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Ralph, Fred, Archie and Homer: Why television keeps re-creating the white male working class buffoon

Richard Butsch

from Gail Dines and Jean Humez, eds., *Gender, Race and Class in Media: A Text-Reader*, second edition (Sage, 2003), 575-85

Strewn across our mass media are portrayals of class that justify class relations of modern capitalism. Studies of 50 years of comic strips, radio serials, television drama, movies, and popular fiction reveal a very persistent pattern, an under-representation of working-class occupations and an overrepresentation of professional and managerial occupations among characters.¹

My own studies of class in prime-time network television family series from 1946 to 1990 (Butsch, 1992; Butsch & Glennon, 1983; Glennon & Butsch, 1982) indicate that this pattern is persistent over four decades of television, in 262 domestic situation comedies, such as *I Love Lucy*, *The Brady Bunch*, *All in the Family*, and *The Simpsons*. In only 11 % of the series were heads of house portrayed as working class, that is, holding occupations as blue-collar, clerical, or unskilled or semiskilled service workers. Blue-collar families were most underrepresented: only 4% (11 series) compared with 45% of American families in 1970.

Widespread affluence was exaggerated as well. More lucrative, glamorous, or prestigious professions predominated over more mundane ones: 9 doctors to 1 nurse, 19 lawyers to 2 accountants, 7 college professors to 2 schoolteachers. Working wives were almost exclusively middle class and in pursuit of a career. Working-class wives such as in *Roseanne*, who have to work to help support the family, were very rare. Particularly notable was the prevalence of servants: one of every five series had a maid or butler.

The working class is not only underrepresented; the few men who are portrayed are buffoons. They are dumb, immature, irresponsible, or lacking in common sense. This is the character of the husbands in almost every sitcom depicting a blue-collar {white} male head of house, *The Honeymooners*, *The Flintstones*, *All in the Family*, and *The Simpsons* being the most famous examples. He is typically well-intentioned, even lovable, but no one to respect or emulate. These men are played against more mature, sensible wives, such as Ralph against Alice in *The Honeymooners*.

In most middle-class series, there is no buffoon. More typically, both parents are wise and work cooperatively to raise their children in practically perfect families, as in *Father Knows Best*, *The Brady Bunch*, and *The Cosby Show*. In the few middle-class series featuring a buffoon, it is the dizzy wife, such as Lucy. The professional managerial husband is the sensible, mature partner. Inverting gender status in working-class but not middle-class sitcoms is a statement about class.

How Does It Happen?

The prevalence of such views of working class men well illustrates ideological hegemony, the dominance of values in mainstream culture that justify and help to maintain the status quo. Blue-collar workers are portrayed as requiring supervision, and managers and professionals as intelligent and mature enough to provide it. But do viewers, and particularly the working class, accept these views? Only a handful of scattered, incidental observations (Blum, 1969; Gans, 1962; Jhally & Lewis, 1992; Vidmar & Rokeach, 1974) consider how people have responded to portrayals of class.

And why does television keep reproducing these caricatures? How does it happen? Seldom have studies of television industries pinpointed how specific content arises. Studies of production have not been linked to studies of content any more than audience studies have. What follows is an effort to make that link between existing production studies and persistent images of working-class men in domestic sitcoms. In the words of Connell (1978), "No evil-minded capitalistic

plotters need be assumed because 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. 195). The simple need to make a profit is a structural constraint that affects content (see also Ryan, 1992).

Let us then examine how the organization of the industry and television drama production may explain class content in television series. I will look at three levels of organization: (a) network domination of the industry, (b) the organization of decisions within the networks and on the production line, and (c) the work community and culture of the creative personnel. I will trace how these may explain the consistency and persistence of the portrayals, the under-representation of the working class, and the choice of the particular 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. Of all television audiences, 90% watched network programs. The networks accounted for over half of all television advertising revenues in the 1960s and 1970s and just under half by the late 1980s (Owen & Wildman, 1992). They therefore had the money and the audience to dominate as almost the sole buyers of drama programming from Hollywood producers and studios.²

During the 1980s, the three-network share of the audience dropped from about 90% to 60%; network share of television ad revenues declined from 60% to 47% (Owen & Wildman, 1992). These dramatic changes have generated many news stories of the demise of the big three. Cable networks and multi-station owners (companies that own several local broadcast stations) began to challenge the dominance of the big three. They became alternative markets for producers as they began purchasing their own programs.

But program development is costly; even major Hollywood studios are unwilling to produce drama programs without subsidies from buyers. Nine networks have sufficient funds in the 1990s to qualify as buyers of drama programming: the four broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, Fox, and NBC) and five cable networks (Disney, HBO, Showtime, TNT, and USA Network) (Blumler & Spicer, 1990). But ABC, CBS, and NBC still account for the development of the overwhelming majority of new drama series, the programming that presents the same characters week after week-and year after year in reruns.

This is the case in part because the broadcast networks still deliver by far the largest audiences. Even in 1993, the combined ratings for the 20 largest cable audiences would still only rank 48th in ratings for broadcast network shows. The highest rated cable network, USA Network, reached only 1.5% of the audience, compared to an average of 20% for ABC, NBC, and CBS. The larger audiences translate into more dollars for program development.

And producers still prefer to work for the broadcast networks. When sold to broadcast networks, their work receives much broader exposure, which enhances their subsequent profits from syndication after the network run and increases the likelihood for future purchases and employment.

Moreover, whether or not dominance by the big three has slipped, many of the same factors that shaped their programming decisions shape the decisions of their competitors as well. The increased number of outlets has not resulted in the innovation and diversity in program development once expected. Jay Blumler and Carolyn Spicer (1990) interviewed more than 150 industry personnel concerned with program decision making and found that the promise of more openness to innovation and creativity was short-lived. The cost of drama programming limits buyers to only a handful of large corporations and dictates that programs attract a large audience and avoid risk. How has this affected content?

Using their market power, the networks have maintained sweeping control over production decisions of even highly successful producers from initial idea for a new program to final film or tape (Bryant, 1969, pp. 624-626; Gitlin, 1983; Pekurny, 1977, 1982; Winick, 1961). Their first concern affecting program decisions is risk avoidance. Popular culture success is notoriously unpredictable, making decisions risky. The music recording industry spreads investment over many records so that any single decision is less significant (Peterson & Berger, 1971). Spreading risk is not a strategy available to networks (neither broadcast nor cable), because 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 series format increases ratings predictability from week to week. Each decision, then, represents a considerable financial risk, not simply in production costs but in advertising income. For example, ABC increased profits from \$35 million in 1975 to \$185 million in 1978 by raising its average prime-time ratings from 16.6 to 20.7 (personal communication, W. Behanna, A. C. Nielsen Company, June 1980).

Because programming decisions are risky and costly and network executives' careers rest on their ability to make the right decisions, they are constrained, in their own interest, to avoid innovation and novelty. They stick to tried-and-true formulas and to producers with a track record of success (Brown, 1971; Wakshlag & Adams, 1985). The result is a small, closed community of proven creative personnel (about 500 producers, writers, directors) closely tied to and dependent on the networks (Gitlin, 1983, pp. 115, 135; Pekurny, 1982; Tunstall & Walker, 1981, pp. 77-79). This proven talent 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.

These same conditions continue to characterize program development in the late 1980s (Blumler & Spicer, 1990), as 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 has appeared only in the early days of an 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 (Blumler & Spicer, 1990; Turow, 1982b, p. 124). Dominick (1976) found that the lower the profits 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 to become competitive with NBC and CBS (Federal Communications Commission [FCC], Office of Network Study, 1965, pp. 373, 742). Again, in 1970, CBS purchased Norman Lear's then controversial *All in the Family* (other networks turned it down) to counteract a the drift to an audience of undesirable demographics (rural and over 50). Acceptance by the networks of innovative programs takes much longer than conventional programs and requires backing by the most successful producers (Turow, 1982b, p. 126). *Roseanne* was introduced by Carsey- Werner, producers of the top-rated *Cosby Show*, when ABC was trying to counter ratings losses (Reeves, 1990, pp. 153-154). 5; Hugh Wilson, the creator of *WKRP* and *Frank's Place*, described CBS in 1987 as desperate about slipping ratings; "Consequently they were the best people to work for from a creative standpoint" (Campbell & Reeves, '1; 1990, p. 8).

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 - or what network executives imagine they want - is secondary to ad revenue. (Subscriber-supported, pay cable networks, which do not sell advertising, also do not program weekly drama in series.) In matters of content, networks avoid that which will offend or dissatisfy advertisers (Bryant, 1969). For example, in 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 or the products or services of any such sponsor. (FCC, Network Inquiry, 1980, Appendix C, p. A-2) Garry Marshall, producer of several highly successful series, stated that ABC rejected a story line for *Mark & 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 story line.

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 glamourize their products, the people who buy them, and the whole American social and economic scene" (Barnouw, 1970, p. 32). Advertisers in 1961 considered it "of key importance" to avoid "irritating, controversial, depressive, or downbeat material" (FCC, Office of Network Study, 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.

A third factor in program decisions is whether it will attract the right audience. Network executives construct a product image of what they *imagine* the audience wants, which surprisingly is not based on actual research of audiences in their homes (Blumler & Spicer, 1990; Pekurny, 1982). For example, Michael Dann, a CBS executive, was "concerned the public might not accept a program about a blue collar worker" when offered the pilot script for *Arnie* in 1969 (before *All in the Family* proved that wrong and after a decade in which the only working-class family appearing in prime time was *The Flintstones*). On the other hand, in 1979 an NBC executive expressed the concern that a couple in a pilot was too wealthy to appeal to most viewers (Turow, 1982b, p. 123).

With the exception of the few anecdotes I have mentioned, almost no research has examined program development or production decisions about class content of programs. My research found no significant differences between characters in sitcom pilots and series from 1973 to 1982, indicating that class biases in content begin very early in the decision-making process, when the first pilot episode is being developed (Butsch, 1984). I therefore conducted a mail survey of the producers, writers, or directors of the pilots from 1973 to 1982. I specifically asked how the decisions were made about the occupation of the characters in their pilot. I was able to contact 40 persons concerning 50 pilots. I received responses from 6 persons concerning 12 pilots.

Although this represents only a small portion of the original sample, their responses are strikingly similar. Decisions on occupations of main characters were made by the creators and made early in program development, as part of the program idea. In no case did the occupation become a matter of debate or disagreement with the networks. Moreover, the choice of occupation was incidental to the situation or other aspect of the program idea; thus, it was embedded in the creator's conception of the situation. For example, according to one writer, a character was conceived of as an architect "to take advantage of the Century City" location for shooting the series; the father in another pilot was cast as owner of a bakery after the decision was made to do a series about an extended Italian family; in 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 think through themselves why this *particular* class or occupation; rather, the occupations seem to them an obvious derivative of the situation or location or actors they choose. The choice of class is thus diffuse, embedded in their culture.

This absence of any awareness of decisions about class is confirmed by Gitlin's (1983) interviews with industry personnel about social issues. 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 decision about class. Class or occupation is not typically an issue for discussion, as are obscenity or race. To examine it further, we need to look at the organization of the production process and the culture of creative personnel.

THE HOLLYWOOD INPUT - PROGRAM PRODUCTION

Within the production process Hollywood studios and associated organizations, and in the work culture of creative personnel, we find factors 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 constraint (Lynch, 1973; Ravage, 1978; Reeves, 1991 p. 150). The production schedule for 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 22-24 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 in which several episodes are in various stages ' production and being worked on by the same team of producer, writers, directors and actors, simultaneously (Lynch, 1978; Ravage, 1978; Reeves, 1990).

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

The time pressures contribute in several ways to the dependence on stereotypes for characterization. First, if ideas for new series are to be noticed, they cannot be "subtle ideas and feelings of depth," but rather, "have to be attention getters-lam farts," in the words of a successful director (Ravage, 1978, p. 92).

Also, time pressure encourages type casting to obtain casts quickly. The script is sent to a "breakdown" agency, which read the script and extracts the description of characters that need to be cast. One such agency, employing six persons, provides this service for the majority of series (Turow, 1978). These brief character descriptions, not the script, are used by the casting agency to recommend actors, particularly for minor characters. Not surprisingly, the descriptions are highly stereotype, (Turow, 1980). Occupation - and by inference, class - was an important part of these descriptions, being identified for 84 % of male characters.

Producers, casting directors, and casting agencies freely admit the stereotyping, but argue its necessity on the basis of time and dramatic constraints. Type-casting is much quicker. They also argue that to diverge from stereotypes would draw attention away from the action, the story line, or other character and destroy dramatic effect. Thus, unless the contradiction of the stereotype is the basic story idea - as in *Arnie*, a blue-collar worker suddenly appointed corporate executive - there is a very strong pressure, for purpose of dramatic effect, to reproduce existing stereotypes.

The time pressures also make it more likely that the creators will stick to what is familiar to them whenever possible. Two of the most frequent occupations of main characters in family series were in entertainment and writing, that is, modeled on the creators' own lives (Butsch & Glennon, 1983)

The vast majority of producers grew up in middle-class homes, with little direct experience of working-class life (Cantor, 1971; Gitlin, 1983; Stein, 1979; Thompson; Burns, 1990). Moreover, the tight schedule and deadlines of series production leave no time for becoming familiar enough with working-class lifestyle to be able to capture it realistically. Those who have done so - for example, Jackie Gleason, Norman Lear - had childhood memories of working class neighborhoods to draw on.

Thus, the time pressure encourages creative personnel to rely heavily on a shared and consistent product image - including diffuse and undifferentiated images of class - embedded 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; Tunstall & Walker, 1981; Turow, 1982a) shares a culture that includes certain conceptions of what life is like and what the audience finds interesting. According to Norman Lear, the production community draws its ideas from what filters into it from the mass media (Gitlin, 1983, p. 204). From this, they try to guess what "the public" would like and formulate images of class they think are compatible (Gitlin, 1983, pp. 225-226).

Although the consistency of image, the under-representation 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. Any further specification will require a close examination of the construction of the consciousness of the program creators and network executives from, among other things, their exposure to the same media they create-a closed circle of cultural reproduction. Whether one can indeed extract the process of class image making from the totality of this occupational culture remains a challenge to researchers.

Industry and Image in the 1990s: A Postscript

Although by 2000 cable networks began to purchase new drama and comedy series ("B'cast, Cable," 2000), commercial broadcast networks still accounted for the development of the

overwhelming majority of new drama and sitcom series. At the same time, competition from cable and other media forms began to take their toll on broadcast network television, the patrons of sitcom production.

From the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, the average household's television use increased from 6 to 7 hours per day, due to increased numbers of cable channels and independent broadcast stations, and to the growth of VCRs and video rental. The increase in television use leveled off around 1984, as VCR and cable growth plateaued. Television viewing remained at 7 hours per day through the 1990s (Butsch, 2000, p.269).

The increased television viewing, however, did not benefit the broadcast networks. Rather, broadcast networks' television ratings, the percentage of television households with the television turned on and tuned to a broadcast network, continued to decline as people turned to cable, VCR, and the Internet. In 1990, the big four commercial broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox) had shrunk to a combined rating of 39.7% from 56.5% in 1980, about when the decline began (Butsch, 2000, p. 269). By mid-1999, the big four combined rating had slipped to 28.6% ("Upscale Auds," 1999). Advertising supported cable had grown from 9.6% in 1990 to 23.9% in mid-1999 to become substantial competitors of the broadcast networks. A Nielsen study of their ratings concluded that among 18- to 34-year-olds, television use overall declined about 5 rating points from 1991 to 1997 ("Young Auds," 1999).

This decline of broadcast network hegemony began to influence domestic sitcoms. The networks even began to fear that people might not only leave the networks but desert television altogether for other entertainments, especially the young turning to the Internet and computer games, the first time in television history that household television use would not have been increasing. In response, the networks reduced the number of sitcoms scheduled for prime time. The fall schedules, where new shows are traditionally debuted, now included fewer domestic sitcoms; new sitcoms were more youth- and single- rather than family-oriented. Also, the industry replaced sitcoms with less expensive formats such as "reality" shows, even though they drew a less desirable (for advertisers) lower income audience ("Genre-ation Gap," 1999; "TV Tosses," 1999; "Webs' Final," 1999).

Broadcast networks began to seek a downscale audience on the premise that they had already lost the upscale audience to pay-cable. Because ratings had been declining, network executives were more willing to try innovations, including sitcoms that differed from the usual formulas. They tried animated, singles, and other "situations" instead of the family situation. Domestic sitcoms that did make it to prime time featured different families than they had in the past, especially downscale families more frequently than ever before. Of 53 new domestic sitcoms from 1990 to 1999, 16 featured working-class families; 11 series featured black families. Other shows for which the occupation was not blue collar or was not specified were set in working-class locales.

Nevertheless, even in this new environment, the Hollywood culture's image of working-class men persisted. The 1998 series *King of Queens* was called a Ralph Kramden remake, with a wife that was a little too bright for her husband. *Bless This House* (1995) featured a macho postal worker and feisty wife and also was described as *The Honeymooners* with kids. In 1991, *Roc* featured a not-too-bright black garbageman with a stereotypic macho attitude and a more educated nurse as his wife. *King of the Hill* (1998) caricatures southern working-class men as beer drinking, gun toting, pickup truck driving, narrow-minded, and uncommunicative. In *Grace Under Fire* (1993), the father was an unreliable drunken "good for nothing" who abandoned the family. In the new *Cosby* show (1996), the husband was an unemployed airport worker while his wife co-owned a flower shop and his daughter was a lawyer. Even mainstream reviewers criticized *Costello* (1998) for its crude stereotypes of working-class men. In many cases, wives and mothers overshadowed the men. In addition to the brighter wives mentioned above, Jesse, Thea, and Grace presented single mothers who exhibited strength and good character that put their men to shame.

Many 1990s shows featured dysfunctional families, but the more serious dysfunctions were blue collar. Alcoholism, spouse abuse, and children abandoned or put up for adoption appeared in working class shows. Divorce and quirky personalities were typical "dysfunctions" for middle-class shows (James, 1995). So, although there were more shows featuring working-class people in the 1990s, the men continued to be stereotyped as not too bright, immature, and contrasted to

their more capable and responsible wives or adult female relatives. Plus ça change, plus c'est la meme chose.

It would seem that the great changes in industry structure have not changed the outcome when it came to issues of class. One thing has not changed in the industry. The market for sitcoms has always been oligopsonistic, that is, few buyers and many more sellers. Sitcom series have had only one market, network television. New shows are chosen by network executives, and these purchasers have always been few in number and averse to new ideas: When the FCC's financial interest and syndication rules in 1970 forced the networks out of producing their own shows, they still remained the only purchasers of such shows from movie studios and independent producers, and thus still represented a conservative force against innovation and risk. Also, they still were financed by advertisers who were risk averse. The re-creation of vertical integration and the horizontal integration across broadcast, cable, and movie studios in the 1990s likewise did not change the fundamental fact of oligopsony (Gomery, 1999). The only thing that has motivated innovation or change, from the 1950s through the 1990s, has been declining ratings and profits for established networks and the need for new networks such as Fox to break into the market. Once ratings rebounded or new networks established themselves, they shied away from innovation. (e.g., see Zook, 1999, pp. 102-104, on Fox).

Remarkably, even these pressures to try something new have not deterred stereotyping of working-class men. The unchanged nature of sitcom production, where these ideas are created and put on tape, is the source of continuity in this respect. When a sitcom producer has a secure contract with a network, there are few opportunities to abandon stereotypes. The production schedule's time pressures eliminate opportunities to explore new character types. These have not changed from the days of *Lucy and Ozzie* in the 1950s to *Archie* in the 1970s, and *Mad About You* in the 1990s (Meisler, 1997).

Notes

1. Subordinate statuses, generally, race and gender as well as class, are underrepresented and/or presented negatively.

2. The sellers, the production companies, on the other hand, are not an oligopoly. Market concentration is low compared to the buyers (broadcast and cable networks); there was high turnover in the ranks of suppliers and great year-to-year fluctuation in market share; and collusion between suppliers is very difficult (FCC Network Inquiry Special Staff, 1980; Owen & Wildman, 1990).

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