

Kathleen Kendall – Governmentality Transcription

This script and commentary nicely illustrate, I think, the ultimate aim of mental hygienists like Griffin – that is to have each Canadian citizen follow expert advice -- to put into practice the philosophy of mental hygiene by keeping surveillance over one another and one's self in order to detect and correct emotional maladjustments and more severe mental health problems as soon as possible. And then of course to seek further expert help if needed. The future of Canada – and the world – depended upon it if we were to establish a liberal democracy and to have healthy citizens!

I think the sentiment is nicely captured in publicity material for one of the series, and this is a quote from one of the pamphlets here: ‘...human nature will have to be changed in a hurry if we are to survive in the atomic age. And where do we begin to change human nature? With ourselves of course! And how do we begin? By understanding the reasons for our behaviour and our attitudes. And with greater understanding of ourselves, perhaps we can help our children grow up into happy and useful citizens. When the causes of hostility and aggressive actions are well understood, perhaps the world will become a happier and safer place for all its citizens!’

So here is the key mental hygiene message. However, at the centre of this project, there really is a contradiction: children were to be recognized and treated as autonomous individuals with minds of their own on the one hand, but on the other they were also simultaneously expected to conform to prescribed norms of behavior.

I think that the In Search of Ourselves also nicely illustrates the notion of governmentality. And governmentality is an analytic framework first introduced by philosopher Michel Foucault and which has since been developed by many other people. Very simply, it holds that governments can control populations either by coercive means such as the threat of violence or by the cultivation of subjectivity – that is through the internalization of desired values and beliefs within its populace. In this second form of governance, regulation is achieved through the consent of citizens as they learn to self-discipline themselves in accordance with the desired values and beliefs of those who are in power, or in government. The operation of control of power in this way is often referred to as ‘positive power’ because its done through peoples’ subjectivity rather than exercise over them physically in a negative fashion. The In Search of Ourselves program can be seen as one example of ‘positive power’ in the sense that it was an attempt by mental hygienists and other helping professionals or psych scientists to regulate or govern the behaviour of Canadian citizens, not through brute force but instead really through their hearts and minds – by encouraging listeners to think and act in alignment with the principles of mental hygiene which reflected liberal democratic principles.

It is useful, however, to recognize that the concept of governmentality suggests that power does not always operate from the top-down but that it can also be deployed from the bottom-up – and that it is dispersed, fragmented and exercised by ‘ordinary’ men and women’. Many factors, can of course, can operate to constrain the methods and opportunities available to individuals to do so, such as the different social positions they occupy, such as racism for example. Nonetheless, using this concept of power, it can be argued that listeners did not simply accept the intended

messages of 'In Search of Ourselves' but they could disregard or challenge them. My own research which examined a mental health education experiment in Indian Head, Saskatchewan, found that citizens resisted attempts to inculcate the mental hygiene message by various means including simply ignoring the experts – not listening to them and attending their discussion groups – and finally even closing ranks against them.

And I think the last things I would like to say is that the so-called 'normal' family prescribed by the mental hygienists generally reflected and reproduced the values of the white, middle-class, patriarchal and heterosexual social order. Those falling outside these parameters could never be normal and thus are perceived as constant threats to the social order. In some these cases, 'sovereign' power or forced coercion was – is often used to maintain conformity or control.