay the money to the adoptive parents but because he "refused" to enterprise himself in accordance with the middle-class work ethic.

Cases involving men who manipulate women out of money, gifts, rent, or property are a staple on Judge Judy, and in these cases, male unemployment and insolvency are closely tied to the detection and avoidance of romantic risk. In a case where a woman met a man on the Internet, loaned him money, and was dumped, Sheindlin fused a harsh judgment of the boyfriend's opportunism and dishonesty in his romantic relationship to an underdeveloped work ethic. Demanding to know when he last "held a full-time job," she swiftly identified the man as a freeloader and "con artist," implying that men without economic means are especially dangerous and therefore not to be trusted when it comes to intimate relationships. Female litigants can also be categorized as identifiable romantic risks, as was the case in "Opportunity Knocks," where Sheindlin accused an attractive young woman in court to resolve whether money from her ex-boyfriend was a gift or loan of "using" the man financially with "no intention of marrying him." In most cases, though, it is lower-income men who play this role in a gender reversal of the gold digger stereotype that complements the program's focus on solving the problem of female victimization through better self-management.

Women are typically cast as "self-created" victims in terms that articulate neoliberal currents to female self-help culture. Rejecting what she terms the "disease of victimization" or tendency to blame society for one's hardships, Sheindlin claims, in her books and on her TV program, that all women can achieve happiness and success with a little knowledge along with the right attitude. On Judge Judy, women's problems are blamed on their own failure to make good decisions, whether that means pulling one's self up from a life of poverty, "preparing" wisely for financial
independence, or avoiding entanglements with unstable, manipulative, or abusive individuals. In her book *Beauty Rules, Dumb Is Forever*, Sheindlin elaborates on the value of personal responsibility, contending that victims are self-made. They aren’t born. They aren’t created by circumstances. There are many, many poor, disadvantaged people who had terrible parents and suffered great hardships who do just fine. Some even rise to the level of greatness. You are responsible for nurturing your roots, for blooming. No one can take that away from you. If you decide to be a victim, the destruction of your life will be by your own hand.6

In some cases, female “victims” are lectured for allowing themselves to be mistreated by other women. In “The Kool-Aid Debacle,” where a young waitress sued her female ex-roommate over Kool-Aid stains on the carpet and a couch that got smelly, Sheindlin scolded the plaintiff for getting herself into such a situation: “You make a mistake when you let someone into your house who is a slob,” she explained. Other times, women are deemed responsible for making their own misfortunes. In a case involving former lovers at odds over an unpaid loan, the program’s neoliberal dismissal of female victimization is spelled out. The woman claims that her ex-boyfriend helped cover her hospital bill when she miscarried their baby. The man asserts that she promised to pay him back. As is typical, Sheindlin focuses less on the details of the loan than on the moral and behavioral lessons she discerns from the case. She lectures the young woman (but not the man) for not using birth control, and attributes her “situation” to her own unsafe and irresponsible conduct. Refusing to accept this ruling, the young woman insists that the ex-boyfriend should help pay the cost of the miscarriage since she was uninsured and it “was his baby too.” Defying Sheindlin’s orders to speak only when addressed, she demands to know what she as a woman would do in such circumstances. Rejecting the female litigant’s appeal to a sense of female solidarity on the question—and ignoring the broader issue of health care access raised by the episode—Sheindlin tells the litigant that she wouldn’t be in her shoes because she’s “smarter than that.”

Women who claim to have been abused by men appear frequently on *Judge Judy*, where they too are lectured for creating their circumstances. Domestic abuse is never the basis of a legal case, but is typically revealed in the course of Sheindlin’s interrogation of the participants involved. In a case involving cousins fighting over a family collection of knickknacks, Sheindlin determines that the man is a deranged and unstable individual, while the woman he bullied and harassed is an “adult” who has “chosen to let someone do this to her.” When Sheindlin learns that an ex-boyfriend in court over a minor car accident has battered his former teenage girlfriend, she maintains that the girl made unsafe “choices,” sternly advising, “Never let a man put his hands on you.” In a case involving former lovers disputing overdue phone and gas bills, the woman reveals that in refusing to pay household expenses, her former boyfriend was addicted to heroin and had spent time in jail for assaulting a minor. She also implies that he physically abused her. Typifying the program’s neoliberal solution to the problem of domestic violence as well as the complexities of gender and class, Sheindlin faults the woman for failing to accept responsibility for her own conduct. Taking the troubled relationship as the raw material for a citizenship lesson aimed at women, Sheindlin determines that “being with him doesn’t speak well of your judgment.” As “young as you are, you allowed someone with a criminal history and no job to live with you . . . and you want the courts to fix that?”

*Judge Judy* seeks to instill in women a desire to avoid the “disease” of victimization along with the overreliance on state assistance and intervention it is said to have spawned. This message carries traces of liberal feminist discourse to the extent that it promotes female independence and agency. Presuming that barriers to social and gender equality have long been dismantled, the program places the onus to achieve these goals on individuals. Sheindlin, who considers herself a positive female role model, contends that all “women have the power to make decisions, to call it as they see it, to take no gruff.”7 She claims that all women, however positioned by an unequal capitalist society, can reap the benefits of happiness and success so long as they exercise good judgment and cultivate self-esteem. Economic security and “feeling good about yourself” are thus closely bound in Sheindlin’s blueprint for successful female citizenship. The responsibility for cultivating self-esteem is placed not on society but on individual women, whose job it is to train themselves and their daughters “to have a profession, have a career . . . so they will never be dependent on anybody.”8 On *Judge Judy*, female litigants are advised to avoid “depending” on boyfriends and husbands for financial assistance in particular. This message has less to do with dismantling dominant ideologies and institutions than it does with ensuring that women “take care of themselves” so that the state doesn’t have to. *Judge Judy* conveys the idea that women can no longer “claim” a victim status rooted in bifurcated and
hierarchical gender roles; nor, however, can they expect public solutions to the inequalities that structure women's lives.

Sheindlin presents "independence" as a responsibility that all women must strive to achieve, but she also promotes the hegemony of the nuclear family, reconstituted as a two-wage-earning unit. Family troubles underscore many of the cases heard on *Judge Judy*, where mothers suing daughters, children suing their parents, and parents suing each other are the norm. This steady stream of feuding relations paints a portrait of a troubled institution that clearly isn't working, yet Sheindlin uses her authority to promote the sacred importance of family bonds. The contradiction exists in perpetual tension, as illuminated by the treatment of family in two key episodes. In the first, a male cashier is suing his unemployed ex-fiancée for bills paid when they lived together; she is countersuing for "mental distress." After Sheindlin interrogates the woman about why she wasn't working at the time, the woman replies that she quit her job to "build a home together." She also tells Sheindlin that her fiancé stalked her and threatened to come after her with a gun when they broke up. Although this scenario contains the material to cast the male as a deviant individual, Sheindlin rejects the woman's story as an "excuse" smacking of victimization. Comparing her own success as a married working woman who didn't "quit her job to pick out furniture and dishes" to the failure of the "alleged victim of harassment," she orders the woman to pay the back rent. In this episode, the female litigant's embrace of traditional family values is denounced because it includes the desire for "dependency" on a male breadwinner, thereby violating the neoliberal mantra of self-sufficiency that *Judge Judy* espouses. In a dispute involving an estranged mother and daughter, though, the nuclear family is valorized against a woman's quest for independence. The mother, who divorced her husband when she came out as a lesbian, is implicitly cast as selfish and irresponsible for abandoning the heterosexual family unit to pursue her own personal fulfillment. While Sheindlin doesn't condemn the woman's homosexuality, she harshly criticizes her performance and "choices" as a mother, and recommends family counseling to repair the damage. As these examples attest, *Judge Judy* 's advice to women does not seek to expand women's choices, it merely guides them in particular directions. Operating as a technology of citizenship, the program steers women toward neoliberal reforms that are presented as their own responsibilities and in their own "best interests." In this sense, *Judge Judy* seeks to transform what Rose calls the "goals of authorities" into the "choices and commitments of individuals."29

Judge *Judge Judy* constitutes the normative citizen—the TV viewer at home—in opposition to both risky deviants and "self-made" victims. By scrutinizing the dos and don'ts of everyday life as it is presumed to be lived by "troubled" populations, it promotes neoliberal policies for conducting one's self in private. It scapegoats the uneducated and unprivileged as "others" who manufacture their hardships, and thus, require nothing more than personal responsibility and self-discipline in the wake of shrinking public services. Those who reject this logic are deemed abnormal and often unformable: "I'm not going to get through to her. I have a sense that she's lost cause at fourteen," Sheindlin once said of a female litigant.30 TV viewers are encouraged to distance themselves from the "deficient" individuals who seep into Sheindlin's courtroom, therefore avoiding any recognition of the societal basis of women's problems and concerns. While Sheindlin's harshest derision is aimed at the socially "unrespectable," her governmental advice is intended for all women—particularly middle-class viewers—for according to the program's neoliberal logic, their happiness and success hinges on it.

It is untenable to presume that viewers respond to *Judge Judy* in seamless or uniform ways. The program can be read as an authoritarian spectacles that traverses what Foucault has called the "ideology of bourgeois justice." The running parody of *Judge Judy* on Saturday Night Live, where Sheindlin is portrayed as an exaggerated version of her insulting, authoritarian television persona, suggests that *Judge Judy* may partly dislocate an image of the courts as inherently objective and fair.31 Women on the wrong end of unequal class and gender relations may also see in *Judge Judy* a glaring example of class prejudice and professional gumption. Yet these possibilities do not prevent the program from exemplifying a neoliberal form of governing that in various dimensions and forms, cuts across the newest wave of reality TV.

We can see variations of the neoliberal currents examined here in makeover programs, gamedocs, and other reality formats that "govern at a distance" by instilling the importance of self-discipline, the rewards of self-enterprise, and the personal consequences of making the "wrong" choices. *Judge Judy* represents one of the clearest examples of this trend because it articulates neoliberal templates for citizenship to the privatization of public life while self-consciously bringing what Foucault called
"the minute disciplines" and "panoptics of the everyday" into the home.12 The citizen subjectivities constructed on Judge Judy complement a model of government that disdains state authority and intervention, but demands a heightened form of personal responsibility and self-discipline from individuals. Reality TV as exemplified by the courtroom program is not outside democracy, then, but is an active agent in its neoliberal transformation.

NOTES

1. The popular press has emphasized the "no tolerance" ethos of the programs, contributing to the cultural context in which they are received. See, in particular, Melanie McFarland, "Tough Judges Show There's Justice in Watching Television," Seattle Times, 30 November 1998, http://archives.seattletimes.

2. See ibid.


9. Ibid., 57, 58.


22. Michael M. Epstein, for example, argues that courtroom programs are an extension of the talk show to the extent that they use law and order to legitimate a sensationalist focus on personal conflict. Epstein also points out that the judge figure is constructed as an "ultimate" moral authority less concerned with legal procedures than with the evaluation of personal behaviors. The concept of the "law" in the United States, Epstein argues, has been shaped by the role of judges in the judicial system, where the judges are expected to make decisions based on the law and the facts of the case, and are held accountable for their decisions. See Michael M. Epstein, "Judging Judy, Malheur, and Mills: How Courtroom Programs Use Law to Parody Private Lives to Mass Audiences," Television Quarterly (2001), http://www.emmyonline.org/tqv/articles/2.1-1-1.asp.


See You in Hell, Johnny Bravo!

Jeffrey Sconce

As it turns out, the Partridge family once lived next to a gloomy old mansion. One day a mysterious new boy moved into the old house along with his sister and a stern caretaker. Much to everyone’s amazement, the new neighbor looked to be an identical twin of Danny Partridge, the irrepressible carrot-top guitarist in ABC’s famous family rock band on The Partridge Family. Feeling unappreciated in the daily life of his fellow Partridges, Danny soon becomes fast friends with his British doppelgänger, Robert. When the rest of the Partridges show little interest in Danny’s songwriting abilities, he and Robert decide to write a song together.

Bump on the head
Bump on the head
Not as bad as being dead
But I may get a bump on the head
Because someone wants me dead

Later, Danny’s new friend confesses that he is actually the exiled prince of Carpathia. Later still, as the two boys play a prank at school by exchanging identities, Danny is mistaken for Robert and kidnapped by enemies of the Carpathian monarchy.1 Things look bad for a while, but Danny finds a way out of the jam just in time to join the family for a big rock concert in Hollywood. “Bump on the head, nobody’s dead, we’re not looking back, we’re looking ahead,” he sings triumphantly.2

Meanwhile, in a strangely parallel world of suburban enchantment, Greg Brady confronts his own challenge to reconcile music, family, and identity on The Brady Bunch. Having organized his siblings into a singing