GENDER, RACE, AND CLASS IN MEDIA
A CRITICAL READER

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Why Television Keeps Re-Creating the Male Working-Class Buffoon

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Strung across our mass media are portrayals that justify class relations of modern capitalism. Studies of comic strips, radio serials, television series, movies, and popular fiction reveal a very persistent pattern, underrepresenting working-class occupations and overrepresenting professional and managerial occupations, minimizing the visibility of the working class. Similar patterns are evident for other subordinate statuses on race, gender, and regional lines.

My own studies of class in prime-time network television family series from 1946 to 2004 (Butsch, 1992, 2005; Butsch & Glennon, 1983; Glennon & Butsch, 1982) indicate that this pattern persists over six decades of television and roughly 400 domestic situation comedies, including such icons as I Love Lucy, The Brady Bunch, All in the Family, and The Simpsons. In only about 10% of the series were heads of house portrayed as working class (i.e., holding occupations as blue-collar, clerical, or unskilled or semi-skilled service workers). Widespread affluence was exaggerated as well. More lucrative, glamorous, or prestigious professions predominated over more mundane ones. Working wives were almost exclusively middle class and pursuing a career. Working-class wives, like Roseanne, who have to work to help support the family, were rare.

Throughout these decades, the few working-class men were portrayed as buffoons. They were dumb, immature, irresponsible, and lacking in common sense. This is the character of the husbands in almost every sitcom depicting a blue-collar head of house, The Honeymooners, The Flintstones, All in the Family, The Simpsons, and The King of Queens being the most famous examples. The man was typically well intentioned, even lovable, but no one to respect or emulate. These men were played against more sensible wives, such as Alice in The Honeymooners or Carrie in King of Queens.

For most of this history, there were few buffoons in middle-class series. More typically, both parents were wise and worked cooperatively to raise their children in practically
Connell (1977), "No evil-minded capitalis-
ict speculators need be interested in the
production of ideology is seen as the more
or less automatic outcome of the normal,
regular processes by which commercial
mass communications work in a capitalist
system" (p. 193). It is the outcome of a
complex of structural and cultural factors
that shaped and continue to shape the rep-
resentation of working-class men, even as
the television industry underwent remark-
able changes from the 1980s on.

I will describe the factors as they worked
from the beginnings of TV sitcoms in the
late 1940s into the 1980s, then examine
what effects on representation were
wrought by the growth of cable TV and
VCR in the 1980s, computers and the
Internet in the 1990s, and the concomitant
restructuring of the industry into a new
oligopoly of global multimedia corpora-
tions. I will look at three levels of organiza-
tion: (1) network domination of the
industry, (2) the organization of decisions
within the networks and on the production
line, and (3) the work community and cul-
ture of the "creative personnel." I will trace
how these may explain the consistency and
the persistence of the portrayals, the underrep-
resentations of the working class, and the
specific negative stereotypes of working-
class men in prime-time domestic sitcoms.

Network Domination and Persistent Images

For four decades, ABC, CBS, and NBC
dominated the television industry. Ninety
percent of television audiences watched
these networks. They accounted for more
than half of all television advertising rev-
ues in the 1960s and 1970s, and just
under half by the late 1980s (Owen &
Wildman, 1985). The networks were able
to attract the highest audience rates because
the vast majority of television watching
occurred in the home, where viewers were
isolated from other forms of entertainment.

The television series market was thus
an oligopoly—the buyer equivalent to
an oligopoly—with only three buyers of
sitcoms and several sellers (Federal
Communications Commission [FCC],

Through the 1980s, cable networks and
multisatellite owners (companies that own
several local broadcast stations) began to
challenge the dominance of the big three.
The big networks' combined rating shrank
from 56.5% in 1980 to 39.7% in 1990—the
latter number even including the new Fox
Broadcasting Network that debuted in 1986
(Butsch, 2000, p. 269; Hindman &
Wigand, 2008). By 1999, the four-
network rating had slipped to 28.6% ("Upscale
Auds Ease B'casters," 2000),
while advertising-supported cable had
grown to 23.9% ("Young Auds Seek Web,
Not Webs," 1999). Still, only five cable net-
works had sufficient funds in the 1990s to
qualify as buyers of drama programming
(Blumler & Spire, 1990). In 2000, cable net-
works were beginning to become a factor in
the market for new drama and comedy series
("B'cast: Cable: Trading Places," 2000),
yet ABC, CBS, and NBC still accounted for
the development of the overwhelming majority
of new series. However, by 2008, cable net-
works had become major buyers of new
scripted series ("TV Role Reversal," 2009).

Dominance by the broadcast networks
may have slipped, but many of the same
factors that shaped their programming
decisions shape the decisions of their cable
competitors as well. The increased number
of buyers has not resulted in the innovation
and diversity in program development once
expected (FCC, 1980). Jay Blumler and
Carolyn Spicer (1990) and Robert Kuby
(2004) interviewed writers, directors, and
producers and found that the promise of
more openness to innovation and creativity
was short-lived. The cost of drama program-
ning attracts buyers to only a handful of large
 corporations and dictates that programs
must attract a large audience and avoid risk.
Moreover, even when cable networks
became viable buyers, they did not increase
significantly the number of buyers because
they seek niche markets, and a given new
series idea can be sold only to a cable net-
work seeking that niche. In other words,
sitcoms tend to be custom-made for a par-
ticular network.

Using their market power, networks have
maintained sweeping control over
production decisions of even highly success-
ful producers, from the initial idea for a
new program to a final film or tape (Bryant,
1969, pp. 624-626; Gitlin, 1983; Fekuny,
1977, p. 1982; Winick, 1961). In the
1990s, the FCC freed the broadcast
networks from rules established in 1970 to
reduce their power. This allowed them to
increase ownership of programs and in-
house production and re-create the vertical
integration of television production of the
1950s and 1960s ("TV's Little Guys Stayin'

Both broadcast and cable networks' first
concern affecting program decisions is risk
avoidance. Popular culture success is no-
toriously unpredictable. The music recording
industry spreads risk over many albums so
that any single decision is less significant
(Peterson & Berger, 1971; Rosensman, 2005).
Spreading risk is not a strategy available to
networks (neither broadcast nor cable)
since only a few programming decisions fill
the prime-time hours that account for
most income. Networks are constrained
further from expanding the number of their
decisions by their use of the series as the
basic unit of programming. The ben-
et of the series format is that it increases
ratings predictability from week to week,
but it reduces the number of prime-time
programming decisions to less than 50
for the whole season. So each decision
represents a considerable financial risk,
not simply in production costs but in
advertising income as well. Success may
produce a windfall. For example, ABC
multiplied its profits fivefold from 1973
to 1978 by raising its average prime-time
ratings from 16.6 to 20.7 (W. Behanna,
personal communication, 1980). But mistakes can cause severe losses.

Since programming decisions were and continue to be risky and costly, and network executives’ careers rest on their ability to make right decisions, they are constrained, in their own interest, to avoid innovation and novelty. They stick to tried and true formats, a common complaint among successful television writers and producers (Brown, 1971; Kubey, 2004; Washlag & Adams, 1983). They also prefer those who have a track record of success.

The result is a small, closed community of proven creative personnel (roughly 500 producers, writers, and directors) closely tied to and dependent on the networks (Gillin, 1983, pp. 115, 135; Kubey, 2004; Pekurny, 1982; Tunstall & Walker, 1981, pp. 77-79).

These proven talents then self-censor their work on the basis of a product image their previous experience tells them the networks will tolerate (Cantor, 1971; Pekurny, 1982; Ravage, 1978), creating an "imaginary feedback loop" (DiMaggio & Hirsch, 1976) between producers and network executives.

Some conditions characterized program development programs in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, since the new buyers of programming, cable networks, operate under the same constraints as broadcast networks. To avoid risk, network executives have chosen programs that repeat the same images of class, decade after decade. More diverse programming appeared only in the early days of the industry when there were no past successes to copy—broadcast television in the early 1950s and cable in the early 1980s—or when declining ratings made it clear that past successes no longer worked (Blumber & Spicer, 1990; Turow, 1982b, p. 124). Dominick (1976) found the 1970s the lowest of the networks, the more variation in program types could be discerned from season to season and the less network schedules resembled each other. For example, in the late 1950s, ABC introduced hour-long western series to prime time in order to become competitive with NBC and CBS (FCC, 1965). Again, in 1970, CBS purchased Norman Lear’s then contractually bound Ad, the Family—other networks turned it down—to counteract a drift to an audience with demographics (rural and over 30) not desired by advertisers.

In the mid-1990s, when numbers of working-class and African American sitcoms occurred in the early 1990s when television executives feared that the white middle class was turning to other entertainments ("Generation Gap Hits Sitcoms," 1999).

Acceptance by networks of innovative programs takes much longer than conventional programs and requires backing by the most successful producers (Turow, 1982b, p. 126). For example, Roseanne was introduced by Carey-Werner, producers of the top-rated Cosby Show; when ABC was trying to counter ratings losses (Reeves, 1990, pp. 153-154). Hugh Wilson, the creator of WKRP and Frank’s Place, described CBS in 1987 as desperate over slipping ratings: "Consequently they were the best people to work for from a creative standpoint" (Campbell & Reeves, 1990, p. 8). Even as declining ratings spurred networks to try innovative programs in the 1990s, they still tended to hire proven talent within the existing production community. The new ideas that were accepted came from (or through) established figures in the industry. As cable networks began to buy series, they contributed to this pattern by supporting programming that satisfied their niche audience but would offend some portion of the broadcast networks’ mass market.

**Network Decision-Making—Program Development**

The second factor affecting network decisions on content is the need to produce programming suited to advertising. What the audience wants, second or third in the executives’ mind is secondary to ad revenue. Pay-cable networks, not bound by this constraint, have been free to explore sexual and violent content, as in the Sopranos, that may have scared off advertisers but attracts an audience. In matters of advertisement content, advertising-supported networks avoid content that will offend or dissatisfy advertisers (Bryant, 1969). For example, ABC contracts with producers in 1977 stipulated that no program or pilot shall contain—anything—which does not conform with the then current business or advertising policies of any such sponsor; or which is detrimental to the good will of the products or services of...any such sponsor (FCC, 1980, Appendix C, p. A-2). Gary Marshall, producer of several highly successful series in the 1970s, stated that ABC rejected a storyline for Mork & Mindy, the top-rated show for 1978, in which Mork takes TV ads literally, buys everything, and creates havoc. Despite the series’ and Marshall’s proven success, the network feared advertisers’ reactions to such a storyline.

An advertiser’s preferred program is one that allows full use of the products being advertised. The program should be a complimentary context for the ad. In the 1950s, an ad agency rejecting a play about working-class life stated, "It is the general policy of advertisers to glamorize their products, the people who buy them, and the whole American social and economic scene" (Burns, 1970, p. 32). Advertisers in 1961 considered it "of key importance" to avoid "irritating, controversial, depressive, or 'downbeat' material" (FCC, 1965, p. 373). This requires dramas built around affluent characters for whom consuming is not problematic. Thus, affluent characters predominate and occupational groups with higher levels of consumer expenditure are overrepresented. Even in a working-class domestic sitcom, it is unusual for financial strain to be a regular theme of the show—The Honeymooners and Roseanne are two exceptions to this.

A third factor in program decisions is whether it will attract the right audience.
occupation was incidental to the situation or the plot of the program idea; thus, it was embedded in the creators' conception of the situation. For example, according to one writer, a character was conceived of as an archetypal "man of the 19th Century City" location for shooting the series; the father in another pilot was cast as owner of a bakery after the decision to do a series about an extended Italian family; another pilot, the creator thought the actor "looked like your average businessman."

The particular occupations and even the classes are not necessitated by the situations that creators offered as explanations. But they do not seem to be hiding the truth; their responses were open and unguarded. It appears they did not consciously consider whether they wished to portray this particular class or occupation; rather, to them, the occupations were derivative of the situation or location or actors they chose. They didn't think of characters explicitly in terms of class or race but rather as a personality type that might conjure up a particular occupation. This absence of any awareness of decisions about class is confirmed by Gitlin's (1983) and Kubey's (2004) interviews with industry personnel. Thus, the process of class construction seems difficult to document given the unspoken guidelines, the indirect manner in which they suggest class, and the absence of overt decisions about class. Class or occupation is not typically an issue of discussion, as obscurity and race are. The choice of class is thus diffuse and indirect, drawn from a culture that provides no vocabulary to think explicitly and speak directly about class. To examine this further, we need to look at the organization of the production process and the culture of creative personnel.

The Hollywood Input—Television Series Production

Within the production process in Hollywood studios and associated organizations, as well as in the work culture of creative personnel, we recognize that contribute to the use of simple and repetitious stereotypes of working-class men.

An important factor in television drama production is the severe time constraints of production (Kubey, 2004; Lynch, 1973; Ravage, 1978; Reeves, 1990). The production schedule for a series requires that a finished program be delivered to the networks each week. Even if the production company had the entire year over which to complete the season's 22 to 24 episodes, an episode would have to be produced on the average every 2 weeks, including script writing, casting, staging, filming, and editing. This is achieved through an assembly line process where several episodes are in various stages of production and being worked on simultaneously by the same team of producer, writers, directors, and actors.

Such a schedule puts great pressures on the production team to simplify the amount of detail and decisions to be made, as much as possible. The series format is advantageous for this reason: When the general storyline and main characters are set, the script can be written following a single formula. For situation comedy, even the sets and the cast do not change from episode to episode.

The time pressures contribute in several ways to dependence on stereotypes for characterization. First, sitcoms are based on central characters rather than plot and development. These characters are coming into the living rooms of people who have to like to watch the characters and find them believable (Kubey, 2004). All this means that, to sell a new series, writers should offer stock characters (i.e., stereotypes). Writing for the same stock character, week after week, also greatly reduces the task of producing a script.

Thus, time pressure encourages typecasting because writers rely heavily on a shared and consistent product image—including diffuse and unidifferentiated images of class—embodied in what Elliott (1972) called the media culture. The small, closed community of those engaged in television production, including Hollywood creators and network executives (Blumler & Spicer, 1990; Gitlin, 1983; Stein, 1979; Tustull & Walker, 1981; Turow, 1982a), shares a culture that includes certain conventions of what life is like and what the audience finds interesting. The closedness of this community is both reflected in and reinforced by the hiring preference for proven talent already in the community, lack of any apprenticeship system to train new talent, and the importance of social networking, or, as one director phrased it, "networking," in obtaining work (Kubey, 2004). According to Norman Lear, the production community draws its ideas from what filters into it from the mass media, which is then interpreted through the lens of their own experience and culture, to guess what "the public" would like and formulate images of class they think are compatible (Gitlin, 1983, pp. 204, 225–226).

While the consistency of image, the underrepresentation of the working class, and the use of stereotypes can be explained by structural constraints, the particular stereotypes grow from a rather diffuse set of cultural images, constrained and framed by the structure of the industry.

Reaching the vast majority of the population for over a half century and seeping into everyday conversation, sitcoms have made a significant contribution to our culture's attitude toward the man who makes his living with his hands. It is an attitude based on the presumption that these sitcoms repeated again and again—that this man is dumb, immature, irresponsible, lacking common sense, often frustrated, and sometimes angry. This legitimizes his low pay and close supervision at work. Furthermore, it is an attitude of disrespect for him everywhere else in the public realm. It is that disrespect that is the ultimate "hidden injury" that working-class interviewees expressed to Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb (1972) in the early 1970s, just about the time Archie Bunker first appeared on network television.
The continuing stereotype in sitcoms tells us plus ça change, the injury remains the same.

References


