

## Ralph, Fred, Archie, Homer, and the King of Queens

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

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Scattered 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

perfect families like those in *Father Knows Best*, *The Brady Bunch*, and *The Bill Cosby Show*. The humor came from the innocent foibles and fumbles of the children. The few middle-class buffoons were usually the dizzy wife, like Lucy, while the professional/managerial husband was the sensible, mature partner. Inverting gender status in working-class but not middle-class sitcoms makes this a statement about class more than gender.

The 1990s brought a shift in parts of this pattern. There was a significant increase in the number and percentage of working-class families represented in domestic sitcoms: Of 42 new domestic sitcoms from 1991 to 1999, 16 featured working-class families, and 9 were Black. Reverting to form, in the 2000s, only 3 more new working-class and 4 African American sitcoms were added. By 2008, working-class sitcoms again disappeared (“TV’s Class Struggle,” 2008). The depictions of middle-class males became more diverse in these two decades, with males in shows such as *Home Improvement* and *Two and a Half Men*, who succeeded at work but at home exhibited an insistent adolescent macho maleness—not buffoons, but not super-parents either.

Still, the portrayals of working-class men remained relatively unchanged. The successful *King of the Hill* (1997), *King of Queens* (1998), and *Family Guy* (1999), as well as several shorter lived series throughout the decade, reproduced the traditional stereotyped working-class man cast opposite capable women. *Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*.

Why does television keep re-producing these caricatures across six decades, despite major changes in the television industry? 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 explain the link between sitcom production and the persistent images produced. In the words of

Connell (1977), “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). It is the outcome of a complex of structural and cultural factors that shaped and continues to shape the representation of working-class men, even as the television industry underwent remarkable 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 corporations. I will look at three levels of organization: (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 culture of the “creative personnel.” I will trace how these may explain the consistency and persistence of the portrayals, the underrepresentation 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 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 the market as the only buyers of series programming from Hollywood producers and

studios. The television series market was thus an oligopsony—the buyer equivalent to an oligopoly—with only three buyers of sitcoms and several sellers (Federal Communications Commission [FCC], 1980; Owen & Wildman, 1992).

Through the 1980s, cable networks and multistation 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 & Wiegand, 2008). By 1999, the four-network rating had slipped to 28.6% ("Upscale Auds Ease B'casters," 1999), while advertising-supported cable had grown to 23.9% ("Young Auds Seek Web, Not Webs," 1999). Still, only five cable networks had sufficient funds in the 1990s to qualify as buyers of drama programming (Blumler & Spicer, 1990). In 2000, cable networks 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 networks 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 Kubey (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 programming limits 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 network seeking that niche. In other words, sitcoms tend to be custom-made for a particular network.

Using their market power, networks have maintained sweeping control over production decisions of even highly successful producers, from the initial idea for a new program to a final film or tape (Bryant, 1969, pp. 624–626; Gitlin, 1983; Pekurny, 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' Alive," 2001).

Both broadcast and cable networks' first concern affecting program decisions is risk avoidance. Popular culture success is notoriously unpredictable. The music recording industry spreads risk over many albums so that any single decision is less significant (Peterson & Berger, 1971; Rossman, 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 benefit 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 1975 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 the right decisions, they are constrained, in their own interest, to avoid innovation and novelty. They stick to tried and true formulas, a common complaint among successful television writers and producers (Brown, 1971; Kubey, 2004; Wakshlag & Adams, 1985). 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 (Gitlin, 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. These same conditions characterized program development 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 (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 in order to become competitive with NBC and CBS (FCC, 1965). Again, in

1970, CBS purchased Norman Lear's then controversial *All in the Family*—other networks turned it down—to counteract a drift to an audience with demographics (rural and over 50) not desired by advertisers. Increased numbers of working-class and African American sitcoms occurred in the 1990s when television executives feared that the white middle class was turning to other entertainments (“Genre-ation 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 Carsey-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 about 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—or what network executives imagine they want—is secondary to ad revenue. Pay-cable networks, not bound by this constraint, have been freer to explore sexual and violent content, as in the

*Sopranos*, that may have scared off advertisers but attracts an audience. In matters of 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 or 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 complementary 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" (Barnouw, 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.

Network executives construct a product image of what they *imagine* the audience wants—which surprisingly often is not based on actual market research on audiences (Blumler & Spicer, 1990; Pekurny, 1982). 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). Sitcom producer Lee Rich said, "A television series, to be truly successful, has got to have people you can identify with or dream about being" (Kubey, 2004, p. 102). For the sought after middle-class audience, then, advertisers prefer affluent middle-class characters.

Aside from anecdotes such as I have mentioned, almost no research has examined program development or production decisions about class content of programs. My own 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 creators' 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 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 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 a class but rather as a personality type that may 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 for discussion, as obscenity 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 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 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, director, and actors.

Such a schedule puts great pressures on the production team to simplify the amount of work necessary 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 simple 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.

Also, time pressure encourages typecasting for the minor characters who are new in each episode. The script is sent to a "break-down" agency, which reads the script and extracts the description of characters for that episode. These brief character descriptions,

not the script, are used by the casting agency to recommend actors (Turow, 1978). Occupation and, by inference, class are an important part of these descriptions, being identified for 84% of male characters. Not surprisingly, the descriptions are highly stereotyped (Turow, 1980).

Producers, casting directors, and casting agencies freely admit the stereotyping but argue its necessity on the basis of time and dramatic constraints. Typecasting is easier and much quicker. They also argue that to diverge from widely held stereotypes would draw attention away from the action, the storyline, or other characters and destroy dramatic effect. In addition, stereotyped stock characters are familiar to audiences, requiring less dramatic explanation. 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 to reproduce existing stereotypes.

The time pressures also make it more likely that the creators will stick to what is familiar to them as well. Two of the most frequent occupations of main characters in family series were in entertainment and writing (i.e., modeled on the creators' own lives; Butsch & Glennon, 1983). The vast majority of writers and producers come from upper-middle-class families, with little direct experience of working-class life (Cantor, 1971; Gitlin, 1983; Kubey, 2004; Stein, 1979; Thompson & Burns, 1990). Moreover, the tight schedules 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 (e.g., Jackie Gleason, Norman Lear) had childhood memories of working-class neighborhoods to draw upon.

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. 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, “nepotism,” 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 class 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 legitimates 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.

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