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## **Richard Butsch, Five decades and three hundred sitcoms about class and gender**

from Gary Edgerton and Brian Rose, eds.,  
Thinking Outside the Box: Television Genre Reader

Since *I Love Lucy*, situation comedy has been the mainstay, the bread and butter, of prime-time television. It has been the most durable of genres: at least four hundred sitcoms have appeared during prime time. Three hundred were domestic sitcoms depicting families; many of the rest were constructed as artificial families of friends or coworkers. Many lasted only a few weeks, some lasted for years, but each year they were key to network profits. Overall they reliably provided good ratings, and they were cheaper to produce than drama and far more sellable as reruns than any other form.

Situation comedy is built around a humorous "situation" in which tension develops and is resolved during the half hour. In episode after episode the situation is re-created. In many sitcoms, particularly those featuring a well-known comic, the comic situations are embodied in a character who is always getting himself into trouble. David Grote said comic characters are traditionally of three types, the Innocent, the Fool, and the Scoundrel. The Scoundrel is rare in TV sitcoms, Sergeant Bilko being the most famous exception. Many domestic sitcoms feature children, Innocents, as the comic characters. This was typical of idyllic middle class families depicted in sitcoms such as *The Brady Bunch*, *The Cosby Show*, and *Seventh Heaven*.<sup>1</sup> The parents are cast as wise in contrast to the innocent children. These shows evoke a warm glow more than a loud laugh.

However, the most memorable sitcoms have been built around a Fool, such as Lucy, Archie, or Homer. Sometimes the fool is a supporting character, such as Raymond's father in *Everybody Loves Raymond*. The buffoon or fool is a classic type in comic drama, traditionally cast as someone of inferior status, slaves or servants, women, peasants and lower classes, subordinate races, and so forth. The fool has been used in ancient Greek and Roman drama, in Renaissance drama, in nineteenth-century minstrelsy, in ethnic humor of vaudeville. The ground was well trod long before the creation of situation comedy.<sup>2</sup>

Inferior statuses are represented using negative stereotypes of women, blacks and other minorities, the old and the young, and other low statuses. Already embedded in the larger culture, these stereotypes are useful for their familiarity. Over time, stereotypes are merged into character types that recur and have a special importance in the culture as stock images—the country bumpkin, the dizzy blonde—used to construct a culture's tales and even to type each other in everyday life. They become codes that audiences can be expected to know and that writers can use to advance dramatic goals without having to explain. This is especially useful in a short form of drama like the twenty-two minute sitcom. The foolishness in sitcoms is almost always attached to a character's lower status, by representing well-known stereotypes of this status group.

A higher status can be denied by representing a person as having opposite characteristics. Men are devalued by characterizing them as feminine. Adults have been devalued by characterizing them as childlike. When a person has two contradictory status positions, such as rich woman, black middle class, working-class man, the higher status can be undercut to resolve the contradiction in favor of the lower status. Demasculinizing working-class men - that is, applying descriptors that contradict the culturally accepted definition of masculine - not only devalues them as men but also uses gender to affirm their subordinate class status.<sup>3</sup>

Television sitcoms have continued the tradition of representing lower-status groups as inferior. They also have valued one status by manipulating other status traits. One of the most striking patterns in the fifty year~ of television situation comedy is the consistency in devaluing working-class men's masculinity and thus confirming that class as a deserved lower status. This dramatic mechanism has been a central part of television sitcoms throughout the form's history. Working-class men have been persistently represented as fools, middle-class men seldom so.

There have been times, before television, when working-class men were not represented as fools. The Depression and World War II when the most recent eras when public discourse acknowledged the

positive contribution of manual labor. Muscle was depicted as heroic and patriotic-not the sculpted muscle of the gym, but muscles for work, ones on which the nation depended to rebuild itself during the Depression and defend itself during the war. The Roosevelt administration celebrated these working men as strong and vital through Works Progress Administration (WPA) arts and building projects.

By the time television arrived, something had changed America's cultural discourse. From the 1950s on, the admiration of physical labor steadily declined. No longer were construction workers, steelworkers, miners, and craftsmen represented positively. Manual labor instead came to represent stupidity and failure, the only alternative for those men who were not smart enough to be educated to achieve mental work occupations. The mental worker, the middle class, was ascendant in cultural discourse. Since the 1950s manual workers, especially white working-class men, have been characterized as uncouth beer-bellied loudmouths, couch potatoes, wife beaters, the silent majority, racists, supporters of right-wing causes.

Nowhere has this been so consistently represented to so large an audience as in television domestic sitcoms. For generations, television has presented this message, so long that few people have any memory of sympathetic, let alone heroic, images of working men who perform manual labor. White working-class men have been reduced to Homer, Archie, Fred, Ralph. Every American is familiar with these characters. They are the representatives of working-class men. They are not positive images. They confirm other discourses about America's working class that demean these people and, in doing so, resign them to their fate of low income and little respect.

Sitcoms' predominance on prime-time television throughout its history and their consequent share of the television audience over this history mean that they are preeminent examples of dominant culture, steadily presented to the largest population over the longest time. Pervasive and persistent images crystallize as cultural types. Alternative and oppositional images and readings appear within this context and typically refer to it. Character types that recur across series and across time, and contrasts between types, which may be evident only when we look at the panorama of series taken together, are of especial importance.

What does this half century of dominant culture say? While there can be many readings of these hundreds of sitcoms, there are also patterns of consistency that are powerful means to reproduce and naturalize certain views. A wealth of studies document television images of women and of African Americans. Some have documented images of men. An older research tradition has tabulated occupational frequencies. A handful of studies have examined class or the intersection of gender and class. <sup>4</sup> Almost all these have looked at a specific point in time. Innumerable studies have focused on the text of a single television show. Almost none have examined the pattern of images across many series and over several seasons, what we might call the historical tapestry of television culture.

Analysis across many shows and many years can reveal persistent and pervasive images. It also enables us to discover important contrasts that otherwise would not be noticeable. For example, when we observe the treatment of men and women across shows of different classes, we discover contrasts in the representations of men and women depending on class. Such analyses add depth to our understanding of the traditional types in our culture's tales.

Richard Butsch and Lynda Glennon surveyed three decades of primetime network domestic situation comedies from the beginning of network television in 1946 to 1980 and found persistent patterns throughout. In previous publications I extended this work to 1989.<sup>5</sup> This chapter extends the earlier work through the 2003-4 season. This research is based on lists of all domestic situation comedy series compiled from Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh's 1999 edition of *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network Shows*, the annual *TV Guide* fall preview issues, and the [epguides.com](http://epguides.com) Web site (<http://epguides.com>), which provides situation and episode summaries for hundreds of shows. It includes all domestic sitcoms appearing on the six broadcast networks; it does not include series appearing on cable networks or solely in syndication.

I concentrate here on successful series that had five or more first-run seasons, the determinant of successful sale on the syndication market, or that ranked in the top twenty of the annual Nielsen ratings. These are the series and characters that sedimented in the national culture and conversation,

shows that most Americans know something about even if they haven't seen them. I will contrast working-class to middle-class series over the five decades.

Most sitcoms featured upper-middle-class families of professionals and businesspeople, but the vast majority were not successful series. Working-class family sitcoms were relatively scarce through most of the nearly six decades of broadcast network television. They were more common during transitional times for network television, seeming to be chosen only when network executives were desperate. Once on television, however, a remarkable percentage became television classics (*The Honeymooners*, *The Flintstones*, *All in the Family*, *The Simpsons*) and created a vivid cultural type of the working-class man. Also illustrating their exceptional success, only three prime-time animated series have aired more than one hundred episodes: *The Flintstones*, *The Simpsons*, and *King of the Hill*...All three depict working-class families.

### Simpler Times: The 1950s and 1960s

The sitcom began as a radio genre, gaining success in the 1940s due in part to its lower costs compared to comedy-variety shows with big-name stars and orchestras. Even on radio the most common situation was a family. Many of the 1950s radio sitcoms became the first television sitcoms. Even *I Love Lucy* was copied from the radio show *My Favorite Husband*, in which Lucille Ball had starred. As J. Fred MacDonald summed up, "Radio situation comedies were middle-class morality tales. The American family was portrayed as a vital institution in which love, trust and self-confidence were best developed."<sup>8</sup>

Television production costs were many times those of radio, which affected the form of sitcom adapted to television. Advertisers were less willing to pay such costs. The networks moved to a magazine format of programming in which they owned and produced or controlled production of the programs, selling commercial time between programs. Networks benefited from efficiencies of scale, since they were producing many more programs than any advertiser or ad agency could expect to do. The breakthrough was the use of film, which allowed the rerun and syndication of programs, spreading the costs over repeated use and sales.

To sustain a mass audience, the networks preferred blandness in sitcoms. Each network had a censorship office, called standards and practices, to weed out anything controversial.<sup>9</sup> No threatening world impinged on these early TV families, not the bomb or the cold war, not 1960s Vietnam, riots, protests; not sex or drugs. These families seldom struggled. All problems were simple and internal to the family. Almost everyone was content about their place in the family and in the world. With this reassuring formula, the characters were inevitably oversimplified stereotypes that were rather consistent from series to series.

#### *Working-Class Stereotypes*

In working-class sitcoms of the period, the man is more or less a buffoon, dumb, incompetent, irresponsible, immature, lacking good sense. His saving grace, for audiences to like and continue to watch him, is that he has a good heart and cares about his family. He is simply not capable of fulfilling his role as father and husband. Humor was built around some variant of his inadequacy as a man. The man was typically caught in a situation of his own making.

This characterization is accentuated by contrasts to the wives and children in these working-class series, as well as by contrasts to the middle-class men in other series. Typically the working-class wife and sometimes the children were portrayed as more intelligent, rational, sensible, responsible, and mature than the man. Mother, not father, typically knew best. Often she had to help him out of situations. The children were often smarter than their fathers, and their successes contrasted to their father's failures. At best father was benign but inferior, at worst an embarrassment.

This formula was the core of the successful 1950s series *The Honeymooners*, *The Life of Riley*, and *I Remember Mama*. Chester, the father on *The Life of Riley*, was continually concocting schemes to help his family. He attempted to fix a school election so his daughter would win, but he succeeded only in embarrassing her. His incessant failures were expressed in his closing line for each episode,

"What a revoltin' development this is!" His wife, Peg, was tolerant of Chester's fiascoes and helped him, sometimes enlisting the children, to save face. The children were Chester's intellectual superiors. While Chester tripped over the English language, Junior headed for college.

The main characters in *The Honeymooners* lived in a bare Brooklyn apartment with few amenities. Consequently, husband Ralph was obsessed with success and modest affluence, at which he constantly schemed but invariably failed. He wanted to afford simple comforts such as a television for his wife, Alice. He tried get-rich-quick schemes, such as marketing what he thought was Alice's homemade sauce, only to learn it was dog food. Alice always quipped, "I told you so." He occasionally tried more conventional means, such as applying for a promotion or trying a self-improvement program-means Alice approved of, but which also got nowhere. Alice's logic and sarcasm invariably bested Ralph in arguments, which typically ended with Ralph saying, in angry frustration, "Just you wait, Alice, one of these days, pow, right in the kisser." She recognized the foolishness of his schemes and sometimes got him out of the messes he'd gotten them into.

*I Remember Mama*, a sentimental reminiscence of early-twentieth century family life, was one of the few working-class series in which a working-class family was taken seriously. No one was the butt of humor, yet Lars, the father in this Norwegian immigrant family, was an "earnest bumbler," in the words of the show's scriptwriter.<sup>10</sup> Frequently Mama had to conspire to help him save face. The children went to Mama for advice.

Only one working-class domestic situation comedy was aired through the entire decade of the 1960s. *The Flintstones* was a cartoon version of *The Life of Riley* and *The Honeymooners*. Fred Flintstone's loudmouth brashness was like Ralph Kramden's, but Fred was more amiable, like Chester Riley. Fred's wife, Wilma, exhibited motherly tolerance of Fred's shenanigans, as Peg did of Chester Riley's. Typically Wilma was aware of Fred's surreptitious schemes from the beginning and provided both a safety net for him when he failed and a punishment, much as a mother would for a child. When Fred persuaded his mend Barney to play hooky from work to attend a ball game, Wilma and Barney's wife, Betty, caught them; for their punishment, the "boys" had to take their wives to the opera. All four of these successful working-class series presented a consistent picture of working-class men as bumlbers who were inadequate to fulfill their manly roles of supporting and leading their families. Failing as men confirmed the appropriateness of their lower class status, especially when compared with the middle-class TV husbands of the time.

### *Middle-Class Stereotypes*

In most middle-class series, both parents were intelligent, sensible, and mature. They were calm and affable, in stark contrast to the hysteria that typified the slapstick comedy of the working-class series. In these programs the situation was typically a problem involving one of the children. The parents, seldom perplexed, guided the child through a solution, providing a moral lesson along the way. They were what Glennon and Butsch called superparents.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, the fathers tended to be more than usually affluent and successful, further accenting the difference from working-class men. Glamorous, prestigious professions predominated over more mundane ones, for example, stars over struggling actors, doctors over nurses, lawyers over accountants; within a given profession, characters were very successful or young, with much promise. Occupational success like this affirmed their manhood, which, in turn, buttressed their class status.

The successful middle-class series of the 1950s included *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*, *The Stu Erwin Show*, *I Love Lucy*, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, *Make Room for Daddy*, *Father Knows Best*, *Leave It to Beaver*, and *December Bride*. *Father Knows Best* is, of course, the prototype of its title, the completely self-assured and successful father, admired by his wife and children, the ideal of 1950s middle-class masculinity. Jim Anderson was always calm, reasonable, and ready with the answers. When the children forgot his birthday, his wife, Margaret, got upset. Jim, unfazed, admonished her for getting angry. Ozzie Nelson wrote the scripts for *Ozzie and Harriet* to

express his view of child rearing as relaxed but moral guidance.<sup>12</sup> The title *Make Room for Daddy* made clear who was important in that program's family, in contrast to *I Remember Mama*.

Occasionally a middle-class series was built around a fool as the source of humor. In these cases, however, the fool was almost always the wife, some variant of the movies' stock character the "dizzy blonde." This stereotype confirmed the lower status of women while it avoided undercutting the middle-class status of the family by preserving the reputation of the husband and head of house. Gracie Allen of *The Burns and Allen Show* was the prototype of the dizzy blonde, interjecting inane statements into the conversations of her husband, George. In *December Bride* the mother-in-law played the scatterbrain. The title character of *I Love Lucy*—and its various reincarnations, *Here's Lucy*) and so on—was the singular example of the woman as buffoon, with the husband as the mature and sensible one, though occasionally he was driven to distraction by his wife's antics. Lucy reversed the gender roles of *Riley* and *The Honeymooners*.

*The Stu Erwin Show* was the one exception to the rule, reflected in the show's other title, *Trouble with Father*. Comic actor Stu Erwin played a middle-class version of the bumbling father, a high school principal out of his depths at home, based on his stock character from movies since the 1930s.

In the working-class vacuum of the 1960s, middle-class superparents reigned with *The Donna Reed Show*, *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, *Petticoat Junction*) *Bewitched*, *Green Acres*, *My Three Sons*) and *Family Affair*. *The Donna Reed Show*, *My Three Sons*, and *Family Affair* were classic superparent series. In each the parents were calm and rational. Donna Reed was nicknamed "Mother Knows Best," but the father, a pediatrician, was not ineffectual; his wife merely filled the traditional role of providing the primary child care. The same traditional division of labor was a continuing theme in *My Three Sons*, which often depicted the difficulty an all-male household had with domestic matters. The widowed father, an engineer, however, is more than adequate in helping his sons grow up, despite minor mishaps at home. His success as a man is further attested by the continual stream of women who are attracted to him while he is engrossed in his fatherly role. *Family Affair* revived the *Bachelor Father* formula, in which a prosperous bachelor inherits children and becomes a devoted father. *The Dick Van Dyke Show* also reinforced traditional gender roles: the wife, Laura, typically asked the questions or posed the problem, and husband, Rob, provided the answer. The stumbling physical humor that was Van Dyke's signature as a comic was mostly absent from the show.

*Petticoat Junction* and *Green Acres* were part of a rural nostalgia period of 1960s television. *Petticoat Junction* featured a widow with three beautiful daughters. Its principal theme centered on how to be feminine and attract a husband. Its spin-off, *Green Acres*, featured a stereotypical "dumb blonde" wife, à la Gracie Allen, opposite a successful husband who gave up his Manhattan law practice to become a gentleman farmer. In *Bewitched*, Samantha, the wife, was a clever witch often tempted to use her powers to get her way or help her husband's career, but she also wanted to abandon witchcraft to please her husband, Darrin. Darrin was sometimes befuddled by the supernatural shenanigans but otherwise was depicted as sensible and a competent advertising executive. The 1960s domestic sitcoms uniformly continued the theme of confident, mature, and successful middle-class men posed against the caricature Fred Flintstone, the only representative of working-class men.

## Changing Times: The 1970s and 1980s

CBS had been the dominant network of the 1960s, but by 1970 many of its top shows were aging badly. Several had begun in the 1950s, and their audiences were similarly aging and shrinking. Rather than seeking to please everyone, advertisers and networks began to target specific demographic groups, particularly younger audiences aged eighteen to forty-nine. CBS brass decided it was necessary to take some risk, dropping old standbys like comic Red Skelton and introducing new shows that might attract a younger, more savvy viewership. They bought *All in the Family* and began broadcasting it in January 1971.

Norman Lear and MTM Productions began to modify situation comedy in the 1970s. Life in their shows was less idyllic, the characters were less one-dimensional than during the 1950s, and more

mediating themes appeared. Lear, who produced *All in the Family*, *Sanford and Son*, and *Good Times*, introduced real-life problems such as racism, poverty, and abortion that were nonexistent in 1950s and 1960s sitcoms.

While introducing many controversial topics, Lear built this new style on the old and familiar stereotype of the blustery and none-too-bright working-class man. Archie Bunker of *All in the Family* and Fred Sanford of *Sanford and Son* were reminiscent of Ralph Kramden and Chester Riley; James of *Good Times* was a good deal like Lars of *I Remember Mama*. In *All in the Family* Lear intentionally made Archie a ridiculous character whose prejudices were illogical and senseless. Archie's malapropisms made him the butt of humor, just as Chester Riley's did in the 1950s. Archie also engaged in harebrained schemes like Ralph Kramden's and Chester Riley's.

Edith was not as evidently superior to Archie as the earlier wives were. She was much more hesitant in her criticism of Archie, but she tried timidly to advise him against his schemes. The foil for Archie was Mike, his son-in-law, a college graduate who served as the spokesperson for Lear's upper-middle-class viewpoint. He was the liberal to Archie's silent majority, the highbrow to Archie's lowbrow. In one episode Archie changed the television channel from a Beethoven concert that Mike was watching to midget wrestling.

*Sanford and Son* was a black version of *All in the Family*. Widower Fred Sanford was as bigoted and ignorant as Archie. His son, Lamont, like Mike, was oriented to improvement and middle-class manners. He was embarrassed by his father's behavior. George, the father in *The Jeffersons*, although a businessman, fit the same mold as Archie and Fred, namely, loud and bigoted. The theme song, "Movin' on Up to the East Side," expressed the fact that Jefferson was not born and bred middleclass. His misbehavior, in other words, reflected not on the middle class, but on his working-class roots. Like Lamont, his wife and family were embarrassed at the things he said. He and Fred, despite class differences, were devalued in the same way white working-class men were. Race worked as the equivalent of class, illustrating that lower statuses were interchangeable for the purpose of creating a dramatic fool.

*Good Times* was a black version of *I Remember Mama*. The mother, Florida, was the mainstay of the family. James, like Lars of *I Remember Mama*, was not a buffoon but nevertheless was unable to fulfill his role as breadwinner and father figure. He was often unemployed and hottempered as well. The role of fool fell to teenage J.J., the oldest son, who was the one with endless get-rich-quick schemes. Rather than a fool, however, he was an irreverent jokester with a quick wit, in contrast to his father's inadequacies. His irreverence appealed to audiences, so producers enlarged his role. Thelma and Michael were model children and ambitious: she attended college, he was very bright and was talked about as a future president.

The 1980s continued the tradition of stereotyping working-class men in *Alice*. The show blended work and family. The surrogate father was Mel, the owner and cook of a greasy spoon Arizona diner, who was a loudmouth like Archie Bunker. Alice was the wise and calm surrogate wife, like her namesake in *The Honeymooners*, and the mother of a twelve-year-old son who respected her. In *Gimme a Break*, a widowed police captain- a managerial occupation with working-class ties and traditions - was an ineffective father; his black maid bailed him out when he got himself into a domestic jam.

#### *Middle-Class Sitcoms in the 1970s and 1980s*

Through the 1970s and 1980s, TV's middle-class parents became fallible, made mistakes, got upset. But they soon regained control of the situation and resolved the problem, like the mothers and unlike the fathers of working-class series. They allowed their children to speak to them much more as equals than those in the earlier series, yet they remained unflappable and ultimately retained their roles as guides and models to their children. They co-opted the high ground by admitting their mistakes and summarizing the moral lesson both for their children and for the audience.

Of the successful middle-class sitcoms of the 1970s, *The Brady Bunch* maintained the 1950s tradition of *Father Knows Best*. The parents had the answers to all their children's questions. When vacationing at the Grand Canyon they explained the canyon and the traditions of the local Hopi tribe

as if they were trained guides. They consistently approached problems calmly and rationally, even in an episode in which one of the children was lost. The mother in *Happy Days* was a bit of a dizzy woman, a tamer version of Lucy. The father, Howard Cunningham, was reasonable and sensible. Fonzie, a young working-class friend of the family whom the kids admired and women found irresistible, typically supported the father's moral authority.

But other shows diverged from the earlier formula, as situation comedy expressed a new irreverence toward professionals and experts. *The Bob Newhart Show* featured a psychologist who hesitated, had self-doubts, and often was caught in his own words. His office mate, a dentist, was a schemer, and his neighbor, Howard, was a divorced airplane pilot and a buffoon. The title character of *Maude* was an outspoken feminist woman whose demands continually exasperated her husband, Walter. Although Walter was a match for Maude, his friend Arthur, an M.D., was a buffoon. As just discussed, George Jefferson, the husband in *The Jeffersons*, who owned a dry-cleaning chain, was an uncouth loudmouth. Notably, none of these series that deviated from the calm, competent middle-class man included young children to witness their limitations, as in most working class series.

Through the early 1980s shows continued their questioning of upper-middle-class professionals and authority in *Benson*, *Newhart* (a new show), and *Who's the Boss?* Bob Newhart continued to play the stuttering, flummoxed character from his old show, but now as the owner/operator of a Vermont bed-and-breakfast. *Benson* featured a white, widowed upper-middle-class man who was a klutz as a governor and a father. His black butler, Benson, regularly rescued his white male boss. Confirming his ability, Benson was successively promoted from butler to budget director, then to lieutenant governor; in the last episode he was a candidate for governor, an unusually positive portrayal of a black male character.

The mid-1980s returned to the superparent tradition. The classic, middle-class father appeared in *The Cosby Show*, *The Hogan Family*, *Family Ties* and *Growing Pains*. *Full House* was most like the saccharine 1950s shows, with a calm, understanding widowed sportscaster father skillfully shepherding three cute daughters. In *The Cosby Show* the father joked around with his children but also made it clear who was the boss. *Growing Pains*, *Family Ties*, and, to a lesser degree, *The Hogan Family* featured slightly more fallible parents. In one episode of *Growing Pains* the parents insist that their daughter plead guilty to a charge of resisting arrest to avoid a trial. The daughter refuses to lie; the judge respects this and lets her off. The parents, however, regain the high ground by approving her behavior and summarizing the lesson. The teen son of *Family Ties* was a bit too bright for his parents, yet he was held in check and still respected them. While the fathers and mothers exhibited foibles and flaws absent in series of the 1950s, they were nonetheless parents who knew best.

*Who's the Boss?* complicates the trend with its gender reversal between Angela, the quintessential upper-middle-class professional, and the ethnic working-class Tony as the housekeeper. But, as the title suggests, Angela is not such a success at home. Tony is a wiser parent and better housekeeper than Angela, an advertising executive. This class reversal, however, is veiled by the gender reversal that is the heart of the situation. Both are succeeding at what their gender is *not* supposed to do, and the woman fails in what she *is* supposed to do.

## Postmodern Times: The Late 1980s and 1990s

VCRs and communication satellites changed the television industry through the 1980s and 1990s. Satellites made it economically feasible for smaller networks to distribute programming. This in turn created a large supply of programming that made cable television attractive and multiplied the number of channels available to viewers. VCRs were a second alternative to broadcast, once movies were released and rental began.<sup>14</sup> These changes were complemented by the growth of independent television stations and the beginning of Fox, the first new broadcast network since DuMont in the 1940s. The three networks that dominated network and radio for fifty years, and that accounted for 90 percent of the prime-time TV audience for thirty years, watched their ratings erode steadily. In this climate networks were willing to try things they would not consider in good times. The Reagan-era Federal Communications Commission enabled this experimentation by relaxing rules on language



and subject matter for TV. By the late 1980s all these pieces were in place, and a new era of sitcom blossomed.

The shift began perhaps with two developments, *Roseanne* (1988), in which the Carsey-Werner production company spread its wings in ways it could not do with *Cosby*; and the arrival of Fox with programming that pushed the envelope, like *Married . . . with Children* (1987), *The Simpsons* (1990), and several shows featuring black performers. Fox was ready to use sassier scripts to gain a foothold against its established competitors.<sup>15</sup> These new shows were noted for regular use of irreverence, sarcasm, irony, and even insult in the dialogue, forms uncommon in earlier sitcoms. They were more likely to include risqué lines about sex than to introduce social issues as Lear did in the 1970s. In general, sitcoms shifted away from the morality tales typical since radio to programs about flawed families.

#### *Working-Class Shows of the Late 1980s and 1990s*

Yet for all the talk about postmodernism at the time, sitcom scripts were not as postmodern as one might expect. All these changes were still built on decades-old character types. While *The Simpsons* and *Married . . . with Children* were ruder, even gross, at the same time they used the old stereotypes of working-class men as inadequate breadwinners and models for their children.

*The Simpsons* began its sixteenth season in fall 2004. In its earlier years, Homer Simpson barely brought home the bacon. The children's "college fund" contained \$88.50. The family couldn't afford a new TV until Homer received double his money back for guaranteed family therapy that failed. He caused a nuclear accident while waving to his son touring the nuclear power plant where he works. Repeating the tradition's negative contrasts between father and mother, Marge, like Edith Bunker, is somewhat more levelheaded than Homer. The kids are embarrassingly smarter than their dad; second grader Lisa wins against him at Scrabble, and Bart consistently beats him in a boxing video game. Both better Homer in arguments, with Homer resorting to shouting.

One episode of *The Simpsons* even encapsulated the continuing tradition of working-class sitcoms. Lisa Simpson realized she had the same genes as her dad and became depressed. Then she realized all the male relatives were jerks like her dad. By contrast, she discovered the females were all successful, with careers as surgeons, professors, or scientists.

*Married . . . with Children* portrayed a family of uniformly unlikable people. The show was a spoof of the goody-goody TV family. The contrast was not between family members but to the wholesomeness of other TV families. The father, Al Bundy, a shoe salesman, was dumb but not lovable as in the traditional working-class type. He lied and smelled bad. The show was an endless stream of put-downs. Al's wife, Peg, regularly complained of his lack of money and sexual inadequacy. Peg's friend described Al as having no skills and no brain. Peg and her daughter, Kelly, were also depicted as dumb. Peg couldn't remember what channel her favorite TV show was on; Kelly did not know what the word "simpleton" meant. The son, Bud, was the only one with any intelligence, and he was an oversexed adolescent.<sup>16</sup>

A more conventional sitcom, *Family Matters* moderated the traditional working-class stereotype father. At first the father, a black policeman, bungled his efforts. He got lost taking a shortcut, gave the wrong directions to rescuers, said the wrong things trying to impress his boss. But soon the role of fool shifted to the neighbor boy Steve Urkel, who became an unexpected hit with audiences. The father began to fade as the featured fool, and the role of Urkel was expanded, much as had occurred with the role of J.J. in *Good Times* in the 1970s. Yet consistent with the tradition of working-class wives, Harriet, the wife, was the more sensible person in the family.

Somewhat of an exception to the traditional stereotype was Dan Connors, the father of *Roseanne*, who, while a bit wild, was also sensible about the kids. In one episode Dan was the voice of wisdom when he advised Roseanne not to engage in a power struggle with teenage Becky. More striking about *Roseanne* was its refusal to apologize for the family's working-class ways or to accept middle-class manners as superior. Dan and Roseanne were content with their working-class tastes. They could use more money, but they were not conflicted about behaving "properly," and they did not aspire to cultural upward mobility.

The Bundys of *Married. . . with Children* also were unapologetic for not being upper-middle-class and rather metaphorically thumbed their noses at those expectations. For the first time, working-class characters were allowed to be themselves instead of inferior copies of middle-class characters.

Of fifty-three new domestic sitcoms from 1990 to 1999, sixteen featured working-class families. Eleven series featured black families, indicating another trend toward more representation of subordinate groups. Yet several notable series that did not survive five seasons reproduced the working-class stereotype. The father in *The Dinosaurs* was a Jurassic Archie Bunker. The father in *Joe's Life* was an unemployed househusband whose wife supported the family. *Bless This House*, which featured a macho postal worker with a feisty wife and sassy daughter, was described as *The Honeymooners* with kids. In 1991 *Roc* featured a not-too-bright black garbage man with a stereotypical macho attitude and a more educated wife who worked as a nurse. In the new *Cosby*, the husband was an unemployed airport worker whose wife co-owned a flower shop and whose daughter was a lawyer. *Costello* was criticized for its crude stereotypes of working-class men. Strong, working wives and mothers ran their families and, in some shows, overshadowed their husbands. The title characters in *Jesse* and *Thea*, among others, were 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 existed in blue-collar families. Alcoholism, spousal abuse, child abandonment, and children being put up for adoption appeared in working-class shows like *Grace under Fire*. Divorce and quirky personalities were more typical of middle-class shows.<sup>18</sup>

In *Grace under Fire*, the working-class father was an unreliable drunken "good-for-nothing" who abandoned the family. Grace held a traditionally male job in an oil refinery and did better than most of the men. Two of her male friends were relaxed and comfortable, a middle-class pharmacist and a local TV reporter. She dated a series of stable, apparently middle-class men.

In the late 1990s' *King of the Hill*, Hank, a Texas propane gas salesman, wears white T-shirts and jeans and drinks beer from cans with his buddies, and is often clueless when his son tries to ask him questions. His son and wife are also not too bright. His live-in niece, Luanne Platter, is frustrated and embarrassed by them. Hank's friends are a divorced military barber, a paranoid with an obsession for government conspiracy theories, and a man who just mumbles. All the males are of limited intellect. Unlike in older working-class series, however, so is everyone else.

The main character of *King of Queens* is Doug, a UPS driver whose wife, Carrie, works in a law firm and is a little too bright for him. He is a couch potato who loves to watch sports with his buddies on his seventy-inch television. Husband and wife are young, fun-loving, and not quite ready to become parents. But Carrie is interested in self improvement for both of them, for example, by going to highbrow events. She tries to reform Doug's bad habits, such as too much eating and TV. It's a bit like a 1990s version of Fred and Wilma's relationship.

Thus, while there were more shows featuring working-class people in the 1990s, the men continued to be stereotyped as immature and not too bright, in contrast to their more capable and responsible wives or adult female relatives. With few exceptions the working-class male leads were inadequate in their masculine roles. Undercutting their status as men, in turn, confirmed their lower status as working-class and resolved the contradictory statuses of adult white male, on the one hand, and working-class, on the other.

#### *Middle-Class Sitcoms of the Late 1980s and 1990s*

Unlike working-class characters of the 1990s, who continued to be true to stereotype, middle-class series came in all forms and sizes. One show briefly featured an ex-husband who was a fired soap opera actor, another a con artist who moves in with his successful lawyer sister, another a hyperactive party planner on her third husband, and another a suspended professional athlete who moves in with his professor brother. There were four black middle-class families and one mixed-race couple. Jack, the father in *The Wonder Years*, is a businessman who wears a suit and tie to work. He is singularly uninvolved in his family. When asked, he advises the kids, "Do what your mother said."

But there continued to be plenty of warm and fuzzy middle-class families, including some with slightly offbeat parents. Most were shortlived. *Something So Right* was described as *The Brady Bunch* with taboo subjects; *Cleghorne* was called a dysfunctional *Family Ties*; and *Parenthood* was likened to *thirtysomething*. *Harts of the West*, *Something Wilder*, *The Tony Danza Show*, and *The Gregory Hines Show* featured wholesome families. While quirky or even a bit dysfunctional, these families were still warm and comforting, with competent parents.

More long-lasting were two conventional shows. *Step by Step* was called *The Brady Bunch* for the 1990s. Frank, the father, owned a contracting company. He carried a lunch box to work but bought pro basketball game tickets for a "client." His wife, Carol, owned a beauty salon, although she also graduated from college. He was an outdoorsy type who was permissive with the kids, while Carol was more compulsive. The children were the focus of situations.

*Seventh Heaven* is another saccharine *Brady Bunch* look-alike that has survived a decade. A minister and a stay-at-home mom are perfect parents to five children whose trials of growing up are the subject of the show. Issues have included dating crises, teen suicide, sibling rivalry, gang violence, hate crimes, violence in schools, drug use, vandalism, drinking and driving, teen pregnancy, and homelessness. The show has thrived presenting old-fashioned moral lessons in the security of an old-fashioned ideal middle-class family.

More written and talked about were *Home Improvement*, *Mad about You*, and *Everybody Loves Raymond*. Magazine and newspaper articles have commented on how these fathers/husbands were portrayed less positively than in the old days. Some attributed this to women becoming the majority on writing teams for several sitcoms and holding important executive positions at the networks.<sup>19</sup> But, while these men are not fathers who know best, neither are they buffoons, like the men of working-class series.

Tim, the father in *Home Improvement*, is the star of his own TV show. At home, the focus is on the antics of the father rather than the children. But his antics involve his asserting his own independence and macho masculinity, rather than making a fool of himself. He reaffirms his manhood rather than undermining it, the masculine answer to feminism, a role model for the contemporary man. *Mad about You* explored the little annoyances and knots of relationships and in doing so also revealed the flaws and insecurities of both the man and the woman. At the same time, both were professionals with promising careers; both worked together to sort out their differences; both were mature and intelligent adults.

The social class of *Everybody Loves Raymond* is anomalous, and the main character does not conform to stereotypes of the middle-class man. Raymond is a sportswriter and joins a private golf club, but in other ways the show is similar to the working-class form. Raymond's brother is a policeman, and his parents are stereotypical ethnic New Yorkers. His father, in particular, is the classic working-class television type, modeled on Ralph and Archie: loud, gruff, overbearing. Moreover, Raymond appears several times on *King of Queens* as a friend of Doug, the UPS driver. Raymond is cowed by his wife and his parents. He lies and concocts schemes to avoid confronting them. Yet he is professionally successful, and his children are toddlers and thus are too young to outsmart or disrespect him, as is the tradition in working-class series.

While the 1990s continued the trend to show middle-class people as imperfect, the variety of representations avoided the stereotyping in working-class series. Like the characters of urban sitcoms described by Michael Tueth, these middle-class men are well-educated professionals, successful, intellectually superior, and emotionally intense, while also being emotionally confused and childish to a degree.<sup>20</sup>

## The New Millennium

In the new millennium, a bounty of new black and working-class sitcoms were scheduled for prime time by the six broadcast networks. Joining *King of the Hill* and *King of Queens*, which began in the 1990s, were two more successful white working-class shows, *Grounded for Life* and *Still Standing*,

as well as three unsuccessful shows, *The Fighting Fitzgeralds*, *The Mullets*, and *My Big Fat Greek Life*. Ten new black family sitcoms appeared, including *My Wife and Kids*, *One on One*, and *Bernie Mac*. Only two of the ten black families are working-class; the rest feature very successful heads of house, mostly as entertainers. Five of the ten programs appeared on UPN and WB, where they represented half the minor networks' new sitcoms. Two Hispanic families and two gay shows set in families also appeared. Broadcast networks were clearly looking for the unconventional more than ever to stem the decline in ratings.

Sean of *Grounded for Life* is a grown-up kid, but he's also an echo of the old stereotype. He's continually screwing up, like Ralph and Fred. He tries to help his daughter, Lily (who has been given detention for wearing too short a skirt to school), by taking pictures of the other girls, all of whom have short skirts. The principal gives all the girls detention and tells them it's Lily's fault. Sean's son wants to go home to work on a science project, but Sean insists on staying at a fair to listen to the Ramones. Sean writes a note to school explaining why his son did not finish the project; the boy gets in trouble, and Sean feels guilty. When he gets \$1,500 from his mother's inheritance, Sean buys a guitar, then returns it out of guilt to pay for a ski trip for his daughter.

*Still Standing* is about a working-class Chicago couple who came of age in the 1970s and still love rock and roll but now have three kids. The wife, Judy, is supposed to be smarter than her husband, Bill, who always screws up. He tries to make Judy feel better by telling her the husband of a woman she envies is cheating on her. This backfires when Judy tells everyone. The difference here is that the wife also screws up. These two shows present couples similar to the one in *King of Queens*.

*The Fighting Fitzgeralds* presented a rather positive portrayal of a retired fire captain, a managerial position, but one rooted in working-class culture. Unfortunately, the show was canceled after only ten episodes. *The Mullets*, about two brothers described as "dumb and dumber," is a classic case of laughing at white trash.<sup>21</sup> These new shows again portray working-class men as irresponsible and immature. The difference is that some middle-class men are now being portrayed in this way, whereas this was rarely the case before the 1990s.

*Malcolm in the Middle* and *According to Jim* continue the unashamedly irresponsible middle-class men of the 1990s. Malcolm's father, Hal, works in an unspecified office but finds plenty of time for all kinds of fun and trouble. He hijacks the kids from school to take them to car races. He has a chance to drive a steamroller and gets a hankering to crush things. Hal has a wealthy father, and one might explain the character as an eccentric who never learned to worry about practical matters like money. The mother, Lois, has the bigger part of the job of civilizing their four exceptionally rowdy boys.

Jim of *According to Jim* is a contractor in partnership with his architect brother-in-law. Jim can't give up his motorcycle. He's also in a hurry to go to a Bears game, sticking his wife's dead cat in the freezer instead of burying it. He has his sister-in-law pick out presents for his wife rather than doing it himself.

*One on One* and *Two and a Half Men* feature bachelors with child-rearing responsibilities suddenly thrust upon them. These shows are a new version of the old formula of the affluent bachelor father, such as the 1960s *Family Affair*, which was revived in 2002 but soon canceled. In the past the bachelors experienced a strain between their former unencumbered single life and their new obligations, and attempted to live up to those obligations. The father in *One on One* is a black version of the bachelor father. While he enjoys sports, his buddies, and women, he's concerned about protecting and properly bringing up his daughter, Breanna.

Charlie of *Two and a Half Men* is another adolescent man. He is a prosperous bachelor with a Malibu beach house, a Jaguar, and success with women. But when his brother's marriage falls apart, Charlie takes in him and his fourth-grade son, creating the situational conflict between his social life and the boy. To resolve the conflict Charlie sometimes includes the boy in his activities such as shopping for women and playing poker.

These programs depicting grown men behaving as adolescents are surrounded by shows that settle for a quirky twist on the old formula. *Even Stevens* is a show about a perfect family that focuses on a seventh grade boy. The parents, a successful attorney and a state senator, remain in the background,

while the boy stumbles through life; when he has problems, the parents and older kids help him put things back together. *My Wife and Kids* features a successful businessman who becomes a househusband so his wife can pursue her career. He trips up, but he also creates a warm and fuzzy feeling at home. Similarly, *Bernie Mac*, featuring a successful comedian whose wife is a corporate executive, welcomes into his home and takes care of his sister's kids. Bernie is blustery but "well-meaning. These are slightly jazzier versions of *The Cosby Show*, and even the two programs that feature a gay character are rather tame. In both *The Ellen Show* and *Normal, Ohio*, the gay character returns to a family and hometown and by and large is accepted.

## Conclusion

The five decades of television sitcoms can be summed up in the French phrase "Plus -;a change, plus c'est la meme chose" (The more things change, the more they stay the same). While there have been variations and exceptions, the stock character of the ineffectual, even buffoonish, working class man has persisted as the dominant image. In the prime-time tapestry he is contrasted with consistently competent working-class wives and children and manly middle-class fathers-a composite image in which working-class men are demasculinized and their class status justified.

The persistence of the working-class male stereotype contrasts with the changes in representations of middle-class families. Although middleclass families were stereotypically perfect in the 1950s and 1960s, from the 1970s on their depictions progressively broadened to include a wide range of character types and situations. Nevertheless, the superparent continued to be a common representation of the middle class, and middleclass men, while sometimes represented as irresponsible, were not demasculinized and continued to be unusually successful in their careers.

Major upheavals in American society and culture during the 1960s and 1970s, followed by major changes in television industry and television technology in the 1980s and 1990s, brought innovations to TV's domestic sitcoms and broadened and deepened their characterizations. But they have not dislodged the pattern of class representations that are at the core of more than three hundred domestic sitcoms that have been consumed nightly by the American people. If there has been any change in the class representations, it has been to leaven the starchy image of a perfect middle class. There is no sign of a return to the more positive representations of working men that were more common in the popular culture of the 1930s and 1940s and that slowly passed away with the appearance of television.

## Notes

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6. The occupation of the head of household was used to distinguish the class represented in the sitcom. For consistency I continue to use the same guidelines as when I began this research three decades ago, following Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974), 377-80.
7. John Consoli, "Network1V," *MediaWeek* 11, no. 9 (February 26, 2001): 9.
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