

“Excuse the Mess, But We Live Here”:  
Class, Gender, and Identity in the Post-Cold War  
Working-Class Family Sitcom

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this dissertation to Roseanne Barr for providing a model of powerful, realistic, working-class American womanhood in a medium few of us can ignore.

## **Abstract**

American television became a national medium in the late 1940s and, at its inception, foregrounded both the family and the American Dream as cornerstones of American culture and identity. An explicitly commercial medium, television used middle- and working-class family sitcoms to promote the commodities necessary for middle-class assimilation, but also to position working-class characters as stern object lessons in the battle to promote a “classless” American post–World War II idyll. Although 1970s television ushered in a much more visible (and in some ways, sympathetic) image of American working-class life, the era’s programming nevertheless continued to promote the American Dream through material accumulation and behavioral assimilation in its representations of socio-economic class. A new representation of class, however, emerged just as the Cold War was grinding to a halt. Beginning in the late 1980s and continuing into the late 1990s, working-class family sitcoms began to challenge the American Dream paradigm by presenting working-class cultures to be equally valid to the middle-class American culture that television had always promoted. This dissertation explores the rise and fall of this phenomenon, and how the politics, economics, history, and technological developments of the era facilitated this challenge to the hegemonic, middle-class norm.

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## **Introduction**

American television became a national medium in the late 1940s and, at its inception, foregrounded both the family and the American Dream as cornerstones of American culture and identity. An explicitly commercial medium, television used middle- and working-class family sitcoms to promote the commodities necessary for middle-class assimilation, but also to position working-class characters as stern object lessons in the battle to promote a “classless” American post–World War II idyll.

Although 1970s television ushered in a much more visible (and in some ways, sympathetic) image of American working-class life, the era’s programming nevertheless continued to promote the American Dream through material accumulation and behavioral assimilation in its representations of socio-economic class. A new representation of class, however, emerged just as the Cold War was grinding to a halt. Beginning in the late 1980s and continuing into the late 1990s, working-class family sitcoms began to challenge the American Dream paradigm by presenting working-class cultures to be equally valid to the middle-class American culture that television had always promoted. My dissertation explores the rise and fall of this phenomenon, and how the politics, economics, history, and technological developments of the era facilitated this challenge to the hegemonic, middle-class norm.

By the early 1990s, American entertainment television, which could no longer be characterized wholesale as a hegemonic reinforcement of the status quo, seemed to be in the midst of a breakthrough. Citing the self-aware, postmodern sensibilities of programs like *Seinfeld* and *The Simpsons* in 1992, writer and cultural critic Gerard Jones observed “The mask of viewers who once stared into the screen hoping to see

themselves mythologized now stare into it in order to see themselves staring back as critical viewers.”<sup>1</sup> Jones was not very optimistic about the possibilities for significant social change via sitcoms, however; he pointed out that, while “exploring new structures, discarding trite solutions, and asking new questions for which the answers might not be so blandly reassuring,” they nevertheless were products of a “corporate entertainment factory” designed to sell a particular American identity and its material accompaniments. But he ended his criticism of the new self-reflexivity in the American sitcom on a hopeful note:

[T]he mood of the nation and the state of the genre may be best summed up by the most popular show on the air at the time of this writing: *Roseanne*. After an uncertain start as another blue-collar “slobcom,” this vehicle for stand-up comic Roseanne Barr Arnold has evolved into one of the bravest, truest, most penetrating sitcoms ever made. The protagonists, Dan and Roseanne Conner, are bright, cynical, but financially unsuccessful heartland suburbanites, struggling to survive in a hostile America and raise (just halfway decently) their three combative, anything-but-cutesy kids. They’re boomers and they’re modern TV characters—self-conscious, worldly, smart-ass—but they’re also parents of a nuclear family, well-meaning but disappointed heirs to the Andersons and Cleavers. At its best, *Roseanne* perfectly captures the despair, humor, frustration, and durability of people caught in the gap between promise and reality, well aware of what’s happening to them, unable to change it, finding ways to enjoy it. Jobs are lost, businesses go under, one daughter elopes at seventeen with her sleazy boyfriend, the other disappears into sullenness and comic books. Yet they find a way to keep going week after week. Just like the country.<sup>2</sup>

The amazement that Jones expressed in the early 1990s over the way *Roseanne* epitomized the mood of the country seems to confirm what my research has led me to conclude: *Roseanne* was at the forefront of a phenomenon in American television

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<sup>1</sup> Gerard Jones, *Honey, I'm Home! Sitcoms: Selling the American Dream* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 269.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 270.

programming that in many ways revolutionized the way “Americanness” was presented in mass media. My dissertation research began with my curiosity over the fact that in the early 1990s, there were more working-class characters on American television than at any other point in history.<sup>3</sup> This didn’t seem to fit with what I had learned about historical class dynamics in American cultural history. The common perception amongst historians seemed to be that the 1930s was the last period in which the American working class had any significant visibility or agency, although there was a rather pessimistic nod to class in 1970s popular culture that might be attributed to the economic downturns within that decade.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the divide between rich and poor in the United States was the largest it had ever been in the late 1980s and early 1990s (the divide has since widened);<sup>5</sup> further, working-class Americans were noticing the divide and speaking out about their invisibility in ways that were more public than ever before. This era of working-class visibility was different from the 1930s and the 1970s in the sense that many of the voices and images were actually coming, to a degree, *from* the working class themselves. This was unlike the creative expressions of the Popular Front in the 1930s, in which unions teamed up with artists to form a powerful political bloc. It was also different from the New Hollywood realism of the 1970s that resulted in working-class characterizations in the creations of middle-class, up-and-coming, baby-boomer filmmakers and television writers who cut their teeth on the political movements of the 1960s. Rather, 1990s cultural expressions of the American working

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Butsch, “A Half-Century of Class and Gender in American TV Domestic Sitcoms,” *Circles* 8 (2003), 26.

<sup>4</sup> Lary May, *The Big Tomorrow* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Jefferson Cowie, “‘Vigorously Left, Right, and Center’: The Crosscurrents of Working-Class America in the 1970s,” in *America in the 70s*, ed. Beth Bailey and David Farber (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Paul Krugman, *The Conscience of a Liberal* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 4-5.

class were frequently coming from the actual American working class. Note that this was the time in which hip hop and rap became mainstream; grunge music, culture, and clothing started to emerge around 1990; the term “white trash” came into vogue; and country music made the Top 40 charts with hits from Garth Brooks and Billy Ray Cyrus, among others. This is a tremendously exciting development, given Vincent Rocchio’s assertions that mass media frameworks of “reality” are in fact based on their creators’ notions of reality, and hence generally imbued with an upper-middle-class experience of American life.<sup>6</sup> Finally, there were noticeable, highly popular working-class voices in mass media, and they were speaking for themselves.

In addition (or perhaps because of their origins?), these cultural expressions also varied from their predecessors in that they challenged a fundamental cornerstone of American identity and culture: the legitimacy of the American Dream. An idea explicitly associated with upward class mobility, the American Dream was historically based on the idea that leaving behind rigid class and economic structures in Europe and elsewhere provided opportunity for individuals to ascend the class ladder. Dana Nelson argues that American citizenship was foundationally about the dual—and contradictory—promise of both equality and competition among property-owning white males. Citizenship, which has historically been associated with suffrage, belonged to those demonstrating at least a middle-class standard of living, as indicated by property ownership. The contradiction came with the fact that continued participation in the capitalist market and of success within that market as marked by economic gain was by necessity not available to all. Some had to lose in order for the promise of upward class

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<sup>6</sup> Vincent F. Rocchio, *Reel Racism: Confronting Hollywood’s Construction of African-American Culture* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2000), 213.

mobility to become true for others, and maintaining the balance between the promise of equal opportunity and the necessity of competition and hierarchy was the fundamental flaw in the American Dream at its inception. It had to appear that all had opportunity and that those who sat higher on the class ladder did so because they deserved to do so. In other words, the United States was conceived as a meritocracy, but one that provided (often hidden, sometimes overt) unequal starting points for each of its competitors.<sup>7</sup>

Manners and behavior, combined with the material accoutrements necessary to execute those behaviors, became a resolving factor in the contradiction of capitalism versus the rhetoric of “equality” at a very early stage in the development of the American Dream as an ideology. Key to dissolving the idea of aristocracy as meriting their elevated rank was the adoption (and adaptation) of old aristocratic codes of behavior in ways that made them accessible to the rising middle class in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, the necessity within the capitalist system of a proletarian class in order to keep the economy functioning required a way of policing workers without openly admitting the relative inaccessibility of “classlessness” for their kind. As C. Dallett Hemphill argues, “manners are what allowed Americans to espouse both democracy and the imperatives of the market; they simply proclaimed the first while acting out the second. In this way, manners communicated nonverbally what was difficult to communicate otherwise.”<sup>8</sup> Hemphill and others illuminate an increasing complexity in the social codes for manners among the middle class in the nineteenth

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<sup>7</sup> Dana D. Nelson, *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998), ix.

<sup>8</sup> C. Dallett Hemphill, *Bowing to Necessities: A History of Manners in America, 1620-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1999), 130.

century, which, for reasons of economics and practicality, made middle-class status unreachable for the American working class.<sup>9</sup>

This notion became a recurrent theme in American popular culture and media. The American Dream became widely popularized with mass literature in the nineteenth century, most commonly in the writing of Horatio Alger, Jr., who wrote stories of poor young men achieving middle-class respectability due to hard work, courage, and determination. Of significance is the fact that, although Alger's reputation now is for "rags-to-riches" stories, they were in fact about ascension to middle-class norms of behavior and economics. Money in Alger's stories was a means to bourgeois respectability, for full recognition in society as a participating citizen.<sup>10</sup> "For Alger," Alan Trachtenberg writes,

"bourgeois life means security, comfort, cultivation, companionship, responsibility—the reverse of cutthroat competitiveness. He wants his boys to read and write, to look neat and speak well, to show kindness to younger children and old people. He also wants them to take pleasure in watching the interest on their savings accounts grow

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<sup>9</sup> Hemphill writes, commenting on the wide availability of advice manuals on manners and decorum in the mid-nineteenth century and the claim that these codes were therefore accessible to all:

" . . . [T]he lower class could not have imitated middle-class behavior—even if they wanted to—because polite behavior did not come cheap. If the manual itself could be afforded, the elaborations in the instructions all required further expenditure for various crucial accessories . . . . The rituals themselves thus served to raise the ante to a safely exclusionary level. . . . Put another way, having confirmed their revolutionary rise, the antebellum middle class wanted to pull the ladder up behind them." Hemphill, 157.

Richard Bushman's study of "refinement" in roughly the same era complements Hemphill's findings. Bushman writes,

"Gentility [via outward markers of material well-being according to middle-class standards of propriety] bestowed concrete social power on its practitioners. It was a resource for impressing and influencing powerful people, frequently a prerequisite for inspiring trust. All who sought worldly advancement were tempted to use refinement as a bargaining chip in social negotiations. Moreover, it afforded a convenient identity and a definition of position in the confusing fluidity of democratic society....Refinement held out the hope of elevation from ordinary existence into an exalted society of superior beings. That promise and hope . . . gave gentility its strength."

Richard Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1992), xix.

<sup>10</sup> Alan Trachtenberg, Preface to *Ragged Dick*, by Horatio Alger (New York: Penguin Books USA Inc., 1990), xviii-xix.

little by little—but this is always a means to the end of self-respect.”<sup>11</sup>

Alger’s formula of “luck and pluck” for upward class mobility was, therefore, contingent upon his young heroes’ abilities to navigate the social (and by extension, material) demands of a middle-class world once they had demonstrated “pluck” and encountered “luck.”

This concept was also the basis of twentieth-century shifts in consumption and work practices, as home ownership, higher education, and living-wage industrial jobs (due to increasingly globalized industrial markets) became more available. There was high anxiety about culture and class at mid-century and, as much scholarship has detailed, specific anxiety about how middle-class manners did or did not impact a person’s ability to “succeed” in their quest for “classlessness.” Margaret Mead’s mid-war examination of the American global reputation touches on this anxiety: “As America is a ‘middle-class’ country in this sense of the greater role of the mother in rearing the children and in the peculiar attitudes towards ‘goody-goodiness’ and ‘frills’ which result, this must also be taken into account in talking of America in ‘class’ terms.”<sup>12</sup> Eight years later, David Reisman famously pointed to the “other-directed” suburban obsession with pleasing one’s peers as a key factor in anxiety for the burgeoning American middle class.<sup>13</sup> But William Whyte’s 1956 *The Organization Man* is perhaps more representative of the Cold War emphasis on assimilation into middle-class behavior as a method for achieving the American Dream. In fact, in his discussion of suburban voting patterns, Whyte inadvertently proves my point here: “A Democratic

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<sup>11</sup> Trachtenberg, xii.

<sup>12</sup> Margaret Mead, *And Keep Your Powder Dry* (New York: Morrow, 1942), 55-56.

<sup>13</sup> David Reisman, *The Lonely Crowd* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1950), 47-48.

allegiance is part of an environment which the newcomers wish to leave behind, and in attuning themselves to the values of the group they now wish to join, they soon find that ‘acceptance,’ to use a favorite word of suburbia, is more difficult if one persists in obdurately sticking to what others regard as a lower-class habit.”<sup>14</sup> In conclusion, class status has long been predicated not only upon the actual economic status of a person living in the United States, but also upon his or her mastery of the unwritten codes of behavior and material accumulation that indicate one’s class status to the rest of the community.

Herein lies the importance of television in reinforcing notions of class in the “classless” United States. We’ve established that class, American-style, has typically been culturally defined by the combination of material accumulation and comportment. American television was born into the era in which Mead, Reisman, and Whyte were writing, and it was from the start an essentially Cold War medium. Designed as an entertainment vehicle for selling products to viewers, the industry based its content decisions on creating a unified image of the American Dream to which its viewers could aspire. This dream was based on the notion of “classlessness”; that is, the idea that the United States was a meritocracy, in which “success” was defined by financial achievement, and that financial achievement was to be signified by a specific presentation of material goods and behaviors indicating one’s full assimilation into the “classless” ideal. Accordingly, television programming in its first four decades relied on the notion of full inclusion into American “classlessness” being predicated upon demonstrating appropriate manners, behaviors, and economic standards. Until the late

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<sup>14</sup> William H. Whyte, Jr., *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), 300-301.

1980s, working-class characters in the family sitcom served as warnings to the American public of the consequences of failure to assimilate into middle-class norms of behavior and consumption.

Because this notion was at its core a classed vision of American identity, it played a key role in maintaining the notion that American identity (and full citizenship) was predicated upon assimilation into middle-class identity. And because the ability to demonstrate this assimilation to one's community was vital to one's full, democratic participation in civic culture and politics, the cultural elements of middle-class assimilation became absolutely fundamental to successful citizenship in a country primarily made up of immigrants and their children. How does one know when one has successfully become "American"? By demonstrating it through one's cultural choices, behavior, and material accumulation. What made *Roseanne* remarkable, then, was the way in which it turned two centuries' worth of American thought on class hierarchy in a "classless" nation on its head. For the first time on television, Americans were presented with the idea that the American working class was already worthy of inclusion in the American ideal, and that the middle-class norms of behavior and consumption were in fact suspect.

So when the cultural expressions questioning American "classlessness" gained popularity in the late 1980s, it represented a significant and rare opportunity in the United States for the very real inequalities within the country to be addressed, or at the very least to become visible. As I looked back at this potentially revolutionary moment in American history, then, my question was, "Why didn't it happen?" After all, the economy was failing, the Cold War was all but over, and people were starting to see

their working-class neighbors in the everyday popular culture that they were consuming (and therefore accepting their working-class identities with less of the pejorative connotation that might previously have been associated with those identities). Why didn't this opportunity to truly address class inequality come to full fruition?

This dissertation is my answer to that question. Just as Roosevelt's New Deal, a seemingly progressive concept, diffused the seemingly inevitable revolution toward which the United States was moving in the early 1930s,<sup>15</sup> the multicultural neoliberalism of the Clinton administration, which righted some inequalities but did so via neoliberal principles, diffused the increasing class anger that characterized the nation coming out of a recession in the early 1990s. The opportunity was there, but the people who were positioned to bring it to full fruition were distracted by what Lisa Duggan has called "neoliberalism's paltry promise"<sup>16</sup>: the argument that unfettered capitalism will remedy inequality rather than perpetuate it. So the legacy of this rise in working-class visibility in the late 1980s and early 1990s became not greater equality for all people living in the United States, but rather the return of the working-class character as a failed representation of the American Dream, of what happens if one does not adequately assimilate into the middle class. In a brilliant move, cultural producers didn't try to quash the newly prevalent working-class image, but rather increased its frequency while returning to the old, familiar image of the working-class character as a Lovable Loser—not to be emulated, respected, or heard, but rather to be viewed as the object of bemused derision once more.

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<sup>15</sup> Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 400-403.

<sup>16</sup> Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), xviii.

Perhaps nowhere is this rise and fall of working-class visibility and agency more visible than in the story of Roseanne Barr and her wildly popular television program, *Roseanne* (1988-1997). In creating a “show about class and women”<sup>17</sup> “for political reasons, as an activist,”<sup>18</sup> Barr in many ways epitomized the ethos of this trend: grassroots, deeply enmeshed in cultural expression, and aware of the overdetermination of race, class, gender, and sexuality in the daily oppression facing many Americans. *Roseanne*, too, fizzled out in the mid-1990s, moving from winning awards for its “unflinching look at American family life”<sup>19</sup> to dismissal as “irrelevant”<sup>20</sup> in less than a decade. Barr herself went from being one of the most powerful people in Hollywood to being marginalized as “crazy” by the end of the twentieth century. As my dissertation demonstrates, this seemingly inexplicable shift in public opinion toward both the program and the star does make sense within the context of multicultural neoliberalism’s rise during the 1990s, and as such provides us with a rich case study of the rise and fall of this phenomenon.

## **Survey of the literature**

There are very few scholars who have studied class dynamics in American television programming: Richard Butsch, Lynn Berk, Robert Sklar, and George Lipsitz are among those who’ve written key articles on the subject, but there is no definitive

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<sup>17</sup> As quoted in Julie Bettie, “Class Dismissed? Roseanne and the Changing Face of Working-Class Iconography,” *Social Text* 45 (Winter 1995), 126.

<sup>18</sup> Roseanne Arnold, *My Lives* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 6.

<sup>19</sup> Alex McNeil, *Total Television* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 709.

<sup>20</sup> James Taranto, “Roseanne Barr: From Deification to Disgust,” *New York City Tribune*, August 1, 1990.

book published on the topic, and most of the work is pre-1992.<sup>21</sup> Many, however, have touched upon class as a peripheral category of identity in their studies of politics, race, gender, sexuality, or industry development within American television, and, not surprisingly, these are frequently seminal texts in the development of television studies as a discipline. Fundamental to my and many other media historians' understandings of American television history is the work of Erik Barnouw, whose seminal television history, *Tube of Plenty*, details the ways in which the television industry took its cues from the radio industry (from which most of the major players sprung) thereby positioning media as industries in service of advertising.<sup>22</sup> Further, his scholarship masterfully juggles the tensions among politics, economy, technological development, and creativity within this medium in ways that have irrevocably impacted later scholarship. Barnouw's account of the industry through the 1980s is the baseline upon which I build my arguments.

Barnouw's work was contemporary with the "effects" literature that dominated the study of television up until the 1970s, when cultural studies began its foray into analysis of popular culture in earnest. Marshall McLuhan and others aside, my primary influences are from British cultural studies and history rather than from mass communications. Strongly influential on my thinking about how television works is Stuart Hall. Hall in turn was primarily influenced in his early development by the Frankfurt School, which included key theorists such as Theodor Adorno, who had a

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<sup>21</sup> For a great overview of the paucity of scholarship on class in American television, see Richard Butsch, "Social Class and Television," in *The Encyclopedia of Television*, ed. Horace Newcombe (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2004), 2126-2130.

<sup>22</sup> Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. rev. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). See chapter 2 for details on the commercial development of television as an offshoot of radio, especially pp. 72-77.

relatively pessimistic view of the “impact” of mass culture on societies. (This is perhaps understandable, given the Frankfurt School’s rise in Weimar Germany and the flight of most of its participants as Hitler came to power.) Adorno saw both the culture industry and fascist propaganda as “psychoanalysis in reverse.” He suggests that a psychoanalytic reading of these phenomena reveal an appeal to the libidinal nature of the masses.<sup>23</sup> In other words, mass culture holds primal urges (including self-interest, or the desire to avoid “unpleasure,” as Freud calls it<sup>24</sup>) in check. Hall’s study into the role of popular culture in identity-making and the balance of power, on the other hand, allows for a great deal more agency on behalf of the consumer/audience of popular culture. Hall has described popular culture as “one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost *in* that struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured.”<sup>25</sup> But Hall does not ignore the significant differential in power between producer and consumer in the media relationship, either. Even though Hall allows for multiple receptions of an intended message within popular media, he acknowledges that the intent of the producer does limit the scope of meanings the audience might glean from any given text.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, much of the work of the Birmingham School (of which Hall is a part) explores agency and power as a primary facet of meaning making within popular expressions of culture. In this sense, Hall’s

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<sup>23</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda,” in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Continuum, 2000), 118–37.

<sup>24</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, ed. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961), 28.

<sup>25</sup> Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing the Popular,” in *People’s History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 239.

<sup>26</sup> Stuart Hall , “Encoding/Decoding.,” in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-1979*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 128-138.

article “Encoding/Decoding” becomes a foundational model for the way that I understand and read the texts analyzed within this dissertation. In locating working-class sitcoms within their political, cultural, economic, and industrial milieu, I acknowledge the “encoding” of these texts and the inevitably imbalanced, or narrowed, viewpoints that are part of their production. But I also hope to show through my “decoding,” or analysis, of these texts how working-class agency in production, especially in the program *Roseanne*, does impact the possibility of increased visibility of class in American culture.

Within television studies, certain texts have touched upon class (albeit while exploring other aspects of television) in ways that have been extremely useful to my project. Among those is Lynn Spigel’s *Make Room For TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*.<sup>27</sup> Spigel’s was one of the first books to look at how the development of American television as a national medium had impacted notions of the American family in the Cold War era. She argues that debates around the impact of television as a visual medium in *the family home* reveal the importance of its presentations of American life on how Americans viewed themselves as national, gendered, raced, and classed subjects. In particular, because of television’s function as an advertising medium and the necessity of reaching a wide audience in an era in which most televisions received only three or four channels, Spigel points to the incentive of the industry to draw on the image of the white, middle-class family as the dominant image of American identity. Spigel’s work lays the foundation for my arguments about how the family sitcom in particular executed this task.

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<sup>27</sup> Lynn Spigel, *Make Room For TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

Gerard Jones's *Honey, I'm Home! Sitcoms: Selling the American Dream* outlines the history of the sitcom by intertwining politics, economics, industry change, and programming itself—much like I have done in this dissertation.<sup>28</sup> Both his method of organization and his understanding of the history of the sitcom have strongly influenced the direction of my project. Jones calls the sitcom the “Miracle Play of our consumer society.”<sup>29</sup> Although predominantly an historical overview of major trends in the television sitcom, Jones's book asserts that it is the corporate version of the social and cultural trends that have characterized American culture over the post–World War II era. In that sense, sitcoms still reveal (albeit through a “fuzzy mirror”) indications of what Americans are both anxious about and accepting of in everyday culture, but they do so through a lens of consumption. Jones, as I noted above, concludes his book in a deeply cynical condemnation of the postmodern, self-reflexive sitcom, but his final paragraph ends on a hopeful note, and that note is *Roseanne*. Considering the tone and thesis of his work, it is striking to me that he sees *Roseanne* as a possible antidote to a pervasive aura of corporate culture in American television.

Similar to Jones, Josh Ozersky's *Archie Bunker's America: TV in an Era of Change, 1968-1978* deftly balances politics, economics, and cultural history to create a vivid picture of 1970s television.<sup>30</sup> Ozersky argues that the evolution in television programming in the decade he covers signified a fundamental change in the industry's response to cultural shifts. Although class as a category of analysis isn't high on

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<sup>28</sup> Gerard Jones, *Honey, I'm Home! Sitcoms: Selling the American Dream* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992).

<sup>29</sup> Jones, 4.

<sup>30</sup> Josh Ozersky, *Archie Bunker's America: TV in an Era of Change, 1968-1978* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 2003).

Ozersky's agenda, political engagement and connection with American anxieties about cultural and political change are. Ozersky addresses both the industry's attitudes toward a changing technological and cultural environment for their product and the resulting changes in program content in the 1970s. He is most useful to my project in the way he fills in the history of the television industry in this era and in his observations about the fundamentally co-optive function of the Norman Lear program (the most visible face of working-class programming) in the 1970s; he also helps to explain how and why programming reverted to a more conservative presentation of American culture by the Reagan years.

Jane Feuer's *Seeing Through the Eighties: Television and Reaganism* picks up where Ozersky left off.<sup>31</sup> Feuer tackles the question of why television critics frame 1980s television as an elitist and conservative era, even as conflict with established norms of American behavior and loyalties to government and other institutions pervade these narratives. Her answer is that a Reaganesque populism is the dominant order of the 1980s program; distrust of government and public institutions, along with a strong emphasis on the individual and the nuclear family ideal, promote an American Dream centered in the private foundation/institution and in localized or familial response to hardship. She also positions the proliferation of primetime melodramas (*Dynasty* in particular) in the 1980s as due to the increasing anxieties Americans held over the consequences of embracing Reagan's version of populism; these programs may have functioned on one level as a reinforcement of conservative values, but in another sense, audiences used these programs in surprising ways as a campy critique of those values.

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<sup>31</sup> Jane Feuer, *Seeing Through the Eighties: Television and Reaganism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995).

In that sense, her work is a helpful segue into my own arguments about the “slobcom” trend that developed in the late 1980s.

I have also borrowed heavily from Mark Crispen Miller’s notion of the dumbed-down television dad in his article “Deride and Conquer” from 1986.<sup>32</sup> Miller suggests that television has developed a self-reflexive style of programming that simultaneously flatters the viewer (“you’re too smart/independent to be taken in”) and reinforces assimilation through characters that parody the stereotypes we embrace about American behavioral norms. He uses the working-class father of the 1950s as the first example of this format, one that eventually dominates the presentation of masculinity (and the expectations that accompany it) on-screen. In the end, he argues that the sitcom’s ultimate goal is to suppress independent thought or real rebellion by making any sort of claims to authority by sitcom characters laughable. While Miller’s article must be viewed as a product of its era (in the midst of Reagan hegemony), its approach to how authority is undercut in the television sitcom is useful to my understanding of how the Lovable Loser character (my own term for the working-class father) functions in the working-class family sitcom.

There are, however, two key articles that have directly addressed class dynamics in American television, both of which provided an excellent starting point for my research. In “The Meaning of Memory: Family, Class, and Ethnicity in Early Network Television,”<sup>33</sup> from George Lipsitz’s *Time Passages*, Lipsitz grapples with the question of why working-class families would appear at all on the new medium of the 1950s, in

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<sup>32</sup> Mark Crispen Miller, “Deride and Conquer,” in *Watching Television: A Pantheon Guide to Popular Culture*, ed. Todd Gitlin (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986).

<sup>33</sup> George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990).

which encouraging consumption by viewers was the number-one priority for networks. His answer lies in looking back at the attitudes about labor and consumption that predominated in the 1930s and through World War II; this recent past validated the worker and encouraged a frugality that was unacceptable in the post-war, pro-consumption era in which the programs aired. Essentially, he argues, these working-class programs resolved the tension surrounding the revolutions in American economic, social, and cultural life after the war by demonstrating for viewers how assimilation into the middle class could be accomplished and what the consequences might be if they failed to assimilate. Lipsitz's article is especially important to my thinking on working-class television characters because the patterns established in this time period (and consequently, many of the intended messages of the programs) became (and continue to be) staples, established tropes, in representing working-class characters in television.

Finally, Richard Butsch has written several useful articles on class on the small screen, the most significant of which is "A Half-Century of Class and Gender in American TV Domestic Sitcoms."<sup>34</sup> Butsch outlines the vast underrepresentation of working-class characters on American television, noting that white-collar workers are grossly overrepresented and that this disparity comes with the impression that failure to belong to the middle class is essentially deviant behavior within American society. Further, Butsch studies the patterns in working-class characters' behaviors and personae and concludes that the working-class male is presented as a failed buffoon (consistent with Miller's assessment), while the working-class female is required to be exceptional in order to make up for the male's shortcomings; he sees this as a way that working-

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<sup>34</sup> Butsch, "A Half-Century of Class and Gender in American TV Domestic Sitcoms," 26.

class men are demasculinized. Since “successful” gender-role execution is predicated upon economic status, particularly for men, failure to reach an economic middle-class norm must also be presented as failure to reach a cultural/gendered middle-class norm; the gendering of class, then, has significant implications for motivating American men to believe in the American Dream of upward class mobility.

## **Chapter Outline**

I begin my dissertation with a look in chapter 1 at how class was narratively coded on television and the culture and history into which television tropes of class were born. Because of the Cold–War emphasis on American “classlessness” and because television as a national medium really emerges around 1948–49, just as the Cold War was really heating up, it initially seems incongruous that working-class characters were so prominent on American television in the early years. But their use as an object lesson makes their presence in the new medium more understandable; further, and more importantly for this project, their presentation establishes several visual and narrative tropes for “coding” class onto the bodies of television characters—tropes that continue to this day to be shorthand expressions of class for American viewers.

Chapter 2 is designed to help the reader better understand how this moment in the late 1980s and early 1990s came into being. How was it that a medium controlled by elites and designed to sell the American Dream to consumers became a primary point of cultural expression for working-class Americans? This chapter also begins to trace the industry, cultural, economic, and political antecedents to the development of our case study: *Roseanne*. What created the cultural and political environment in the late 1980s

that made it possible for a working-class Jewish mother from Denver to become, as Barbara Ehrenreich termed Roseanne Barr in 1989, a “zeitgeist goddess”?<sup>35</sup>

Chapter 3 focuses more explicitly on *Roseanne* and the struggles of Roseanne Barr to maintain agency and voice within the program. I ask the question “What’s so radical about *Roseanne*? ” and, in doing so, illuminate the primary factors in working-class cultural expression during the era that set it apart from its ancestors in American popular culture. Specifically, I detail the ways that *Roseanne* both borrowed from and upended the visual and narrative tropes so firmly established in the television programming discussed in chapters 1 and 2. I also begin to point out the ways that the challenges to middle-class manners and propriety fuel the fires of the Culture Wars in the mid-1990s.

Chapter 4, on the other hand, explores the ways that the political climate changed in the mid-1990s and how this impacted the attention to class hierarchy that had become so prevalent in American popular culture. As neoliberalism morphed into its advanced expression—multicultural neoliberalism—the differences between neoconservatives and neoliberals became largely about moral standards; that is, the Culture Wars subsumed the debate over class in an economic sense (since both sides had essentially the same economic goals) and highlighted cultural difference as the primary political battleground for the decade. Class as an exclusively cultural phenomenon, devoid of more significant implications for equality and separated from race, gender, and sexuality as overdetermined categories of identity and oppression, lost its “bite,” so to speak. As I analyze episodes from later seasons of *Roseanne*, I trace this

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<sup>35</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, “The Wretched of the Hearth: The Undainty Feminism of Roseanne Barr,” *New Republic*, April 2, 1990.

shift along with the decreasing significance of the program to possibilities for real social change.

Because American culture, popular and otherwise, has historically rendered class invisible, its treatment within the most popular mass medium in the country is a scholarly topic well worth exploring and long overdue. While scholars such as Lipsitz and Butsch have established a baseline for understanding American television's presentations of class historically (and, in Butsch's case, even quantitatively), post-1990s treatments of class, particularly in the family sitcom, are minimal within the literature. My dissertation provides a contextual exploration of how post-Cold War working-class family sitcoms fit in their historical setting, what they owe to their predecessors, and how they both reflect and challenge hegemonic notions of class in that era.

## **Chapter One**

### **New Families, New Nation, New Medium: Class in the American Sitcom, 1949–1971**

The working-class family sitcoms of the immediate post–Cold War era were consciously different from their predecessors in the early 1950s and early 1970s in that they were a critique of the American Dream, validating working-class culture and work rather than comparing it unfavorably to the middle-class ideal. At the same time, the latter programs owed a great deal to the former. Not only did these earlier programs establish the standard tropes of representation of the working class in mass media for American audiences, but they also resolved the key contradiction between the obvious presence of working-class Americans in the country and the notion of a “classless” American society promoted by Cold War consensus. This initial chapter places the development of the working-class sitcom in historical context, so that we can better understand how and why these later programs, using the tropes established in their predecessors, developed their critique of the American Dream. To do so, I explore post-war anxiety over class and race in an anti-communist environment, how that anxiety shaped the development of the new medium of television, and the ideological underpinnings of the earliest versions of the working-class family sitcom.

#### **Race and Class in the Post–World War II American Ideal**

The late 1940s marked the development of a new paradigm in American culture, politics, and everyday life. As the United States emerged as a world power after World War II, Americans had reason for both great optimism and great anxiety. The relatively

unscathed U.S. economy became globally dominant thanks to the Marshall Plan, and the nation appeared politically unified behind its successful efforts to defeat fascism. One of the reasons for this new-found unity (which, coming less than a decade after the strife-torn militancy of the Depression Era, was a remarkable shift) lay in the seeming accessibility of the American Dream to a larger number of American citizens through the widening definition of whiteness. The correlation between whiteness and citizenship in the United States, especially since the nineteenth century, has been well established by scholars such as David Roediger, who argues that the idea of white “ethnicity” developed around the 1910s and 1920s, as groups of new immigrants, such as Jews, Italians, and Irish, attempted to claim a more fully-integrated version of citizenship for themselves.<sup>36</sup> But the watershed event in the acceptance of new immigrants into whiteness was the mass mobilization of the American military via the draft in World War II. Gary Gerstle notes that “whites from every region and every ethnic group were thrown together in circumstances that demanded cooperation and comradeship, if only for the sake of survival. The military became, in effect, an enormously important site for melting the many streams of Euro-Americans into one white race.”<sup>37</sup>

It became increasingly obvious after the war, however, that, despite a widened notion of whiteness, all Americans did not figure equally when it came to imagined national identity and all the rights that came with inclusion into that identity. Returning minority veterans and women of all racial identities, who had entered the work force during the war, found themselves forced back into lives of second-class citizenship.

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<sup>36</sup> David Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America’s Immigrants Became White* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 21-24.

<sup>37</sup> Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 188.

Further, the Cold War had also begun, and after the horrors of Hiroshima and the revelation in 1949 of the Soviet Union's possession of nuclear technology, many Americans had reason to doubt whether they would even survive the next decade. These twin threats, of racism and of the fears associated with the rising prominence of communism, were more closely associated in American minds than one might initially think; as Mary Dudziak has demonstrated, the American government saw racism in the United States as an embarrassing impediment to American efforts to defeat communism globally.<sup>38</sup> The charge that American life was inherently unequal due to its basis in capitalism was a frequent charge leveled by its number one enemy: the Soviet Union. Convincing not only the rest of the world, but also its own citizens, that the post-war era signified even greater opportunity for all to achieve the American Dream (again, a “dream” explicitly associated with class status) seemed for policymakers an endeavor vital to the nation’s very survival.

Two key elements to American “success” over communism—a supposed end to racism (which, for all practical purposes, translated to a widening of the accepted definition of whiteness and a willingness to legislate incremental increases in rights for African Americans) and an increase in economic stability and upward mobility for Americans—were the cornerstones of American thought in the 1940s. An immense propaganda campaign ensued, striving to, as Elaine Tyler May has put it, “[promote] the American way of life as the triumph of capitalism, allegedly available to all who

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<sup>38</sup> Mary L Dudziak, "Brown as a Cold War Case," *Journal of American History*, June 2004, <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jah/91.1/dudziak.html> (accessed October 3, 2005).

believed in its values. This way of life was characterized by affluence, located in suburbia, and epitomized by white middle-class nuclear families.”<sup>39</sup>

Indeed, the white, suburban, nuclear family was key to the fight against communism. As multiple scholars have noted, perhaps the best example of the family’s centrality to the Cold War was the 1959 Kitchen Debate between Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. In this exchange, the two men debated the relative merits of American and Soviet consumer goods designed for the home and their impact on women in their respective countries in particular. Nixon felt that the suburban home had the ability to quell two potentially subversive elements in American culture: women and workers. Due to the wide availability of consumer goods, workers (which were envisioned as male) would be able to view their homes and the products within them as evidence of their upward class mobility, and women would be satisfied with their roles because these goods would be centered around their turf, the home.<sup>40</sup> Focusing on the nuclear family home, as the locale in which a “classless” American society could see evidence of achieving the American Dream, would therefore answer Soviet charges of class inequality and provide tangible evidence for those within American society who had recently demonstrated dissatisfaction with those inequalities in American culture. William Levitt, creator of Levittown (the best known and extremely influential suburb in Long Island), perhaps summed up this argument best when he famously claimed “No man who owns his own house and lot can be a

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<sup>39</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1999), xviii.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 16-20. May, Karal Ann Marling, and others have used Richard Nixon’s visit to the American Exhibition in Moscow in 1959 as a specific link between politics and postwar suburbia that shows the conscious efforts to link the new dynamic of suburban materialism to Cold War containment. See Karal Ann Marling, *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), chapter 7.

Communist. He has too much to do.”<sup>41</sup> Although this way of life was not available to everyone, especially for African Americans, the *public* vision of the American Dream suggested that it was.

Consumption was clearly the key to this new dynamic. Dwight Eisenhower’s chairman of the Council of Economic Advisors claimed that the “ultimate purpose” of the American economy was “to produce more consumer goods. This is the goal. This is the object of everything we are working at; to produce things for consumers.”<sup>42</sup> And consume they did; by 1953 one out of five Americans were suburban dwellers.<sup>43</sup> Along with the homes came the accoutrements that indicated achievement of the American Dream; these items—refrigerators, furniture, cars, washers and dryers, and more—were also remarkably cheap compared to earlier years. As Gerard Jones has described the new consumption ethos, “Paradise had become a commodity, and an affordable one at that.”<sup>44</sup> The wide availability of cheap consumer goods and the push for people to engage in a consumption-driven lifestyle blurred class divisions in the United States, especially for white ethnics. As assimilation into the white, middle-class ideal became increasingly affordable in the prosperous, post-war period, Jews, Catholics, and European ethnic groups who had previously faced discrimination could now afford to move to exclusively white suburbs, join their social organizations, and benefit from the privileges that came along with whiteness.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> As quoted in Marling, 253.

<sup>42</sup> As quoted in Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Politics of Hope* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963), 92; originally published in *Esquire*, January 1960.

<sup>43</sup> Gerard Jones, *Honey, I’m Home! Sitcoms: Selling the American Dream* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), 88.

<sup>44</sup> Jones, 89.

<sup>45</sup> Elaine May, xviii-xix.

Once again, though, not all promises of post-war prosperity extended to black or brown peoples. By 1955, discrimination in housing, especially in maintaining the “whiteness” of suburbs, was so commonplace that housing reformer Charles Abrams suggested FHA policies “could well have been culled from the Nuremberg laws,” as they positioned the agency as “the protector of the all-white neighborhood.”<sup>46</sup> Individual property owners and realtors certainly contributed to the exclusion of African Americans (and other people of color as well) from the suburbs via zoning, neighborhood initiatives to purportedly “keep property values up” (code for not selling to African American buyers), and outright intimidation in some neighborhoods.<sup>47</sup>

Not only were people of color physically excluded from living in many suburbs—the place that, for most Americans, best represented the American Dream—but so were their fictional counterparts on television. This was accomplished primarily by virtue of their absence. The almost total lack of non-white characters<sup>48</sup> (in the 1950s and 1960s, white families made up 97% of all families presented on television<sup>49</sup>) and the ubiquity of ethnic white families in television programming reinforced the transitions that were occurring in American culture after the war, especially in terms of redefinitions of race and the potential of upward class mobility for newly “white” ethnic

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<sup>46</sup> As quoted in Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Post-War America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 214.

<sup>47</sup> Cohen, 216-227.

<sup>48</sup> Some readers might be thinking of the program *Amos 'n Andy* at this point in my narrative. *Amos 'n Andy* garnered angry responses from black leaders across the United States, including a boycott of the beer company that sponsored *Amos 'n Andy* that was called by the NAACP. Due to the controversy it garnered, this program went off the air after just three years (the radio program had endure for decades); throughout the 1950s and 1960s, according to Jones, “[a]fter all the fuss about *Amos 'n Andy*, the white creators of American TV seemed to feel the safest course was simply to act as if blacks—and all other non-WASPs—simply did not exist.” Jones, 51-61.

<sup>49</sup> James D. Robinson and Thomas Skill, “Five Decades of Families on Television: From the 1950s Through the 1990s,” in *Television and the American Family*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Jennings Bryant and J. Allison Bryant (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001), 147-148.

groups. These dynamics were abundantly clear in the television programming featuring working-class characters in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Coming at the beginning of a medium just beginning to establish its “best practices,” the standards for representing class and race had far-reaching consequences. As I will detail below, the visual and narrative tropes for encoding class (and by extension, race) onto the bodies of television characters developed in this time period continue to impact representations of the working class in American television today.

### **The Nuclear Family and Visions of Classlessness**

Family-centered programming actually preceded both television and the post-war, anti-communist ideal. An increasing emphasis on the family as the center of American entertainment media began in the 1930s in radio. As the central character in *One Man's Family*, a popular weekly serial drama, stated in 1938, “It’s my opinion that the family is the source from whence comes the moral strength of the nation. And disintegration of any nation begins with the disintegration of the family.”<sup>50</sup> Apparently, broadcasters agreed: by the early 1940s, the increasing emphasis on the nuclear family as the key to preserving American society meant that even popular performers like George Burns and Gracie Allen felt they had to change their format to a family setting in order to maintain healthy ratings. *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* soon followed with great success,

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<sup>50</sup> As quoted in Jones, 23. This emphasis on family made sense, given radio’s function in the 1930s as the sole form of mass media entertainment that could reach into the home and the recent efforts by major radio corporations to solidify the medium’s standing as a predominantly commercial form of broadcasting. In many ways, the battle over radio’s relationship to advertising is a significant precursor to television’s development, especially since the major television networks were all owned by powerful radio corporations. For a detailed story of radio’s development in the 1930s and its significance to television’s development a decade later, see Susan Douglas, *Inventing American Broadcasting, 1899-1922* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

and the 1940s were awash with family sitcoms on the radio waves. Many of these programs featured white ethnic working-class families, as efforts during and immediately after World War II to portray America as inclusive became paramount to the fight against fascism and later communism.<sup>51</sup>

But while some aspects of radio could (and did) transfer to television, the visual nature of the new medium demanded that producers borrow more from film in their efforts to convey (intentionally or otherwise) their intended messages to the audience. And the intimacy of the setting—after all, these broadcasts beamed actors right into the homes of viewers!—along with the new emphasis on the nuclear family home as a primary front for fighting the spread of communism demanded that they navigate very carefully.

At the inception of television’s rise as a national medium, both demographic research sophistication and access to channels by the viewing public were limited. As Josh Ozersky explains, “Since the audience was seen for the most part as an undifferentiated mass, the idea of airing polarizing material, which at that time any genuinely realistic show would necessarily have been, simply ran against the grain of network thinking.”<sup>52</sup> This was the result of a theory called “Least Objectionable Programming,” or LOP—a concept developed by NBC’s head of Audience Research, Paul Klein. The idea was that, since the vast majority of the television audience had access to only three channels, the most effective way of increasing audience share was to program material that would alienate no one. As Klein himself explained,

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<sup>51</sup> Jones, 25-28.

<sup>52</sup> Josh Ozersky, *Archie Bunker’s America: TV in an Era of Change, 1968-1978* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 2003), 2.

“[P]rograms . . . by necessity must appeal to the rich and poor, smart and stupid, tall and short, wild and tame, together.”<sup>53</sup> In a nation that had been determined to envision itself as “middle class” since at least the late nineteenth century,<sup>54</sup> and which proclaimed itself the “most truly classless society in history” in a popular national periodical in 1959,<sup>55</sup> it follows that LOP would both aim at a middle-class audience and reproduce the ideal version of homogeneity that the “classless” vision required.

It would logically follow that families on late 1940s and early 1950s television would be exclusively middle class. This, however, was not the case. Programs like *The Goldbergs*, *The O’Neills*, *The Life of Riley*, *Mama*, *Life With Luigi*, and *The Honeymooners* dotted the primetime landscape and frequently made appearances in the Nielsen Top 20 ratings. How, then, can we explain the popularity—indeed, even the existence in this era—of programs in which the protagonists were emphatically NOT middle-class? What purpose would images of families who have not achieved the American Dream play in a medium designed specifically to sell that dream to consumers?

Perhaps the best explanation of why we see characters, issues, and representations of society in mass media that are antithetical to dominant hegemonic notions of the societal order comes from Fredric Jameson’s exploration of the function of this exact phenomenon in popular culture. Jameson argues that our culture is inextricably wrapped up in the images bombarding us via mass media, to the point

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<sup>53</sup> As quoted in Ozersky, 4.

<sup>54</sup> Many thanks to David Noble for his insights on Progressive visions of a “classless” American identity in the late nineteenth century.

<sup>55</sup> Vance Packard, *The Status Seekers* (New York: Pocket Books, 1961), 2, as quoted in Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1990), 18.

“where even the political and the ideological ‘levels’ have initially to be disentangled from their primary mode of representation which is cultural.”<sup>56</sup> At the same time, the primary reason we respond to these images is because we recognize their resemblance to our everyday lives and struggles. Therefore, if the images stray too far from the “real” or fail to contain an element of what Jameson calls “the symbolic fulfillment of the repressed wish,”<sup>57</sup> then we fail to be interpolated by the image. Consequently, “genuine social and historical content must be first tapped and given some initial expression if it is subsequently to be the object of successful manipulation and containment.”<sup>58</sup>

So for working-class viewers, living in a world where 25% of all American children (and 50% of all African American children) were still living in poverty<sup>59</sup> and where the globalization of the American economy was causing great upheaval in the daily lives of workers, acknowledging the difficulty for white ethnics in adjusting to middle-class assimilation was paramount. The depiction of these families showed how previously marginalized Americans might achieve the “classless,” homogenous, and family-centered American Dream via consumerism.<sup>60</sup> As George Lipsitz has explained, “[b]y collapsing the distinction between family as consumer unit and family as part of neighborhood, ethnic, and class associations, television programs in the early 1950s

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<sup>56</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 22.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>59</sup> Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 30.

<sup>60</sup> For an overview of the use of mass media to create the illusion of a homogenous, “classless” society in the 1950s, see Roland Marchand, “Visions of Classlessness, Quests for Dominion: American Popular Culture, 1945-1960,” in *Reshaping America: Society and Institutions 1945-1960*, ed. Robert Bremner and Gary W. Reichard (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1982), 166-167.

connected the most personal and intimate needs of individual to commodity purchases.”<sup>61</sup>

However, these working-class characters also served as warnings to those who did not espouse or adequately execute the consumption ethic of post-war capitalism after World War II. In particular on these programs, the father character often became what I call a “Lovable Loser”: a character loved enough by his family to avoid disturbing the nuclear unit, but seemingly incapable of enacting middle-class norms of behavior and economic accomplishment. Mark Crispen Miller describes the working-class father of the 1950s, for example, as “the eternal jerk, a hapless fatso doomed to live in squalor, always trying to rise above it, always ending up worse off, not only just as poor but ‘in the doghouse’ too.” His efforts to obtain the American Dream usually failed, “earning a weary put-down by ‘the wife’ who, ever yearning for new appliances but thoroughly convinced of her husband’s hopeless impotence, could do nothing but look disgusted, arms akimbo.”<sup>62</sup> While the families themselves demonstrated the potential of white ethnics to become upwardly mobile, the fathers of these families often demonstrated the consequences of failing to pursue the American Dream properly.

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<sup>61</sup> George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 71.

<sup>62</sup> Mark Crispen Miller, “Deride and Conquer,” in *Watching Television: A Pantheon Guide to Popular Culture*, ed. Todd Gitlin (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 197.

Lovable Losers (who until recent years were almost exclusively white<sup>63</sup>) were the key to acceptably portraying a white, American working-class presence in the nation without disrupting the notion of “classlessness.” Because of their personal flaws, Lovable Losers could be blamed for their own problems, rather than serve as contradictions to the notion that upward class mobility was available to anyone who worked hard to achieve it. John Hartigan has traced the development of the white working-class figure in American popular culture as a symbol of “failed” whiteness. Speaking specifically about the term “white trash” and how it polices class boundaries for those included in (or excluded from) the privileges of whiteness, Hartigan states, “As an unpopular culture, the images and instances of white trash in mainstream media productions work as examples of what whites cannot afford to be if the propriety of their implicit racial privileges are to be maintained.”<sup>64</sup> Although Hartigan is speaking to the designation within whiteness that is often perceived as even lower in the class hierarchy than what most would call “working class,” the notion that crossing boundaries of acceptable behavior for whiteness could be dangerous is particularly applicable in this instance. Early television was grappling with the reimagining of

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<sup>63</sup> One exception to this rule was *Amos 'n Andy*, but for a variety of reasons this program did not execute the same function as other working-class family sitcoms in the same era. *Amos 'n Andy* was originally a radio program that was modeled after the characters of the nineteenth-century minstrel show. Because *Amos 'n Andy* was the target of an advertiser boycott, sponsored by the NAACP, from its inception on CBS in 1951, practically all attention to the program focused on its racially stereotypical overtones. Further, the program overlaid these stereotypes (particularly of the lazy, financially scheming Black male) with what Gerard Jones has called a “suffocatingly middle-class” setting. This pattern fits in some ways with the early white, working-class family sitcoms, but the furor over racialized content has overshadowed the programs parallels to other working-class sitcoms starring white ethnics. Further, because the boycott resulted in so much trouble for CBS (and eventually in the cancellation of the series), the industry spent the next two decades avoiding programs that featured African Americans as lead characters. For that reason, working-class family sitcoms were almost exclusively white until the mid-1970s. Jones, 50-61.

<sup>64</sup> John T. Hartigan, Jr., *Odd Tribes: Toward a Cultural Analysis of White People* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005), 115.

whiteness in a post-war era, and its primary responsibility was setting those boundaries.

When Lovable Losers crossed those lines in the imagined “classless” society represented in the American television sitcom of the 1950s, then, they represented a threat to the white ethnic American’s chances of assimilation into that post-war ideal; consequently, they had to be punished for their transgressive behavior.

But how did audiences know to identify the Lovable Loser, especially when he was almost always surrounded by a fully assimilated family? Stuart Hall’s seminal article on encoding and decoding meaning within television narratives suggests that, while the preferred narrative does not always translate directly to an audience’s reception of the material, the intended meaning emanating from production nevertheless has the “effect of constructing some limits and parameters within which decodings will operate.”<sup>65</sup> In other words, although networks in the post–World War II era couldn’t assign definitive meaning to the Lovable Loser for the audiences, they were capable of narrowing the parameters of the audience’s interpretation of this character. Further, given the pervasive public discourse on “classlessness” and upward class mobility that dominated in the late 1940s and early 1950s in the United States, the presentation of a sympathetic-but-contemptuous working-class body in these sitcoms was likely to be understood through the lens of that discourse. By detailing the basic visual and narrative symbols of class in early television, we then can better understand how American audiences read (and continue to read) class in the family sitcom and in entertainment television in general.

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<sup>65</sup> Stuart Hall , “Encoding/Decoding.,” in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-1979*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 128-138.

## **Establishing a Middle-Class “Norm”**

Before I address the dynamics of the working-class family sitcom in this era, it is important to establish the norms of the middle-class family in sitcoms of the post-World War II era. Although middle-class families have been analyzed in many scholarly tomes over the past few decades,<sup>66</sup> their position as explicit models of middle-class norms is often overlooked. The primary reason for this lies in their invisibility in our culture; as white, middle-class, patriarchal, and suburban families, the lives they lead are viewed as raceless, classless, genderless, and regionless for most viewers. The problem with this, as David Roediger has argued, is that “the process of inclusion into whiteness has always been predicated on accepting the exclusion of others.”<sup>67</sup> The invisibility of the white middle-class has traditionally excluded working-class Americans (along with racial, gender, and regional “others”) from fully claiming their roles as “American,” and has often suggested that the visibility of class (race, gender, or region) in their case is due to a failure to fully assimilate into idealized American national identity.

Visual indicators of middle-class family sitcoms in the 1950s include virtually no characters of color.<sup>68</sup> A suburban locale is almost uniformly the setting; urban or rural

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<sup>66</sup> In fact, most explorations of family sitcoms in the Cold War era look almost exclusively at middle-class family sitcoms, without actually designating them as such. Examples include Lynn Spigel, *Make Room For TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Ella Taylor, *Prime-Time Families: Television Culture in Postwar America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); and Jones.

<sup>67</sup> David Roediger, *Colored White: Transcending the Racial Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 240.

<sup>68</sup> Exceptions include Mr. Smith, the Hispanic gardener on *Father Knows Best* (who proudly asserts his “Americanness” via his carefully-chosen surname) and, most famously, Ricky Ricardo in *I Love Lucy* (whose identity carefully slid between “white” and “racial other,” depending on the message the writers wanted to put forward). For more on the racial politics of *I Love Lucy*, see Jude Davies and Carol R. Smith, “Race, Gender, and the American Mother: Political Speech and the Maternity Episodes of *I Love Lucy* and *Murphy Brown*.” *American Studies* 39, no. 2 (Summer 1998), 33-63.

settings are rarely shown, and the establishing shots are almost always of subdivisions or suburban streets. If businesses are shown, it is usually within the context of consumption on the part of the starring family; furthermore, these spaces are shown as “human scale”:<sup>69</sup> that is, the characters in the shot display familiarity with one another, suggesting real (not imagined<sup>70</sup>) community. Streets are rarely busy and do not suggest danger for pedestrians; cars are primarily for recreation rather than tools for transportation. Workplaces of the primary male protagonist are almost never shown or even referenced; instead, the inside of the family home or sites of social interactions are the dominant locales for almost every shot. Priority is placed on making the home and community the centers of activity.

Two scenes from *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* demonstrate these dynamics. In the first scene, Harriet and Ozzie are entertaining a couple in their home, and it becomes apparent that the husband of the couple, Joe, tells his wife much more about his day than does Ozzie, even though those accounts are somewhat embellished (as Joe explains privately to Ozzie, “It makes [Clara’s] day a little more interesting”). All of these stories are about their social interactions; neither man even entertains the notion of sharing their workplace interactions with their wives. After they leave, Harriet asks Ozzie why he doesn’t do the same for her.

**Ozzie:** [Joe] exaggerates a little in order to keep Clara happy.  
**Harriet:** Well, I think that’s very thoughtful of him.

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<sup>69</sup> Thanks to Stephen Young for suggesting this term and for helping me develop these thoughts about middle-class family sitcoms.

<sup>70</sup> I’m referring here to Benedict Anderson’s classic notion of imagined community, in which individuals imagine themselves as part of communities (municipal, national, etc.) as a result of their contact with mass media. Anderson speaks directly to print media’s influence, but the principle clearly applies to television as well. For more on imagined community, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

**Ozzie** (*raising his hand in a Boy Scout salute*): Okay. Starting tomorrow I'll do my best to remember everything that happens. Besides which, I'll be trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent.

**Harriet:** That's all I ask.

**Ozzie:** Well, that's enough.

In the next scene, Ozzie attempts to “make the day a little more interesting” by detailing what happens around town. Ozzie heads into the local soda fountain. He greets the soda jerk by name and discusses another community member who’s just left the store, carefully noting every moment. Joe comes in and discusses Ozzie’s plan to tell Harriet “everything”; all the items on Ozzie’s list of events are accounts of localized interactions at stores and people known to both men. Ozzie declares, “I’m going to write down every inconsequential thing that happens during the day. I’m sorry if you don’t see the humor in this, but it happens to be very funny!” Ozzie finds the notion that his day could be of importance to the family to be an amusing one. There’s no explanation of why these two men (and a few other businessmen in the scene as well) would be sitting at a soda fountain during the morning of a business day, eating ice cream and talking about inconsequential community activity, rather than being at work. Men’s work, therefore, is invisible in this sitcom.<sup>71</sup>

Plot lines for middle-class family sitcoms are also very codified. Plots avoid current political and social “hot-button issues.” In accordance with this, the communities shown are very insular, rarely referring to locations or identities outside of their small suburb. Exceptions to this rule are almost always in the form of vague “Americanness”; that is, American national identity appears congruent with local identity (unlike state or

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<sup>71</sup> “No News for Harriet,” *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, ABC, June 8, 1960. I’m not oblivious to the fact that Ozzie is a bandleader and therefore not a typical middle-class “businessman.” However, the characters appear to be; the sitcom itself does not refer to this fact.

regional identity).<sup>72</sup> Instead, story lines revolve around very simple, insular family issues, such as the loss of an item, social adjustment for the children, or misunderstandings within relationships. These plot lines reinforce the turn toward the suburban, nuclear family home in the 1950s by restricting the characters' most dramatic interactions to those within the family. The climax of the story line almost inevitably comes with a lesson learned. The "moral of the story" is a primary focus for 1950s television, conveying a consensus-culture value to the audience in a very explicit way. Children are the main focus of almost all of the programs, but parents almost always deliver the moral at the end. The wisdom of the parents is never overridden by an outsider.

In an example that initially seems to violate these norms, we can see how even a conflict that could potentially disrupt the nuclear family ideal falls back into the accepted pattern by the end of the episode. In an episode of *Father Knows Best* from 1956, Margaret, the mother, loses her temper over a series of selfish demands for her time from her family, calling them "smug, selfish snobs." She goes on strike, forcing them to mend their own clothes, clean up after themselves, and even make their own meals. The family is miserable; clearly, Margaret is not fulfilling her duties as a wife and mother, and the family doesn't know how to function without her. What might have been read as a statement on the frustrations of women restricted to working in the home, however, becomes a lesson about the civic duty of raising good future citizens. The

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<sup>72</sup> The program *The Simpsons*, which began in 1987, pokes fun at this phenomenon by refusing to specify the state or region in which its fictional town, Springfield, is located. (Matt Groening, the show's creator, got this idea from *Father Knows Best*, which was also located in a stateless, regionless "Springfield".) Some fans will insist that Springfield is in northern Kentucky because one episode ("Behind the Laughter") said as much, but in reruns the creators changed the location to southern Missouri. In the end, Springfield is intentionally left without a specific region or state attached to it, just like the Springfield of *Father Knows Best*.

“moral of the story” is finally delivered by her husband, Jim, who sternly upbraids her over the example she’s showing the children. “I set a pattern for the kids,” he lectures, “but now you’re setting just as bad a pattern. Vindictive! Pouting! If we can’t act like grownups, how can we expect our kids to?” Duly chastened, she goes back to her life of servility, as a “good” middle-class mother did in these sitcoms.<sup>73</sup>

### The Working-Class Family as a Lesson in Assimilation

The term “working-class programming” can mean different things; for my purposes here, “working-class programming” refers to television programs whose primary characters are coded visually and narratively as working class. Both the producers and the intended viewers of these programs are generally middle class; consequently, the image of working-class life depicted in these shows is generally a middle-class conception of what working-class life might be like. One of the best examples is *The Life of Riley*, which clearly demonstrates the cautionary dynamic of post–World War II working-class family sitcoms. Originally a radio hit that followed the lives of an Irish family in Brooklyn, *The Life of Riley* morphed into a television program about a white family from Brooklyn that has moved to Los Angeles so the father, Chester A. Riley, can take a job in a factory building military aircraft.<sup>74</sup> This move enables the family to purchase a suburban home, but Riley’s working-class sensibilities prevent the family from fully assimilating into the middle-class American Dream. Riley epitomizes failure.

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<sup>73</sup> “Family Reunion,” *Father Knows Best*, NBC, March 14, 1956.

<sup>74</sup> The transition to Los Angeles occurred during the radio program’s run, but the television program only peripherally addresses the Rileys’ previous life in Brooklyn. When it does so, it is frequently foreshadowing a mistake that Riley will make in the episode: his reliance on prior connections to Brooklyn is always mistakes that marginalize his family from their attempts to assimilate into middle-class society.

As played by Jackie Gleason from 1949 to 1950 and by William Bendix from 1953 to 1958, Riley gets sick, hurts himself, makes embarrassing mistakes, and raises his voice routinely in the series, unlike the middle-class father characters of this era. Riley's and other working-class male characters' failings are the physical embodiment of their failure at achieving the post-war masculine ideal. Rather than Riley himself fulfilling the consensus father role of authoritarian and decision maker, his wife Peg has to guide him, often fulfilling Riley's responsibilities when he can't (or won't).

Marjorie Reynolds, who played Peg Riley, told *TV Guide* that she liked playing Mrs. Chester A. Riley because "I've done just about everything in films from westerns to no-voice musicals, and now with the Riley show, I'm back in the kitchen. Where every wife belongs."<sup>75</sup> Ironically, her character Peg often does *not* remain in the kitchen, stepping outside of the domestic realm to "clean up" after Riley (unlike middle-class television housewives in this era, who pay dearly if and when they cross their husbands). But this power inversion is always completed via clever subterfuge. For example, when Peg wants to take French lessons, she overrides Riley's objections with the statement: "Why, just the other day you were saying that a woman should have other interests besides housework."<sup>76</sup> At the same time, Peg usually steps into the public world out of necessity rather than choice, frequently voicing her own anxiety about having to take over for Riley when he proves incompetent. Peg is who she is as a direct result of Riley's failure to fulfill his role as a father and the need for her character to facilitate "proper" gender roles for both men and women; while her power within the home might seem admirable fifty years later, it's clear from her expressions of

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<sup>75</sup> As quoted in Lipsitz, 79.

<sup>76</sup> "The French Professor," *The Life of Riley*, Dumont, October 25, 1949.

frustration that the character wants to be able to pursue a consensus-culture gender role and is forced to do otherwise because of her husband's incompetence at his own.<sup>77</sup>

Working-class programs frequently occur in urban settings, although suburban settings and quieter residential streets similar to those seen in middle-class programming are also possible locales for these shows. Unlike that of their middle-class counterparts, working-class men's work is almost always identified and shown. These characters' work, home, and leisure spaces have been coded as working-class as well. Work spaces are devoid of personal space, as blue-collar or lower-level white-collar jobs do not afford them this luxury. Color and décor play significant roles in visual coding, as working-class homes are generally much more drab and either more sparsely decorated or cluttered. Leisure spaces are also coded as working class, with most entertainment in bars, bowling alleys, or other public spaces not generally associated with families or the middle class.

In *The Life of Riley*, for example, the viewer frequently is presented with scenes of Riley and his best friend, Gillis, sitting at a bus stop on their way to work. Other conversations between the two friends occur at their jobs in an aircraft factory, in the open space on the shop floor, often within earshot of their virtually omnipresent supervisor. The Rileys live in a modest suburban home, but we rarely, if ever, see them living in a community; that is, the neighbors are very rarely seen and have little impact on their daily lives. Interestingly, the Rileys' home is an exception to the typical presentation of working-class living spaces. The home, presided over by Peg Riley (who represents successful upward class mobility), presents a lower-middle-class ethos;

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<sup>77</sup> Lipsitz, 88.

it is appropriate, then, that Riley himself often seems out of place in his own home. And upon the rare occasions that Riley does take Peg and the kids out, either the spaces are working class (such as a bowling alley) or else something in the narrative occurs to demonstrate their unsuitability for the locale. For example, when Riley takes Peg to a charity dinner with tickets he found in his boss's trash can, the maitre d' refuses to seat them, humiliating Peg in the process.<sup>78</sup>

The visual coding of the Lovable Loser in particular makes him very easy to spot on television. First, his body generally meets certain specifications. He is usually white, with unfashionable hair (either balding or unruly, generally), unusual facial features, and a less-than-ideal body (generally, a beer belly is the key, but unusually tall, short, or gangly men can be thin and still qualify). Secondly, working-class male characters tend to wear blue-collar uniforms or (in later years) plaid. Working-class women and children cover a wider spectrum of visual appearance; when working-class families are set up to contrast the “failed” working-class father, they often assume middle-class clothing and style for themselves. On the other hand, working-class female characters are much more likely than their middle-class counterparts to be dowdy, shrewish, fat, thin, or otherwise imperfect. There is little difference in the appearance of working-class child characters from middle-class child characters, although occasionally their clothing will mark them as less affluent.

Plot lines in working-class family sitcoms also differ, in that the parents are not always called upon to deliver a moral at the end of the program; in fact, quite often, there is no moral at all. Instead, the episode can be about the mistakes made by a

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<sup>78</sup> “Riley Steps Out,” *The Life of Riley*, NBC, April 10, 1953.

character (quite often, the father), which are then addressed by the rest of the family (who can either correct the mistake or pounce on it as a way to foil the mistake-maker's plans). Families argue loudly, openly express their disdain for other family members, and otherwise highlight the place of discord in their homes as "normal." At the same time, the nuclear family unit is never broken, nor is the dynamic of the father as head of the household ever completely disrupted. Although the mother character frequently upbraids the Lovable Loser for his antics, he never completely loses his authority over the rest of the family. Further, these lectures by the mother (or, even occasionally, the children) are less common than the narrative plot to cleverly undermine the Lovable Loser's mistaken choices. In other words, the viewer is let in on the secret that the assimilated characters are maintaining balance within the family, while the Lovable Loser remains convinced of his authority throughout (or at the very least, asserts his authority throughout). This dynamic allows the balance of power within the working-class family sitcom to ostensibly retain the father at the top of the order, while conveying to the audience the dangers of the Lovable Loser's failure to assimilate.

The juxtaposition of work and home, almost exclusive to working-class (versus middle-class) family sitcoms, demonstrates this dynamic best. Riley's position at work is tenuous at best, and his ability to hold on to his factory job is primarily due to the interventions of Peg. When his request for a raise from his boss becomes a fight in which he is fired, Riley is blamed by everyone except himself. Despite their encouragement of Riley to ask for the raise in the first place, his family's first reaction to the firing is horror. Peg begs him to swallow his pride and apologize to his boss. "You can't eat pride!" Peg concludes. "No, but a man's gotta keep his self-respect,"

Riley responds. “Before I’d apologize to him, I’d sooner see you beggin’ in the streets! That’s the kind of man I am.” The children offer to get jobs, but Riley refuses to allow it. “No kids of mine are gonna work. You’ll starve first!” The laugh track erupts, clearly indicating that Riley’s pride as a worker does not fit into the post-war vision of middle-class assimilation and indeed could result in disaster for the family. As is common in the program, Riley himself is unable to resolve the conflict; his incompetence is underscored when Junior is hired for a job for which Riley has applied. As usual, Peg resolves the conflict. Riley takes a job overseas, almost breaking up the nuclear family unit rather than falling into line. Peg has to beg the boss to convince Riley to stay at the last moment, as Riley is stepping onto the boat to leave. As the boss is upbraiding Riley for abandoning his family, a ship’s horn sounds. Riley is able to pretend that the boss was apologizing to him, thereby allowing him to go back to his job without groveling. Once again, Riley’s position as a Lovable Loser is solidified, and the viewer can see both the consequences of Riley’s failure to assimilate and how Peg is forced to compensate for him.<sup>79</sup>

Postwar lessons about race, racism, and white-ethnic assimilation are also quite clear in this program. In the episode “The French Professor,” daughter Babs and her mother bring her French teacher home two nights a week to teach the family French, even though Riley expressly disapproves. A narrator informs the audience as the opening scene begins that “Riley by nature is a tolerant man, judging all men by their deeds, not by their language or creed,” reassuring the viewer that Riley is indeed tolerant (read: not a racist). Statements like “I ain’t got a family anymore; this is the

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<sup>79</sup> “Riley the Executive Type,” *The Life of Riley*, NBC, May 1, 1953.

Foreign Legion!” and “I’m gonna eat over in Lum Fung Ming Toy Garden, where everybody’s a 100% American!” indicate, however, that this is not the case. When he discusses his problem with the undertaker, Digby O’Dell, O’Dell admonishes him not to hate the teacher: “Oh, you must be tolerant of all nationalities, Riley. Now take me: Frenchmen, Swedes, Italians, Americans, I make no distinctions. I put them all on the same level.” Note that all the nationalities mentioned are European; the subtle message about racism is made even subtler through the exclusion of any mention of people of color.

But even this subtle message is obliterated in the end, as the story becomes a morality tale about leaving ethnicity behind. In an attempt to take back his home from the perceived usurper, Riley bullies the man and threatens to beat him up, until the “French” man loses his temper—and, subsequently, his accent. When Riley discovers the man is actually from Brooklyn and not a foreigner (the main issue was Riley’s dislike of the supposedly adulterous French), he changes his mind about having the man in his house. The rest of the family, however, is horrified that “Monsieur” is not really French (and is, instead, from “back East”): “He sounds just like you!” Peg exclaims in dismay to Riley.<sup>80</sup> Riley once again is demonstrating his reluctance to embrace upward class mobility (via learning a European language) and, in the process, looks like a fool. His upwardly mobile family, on the other hand, is clearly interested in “bettering” themselves, but when they discover the French teacher’s associations with their working-class, ethnic roots, it becomes clear that their affiliation with him is no longer desirable.

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<sup>80</sup> “The French Professor,” *The Life of Riley*, Dumont, October 25, 1949.

Riley's teenaged children, Babs and Junior, serve as foils to their father, demonstrating more successful versions of upward class mobility. Whether it's demonstrating post-war changes in dating standards, teaching their father lessons about being a good corporate worker (rather than an independent business owner), or severing ties with their (ethnic, working-class) roots back East, the children are able lieutenants in their mother's quest for middle-class status. Junior, the son, alternately serves as his father's sidekick (demonstrating Riley's childishness) or cooperates with his mother and sister to suppress Riley's "working-class" behaviors. He provides the business acumen when his father decides to quit his job at the factory and run a hamburger stand; he serves as lookout when Riley wants to beat up the aforementioned "Monsieur"; and he routinely serves as the comic foil to Riley. This juxtaposition of Junior with his father as capable and incapable, respectively, very clearly sets up Junior's assumed assimilation into the middle class, as part of the American Dream (children achieving a higher class status than their parents). And the program will *not* countenance any variation from this theme: when Junior tells his father in a moment of frustration that he'd be satisfied doing what his father is doing career-wise, Riley says sarcastically "That's fine. That's just *dandy*. I can hear the horselaugh when I get up . . . and say, 'My son wants to be like me.'"<sup>81</sup> Riley was representative of the (ethnic, working-class) identity Americans were supposed to be able to leave behind after World War II.

### **What Working Class? The Lovable Loser Moves to the 1960s Pastoral Sitcom**

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<sup>81</sup> "Egbert's Chemistry Set," *The Life of Riley*, Dumont, October 18, 1949.

As the 1950s continued, this need to coach viewers out of their Depression-era loyalty to their ethnic and working-class ties diminished. By 1960, intellectuals were musing that the “problem” of the working class was solved. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., for example, would admit to “pools of poverty” still existing in the United States, but he claimed that more urgent problems were caused by the “economy of abundance” proliferating in the United States.<sup>82</sup> These “pools of poverty” were seen as regional anomalies, often due to rural conditions.<sup>83</sup> Class conflict and the impetus of assimilation on 1960s television subsequently became hidden within another juxtaposition: rural and urban families. Nineteen-sixties television used the urban/rural split to balance American concerns about losing their agrarian heritage and the need to push the public toward assimilation. Such programs as *The Andy Griffith Show*, *Green Acres*, and *Petticoat Junction* positioned small-town Americans as relatively well-assimilated, comparing them favorably to the goofy rural characters who appeared in the programs. It is important to note that the small-town communities presented were almost exclusively white and maintained Cold War family roles as defined earlier in this chapter. In these programs, the clear appeal and influence of urban consumption was present but small town life was also hailed, as long as the core values of the Cold War era—education, hard work, and commitment to the nuclear family—were foregrounded.

One episode of *The Andy Griffith Show*, for example, featured a Joad-like family named the Darlings, who came into town to meet the daughter’s fiancé. The Darlings can’t seem to understand or follow the rules of the community, parking illegally,

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<sup>82</sup> Schlesinger, 92.

<sup>83</sup> Ehrenreich, 19. Michael Harrington’s *The Other America* notwithstanding, American culture and media were still promoting this notion well into the 1970s; this fits with the disconnect that characterized 1960s primetime, as discussed below.

sneaking extra people and belongings into a hotel room, and finally playing “hillbilly” music so loudly that Andy has to intervene. The Darlings are incapable of functioning in Cold War society without Andy’s help; when he offers to put them up for the night in order to resolve the conflict, the father responds “If this is charity, we want no part of it, ‘cause we aim to hang on to our position in the community.” The laugh track appropriately titters after this remark, to clearly convey to the viewer that the Darlings have no “position” in the community. The sexually-forward Charlene (who demonstrates decidedly un-middle-class gender behavior) takes a liking to the “sophisticated” Andy, but in the end she settles on her more class-appropriate fiancé. Andy’s middle-class manners smooth over the situation, and his geniality suggests that even these folks, reminiscent of a 1930s American identity, can adjust to post-war culture.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, one might argue that Hartigan’s notion of the threat so-called white trash pose to the racially-based class hierarchy in American culture is the primary object lesson in these sorts of programs.<sup>85</sup> The rural characters suggest the kinds of whiteness that fail to assimilate into white, middle-class norms, thereby taking away the rationale for privileging whiteness in American society. In many ways, these programs were moving the object lesson of the consequences of “failed whiteness” away from the body of the working-class white male and positioning it instead onto the bodies of rural whites.

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<sup>84</sup> “The Darlings Are Coming,” *The Andy Griffith Show*, CBS, March 18, 1963.

<sup>85</sup> Hartigan, 18-22.

Beyond this sort of rural character, working-class families were virtually absent from the small screen throughout the 1960s.<sup>86</sup> Although poverty and inequality were still issues in the United States, common perception—aided by television—was that American society had indeed achieved “classlessness.” But this disconnect between reality and the televised portrayals of American life began to take a toll on television ratings by the late 1960s. As I will explain in more detail in the next chapter, this problem facilitated a revolution in programming that began with a revival of the working-class family sitcom starting in 1971. The new working-class family continued to follow the Lovable Loser format, simply repositioning the family within a more explicit political context. These programs continued to offer at least one Lovable Loser who was unable to assimilate into middle-class norms, along with families that were positioned to make up for their shortcomings. They simply included the additional element of directly acknowledging conflicts in American culture over changing social values and the increasing tendency in middle-class life to question governmental authority. These programs were on the forefront of a trend in television called “relevance” programming, and the first and best-known example of relevance programming was *All in the Family*.

In conclusion, working-class family sitcoms in the early years of the television industry were not all that incongruent with their middle-class counterparts. Both types of programs reinforced the notion that particular standards of behavior and consumption were key to achieving the “classless” American Dream. While the working-class version was explicit about the economic elements of achieving that dream, their middle-

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<sup>86</sup> The only exception seems to be *The Flintstones*, which has been described as a cartoon version of *The Honeymooners*, but few actual people appeared on television as working class throughout the 1960s.

class counterparts focused more on the cultural aspects of maintaining that status. Despite innovations in the format that would occur in the 1970s, the working-class sitcom continued to support the notion that working-class identity within a “classless” America was representative of a kind of failed whiteness, and that those exhibiting behaviors transgressive of middle-class white expectations (cultural or economic) were to blame for their own inability to assimilate. It was not until the appearance of the so-called slobcom in the late 1980s that the Lovable Loser began to be divested of responsibility for his inability to achieve the American Dream. And while later programs continued to rely on the visual and narrative codes for class status established in earlier programs to convey their characters’ class identities to the viewing public, they did so in a way that turned the intent behind those tropes on its head, providing instead an arena for Americans to begin questioning, for the first time on television, the notion of a “classless” nation.

## Chapter Two

### Archie as Ancestor: The Politics of Class on Television, 1971–1987

This chapter will explore major paradigm changes in the American television industry within the context of the shifting terrain of American economics and politics between 1970 and 1988. I am attempting to illuminate the “perfect storm” of events and circumstances that enabled the slobcom to appear in the primetime lineup in 1988, subsequently becoming part of a renewed public conversation about class in American culture and identity in the late 1980s.

The 1970s and 1980s brought a host of changes to American culture, including changes in the economic circumstances of many Americans and the subsequent representations of American culture on a daily basis in the mass media. Adding to the turbulence of these changes were dizzying paradigm shifts within the television industry. While the late 1980s and early 1990s provides its own set of factors in explaining how, exactly, a program like *Roseanne* became such a *tour de force* in American culture, that era simply cannot be understood without considering the economic, cultural, and political milieu in the two decades prior to the program’s run.

The visibility of the American working class in television diminished markedly in the late 1970s and for a decade thereafter, but working-class characters reclaimed their position at the forefront of the Nielsen ratings and as iconic figures in American popular culture with startling speed around 1988. If these new characters resembled their predecessors in many ways, they nevertheless also possessed a remarkable set of attributes that set them apart from working-class characters in the 1970s as well as from

their more distant ancestors from the early years of American television. In particular, late 1980s working-class programs had a new, politically-conscious edge to them. The 1970s-era Archie Bunker would never have claimed, as the 1990s Homer Simpson did, that American workers in lousy jobs should “do a really half-assed job” rather than strike, nor would he have been as sarcastically disenchanted with family life as Al Bundy or as forthcoming about his financial fears as Roseanne and Dan Conner (all characters in late 1980s/early 1990s working-class family sitcoms). And though these examples might suggest that the dominant tone in these new programs was pessimism, a more accurate characterization might be that the new working-class character seemed disenchanted with the American Dream. Archie Bunker may have ranted and raved about changes in the world around him, but he never lost faith in the “system” that promised him good fortune in exchange for hard work. Roseanne Conner, on the other hand, reserved most of her ranting and raving for that same “system,” calling into question the very foundational premise of the American Dream—that hard work and adherence to middle-class codes of conduct would result in upward class mobility and happiness within the American family.

So how did Archie Bunker and his contemporaries beget radicals? At first glance, the major developments in American politics and culture in the 1970s and 1980s, along with the trajectory of the television industry, would seem very unlikely to culminate in a television program with an agenda as left-leaning and class-conscious as *Roseanne*. In fact, Susan Jeffords, Jane Feuer, and other scholars have suggested quite the opposite: the Reagan years have frequently been painted as an era of optimism, stalwart individualism, and perceived “classlessness”—in other words, the epitome of the

American Dream.<sup>87</sup> Further, network executives in the 1980s were explicit about their disinclination to present American life in any way that would “rock the boat.”<sup>88</sup> Up until 1987, network programming was dominated by either the typical sitcom, lighthearted and neatly resolved, on the one hand, or wealth, decadence, and melodrama on the other.<sup>89</sup> What facilitated the emergence of the trend known as the “slobcom,” in which working-class characters with flawed bodies, bank accounts, and attitudes became the new American heroes? And how could a program starring a woman like Roseanne Barr, known best for her feminist politics, imperfect body, and working-class sensibilities, become a Top Ten show when its highly successful competition (*Dallas*, *Dynasty*, and even *The Cosby Show*) was its antithesis? Most importantly, why was the American public eagerly devouring every minute of these pointed critiques of the American Dream?

A complex set of economic, political, and industry changes set in motion a “perfect storm” of sorts that allowed a program like *Roseanne* to come to network television. *Roseanne* in particular touched on a reality that plagued many Americans in the 1980s: the growing disparity between rich and poor and the lack of respect for American workers that characterized an increasingly corporatized and post-Fordist economic culture. How the program was able to reach the American public in a medium that had

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<sup>87</sup> Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1994); Jane Feuer, *Seeing Through the Eighties: Television and Reaganism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995).

<sup>88</sup> Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 194.

<sup>89</sup> I don’t mean to discount Jane Feuer’s arguments that melodramas of the television special variety were indications of profound anxiety in American culture; in fact, her argument that these melodramas pitted social institutions and government as the enemy of individual happiness and independence fits very nicely with my framing of this era. But Feuer essentially argues that these presentations of problems within American life consistently upheld Reaganite arguments about government intervention. They certainly don’t problematize the American Dream narrative. The reaction against the American Dream ethos instead comes along with the slobcom, as I discuss later in this chapter.

never before countenanced this sort of challenge to the American Dream mythology in its four-decade history is the subject of this chapter.

### **1970-1975: “new era for the working man”?<sup>90</sup>**

Although there had been occasional dips in the general post–World War II prosperity that Americans experienced, it was not until the 1970s that economic downturn settled in for the long haul. Nineteen seventy-one marked the first year in the twentieth century in which the United States imported more goods than it exported, and by 1973 real wages for American workers began to drop for the first time since World War II.<sup>91</sup> What made the downturn even more alarming, however, was that it challenged standard economic theory by coming along with inflation. “Stagflation,” as the phenomenon was called, was previously thought to be impossible; as unemployment rose, so the argument went, prices would necessarily drop. But this proved false, and this surprise development left policy makers unsure how to proceed and the public reeling in the wake of the first major economic downturn in almost four decades.<sup>92</sup>

Although popular historical memory of that era now posits that the American working class (in particular, the white working class) reacted to this initial economic downturn by moving to the right politically, in the first few years of the 1970s this segment of the population was still up for grabs politically. Jefferson Cowie argues that the initial waves of stagflation, along with the frustration many rank-and-file workers

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<sup>90</sup> This phrase is quoted by Jefferson Cowie as one of the proclamations made by pundits in the early 1970s; however, it is unclear from his notes who, exactly, he is quoting. Jefferson Cowie, “‘Vigorously Left, Right, and Center’: The Crosscurrents of Working-Class America in the 1970s,” in Bailey and Farber, eds., *America in the 70s* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2004), 77.

<sup>91</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 25.

<sup>92</sup> For a more complete description of the causes and details of the 1970s economic downturn, see Beth Bailey and David Farber, eds., *America in the 70s* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2004), 2-4.

felt over the corrupt leadership of their unions, prompted one of the most significant periods of labor activism in American history in the first few years of the decade.<sup>93</sup> But there was a growing class resentment developing in American culture and politics, too, and the economic downturn exacerbated it. In addition to the highly publicized “hard hat revolts” of May 1970,<sup>94</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich has suggested that the student movement’s intersection with the Civil Rights and Black Power movements led to a great deal of resentment among working-class whites. The white working class often were the first (and most) affected by initiatives like school bussing, affirmative action, and neighborhood integration, and many of them saw the activist children of the middle-class and elites as directly challenging the legitimacy of their way of life.<sup>95</sup> This might be one reason for the popularity among working-class voters of George Wallace, who combined populist rhetoric with a right-wing political agenda. His surprising support amongst white, working-class voters, not just in the South but in the North, suggested to Republicans that working-class voters were disenchanted with a floundering and (perceived) elitist Democratic Party and were susceptible to wooing by the Right.<sup>96</sup>

As Americans entered the 1970s, however, there was very little in television programming that suggested the new significance and position of working-class whites in national politics; indeed, there was very little on television that suggested a white

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<sup>93</sup> Among the strikes and other political actions taken by rank-and-file workers that Cowie mentions are the 1970 postal workers strike, the 1972 Lordstown, Ohio, strike against GM, the J.P. Stevens organizing drive of 1974, and the formation of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, the Coalition of Labor Union Women, and 9 to 5, all before 1975. Cowie, 78-84.

<sup>94</sup> Construction workers descended upon students in Manhattan protesting the Kent State killings and chased them through the streets of the financial district on national television.

<sup>95</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1990), 128-132.

<sup>96</sup> Cowie, 87.

working class existed in the United States at all. This shift was evident for those who were paying attention—the New Left attempts to organize among the urban poor, Michael Harrington’s highly publicized book *The Other America*, and Lyndon Johnson’s “War on Poverty” all signaled that class inequity was an urgent issue for many Americans—but the television industry continued up until 1971 to offer such tired fare as variety shows hosted by film and television stars from earlier decades,<sup>97</sup> long-running Westerns from the 1950s,<sup>98</sup> supernatural or otherwise fantastic comedy scenarios, and rural (or “pastoral,” as they were called) families on primetime. This sort of programming hardly spoke to the increasing concerns that Americans were voicing about their society. In 1971, a study commissioned by the federal government reported:

Today, there is virtually no accurate dramatic representation—as there was in the 1930s—of men and women in working-class occupations . . . Research shows that less than one character in ten on television is a blue-collar worker, and these few are usually portrayed as crude people with undesirable social traits. Furthermore, portrayals tend to emphasize class stereotypes: lawyers are clever, while construction workers are louts.<sup>99</sup>

It wasn’t just academics and analysts who had noticed the dissonance between primetime and everyday life: Baby Boomers, who (along with their parents) had long

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<sup>97</sup> One of the reasons that these star vehicles remained in circulation in the late 1960s is that William S. Paley, owner of CBS, had used direct star ownership of programs as a financial incentive to lure them to his network in the late 1940s. Although these programs remained extremely popular with older, rural viewers, demographic research showed that the most sought-after demographic, 18- to 30-year-olds, were simply not watching these shows. Eileen Meehan, "Critical Theorizing on Broadcast History," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 30:4 (Fall 1986), 396.

<sup>98</sup> Fred Silverman, the only person ever to have headed all three of the original major networks, has claimed that William S. Paley, longtime owner of CBS, actually fired the president of the network for moving *Gunsmoke* off the schedule during a 1970 planning meeting for the next year's schedule, despite the general agreement that the show's aging audience demographic was an advertising liability. Although most television executives knew that this kind of programming simply was not reaching their target audiences, the industry was still dominated by god-like figures such as Paley, and no amount of reason seemed to convince them that the formulas that had been the foundation of their success when television first emerged as a national medium were, in fact, no longer relevant. Fred Silverman, Interview with the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, American Television Archive, June 27, 2001, Los Angeles, California.

<sup>99</sup> As quoted in Ehrenreich, 141.

been the target of American advertisers, were becoming tired of the irrelevance of primetime to the daily life of the nation. Media scholar Susan Douglas observes that the turbulence of social justice movements shown on the nightly news stood in stark contrast to the middle-class characters that dominated primetime: “News cameras showed us sit-ins protesting segregation; the networks gave us *Dennis the Menace*, *The Flintstones*, *Hazel*, and *Mr. Ed*, inhabitants of a bizarre cartoon world hermetically sealed off from politics and history.”<sup>100</sup> The divide between news programming and entertainment programming in the late 1960s is startling. In 1968, for example, television news brought into American homes the Tet Offensive (and Walter Cronkite’s subsequent disavowal of the Vietnam War), the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy, multiple riots in American cities, and the infamous Democratic National Convention in Chicago. During the same period, the Nielsen ratings listed the following entertainment programming as the most popular:

1. *The Andy Griffith Show*
2. *The Lucy Show*
3. *Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C.*
4. *Gunsmoke*
5. *Family Affair*
6. *Bonanza*
7. *The Red Skelton Hour*
8. *The Dean Martin Show*
9. *The Jackie Gleason Show*
10. *Saturday Night at the Movies*<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Douglas, 26-27.

<sup>101</sup> Ratings listed in Alex McNeil, *Total Television* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 1161. The next ten programs in the ratings were very similar: *Bewitched* ran a close 11<sup>th</sup>, and movie nights, westerns, star vehicles, and rural sitcoms comprised the rest of the list, with one exception. By the 1967-68 season, the first of the edgier, politically-aware programs that dominated the 1970s had appeared in the form of the *Smothers Brother Comedy Hour*. However, this program endured constant censorship and criticism from the establishment, and this particular incarnation lasted only about 18 months. (It was cancelled after Tom Smothers attended the National Broadcasters Association meeting in an effort to find political support in fighting CBS’s censorship efforts). McNeil, 767.

By the late 1960s, the television industry saw a real decline in its viewing numbers, especially among urban Baby Boomers (its target audience at the time). Robert Wood, president of CBS, was very concerned about the fact that NBC was luring away advertisers from the #1 CBS with promises of a younger, hipper audience. Ironically, Paul Klein of NBC, father of Least Objectionable Programming (LOP), was now arguing for targeted demographic programming. According to media studies scholar Eileen Meehan,

the Nielsen ratings demonstrated CBS's appeal to geriatrics and rubes versus NBC's attraction to younger adults eager to consume detergents, cars, and processed foods. In his overtures to the advertising industry, Klein emphasized this difference, pointing out that advertisers were better served by placing commercials in less costly time slots that reached the right audience.<sup>102</sup>

The mantra of LOP had apparently failed the ratings giant, and CBS was looking for a new paradigm to embrace. Robert Wood, then president of CBS, decided that the network would have to shift its programming to be “young, urban, and more realistic.”<sup>103</sup>

This notion of “relevance” programming was, from its inception, an effort to entice Baby Boomers back to the medium. As the Nielsen ratings became increasingly sophisticated, networks were able to learn almost overnight whether their new programs were ratings successes in general *as well as* determine whether the coveted young, urban viewer was watching their show. A few stabs at “relevance” emerged in the 1960s in the form of “law-and-order” programming geared toward youth or the presentation of a comfortably middle-class black presence; however, with the possible

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<sup>102</sup> Meehan, 397.

<sup>103</sup> Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time*, 209.

exceptions of *The Mod Squad* and *Julia*, they invariably failed.<sup>104</sup> It really wasn't until 1971 that the "relevance" trend overtook the medium, primarily due to the rise of a comedy writer named Norman Lear.

The son of working-class Russian Jewish immigrants, Lear had grown up in a world that didn't resemble the American Dream, assimilationist families of 1950s and 1960s television programming. After reading about the British television comedy '*Til Death Do Us Part*', he was inspired to recreate his own family in fictional format for the small screen. The political arguments between the father (Archie) and his son-in-law (Mike, whom Archie called "Meathead" or "you dumb Pollack") were updated versions of the arguments that Lear, a self-described progressive, used to have with his conservative father.<sup>105</sup> Although television's working-class families in the past had had their share of problems, the kind of conflicts that occurred in the Bunker home were unprecedented, in that they addressed current political issues and attempted to break through the divide between the censored version of home life that had traditionally appeared on screen and the less polite, messier version that most people recognized from their own experiences. They were also a huge hit with the American public; by the end of its first season, *All in the Family* was a commercial and critical success and it had launched the new paradigm of "relevance." Lear's style was so dominant in the 1970s that Johnny Carson began the

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<sup>104</sup> Josh Ozersky, *Archie Bunker's America: TV in an Era of Change, 1968-1978* (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003), 46-50.

<sup>105</sup> His father had spent a significant part of Lear's childhood incarcerated, and his uncle's generosity to him as a child led Lear to want to follow in his footsteps by becoming a press agent. Lear began working in the television industry in New York at a young age, eventually moving his family to Los Angeles and getting his big break writing for comedy great Jerry Lewis. As his career developed, he began experimenting with writing sitcom scripts. Norman Lear, Interview with the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, American Television Archive, February 26, 1998, Brentwood, California.

Emmy awards one year by joking “Welcome to the Norman Lear show.”<sup>106</sup> Industry executives scrambled to mimic Lear’s success.

From the very beginning, *All in the Family* addressed issues in American society that had previously been entertainment television taboos—Vietnam, Cold War political ethics (especially Watergate), and, perhaps most memorably, racism. This time, the lesson to be learned was not that white ethnics could earn equal status. Instead, the lessons learned from the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s dictated that African Americans should be afforded equal standing—that is, as long as they, too, assimilated into middle-class culture and values. This dynamic played itself out in the epic battles between Archie, the show’s blue-collar protagonist, and Mike, Archie’s upwardly mobile son-in-law, on a regular basis throughout the series. Consistent with the Lovable Loser character established by his predecessors, Archie represented the stereotype of the white, blue-collar worker: bigoted, uneducated, and threatened by advances in rights for women and people of color. Even in the pilot episode, the question of racism within the white working class is foregrounded:

**Mike:** You know why we got a breakdown in law and order in this country, Archie? Because we got poverty, real poverty. And you know why we got that? Because guys like you are unwilling to give the Black man, the Mexican American, and all the other minorities their just and rightful, hard-earned share of the American Dream.

**Archie:** Oh, that’s gorgeous! If your spics and your spades want their rightful share of the American Dream, let ‘em get out there and hustle for it just like I did.

**Mike:** Yeah, but Archie, you’re forgetting one thing! You didn’t have to hustle for it in black skin.

**Archie:** No, I didn’t have to hustle with one arm and one leg, neither. So what?

**Mike:** So you’re admitting that the Black man is handicapped.

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<sup>106</sup> Lear interview.

**Archie:** Oh, no, no more than me! He's just as good as me!

**Mike:** Now I suppose you're gonna tell me that the Black man has had the same opportunity in this country as you?

**Archie:** More, he's had more. I didn't have no million people out there marching and protesting to get me my job!

**Edith:** No, his uncle got it for him.

**Archie:** All I'm saying is don't blame me! You, and that Reverend "Bleeding-Heart" Felcher up there in his ivory shower [sic].<sup>107</sup>

*All in the Family* presented a politics that had never found a place in primetime before, but it still reinforced the notion of upward class mobility as the ultimate goal for working-class Americans. Cold War gender norms, while debated on the program, continued to be maintained within the Bunker household. Mike and Gloria Stivic (Mike's wife and Archie and Edith's daughter) were living with her parents while Mike completed graduate school. Although Archie didn't always understand why Mike wasn't able to "support" his wife, the assumption that he *should* support his wife and the idea that his education would position the Stivics as middle class were always present. In "Gloria Discovers Women's Lib," Mike shows his true colors. An argument starts when Gloria is defending her mother from her father's constant belittling and barked orders. When Archie refuses to bow to Gloria's feminist logic, she turns to her husband for support:

**Gloria:** Tell him, Michael, tell him what he's doing to her!

**Mike:** It's none of my business.

**Gloria:** Oppressed blacks are your business. Discrimination against Puerto Ricans, Jews and Poles and every other minority is your business. What about discrimination against women?

**Mike:** Gloria, it's not the same thing.

**Gloria:** How can you say that, Michael? You read the books!

**Mike:** Yes, I read the books, but that doesn't mean I buy the whole bag! Yes, I believe women should have equal job opportunities. Yes, I believe they should have equal pay.

**Gloria:** You better believe in it!

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<sup>107</sup> "Meet the Bunkers," *All in the Family*, CBS, January 12, 1971.

**Mike:** But I don't believe in a woman opening up her big mouth around the house, so shut up, would ya?<sup>108</sup>

While Mike and Gloria represented the “enlightened” viewpoint in the program, the fundamental assumptions of Cold War culture about the nuclear family and upward class mobility remained. Mike, who is explicitly identified as Polish-American, represents the Baby Boomer generation of white ethnics, whose parents would have moved into the suburbs after World War II in an embrace of the American Dream’s promise of upward class mobility. Mike, then, as a generational contemporary to Junior (the son in *The Life of Riley*, discussed in chapter 1), would expect to build upon his parents’ Dream, and would see the gender norms associated with assimilation into the middle class as part and parcel of the arrangement.

While public debates about Vietnam, women’s rights, gay rights, Watergate, unions, environmental pollution, etc., were unprecedented within the sitcom format, the belief that working-class culture represented a failure to assimilate was a continuity with *All in the Family*’s predecessors. This turn to “relevance,” while focused around working-class characters and political issues that affected everyday Americans, didn’t necessarily support a revolution in conceptions of national and class identity. Just as Lear’s arguments with his father weren’t about his working-class roots so much as they were about Lear’s frustrations with his father’s right-wing opinions, *All in the Family* wasn’t so much about class as it was about American anxiety over political polarization. In fact, by the end of the show’s run, Archie had bought a bar and become solidly middle-class, despite remaining lovably churlish. Josh Ozersky has argued that Lear’s formula relied on caricaturing the political extremes of the real “America,” turning them

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<sup>108</sup> “Gloria Discovers Women’s Lib,” *All in the Family*, CBS, March 23, 1971.

into a joke that all sides could laugh over. Ozersky writes: “despite Lear’s liberalism, the show was essentially conservative. To that degree . . . leftward critics of the program were correct: *All in the Family* did trivialize serious issues. Once the novelty of dinner-table discussions of war and Watergate wore off, *All in the Family* came more and more to use topical issues merely as springboard for character-driven humor.”<sup>109</sup>

In many ways, *All in the Family* also furthered the stereotype of the white working class as uniformly ignorant and racist. Carroll O’Connor, the actor who played Archie, explained to *TV Guide* that “Archie’s dilemma is coping with a world that is changing in front of him. . . . But he won’t get to the root of the problem because the root of the problem is himself, and he doesn’t know it.”<sup>110</sup> As early as 1969, critics had been warning of the dangers of overemphasizing white working-class racism: “By repeating the rather comforting doctrine that racial hostility was to be found among the working class and particularly among . . . ‘the ethnics,’ rather than among ‘people of substantial place and means,’ the media were spreading an unproven simplification and one that was in danger of being self-verifying.”<sup>111</sup> Lear’s refusal to position his characters as anything other than opposite extremes resulted in much visibility without much substance; while the program seemed on the surface to be progressive in its presentation of an alternate vision of a supposedly “classless” America, in the end, viewers on both ends of the political spectrum were able to point to these caricatured representations as confirmation of their own political beliefs rather than as cause for reexamining them.

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<sup>109</sup> Ozersky, 77-78.

<sup>110</sup> As quoted in McNeil, 26.

<sup>111</sup> Lewis Chester, Godfrey Hodson, and Bruce Page, *The American Melodrama: The Presidential Campaign of 1968* (New York: Viking Press, 1969), 164, as quoted in Ehrenreich, 105. Lear commented in 1998 that they had carefully avoided associating Archie with a particular ethnic identity, but nevertheless many viewers “saw” him as Irish (which probably was fostered by the fact that the character was played by Carroll O’Connor). Lear interview.

Nevertheless, the new “relevance” version of the working-class family sitcom paved the way for their descendants, the working-class families of late 1980s television, who were finally able to destabilize the notion that working-class status represented failure.

Lear’s later programs, although they certainly featured working-class characters (and working-class people of color, which was a daring new move for the medium), nevertheless stuck to the shock-and-insult, character-driven formula that had made *All in the Family* such a success. Shows like *Sanford and Son* and *Good Times* deserve some credit for depicting the trials and frustrations of the invisible American “other,” but they did so without acknowledging the role that institutions and systematic prejudice played in these characters’ struggles and therefore implicitly suggesting that their often buffoonish behavior might be due to their lack of educated assimilation into (white) middle-class norms. And as the nation moved into even deeper economic crisis and political uncertainty in the late 1970s, the lack of public debate over the underlying reasons for these phenomena served to push more people toward the extreme ends of the political spectrum or out of political engagement altogether.

### **1975-1980: “a swan song” for working-class visibility**

The recession of 1975 had enormous and unfortunate implications for the burgeoning labor movement of the era. Rather than maintaining their positions as the “muscle” of the masses, so to speak, unions and their members found themselves positioned as scapegoats for the misfortunes of the working class under stagflation.

Jefferson Cowie notes:

The 1970s ended up as the first decade in which, according to critics, organized workers simply made too much money and their high rates of pay caused a national crisis. Union members remained relatively immune to inflationary pressures because they typically had cost-of-living adjustment mechanisms in their contracts, but the majority of the nation's employees were not so fortunate. In previous decades the unionized sectors pulled the wages and benefits of nonunion workers upward, but with union members reigning as a new aristocracy of labor in inflationary times, the interest of the organized and unorganized diverged more dramatically than at any other time in the postwar era. Resentment and fear between the two groups replaced the hope for solidarity.<sup>112</sup>

This became especially significant during the Reagan years, as Reagan demonized organized labor as the culprit for much of the working class's woes. The primary structural cause of this divergence of interests and solidarities was the U.S. economy's transformation in the mid-1970s from a Fordist to a post-Fordist economy—a move that devastated industrial sectors and resulted in the “rust belt” phenomenon, which continues today, in the upper Midwest. Fordism characterized the American economy from the post–World War II era through the early 1970s, and according to Nick Heffernan may be defined as “the establishment of a durable balance between the mass production of standardized goods on the one hand, and the mass consumption of such goods on the other.”<sup>113</sup> Post-Fordism, on the other hand, is a fundamental shift from a production-based economy that requires a trained, relatively stable supply of workers to a service-based one that thrives on “flexibility” of employees, production, and consumption.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Cowie, 84.

<sup>113</sup> Nick Heffernan, *Capital, Class, and Technology in Contemporary American Culture: Projecting Post-Fordism* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 3.

<sup>114</sup> Stuart Hall sees post-Fordism as embodying the following characteristics: “a shift to the new ‘information technologies;’ more flexible, decentralized forms of labour process and work organization; decline of the old manufacturing base and the growth of the ‘sunrise,’ computer-based industries; the hiving off or contracting out of functions and services; a greater emphasis on choice and product differentiation, on marketing, packaging, and design, on the ‘targeting’ of consumers by lifestyle, taste

The key (and contrasting) terms in these definitions are “durability” and “flexibility”; this fundamental shift unsettled American workers in ways that had far-reaching cultural, economic, and political consequences. The change inevitably affected working-class Americans more than any other group, as workers who had grown up in families with generations of employment in various industrial sectors now found themselves without jobs *or* skills to compete in a new service-oriented job market. And while industrial work had long been unionized, the vast majority of service-industry jobs was not (and *still* is not, for that matter).<sup>115</sup> Workers faced the unsettling notion that their standard of living simply could not be maintained, no matter how hard they worked. Since unionized workers, as discussed above, seemed to many working-class Americans to have joined the ranks of the comfortable middle class, organizing was no longer seen as the solution to economic problems brought on by the “rust belt” phenomenon. And even the unions themselves seemed to have no practical answer to the outsourcing and abandonment of American industrial sites by the corporate world in favor of cheaper plants outside the country.<sup>116</sup> As Jefferson Cowie has characterized the era, “the 1970s ended not as a revival [of worker visibility and agency], but as a swan song.”<sup>117</sup>

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and culture rather than by categories of social class; a decline in the proportion of the skilled, male, manual working class, the rise of the service and white-collar classes and the ‘feminization’ of the work force; an economy dominated by the multinationals, with their new international division of labor and their greater autonomy from nation-state control; and the ‘globalization’ of the new financial markets, linked by the communications revolution.” Stuart Hall, “Brave New World: The Debate About Post-Fordism,” *Socialist Review* 21, no.1 (January–March 1991): 57–64.

<sup>115</sup> Stanley Aronowitz, *The Politics of Identity: Class, Culture, Social Movements* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 3-9.

<sup>116</sup> Harvey, 53.

<sup>117</sup> Cowie, 77.

Meanwhile, television programming was changing almost as dramatically. As the 1970s rolled on, American viewers responded less and less to the in-your-face, character-driven politics that the Lear formula relied upon for laughs. The perception within the networks was that viewers wanted to get away from the acrimonious political atmosphere of the early 1970s; however, what, exactly, they wanted was beyond the knowledge of the networks. The only definitive response networks could point to was the outrage and subsequent pressure to reform programming content that culminated in the response to the 1974 NBC television movie *Born Innocent*. When NBC was sued over what appeared to be a “copycat” crime days after the movie (which featured an all-female gang rape with a plunger), the industry rushed to fend off the resulting political heat generated by a Congress eager to change the subject from Watergate to anything else it could find. CBS President Arthur Taylor rashly suggested in the midst of the heated controversy that all networks should institute a primetime “family hour” every night of the week, and the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) jumped on the idea as a quick fix to the public relations nightmare they were experiencing.<sup>118</sup> One of the more obvious ways that this affected programming trends is that it broke up the Lear/MTM programming blocks that CBS had relied upon for the last five years, making Lear’s brand of programming less omnipotent. “Family Hour” was struck down by the courts in late 1976. But while this allowed for titillation to return to primetime programming, the “Family Hour” saga made networks more leery of any programming that might run afoul of public sentiment against controversy. Further, it galvanized the “Moral Majority,” a conservative political Action Committee that officially formed in

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<sup>118</sup> Ozersky, 107-108.

1978, to focus much of its efforts on ridding the airwaves of “immoral” programming.<sup>119</sup>

A massive ratings war ensued in the wake of “Family Hour,” in which the increasingly fast reception of (and obsession with) ratings resulted in short-term commitments for series, which were often cancelled after just a few episodes.<sup>120</sup> Between the unprecedeted power and money that had been amassed by the networks at this point and the atmosphere of uncertainty and even fear within the industry over making a mistake, programming no longer strove for “relevance”—it was too much of a gamble. The 1978-79 season saw innocuous sitcoms take over the Nielsen Top Ten:

1. *Laverne & Shirley*
2. *Three's Company*
3. *Mork & Mindy*  
*Happy Days*
5. *Angie*
6. *60 Minutes*
7. *M\*A\*S\*H*
8. *The Ropers*
9. *All in the Family*  
*Taxi*<sup>121</sup>

Further, the working-class characters in the early 1970s seemed virtually unaware of class in this new, less politically-charged paradigm in broadcasting. Several of the sitcoms (*Laverne & Shirley*, *Angie*, *All in the Family*, and *Taxi* in particular) featured characters coded as working class but without commentary on class’s

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<sup>119</sup> Norman Lear and others filed suit against the networks for violating the First Amendment in the imposition of “Family Hour.” (Lear argued that the forced move of *All in the Family* and other Lear programs had also financially impacted his company.) David Rintels, president of the Writers Guild, argued, “A policy directed against sex and violence has in practice turned out to be something very different, a crusade against ideas.” Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. rev. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 474-480.

<sup>120</sup> Ozersky, 122-124.

<sup>121</sup> Ratings listed in McNeil, 1464. *Angie* was a rags-to-riches story, while *The Ropers* was a spin-off of *Three's Company*.

significance in their lives. And although *M\*A\*S\*H* was certainly a program with political themes and a pointed critique of the Vietnam War, even it had to be carefully positioned in another era and cushioned with tons of sexual innuendo and silly distractions.<sup>122</sup> The “relevance” era did impact these new programs, in that they incorporated the new freedom to include previously taboo topics into otherwise politically harmless shows. Sexual frankness was common in programs like *Soap*, *Charlie’s Angels*, and *Three’s Company*; ethnic diversity, while still not representative of actual American demographics, took a step forward in programs like *Welcome Back, Kotter* and *Chico and the Man*; and tolerance was a foundational message of seemingly apolitical shows like *The Incredible Hulk* and even *Starsky and Hutch*. But, as Ozersky suggests, these “[c]ontroversial issues were touched upon in a harmless way in an occasional bid for prestige.”<sup>123</sup> This was the primary difference between the direct acknowledgment of the 1960s cultural revolutions occurring in early 1970s television and the co-optation of these newly-established ideals into a less controversial form that characterized the late 1970s. Further, the advent of the Reagan administration solidified industry reluctance to truly explore the class issues (both cultural and economic) that Americans were facing. But another factor—technology—also played a significant role in shaking up the television industry’s approach to primetime. Although cable television and the VCR didn’t reach their full impact on television until the 1980s, their presence in the 1970s foreshadowed major changes within the industry.

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<sup>122</sup> Larry Gelbart, writer and co-producer of *M\*A\*S\*H*, testified in the battle over “Family Hour” that in fact the show had encountered pressure from the networks to tone down their sharp political critique. Barnouw, 477-478.

<sup>123</sup> Ozersky, 117. One great example of this that Ozersky mentions is the TV miniseries *Roots*.

## Technological Transformation

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, long-anticipated (and much dreaded within the industry) technological developments in the way Americans watched television were having their own impact on shifting paradigms in the industry. In 1956, a company called Ampex had publicly demonstrated the world's first videotape recorder, to the dismay of its rival RCA and others in the television and film industries. While the notion of recording broadcasts for use outside of the studio itself had long been discussed (the use of kinescope for delayed broadcast, while common in the industry, was simply not practical for use outside the networks), Ampex's demonstration underscored the necessity for those within the industry to control the new technology before it destroyed the industry itself.<sup>124</sup> Like the development of television as a mass medium, however, the widespread use of videotape recording by the public was delayed by insiders until they could do exactly that—maintain at least some control over the terms of the public's usage. It was not until 1975 that the first video cassette recorders, or VCRs, became widely available to the public.<sup>125</sup>

Part of the reason for the delay was the huge debate within industry circles<sup>126</sup> over what would happen to the television audience once they were able to 1) arrange

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<sup>124</sup> Frederick Wasser, *Veni, Vidi, Video: The Hollywood Empire and the VCR* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 48.

<sup>125</sup> Wasser, 50. One of the primary reasons that videotape recorders became available to the public even as early as the 1970s was the fact that Japanese businesses, particularly Sony, Matsushita, and Japan Victor Company (JVC), were the primary forces behind the public offering. Sony's Betamax recorder, while eventually forced into obsolescence by JVC's VHS, was in fact extremely profitable, so much so that the profit was enough to fund Sony's revolutionary electronic products in the 1980s, namely the walkman and the compact disc. Wasser, 70-75.

<sup>126</sup> By “industry circles,” I mean the almost inextricable industries of film and television that both stood to be impacted by the advent of the VCR. While I am focusing here on the impact of home recording and viewing technologies on broadcasting, Wasser and others point to the enormous impact of these technologies on the film industry as well. Although nods to those implications may appear in this chapter, they are not my primary topic and therefore will not be fully explored. For a fuller exploration, see Wasser.

their television viewing around their schedules, rather than arranging their schedules around their television viewing; and 2) edit out the advertising that funded the broadcasts themselves. Industry research indicated quite clearly that, despite every effort to sway public opinion to the contrary, potential consumers wanted machines that *recorded* material directly from what was broadcast into their homes, rather than simply access to material from the industry that could be subsequently played on machines within the home at their leisure.<sup>127</sup> This notion of the VCR as a “time shifter,” which would free television audiences to watch what and when they pleased, had enormous implications for the relationship between networks and advertisers. Viewers could do two potentially disastrous things with these new machines: edit out or fast forward through the advertisements that funded the industry, which could force down ad rates; and show network materials in other venues, which would cut the copyright owners out of significant profits. In fact, the ad campaign developed for Sony was so explicit about “time shifting” that Universal City Studios took them to court on the grounds of facilitating copyright infringement.<sup>128</sup> The publicity generated from this lawsuit had far-reaching implications for the development of the television industry in the 1980s.

These developments were accompanied by the emergence of cable television as a mass-marketed phenomenon. Cable television had been around almost as long as broadcast television; originally, it served as a way to provide television access to communities in hilly or sparsely-populated areas. However, as criticism of television content increased in the 1960s, cable television providers used the argument that the so-called “vast wasteland” of network television provided little in the way of choice for

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<sup>127</sup> Wasser, 66.

<sup>128</sup> See Wasser on the ad campaigns promoting the VCR as a “time shifter” in the 1970s, 71-87.

viewers. Allowing cable television operators to offer their services to all television owners regardless of location, so the argument went, would provide increased diversity in programming and subsequently the opportunity to choose “quality” programming. The courts were sympathetic, starting the process of deregulating cable television in 1972 and continuing to uphold the rights of the new Home Box Office (HBO) cable network and others in court cases throughout the 1970s. Between 1972 and 1978, the number of cable television subscribers more than doubled.<sup>129</sup>

But the entertainment industry on a large scale found ways to turn these new developments to their advantage, thanks to the increasing deregulation of media industries in the 1980s. Although FCC and other federal policy had traditionally worked to at least contain monopolization within the entertainment industries,<sup>130</sup> the Reagan administration changed this. According to C. H. Sterling, the Reagan years “saw removal of many long-standing rules resulting in an overall reduction in FCC oversight of station and network operations.”<sup>131</sup> In particular, Carol Stabile claims that the Cable Act of 1984 “effectively deregulat[ed] the industry.”<sup>132</sup> This unprecedented sympathy of

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<sup>129</sup> Wasser, 81-82.

<sup>130</sup> The film and television industries have often been at odds with federal policy on ownership, distribution, and other elements of the business. Federal decrees, like the 1939 FCC ruling forcing RCA to divest itself of ABC, the 1948 *Paramount et. al.* decision, the institution of the Financial Interest and Syndication (or Fin/Syn) Rules governing vertical and horizontal ownership in broadcasting, etc., had been much more common than the relaxation of any rules governing potential monopolization—that is, until the Reagan administration came into power in the 1980s. In addition to the changes in broadcasting listed above, the Attorney General’s office issued an announcement in 1985 that they would no longer enforce the 1948 *Paramount* decision because of the impact that videorecorders and cable had had on the industry. As a result, as Wasser writes, “Major U.S. Distributors negotiated theater purchases worth over \$1.5 billion in 1986 and acquired significant ownership positions in one-fifth of the North American movie screens.” Wasser, 135-136.

<sup>131</sup> C. H. Sterling, “Deregulation,” in *The Encyclopedia of Television*, Museum of Broadcast Communications, <http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/D/htmlD/deregulation/deregulation.htm> (accessed September 25, 2006).

<sup>132</sup> Carole Stabile, “Resistance, Reflexivity, and Recuperation: The Limits of a Paradigm,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communications* 12, no. 4 (December 1995): 409.

the federal government for broadcasters was rationalized by the presence of the home video market and cable, which television policy deregulators argued negated the “fairness doctrine.” In short, the fairness doctrine was based on the notion of “equal time” for opposing political viewpoints on the airwaves, the logic being that, although the number of broadcast licenses was finite and airtime consequently scarce, the airwaves belonged to the public and should provide equal access to varying public opinions.<sup>133</sup> Those in the Reagan administration, however, argued that the accessibility of cable and home video to a significant number of households negated that logic, and therefore networks were absolved from their obligation to represent a full spectrum of public viewpoints.<sup>134</sup> As Barnouw explains the logic behind the Reagan administration’s deregulatory mood, “Amid an evolving abundance, why should not communication be left to market forces?”<sup>135</sup> And as we shall see, this approach to governmental regulation was well in keeping with the nascent neoliberalism that was increasingly pervading American economic logic.

As a result, limits on how many media outlets one company could control began to disappear, and the film industry in particular became even more imbedded in the television industry. Barnouw describes, for example, how an elaborate hierarchy of film releases extended the life (and sales potential) of Hollywood full-length features:

Theatrical use would still come first—a catalyst for all other markets. But home video release would come next, before HBO or any of its pay-television rivals. Through this strategy, home owners might be induced to buy or rent the video before having the chance to tape the film off-air. After HBO or other premium channels would come sales to the old

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<sup>133</sup> Newton Minow, Interview with the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, Archive of American Television, July 7, 1999, Chicago, Illinois.

<sup>134</sup> Wasser, 187.

<sup>135</sup> Barnouw, 490.

mainstays—NBC, CBS, ABC—for sponsored broadcasting revenue. Then would come syndication, domestic and foreign—first run, second run, third run, ad infinitum. The world television market remained omnivorous.<sup>136</sup>

Finally, major, global corporations were taking advantage of the massive deregulation of media industries. Although there had traditionally been a seven television-station, seven radio-station limit on broadcast ownership, a 1985 decision that extended those limits, combined with FCC chairperson Mark Fowler's propensity to grant even greater exceptions to mergers and takeover, made that year one of dramatic change for network ownership. By the end of the 1980s, what had begun in the 1970s with Hollywood studios—the buyout of individual companies by major, global corporations—had fully overtaken the television industry as well. In fact, television networks and Hollywood studios (along with radio stations, music labels, and newspapers) were often simply branches of massive media corporations. Lord Robert Maxwell, owner of Pergamon Press and one of the major rivals to other media moguls like Rupert Murdoch and Ted Turner, predicted that there would be “only ten global corporations of communications” by 1995.<sup>137</sup>

The slobcoms that emerged beginning in 1987, then, were appearing in a remarkably different milieu than their 1970s predecessors, in the midst of greatly increased power for networks due to industry deregulation, but also in an atmosphere where networks felt compelled to experiment with differentiation in program formulae. Although the Reagan years were characterized by increasing autonomy for broadcasters and the beginning of the present-day trend toward media monopolization, network

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<sup>136</sup> Barnouw, 501-502.

<sup>137</sup> Barnouw, 509-512.

television was nevertheless still adjusting to the ways that technology had changed the rules of the game within the industry. Further, as I will discuss below, network television itself had a new player: FOX. In the years just prior to *Roseanne*'s premiere in 1988, FOX's embrace of narrowcasting, along with political disenchantment among the American public and the need to acknowledge the new anxieties emerging at the end of the Cold War, provided a space in primetime for a "show about class and women"<sup>138</sup>—a phenomenon that would have been unthinkable in the days of Archie Bunker.

### **1980-1987: Deregulation and Focus on the Family**

These significant changes in television (and film) were occurring at a moment when American politics were shifting to the right. Conservatives, reacting to the social revolutions of the 1960s almost as soon as they started and eager to gain the white working-class vote, had become extraordinarily well organized by the late 1970s. Organizations such as the Moral Majority PAC began organizing conservative whites who resented the equalizing forces of the women's movement, the Civil Rights movement, and other social justice movements. Experiencing what Jimmy Carter called a "crisis of confidence," Americans were searching for someone who represented a confident, winning, and—as Susan Jeffords has suggested—even heroic future for the nation that wouldn't require such a dramatic break with Cold War norms as the cultural revolutions of the 1960s had called for. Ronald Reagan, who garnered the Republican

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<sup>138</sup> Roseanne Barr interview with Terry Gross, March 3, 1994, National Public Radio; as quoted in Julie Bettie, "Class Dismissed? Roseanne and the Changing Face of Working-Class Iconography," *Social Text* 45 (Winter 1995), 134.

nomination for president via his Hollywood career and the governor's mansion in California, was able to capitalize on people's fears and resentments in his 1980 campaign for president.<sup>139</sup>

Reagan's genius lay in presenting a masculine-yet-benign, populist image of himself and his vision of American national identity while at the same time promoting a neoliberal economic strategy that was anything but benign or populist. Using the campaign theme "Morning in America," Reagan claimed that unification of the American people behind basic rhetorical images—individualism, hard work, and consensus-era morality: in other words, the foundational premises of the American Dream—would bring the United States out of its 1970s funk. Todd Gitlin notes that "Reagan promised to be the one-man antidote to identity crises." Relying heavily on Cold War rhetoric as the crucible uniting Americans in a common cause, Reagan simultaneously revived interest in the Cold War and stripped the federal budget bare of much beyond a skyrocketing national debt and a formidable defense budget.<sup>140</sup>

But Reagan also needed a scapegoat. He drew upon (indeed, was explicitly a participant in) a trend in the late 1970s to vilify welfare recipients as the culprits responsible for the wilting American economy.<sup>141</sup> "[Reagan's] version of white populist claims on America could work only if white fears and resentments against what Katz (1989) calls the 'undeserving poor' could be effectively figured and circulated in the contemporary white imaginary," Herman Gray argues. "This, of course, is the reason

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<sup>139</sup> Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 26-28.

<sup>140</sup> Todd Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America is Wracked by Culture Wars* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1995), 77-79.

<sup>141</sup> Barnouw, 485-486.

that the rearticulation of and appeals to whiteness mattered so much in the discourse of Reaganism. Such resentment and fear depended largely on an effective shift in political rhetoric: from a focus on the poor and disadvantaged recipients of state-sponsored support to an emphasis on taxpayers, the white suburban middle class, and erosion in the quality of American life.”<sup>142</sup>

Racialized and gendered images of the American working class and poor in the 1980s were perhaps best characterized by Reagan-generated fictions such as the “Welfare Queen,” the character Reagan frequently invoked in explaining his rationale for eviscerating social programs. As early as his 1976 presidential run,<sup>143</sup> Reagan was well-versed in a politics of division between the working class and the poor by suggesting that his cuts in federal aid programs were designed to support workers by cutting their taxes and replacing that money in the federal budget through the investigation of those supposedly “cheating” the welfare system or other federal assistance programs. As he characterized it in a 1981 speech:

This is the type of thing that we think there's much more of it than anyone realizes, as was evidenced in Chicago a couple of years ago with the -- or a few years ago -- with the welfare queen who went on trial. And it was found that in addition to collecting welfare under 123 different names, she also had 55 social security cards. So, this is where we were going to try and make some of the changes.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for “Blackness”* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 18.

<sup>143</sup> The earliest reference to the “Welfare Queen” story coming from Reagan that I can find is February 15, 1976. “‘Welfare Queen’ Becomes Issue in Reagan Campaign,” *New York Times*, February 15, 1976, 51.

<sup>144</sup> “Remarks in an Interview With Managing Editors on Domestic Issues, December 3, 1981,” *The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan*, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1981/120381e.htm> (accessed July 10, 2008).

The Welfare Queen, who was a hyperbolic version of a woman charged in 1976 for using four aliases to defraud the Illinois state welfare system out of \$8000,<sup>145</sup> provided an iconic image for Americans of why they should blame the increasing gap between rich and poor in the United States on those in need of support rather than those benefiting from Reagan's economic policies. Calling the welfare system "the institutionalization of ghetto life,"<sup>146</sup> Reagan's racialized<sup>147</sup> images of the American poor also provided a way for the white working class to distance itself from the notion that these policies were the cause of their economic anxieties as well.

It's no accident that Reagan's rhetoric connected economic and moral issues in its prescription for "Morning in America." Reagan responded to desperate working-class Americans not by bringing in sweeping institutional support for them like Roosevelt had or declaring a "War on Poverty" like Johnson, but by promoting neoliberal "Reaganomics" and declaring that a return to the Cold War values disrupted by the cultural revolutions of the 1960s was the key to "Morning in America." Reagan specifically connected "values" to the economic promise of the American Dream in a 1987 radio address:

In the fight against poverty, we now know it's essential to have strong families—families that teach children the skills and values they will need in the wider world. How many self-made men and women in America

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<sup>145</sup> "'Welfare Queen' Becomes Issue in Reagan Campaign," *New York Times*, 15 February 1976, 51.

<sup>146</sup> "Remarks at a White House Briefing for Supporters of Welfare Reform February 9, 1987" *The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan*, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1987/020987b.htm> (accessed July 10, 2008).

<sup>147</sup> Franklin Gilliam found that "among white subjects, exposure to [the Welfare Queen story] reduced support for various welfare programs, increased stereotyping of African-Americans, and heightened support for maintaining traditional gender roles." Franklin D. Gilliam, "The 'Welfare Queen' Experiment: How Viewers React to Images of African-American Mothers on Welfare," *Center for Communications and Community: Research on Media Coverage*. University of California, Los Angeles, 1999, 3, <http://repositories.cdlib.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1009&context=ccc> (accessed July 10, 2008).

owe their success to the strength of character given to them by hard-working, loving parents?<sup>148</sup>

To that end, Reagan's policies rewarded adherence to "family values" and punished so-called identity politics as disruptive to national unity. These measures, along with the previously mentioned political engagement of conservative religious leaders beginning in the late 1970s, were the foundation of what came to be known as the Culture Wars. But the Culture Wars cannot be understood without first understanding their economic basis in neoliberal thought.

David Harvey's *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* describes the initial beginnings of neoliberalism as a solution to the "stagflation" phenomenon that economically strangled the American economy in the 1970s. Neoliberalism hearkens back to the classical notion of liberalism as indicating the complete freedom of the individual; neoliberalism takes this notion a step further by suggesting that a completely unfettered market (often called "free trade" these days) is the solution to a host of societal issues and will eventually regulate itself, regardless of its impact on society overall. While economic theories resembling neoliberalism have circulated since the days of Adam Smith, it was not until 1979 that American economic policy shifted from a Keynesian approach to a neoliberal one. In an effort to stymie stagflation, Paul Volcker, Chairman of the U.S. Federal Reserve Bank in 1979, proposed an abandonment of the Keynesian economic policies that had governed federal policy throughout the Cold War in favor of a dramatic raising of interest rates. This decision resulted in a 20% rate of interest by 1981 and resulted, according to Doug Henwood, in "a long deep recession that would

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<sup>148</sup> "Radio Address to the Nation on Welfare Reform February 7, 1987," *The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan*. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1987/020787a.htm> (accessed July 10, 2008).

empty factories and break unions in the U.S. and drive debtor countries to the brink of insolvency, beginning the long era of structural adjustment.”<sup>149</sup> Translated, this meant that those on the bottom of the economic ladder could no longer depend on the federal government as the safety net between them and destitution. Called the “Volcker shock,” this approach to the economy was embraced wholeheartedly by the Reagan administration when it came to power shortly thereafter and facilitated the move by deregulating industries, breaking unions, enacting tax cuts, and doing away with significant numbers of federally-funded social welfare programs.<sup>150</sup>

Reagan (along with his British counterpart, Margaret Thatcher) sold this change in economic policy as a supposedly empowering move for the individual, effectively invoking the populist rhetoric that made George Wallace such a favorite among the white working class just a decade earlier. Neoliberalism touched on the element of the American Dream that privileges individualism. Working-class whites, who were often the first to feel the effects of integration and consequences of the cultural revolutions of the 1960s, often associated these changes with their own economic demise in the 1970s. Given this connection, Reagan’s decision to associate Cold War values and economic well-being seems like political genius. Although working-class people were the first to feel the effects of Reagan’s neoliberal policies, they seemed to buy into the notion that an unfettered market provided them more, not less, agency. The concept that social inequality should only be addressed through market mechanisms left them free to see

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<sup>149</sup> Doug Henwood, *After the New Economy* (New York: New Press, 2003), as quoted in Harvey, 23.

<sup>150</sup> Harvey, 25. Harvey mentions, for example, that it took only six months in 1983 for forty percent of the National Labor Relations Board’s pro-labor decisions from the 1970s to be overturned. Harvey, 52.

government disengagement in social issues as a support of individual freedoms rather than a reinforcement of the economic hardships they were experiencing.

Looking back in 1991, sociologist James Davison Hunter described in a best-selling book this increasing tendency to view American politics through the lens of moral actions and beliefs that began in the late 1960s. This phenomenon, coalescing into what Hunter termed the “Culture Wars,” by the 1980s was nothing less than a battle “over the meaning of America.” At the heart of the debate was the question of whether American culture was disintegrating as a result of changes in the legal and lived practices of Americans in areas like sexuality and privacy, the intersections of education and religion, and legal and institutional support for diversity.<sup>151</sup>

This struggle extended to the entertainment industry, where a battle over control of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG), the union for film and television actors, raged in the early 1980s. Conservative and liberal factions within SAG squared off around a mixture of economic policy (especially federal demonization of unions in the 1980s, but also neoliberal economic policies related to increased globalization) and controversy around politically charged entertainment media offerings. Kim Filner, a union organizer for SAG in the early 1980s, recalls that the leftward swing within the Guild in the late 1970s was met by a right-wing contingent refusing to relinquish power in the early 1980s. The corporatization of Hollywood in the 1970s and 1980s changed the political

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<sup>151</sup> James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle To Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 42-51. Hunter’s terminology was soon picked up by major figures in the already-raging Culture Wars, perhaps most famously by Patrick Buchanan. In his 1992 nominating speech for George H. W. Bush at the Republican National Convention, Buchanan created national controversy by stating “There is a religious war going on in our country for the soul of America. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we will one day be as was the Cold War itself.” Patrick Buchanan, 1992 Republican National Convention Speech, Houston, Texas; reprinted at “Internet Brigade 2000,” <http://www.buchanan.org/pa-92-0817-rnc.html>.

dynamics of the industry. Labor in Hollywood was becoming increasingly aware that the influx of multi-national corporations into studio ownership was making their business less the “family” that so many actors perceived it to be and more a part of the global marketplace. The SAG strike of 1980 (for which Filner was the union organizer) developed out of this awareness, as did the election of Ed Asner, a well-known progressive, to the presidency of the union. However, Filner points to two events that resulted in a backlash from conservative elements both in Hollywood and in the Reagan administration. First, as a response to Reagan’s intervention in the 1981 air traffic controllers’ strike, the executive board at the Screen Actors Guild overturned a decision to award Ronald Reagan a Lifetime Achievement Award. The political fallout from this situation polarized SAG politically, with Charlton Heston leading the conservatives and Ed Asner, the sitting president of the Guild, leading the progressives.<sup>152</sup>

But the real turmoil developed when Asner publicly gave \$10,000 to an organization called the Committee In Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES). At the press conference where this check was presented, Asner stated that Salvadorans had the right to elect any government they chose, even if that government was communist. The fallout from this statement was enormous; right-wing organizations began picketing the SAG offices, employees had their private lives disturbed on many levels by what appeared to be covert federal intervention, and a campaign to end Asner’s show, *Lou Grant*,<sup>153</sup> resulted in the withdrawal of advertising support from major sponsors such as Kimberly Clark.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Kim Filner, interview with Lary May, December 28, 2002, New York City.

<sup>153</sup> *Lou Grant* was well-known as a drama centered around political issues encountered in the newsroom; at the time of its cancellation, it had won multiple Emmys for Outstanding Drama Series, Outstanding

The cancellation of the popular *Lou Grant* television series and the eventual demise of Ed Asner's career came during Reagan's first term and had the industry on edge. Although Reagan very intentionally appealed to populist sentiment among the American working class, his primary goal was to restore the "classless" American society of the 1950s—one that was based on the notion that hard work and adherence to "family values," rather than mass action or attention to economic inequality, would result in the American Dream. He put forward what Todd Gitlin has called an image of "America perennially reborn innocent, its tensions and hungers dissolved into a modest and cheerful Main Street" reminiscent of the Springfield of *Father Knows Best*.<sup>155</sup> Television executives followed the politics of the period, deciding that the American public—and not just the president—wanted "traditional" families with "traditional" family values back on their sets.<sup>156</sup> In 1981 a television executive, explaining television's de-emphasis on social issues, stated

Who are the large advertisers? General Electric, IBM, the oil companies, Proctor & Gamble. What I'm told [when pitching a socially relevant television show] is, "Sales will have a hard time with this." When you look at what Proctor & Gamble's interested in, they're not your rock-the-boat projects. They're biographies; they're human-interest stories, but not the kind that will contribute to social change.<sup>157</sup>

But significant shifts in the political economy, industrial organization, and technology of the business of television facilitated changes in television programming in that decade that might not have been anticipated, given the turn of events described

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<sup>154</sup> Lead Actor (Ed Asner), Outstanding Writing, and more. It ranked respectably, in the Top 20 in the Nielsen ratings, for most of its duration on air. McNeil, 1073.

<sup>155</sup> Michael Kassel, "Asner, Ed," in ed. Newcombe, Horace, *The Encyclopedia of Television* (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2004), 147-150.

<sup>156</sup> Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams*, 77-78.

<sup>156</sup> Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time*, 192-193.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 194-197.

above. The three major networks (CBS, NBC, and ABC) were in the midst of tumultuous upheaval from within, as multinational corporations took ownership, corporations that had their fingers in other media pies such as film, music, and various entertainment venues.<sup>158</sup> The appearance and success of a new network (FOX) didn't help matters, as the audience share now had to be split four ways. The audience was further segmented by access by an increasing number of viewers to cable and "superstations" (local stations like WGN and TBS).<sup>159</sup> In fact, the networks' share of audiences declined from 90 percent in 1979 to 76 percent in 1983, falling to 62 percent in 1989.<sup>160</sup> Although the aforementioned willingness of the Reagan (and later Bush) administrations to deregulate the industry had softened the blow, it was clear that the days of total network domination were over.

Deregulation led to two new developments in programming: an increased focus on the specificity of demographics, and the use of broader control over entertainment media by network owners to market to those specific demographics by way of narrowcasting, or niche marketing (particularly on their cable stations, but increasingly on the networks, too). And the conclusion drawn by the networks was that its white elite viewers were the ones they had lost. Working-class people of color often couldn't afford the new technologies, and they statistically spent more time watching network television than did their white, middle- or upper-class counterparts.<sup>161</sup> As one critic noted of these trends in 1989 that "the networks now think it's advisable to go for the

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<sup>158</sup> Barnouw, 509-512.

<sup>159</sup> Gray, 62-65.

<sup>160</sup> Gray, 67; Adam Snyder reports that the percentage of audiences claimed by networks fell to below 60% in 1992. Adam Snyder, "Trouble in Nielsenland," *Newsday*, April 21, 1991, 8.

<sup>161</sup> Gray, 67.

less affluent. And there are a number of shows focusing on working-class families this year.”<sup>162</sup> Among the programs he listed as being on the forefront of this trend was *Roseanne*, the hit show brought to ABC by Marcy Carsey and Tom Werner the prior year.

### **1980-1987: Sitcoms Revived, “Family Values” Attacked: The Slobcom is Born**

Marcy Carsey and Tom Werner, independent producers in an era when independent producers were quite rare, were able to take advantage of the interest in new target demographics to become a powerhouse in the 1980s. Veterans of network programming (they met while executives at ABC in the 1970s), they both left during the industry’s tumultuous years in the late 1970s and formed their own independent production company, Carsey-Werner LLC, in 1981.<sup>163</sup>

When Carsey and Werner began pitching shows to the networks, the sitcom as a television genre was commonly thought to be on its way out. Given the perilous atmosphere of networking programming at the time, much had changed in the past five years, and broadcasters were following the trend of promoting the one-hour television drama, with a heavy emphasis on the cop shows and decadent family melodramas within that genre. This is clear from a look at the Nielsen Top Ten in 1983:

1. *Dallas*
2. *60 Minutes*
3. *Dynasty*
4. *The A-Team*
5. *Simon & Simon*

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<sup>162</sup> Ed Siegel, “A Season of Slim Pickings,” *Boston Globe*, July 13, 1989, Living/Arts, 69. I originally found portions of this quote in Gray, but he does not use the final sentence of this quote.

<sup>163</sup> Marcy Carsey and Tom Werner, Interview with the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, American Television Archive, March 10, 2003, West Hollywood, Cal.

6. *Magnum, P.I.*
7. *Falcon Crest*
8. *Kate & Allie*
9. *Hotel*
10. *Cagney & Lacey*<sup>164</sup>

Carsey and Werner, however, specialized in sitcoms. As the director and manager, respectively, of the comedy division of ABC in the late 1970s, they had overseen the development of hits like *Three's Company*, *Mork & Mindy*, and *Soap*, among other shows, and their initial pitches to networks were for programs like the short-lived *Oh, Madeline!* in 1982. After that show's failure, they found themselves searching for a project that would fit their personal programming philosophies. First and foremost, Carsey and Werner sought as much independence as possible from the increasingly globalized television industry; instead of looking for the standard financing from a Hollywood studio that characterized most “independent” producing, they mortgaged their houses to put their next project together.<sup>165</sup> Second, they looked to develop a product that would stand out as unique from the standard television fare in the “don’t-rock-the-boat” 1980s industry milieu. As Carsey put it in a 2003 interview, “The way we develop shows often is that we kind of look at what’s not on television. And what ought to be. And what we as, you know, people living lives are thinking about and . . . what we’d like to see on television.”<sup>166</sup> What wasn’t on television at the time was much diversity of any kind—at least, not in comedy. So Carsey and Werner went to Bill Cosby, who had a solid track record of success in primetime television, to talk about developing a program with him. Significantly, they discouraged Cosby from following

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<sup>164</sup> Ratings listed in McNeil, 1466. The only sitcom listed is *Kate & Allie*.

<sup>165</sup> Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. rev. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 515.

<sup>166</sup> Carsey and Werner interview.

up on his initial idea for the series, which was to present a working-class family with “too many kids and not enough money,” according to Carsey, because they were worried about whether networks would see the show as offering sufficiently broad appeal for a network audience. In the end, they agreed to promote a show about an affluent Black family living in New York City, using Cosby’s stand-up material as the anchor for the program. Apparently, exceptionally wealthy professionals were more connected to the “commonality of the human experience” (Carsey’s term) than were the original limousine driver and plumber characters that Cosby had in mind.<sup>167</sup>

The program was a surprise hit and has frequently been credited with reviving network interest in the sitcom format;<sup>168</sup> the year *The Cosby Show* premiered at number 3 on the Nielsen ratings (1984) was also the year that *Family Ties* and *Cheers* began their long, successful runs. But *The Cosby Show*’s importance to the development of *Roseanne* goes much further than its revival of the sitcom. It also put Carsey-Werner on the map in the television industry, since their role in *Cosby*’s success earned them an unprecedented level of flexibility in developing their own projects. Very few independents could get an order for a risky sitcom idea like *Roseanne* (in fact, they had to market the idea to more than one network before they got a deal) but they could and did. Their enormous success in the mid-1980s with *The Cosby Show*, combined with the paradigm shifts within the television industry discussed above, not only allowed them a great deal of leeway in developing unique programming but also encouraged them to try something different once again. That was another significant and unappreciated contribution that *The Cosby Show* made to facilitating *Roseanne*’s inception: *Cosby*

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

proved that a sitcom with mass appeal didn't require a white family in the center. Since one cornerstone of character demographics had been toppled, why not another: class?

The final contribution that *The Cosby Show* made to *Roseanne*'s successful berth in primetime, ironically, was that the backlash against the newly-popular family sitcom generated the genre known as the slobcom, with *Roseanne* held up as its exemplar. As discussed earlier, in the 1980s the FOX network was attempting to develop into a national network—something that hadn't been attempted since the demise of Dumont back in the 1950s. FOX embraced “narrowcasting” earlier than the other networks; in retrospect, this is likely what enabled it to generate initial audiences. Counterprogramming against the other network's broad-based appeal to white, middle-class viewers, FOX specifically targeted those who might be turned off by the bland, controversy-free offerings of the other networks; specifically, they attempted to cater to Black audiences and those younger than Baby Boomers.<sup>169</sup>

In addition to *COPS* and *21 Jump Street* (one of the earlier reality TV shows and a cop drama targeted at teens, respectively), FOX promoted two other programs as flagship shows for the nascent network. One, *The Tracey Ullman Show*, was a variety program that included an animation short known as *The Simpsons*; the other, called *Married... With Children*, was a sitcom. Both featured working-class families that were largely antithetical to the “feel-good” family sitcoms that dominated mid-1980s programming and were considered part of the “slob-com” phenomenon. The term slobcom generally refers to sitcoms in which characters very deliberately violate the norms of middle-class manners on their programs; frequently, these characters are

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<sup>169</sup> For an outstanding overview of the rise African American programming and FOX's role in the 1980s, see Gray.

visually and narratively coded as working-class, and content often pushes the boundaries of topics such as sexuality, marriage, work ethic, and public behavior.

At least one reviewer has called *Married . . . With Children* the “golden archetype of the modern slob-com,”<sup>170</sup> and *Broadcasting* crowned it the first of the new slobcom genre.<sup>171</sup> Ron Leavitt, creator of *Married...With Children*, was consciously working with his writing partner, Michael Moye, to create a program criticizing the throwbacks to the consensus-culture family that dominated the airwaves in the 1980s. “We’d always hated the typical family on television,” he stated. “It just makes us sick, basically.” With a working title of *Not the Cosby Show*, Leavitt and Moye developed a program that crossed the boundaries of “good taste” in order to criticize the utopian atmosphere of the family sitcom.<sup>172</sup> In an era when many Americans weren’t very sure what to believe about the American Dream any more, *Married . . . With Children* struck a chord and became one of FOX’s cornerstone original series. FOX followed up on this success with an even bigger one: *The Simpsons*. Although *The Simpsons* didn’t air as a stand-alone series until 1989, its success on *The Tracey Ullman Show* as a comic short in 1987 had launched plans for its development. While a number of scholars have explored the significance of *The Simpsons* to American perceptions of family life, it should also be understood in the context of the slobcom trend.

*Married . . . With Children*, while not officially acknowledged by anyone involved with *Roseanne*’s development as an inspiration, was frequently compared to *Roseanne* when the latter program debuted a year later. Both programs featured nuclear

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<sup>170</sup> Miles Beller, “TV Review: *Married . . . With Children*,” *Hollywood Reporter* (September 6, 1991).

<sup>171</sup> “‘Raunch’ on a roll.” *Broadcasting* (November 21, 1988), 29.

<sup>172</sup> McNeil, 520.

families in scenarios that made their contrast to *The Cosby Show*, *Family Ties*, and other family sitcoms very clear. *Married . . . With Children* was primarily known for its dystopian vision of American suburban life; set on the outskirts of Chicago (as was *Roseanne*),<sup>173</sup> its family, the Bundys, presented each member as the opposite of societal expectations for their position in the family. Al Bundy was a failed shoe salesman who bitterly complained about being “trapped” by his wife and kids. Peg Bundy dropped cigarettes in the salad (if she even bothered to make dinner) and publicly sniped at her husband’s lack of sexual interest and earning power. Daughter Kelly was well-known for her sexual activity and lack of intelligence. Son Bud lacked the looks, initiative, honesty, and even work ethic that typified most teenaged sons in sitcom world. There was nothing appealing about this family except its relative honesty: the Bundys, like most American families, weren’t as perfect as the Cosbys. And this seemed to be precisely what the American public was looking for. At the beginning of its third season, *The New York Times* reported “*Married . . . With Children*, the most popular offering on the Fox schedule, continues to be a phenomenon: with Fox stations covering only about 90 percent of the country (ABC, CBS and NBC all reach nearly 100 percent), the show had a rating of 12.6 and 19 percent of the audience, a figure that would undoubtedly be much higher if the show was available everywhere.”<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> One might wonder why both of these programs were set in Chicago. Although this is sheer conjecture, I would suggest that the longtime obsession of Hollywood with understanding and tapping into the Midwest market probably motivated these choices. Norman Lear references the common saying “This won’t fly in Des Moines” in his 1998 interview with the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, as a way of explaining how networks gear their material to what they believe is the “heartland” of their viewing audiences. Roseanne Barr referenced this notion as well, when *Playboy* interviewed her while she and then-husband Tom Arnold were building a home in Iowa.

<sup>174</sup> “ABC Near No. 1 As 2 Shows Set Rating Records,” *New York Times*, October 11, 1989, Section C, Page 22, Column 4, Cultural Desk.

To everyone's surprise, *Married . . . With Children* and *The Simpsons* were solid performers; by the 1990-91 season, the two shows were ranked 47<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup>, respectively, in the year-end Nielsen ratings.<sup>175</sup> By the time *Roseanne* was in development at Carsey-Werner in 1987, these two shows had already demonstrated that at least some segments of the television audience were interested in viewing challenges to presentations of middle-class family life once more. One might conjecture that, by the end of his administration, Americans had soured on Reagan's "Morning in America."

The Reagan administration was responsible for enormous cutbacks in social services, particularly to working-class and poor families.<sup>176</sup> The end result was that from 1968 to 1983, the poorest fifth of American families went from having 91% of the income required to fulfill basic necessities to 60%.<sup>177</sup> While the rich got richer (the top fifth of Americans accounted for 43% of all family income in 1985, a post-World War II high), the poor got poorer (the bottom fifth only accounted for 4.7%, the lowest share since 1960).<sup>178</sup> And organized labor, to which Reagan was notoriously unsympathetic, suffered miserable setbacks. The trend toward a post-Fordist, neoliberal economy continued, as the 1980s saw a significant shift away from the industrial to the service sector. A total of 11.5 million American workers lost jobs through plant shutdowns and relocations. In Chicago alone (the nearest metropolis to the fictional town of Lanford,

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<sup>175</sup> Steve Craig, "Family Values Television," presented at the 2001 Conference of the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, April 13. 2001, 14.

<sup>176</sup> Ehrenreich, 186.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 202.

where the Conners lived), laid-off steelworkers saw a 50% drop in their income.<sup>179</sup> As discussed earlier, in Reagan's vision of "America," the American working class, in particular those who were people of color and women, had become figurative whipping boys for the powerful, but they no longer had confidence in their ability to generate an organized response through labor.<sup>180</sup> Instead, Americans found themselves trudging toward an inevitable (and predicted) recession in the early 1990s.<sup>181</sup>

Economic instability added to cracks in Americans' foundational belief in the American Dream. Black Monday, the spectacular stock market crash of 1987, was only the first bad economic news that Americans in the late 1980s would encounter. Citing economic trends of the late 1980s, such as downsizing, an increasingly large national debt, and the exodus of capital, Todd Gitlin observes, "Undoubtedly, nobody is comfortable with a decline in living standards, but Americans may have been uniquely vulnerable because such things were not supposed to be possible here. If America *is* the dream, then in a certain sense, the end of the dream portended the end of the nation."<sup>182</sup>

But the emotional impact of real economic decline was matched by an increasing distrust of political figures as well. George H. W. Bush was the heir apparent to the iconic Reagan, but the publicity surrounding the Iran-Contra affair beginning in late 1986 badly damaged the credibility of those associated with the Reagan era and haunted Bush well into his presidency. He was seen alternately as part of the global elite

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 206-207.

<sup>180</sup> In fact, because of the division created between organized industries and unorganized industries (service-sector industries like restaurants, for example) during the "stagflation" years, along with Reagan's ability to tap into the "Reagan Democrat" (typically white working-class) demographic, organized labor would have been one of the last solutions considered by the people most dramatically affected by Reagan's economic policies: the working class and poor.

<sup>181</sup> David Kotz, "Neoliberalism and the U.S. economic expansion of the '90s," *Monthly Review*, April 2003.

<sup>182</sup> Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams*, 81.

(due to his prior position as the head of the CIA, his role in the Iran Contra affair, and, by some, the mistake-by-hindsight that was the Persian Gulf War) and as a disconnected and rather pathetic old guy (hence the stories of him vomiting at a State dinner,<sup>183</sup> accidentally flashing a backward “peace” sign in Australia where that hand gesture is considered lewd,<sup>184</sup> and marveling at barcode technology that had been in grocery stores for over a decade<sup>185</sup>). Bush’s “schizophrenic” image, as he tried to emerge from Reagan’s shadow and unite a Republican party divided between an emphasis on foreign affairs (a legacy of the almost defunct Cold War) and “family values” (the buzz word for the increasingly heated Culture Wars), never really disappeared.<sup>186</sup>

Further, Americans were in the midst of a national identity crisis of sorts as the Cold War slowly ground to a halt. Although the U.S.S.R. would remain in existence until 1991, Mikhail Gorbachev’s introduction of *glasnost* and *perestroika* engendered a ripple effect throughout the Soviet bloc, and indications of the end of the Cold War were becoming apparent. George Arbatov of the USA Institute in Moscow was quoted in the *Boston Globe* in 1989 as saying, “We are going to do a terrible thing to you. . . .

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<sup>183</sup> Michael Wines, “Bush in Japan; Bush Collapses at State Dinner With the Japanese,” *New York Times*, January 9, 1992.

<sup>184</sup> John E. Yang, “Letter from Australia; Bush’s Politics Up Front Down Under,” *Washington Post*, January 3, 1992, A14.

<sup>185</sup> This story was debated hotly in the press; some claimed that he was not amazed at the fact of a barcode scanner, but rather by the innovations for future use being developed from the technology. After a review of the videotape of the event, there was still no consensus. Regardless of whether he was or wasn’t “amazed,” this continues to be a good example of the kind of public presentation Bush received from the press, much of it of his own making. For the original story, see Andrew Rosenthal, “Bush Encounters the Supermarket, Amazed,” *New York Times*, February 5, 1992, A27.

<sup>186</sup> See Thomas Frank, *What’s the Matter With Kansas: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York : Metropolitan/Owl Book, 2005) for an overview of the late 1980s split within the Republican Party between fiscal conservatives and moral fundamentalists. For an excellent discussion of Bush’s struggle with image, see Jeffords, 91-103.

We are going to deprive you of an enemy.”<sup>187</sup> Without a political and ideological “enemy” against which to define themselves, without a *raison d'être*, Americans were looking for what, exactly, made them “American.” This indecision, combined with dramatic political swings—from right to left and back to right again—over the previous quarter century, culminated in the Culture Wars, as Americans fought amongst themselves to control the moral image of “American-ness.”

This debate over “family values” was, in many ways, an extension of Reagan’s framing of the American poor and working class as undeserving of support due to their moral values and behavior. The slow demise of the Cold War in the late 1980s called into question the position of middle-class “family values” as a fundamental aspect of the American Dream, as it became increasingly clear that Reagan’s vision of “Morning in America” was not able to save the nation from recession. *Roseanne*’s ability to remain economically viable, as I will discuss in the following chapter, was largely due to Roseanne Barr’s ability to tap the pulse of a nation hotly debating the relationship between Cold War behavioral norms and class. In particular, *Roseanne* called into question the middle-class gender norms that were reflected in (and reinforced by) its 1970s predecessors and were still accepted uncritically by most Americans. The late 1980s was the beginning of the end for the Cold War, and in an era when the war against communism no longer held its prior urgency with the American people—a people dealing with the looming recession, political disillusionment, neoliberal restructuring of the economy, and the widest gap to date between rich and poor in the

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<sup>187</sup> Jonathan Kaufman, “Facing a world without the wall; For Americans, a search for new role; Upheaval in Germany,” *Boston Globe*, November 12, 1989, 1.

United States since the Depression years—recognition of class in a purportedly “classless” America could finally be given full consideration.

*Roseanne* would have been unlikely to have emerged as a cultural force or even to have made it onto television at all without the development of this “perfect storm” of political, industry, and socioeconomic developments in the 1970s and 1980s. The disintegration of the Cold War, beginning with challenges to hegemonic notions of cultural and economic norms in the 1970s, both in popular culture and the everyday lives of Americans, and culminating in the actual dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, provided a multiplicity of opportunities for Americans to question the notion of a “classless” America and to begin to see strains on working-class life as more than an individual failing. The entertainment industry, struggling with the impact that cable, VCRs, a new national network, and a constantly shifting relationship to public and political involvement in programming standards had on conventional wisdom in the business, began taking risks in programming content that would have been unthinkable in prior decades. But as I will discuss in chapter 3, the emergence of *Roseanne* and other working-class family sitcoms as a significant element of cultural commentary was not predetermined and inevitable. It did not occur without a battle. In particular, struggles over the impact of popular culture (and television programming in particular) on the meaning of “family values” in a national context dominated the lifespan of these programs, as the Culture Wars became the central locale for the debate over who and what was “American.” And the fact that Roseanne Barr refused to back down in the battle over whose voice would guide *Roseanne*’s content allowed her plan to present a feminist-inflected image of class and a class-inflected feminism on the television screen

to come to fruition and to become a major factor in the Culture Wars during the early 1990s.

## Chapter Three

### **Blood, Sweat, and Beers: The Battle Over American Cultural Identity in the Working-Class Sitcom**

The American television industry has weathered its share of criticism for program content since the 1950s,<sup>188</sup> but by the late 1980s and early 1990s, television programming was even more publicly a point of contention for Culture Warriors. Perhaps the most notorious association with the Culture Wars that the television industry encountered in that era was the 1992 controversy over Murphy Brown's single-parent pregnancy in the television sitcom *Murphy Brown*. Dan Quayle, George H. W. Bush's vice president, invoked Murphy Brown's pregnancy as he spoke to the press about declining "family values" in the United States: "It doesn't help matters when prime time TV has Murphy Brown—a character who supposedly epitomizes today's intelligent, highly paid, professional woman—mocking the importance of fathers, by bearing a child alone and calling it just another 'lifestyle choice.'"<sup>189</sup> A public uproar ensued; the show struck back with an episode called "You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato" (referring to Quayle's infamous spelling woes) that responded to the vice president's criticisms directly by having the fictional journalist present multiple real, single-parent families on her news show.<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> For an overview of the major controversies surrounding American television programming from the 1940s to the 1980s, see Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. rev. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>189</sup> Dan Quayle, speech to the Commonwealth Club of California, San Francisco, May 19, 1992; as quoted in Jude Davies and Carol R. Smith, "Race, Gender, and the American Mother: Political Speech and the Maternity Episodes of *I Love Lucy* and *Murphy Brown*," *American Studies* 39, no. 2 (Summer 1998), 33-34.

<sup>190</sup> Davies and Smith, 51.

A cultural debate of this magnitude would likely have been quashed before reaching the public just a decade earlier. The challenge to middle-class “family values,” however, had been mounted in a variety of genres by this time, albeit not with the accompanying publicity and conflict that the *Murphy Brown* episode generated. Controversies over new strides in representations of queer(ed) characters,<sup>191</sup> the rise of what was then called “Tabloid TV,”<sup>192</sup> the use of previously taboo language and violence, and the rise in visibility of television characters who intentionally challenged middle-class moral values simply by not identifying as middle-class became common phenomena in this era. This trend culminated in 1996 legislation requiring the installation of the V-chip in every television manufactured after 1999.<sup>193</sup> Because television was (and continues to be) the most popular mass medium in the world, what—and who—was appearing on its broadcasts played an enormous role in how its viewing audience understood what was “normal” in the world around them.<sup>194</sup> Much like in other forms of advertising, the “normalization” of behaviors and lifestyles has been a facet of entertainment television for years, so the stakes for representing the left

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<sup>191</sup> For an overview of landmark developments in depictions of gay, lesbian, and other queer subjects in American entertainment television, see Stephen Tropiano, *Prime Time Closet: A History of Gays and Lesbians on TV* (New York: Applause Theater and Cinema, 2002).

<sup>192</sup> Kevin Glynn, “Tabloid Television,” in ed. Horace Newcombe, *The Encyclopedia of Television* (New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2004)), 2249-2251.

<sup>193</sup> The V(iolence) Chip emerged in public debate over broadcast content in the 1980s. As Willard Rowland characterizes the debate, the federal government was stuck between political trends toward deregulation of broadcast industries and an increasing outcry from the public for controversial material to be restricted from the airwaves. The V-Chip was subsequently a useful compromise for industry and government, as television’s agreement to code its programming to respond to the V-Chip signified its willingness to cooperate with legislators while providing the industry leverage to ask for other favors (such as rights to digital and satellite channels and systems). Willard D. Rowland, Jr., “The V-Chip,” in *The Television History Book*, ed. Michele Hilmes (London: BFI Publishing, 2003), 135.

<sup>194</sup> Stuart Hall , “Encoding/Decoding,” in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-1979*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 128-138.

wing of the Culture Wars more thoroughly in television programming was a huge threat to the right-wing Culture Warriors who currently held cultural and political hegemony.

A key underlying factor in these developments is the role that class played in the battle over “family values.” Implicit in Quayle’s criticism of representations of single motherhood on television was the suggestion that moral choices were to blame for the increasing disparity between rich and poor in American society. Despite Quayle’s decision to single out a program featuring an upper-middle-class woman rather than a working-class woman, his speech was at its heart a rationale for blaming the working class and poor for their own economic difficulties. This was a continuation of the strategy discussed in chapter 2, in which the Reagan administration positioned women and people of color as deserving of their typically less-economically-secure status in comparison to white males and nuclear families. Quayle’s speech connected the single-mother pregnancy of the character Murphy Brown to the increasingly visible rise of poverty in the United States, as the text of the speech just prior to the *Murphy Brown* reference demonstrates:

Right now the failure of our families is hurting America deeply. When families fall, society falls. The anarchy and lack of structure in our inner cities are testament to how quickly civilization falls apart when the family foundation cracks. Children need love and discipline. A welfare check is not a husband. The state is not a father. It is from parents that children come to understand values and themselves as men and women, mothers and fathers. And for those concerned about children growing up in poverty, we should know this: marriage is probably the best anti-poverty program of them all.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Quayle’s speech was on why the Rodney King riots in Los Angeles had occurred in the recent past. He prefaced his comments about Murphy Brown with a slew of statistics that he claimed proved that the failure of African Americans to enjoy equal economic and social status with white Americans was due to changing moral values in Black communities between the 1960s and the 1980s. Dan Quayle, “Address to

Once again, conservatives relied on the tactic that had been so successful for Reagan: find a scapegoat for American woes by demonizing groups that stood outside the bounds of “normative” American identity. The fact that Quayle used a character marked as upper-middle-class to illustrate his point about decaying “family values” as a bane on American economic well-being is significant, in that he was able to simultaneously avoid directly naming working-class culture as antithetical to “family values” while exhorting those of sufficient economic means to fall in line with Cold War standards of middle-class propriety and behavior. The biggest danger here, then, was not that Murphy Brown’s child would end up impoverished; rather, the danger was that Murphy Brown’s success at single motherhood might encourage those of less significant economic means to attempt single motherhood as well. She was of the “appropriate” class status but modeling behavior that Quayle and Reagan’s other political descendants specifically associated with poverty. This kind of representation, which was an alternative to hegemonic standards for “classy” behavior, had significant implications for breaking the hegemony of middle-class morality that provided the glue in the broken image of a “classless” American in the early 1990s.

But the controversy over *Murphy Brown* was simply one of the more visible examples of how the Culture Wars became a major factor in the debate over American identity in the late 1980s and early 1990s. As the Culture Wars heated up, working-class family sitcoms like *The Simpsons*, *Married . . . With Children*, and especially *Roseanne* found their way into the heart of the controversy over the future cultural identity of

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the Commonwealth Club of California,” May 19, 1992, *Dan Quayle, 44<sup>th</sup> Vice President of the United States*, [http://www.vicepresidentdanquayle.com/speeches\\_StandingFirm\\_CCC\\_1.html](http://www.vicepresidentdanquayle.com/speeches_StandingFirm_CCC_1.html) (accessed October 1, 2008).

America. Unlike *Murphy Brown*, where crossing Culture Warriors was originally an incidental rather than intentional motivation for questioning conservative “family values,” *Roseanne* was from its outset a “show about class and women,”<sup>196</sup> designed to destabilize the middle-class code of behavior that dominated the Cold War era. There was no question that destabilization of middle-class norms was a priority for the woman who once explained her rationale for getting into the industry thusly: “I wanted to create a real woman/mother on TV—for political reasons, as an activist.”<sup>197</sup> Barr’s explicit desire to depict working-class women as an underrepresented, yet significant, part of American society was tantamount to revolution in industry circles, but she was able to ride her “perfect storm” onto the airwaves, tapping a nerve in the American viewing public that changed the public representation of who and what was “American” irrevocably.

### **Roseanne Barr and Working-Class Agency/Voice in American Television**

[Barr] had developed a persona in her stand-up comedy . . . where she wasn’t a working mother at all. She stayed home. She was lazy. It was a funny persona, you know, “And hey, if my husband comes home and the kids are still alive, I’ve done my job” . . . It wasn’t anything like the working class heroine that we kind of turned her into. You know, we took it 180 degrees around. Still with that great voice, but just turning it around to another way of life and another character. The script was written. The intention of the show was there. We just—we cast her.  
—Marcy Carsey, 2003<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> Roseanne Barr, Interview with Terry Gross, March 3, 1994, National Public Radio; as quoted in Julie Bettie, “Class Dismissed? Roseanne and the Changing Face of Working-Class Iconography,” *Social Text*, No. 45 (Winter 1995), 134.

<sup>197</sup> Roseanne Arnold, *My Lives* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 6.

<sup>198</sup> Marcy Carsey and Tom Werner, Interview with the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, American Television Archive, March 10, 2003, West Hollywood, Cal.

On March 27, 1990, Jeff Harris, who had just been forced out of his position as executive producer of the popular American television program *Roseanne*, took out a full page ad in the *Daily Variety* that read: “I have chosen not to return to the show next season. Instead, my wife and I have decided to share a vacation in the relative peace and quiet of Beirut.”<sup>199</sup> This jibe at Roseanne Barr and her response—“They won’t think you’re funny in Beirut, either”<sup>200</sup>—epitomized the public representation of the power struggles occurring regularly on the set of *Roseanne*. The battle with Harris was only one of the clashes that were regularly reported in the media during *Roseanne*’s run. Barr’s conflicts with Matt Williams, the original head writer on the show, her disagreements with the program’s original developers, Tom Werner and Marcy Carsey, and her battles with ABC shared equal time with reporters’ coverage of *Roseanne*’s massive ratings success.

Celebrity shenanigans and power struggles were certainly nothing new in Hollywood. Underlying the reports on both Barr’s popularity and her conflicts with Hollywood’s power elite, though, was a sense of amazement that this woman was getting away with challenging rigid conventions within the industry. Barr’s public presentation as overweight, decidedly working-class, and aggressively powerful, and her choice of topical coverage on her program, challenged decades’ worth of industry standards for women’s beauty and behavior, the presentation of lifestyles associated with middle-class “values,” and the traditional industry power hierarchy. For nearly a decade, Roseanne Barr was one of the most powerful women in Hollywood, and her

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<sup>199</sup> Jeremy Gerard, “Producers Carsey and Werner: What Have They Done for Us Lately?” *New York Times*, 25 November 1990, Section 6, Page 55, Column 1, Magazine Desk.

<sup>200</sup> David Rensin, “Roseanne & Tom Arnold: Interview,” *Playboy* 40, no. 6 (June 1, 1993), 59.

nine-year television program ended up as one of the most popular television programs in American history. What was Roseanne Barr's motivation for constantly challenging the Hollywood power structure, and how was she able to maintain her popularity (and *Roseanne*'s ratings success) in the midst of this chaos? The answer to those questions sheds light on the cultural and political milieu into which *Roseanne* was born and also tells a relatively unique story of how one woman used her star power to make an explicitly political statement via the most popular mass medium in the world. Roseanne Barr's struggle within Hollywood was motivated by her desire to present both a class-inflected feminism and a feminist-inflected representation of class in a sitcom format.

Roseanne Barr was born in 1952 in Salt Lake City, Utah, to working-class Jewish parents in a predominantly Mormon and middle-class community.<sup>201</sup> She treasured television appearances of working-class comedians like Lenny Bruce and Jackie Gleason as examples of “people like me” who found laughter as a means of escaping class and ethnic marginalization. She also saw their approach as a powerful way to attack cultural marginalization. In speaking about her love for Jackie Gleason, she explicitly referenced the agency that she saw in his performances: “[T]he whole author/performer thing is so awesome. . . . [T]hese people were his own creations that he gave birth to and not what somebody wrote and he copied. His message said, ‘take a minute to laugh at what’s wrong, rather than attack it.’”<sup>202</sup> Based on accounts by Barr and others of her early years, it would appear that experiences of cultural marginalization—as a Jew, as working class, and as a woman—dominated the formation

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<sup>201</sup> Geraldine Barr with Ted Schwarz, *My Sister Roseanne: The True Story of Roseanne Barr Arnold* (New York: Birch Lane Press, 1994), 26.

<sup>202</sup> “Comedian’s Choice: Acts and Influences: Roseanne Barr; All in the Family; The Honeymooners,” Museum of Broadcasting, 1990.

of her identity. After a tumultuous childhood, Barr left Utah looking for a place where she would no longer be an outsider.<sup>203</sup> She ended up in the Colorado mountains, where she met and married her first husband. They moved to a working-class Denver suburb and had three children in quick succession, while Barr became a severely depressed housewife and her husband plodded along as a postal worker.<sup>204</sup>

A restaurant job and a feminist bookstore dramatically altered the course of her life. While working as a host at Bennigan's, Barr experienced a relative degree of financial autonomy and agency, but she also experienced the daily struggles with sexism, low wages, physical exhaustion, etc., that women in working-class jobs encountered on a daily basis. Her engagement with the Woman to Woman Bookcenter in downtown Denver prompted her to see this experience through a feminist lens. Barr's awareness of feminism had an explicitly "classed" tinge to it. She spoke in retrospect of her frustration with the overwhelmingly middle-class approach to women's rights that seemed to dominate the movement in the early 1980s and how her small group of radical feminists railed against it: "No longer wishing to speak in academic language, or even in a feminist language, because it all seemed dead to me," she recalled in her 1989 autobiography, she consciously embraced the language of a "working-class woman who is a mother, a woman who no longer believed in change, progress, growth, or hope."<sup>205</sup> This approach guided the development of her comic delivery style, both in stand-up and on television.

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<sup>203</sup> Arnold, 21-23, 27.

<sup>204</sup> Roseanne Barr, *My Life As a Woman* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), 101-146.

<sup>205</sup> Barr, *My Life as a Woman*, 161.

While learning more about and embracing a radical style of feminism at the bookstore, Barr was being told by male restaurant customers she sniped at that she should take her quick wit on stage. Stand-up comedy became the place where she could bring together her feminism, her experiences as a wife and mother, and her frustrations with working-class marginalization.<sup>206</sup> Her use of print media and public opinion to wage battles with the (largely male) comedy club owners over stage time proved to be a valuable dress rehearsal for her struggles in Hollywood for control, as the publicity generated by Barr's accusations of sexism in club scheduling eventually opened the door for her in Denver clubs. A brief period on the regional comedy club circuit culminated in a trip to Los Angeles to play at Mitzi Shore's Comedy Club on the Sunset Strip. Shore, who was known for actively supporting female comics, gave Barr a chance to perform in the main room, where a representative from *The Tonight Show* saw her act and invited her to perform on television. Several appearances for Johnny Carson and HBO specials later, Marcy Carsey and Tom Werner offered Barr the chance to star in *Roseanne*.<sup>207</sup>

Carsey and Werner, as independent producers, were able to take advantage of the interest in new target demographics to become a powerhouse in the 1980s. Their enormous success in the mid-1980s with *The Cosby Show*, combined with the paradigm shifts within the television industry discussed in the previous chapter, not only allowed them a great deal of leeway in developing unique programming, but also encouraged them to once again try something different. *The Cosby Show* established what was to become their signature style: providing a “slice of life” peek at American

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<sup>206</sup> Arnold, 48.

<sup>207</sup> Barr, *My Life as a Woman*, 168-185.

identities that were typically underrepresented in mass media. After a second success with the *Cosby* spin-off *A Different World*, Carsey and Werner began looking for a new show to develop. This time, it was an issue that Carsey had personally experienced:

[W]hat wasn't on at the time was anything about a working mother. Working mothers were part of other shows that were really about the guy. And the wife was an adjunct to the thing. And she might or might not have a job. But there was no show about the absurdity and really the prevalence of the phenomenon of the working mom in America. And . . . in 1988, something like 85 percent of households in America included a full-time working mother . . . [T]he percentages had been building up until America was just full of these households where the mother was working eight hours or so a day, and coming home and working another eight to do the kids and the house and the thing. Because nothing had changed really at home. Nobody was doing what the woman used to do. She was just doing eight hours of something else as well now. So to talk about that phenomenon was something that was near and dear to my heart.<sup>208</sup>

As Carsey suggests, she was by no means the only woman in the United States struggling with the phenomenon of the double shift. But Roseanne Barr's critical commentary on these issues went far beyond what Marcy Carsey had ever contemplated, addressing class as the foundational issue at the heart of this conflict; while the focus on women's issues was certainly a goal for Carsey-Werner, class-inflected feminism was a topic "near and dear" to *Barr's* heart.

Carsey thought of the show's focus on the "double shift" as a *feminist* statement, rather than a specifically *working-class feminist* statement, and saw Barr's approach to the program as evidence that Barr's class background hampered (rather than augmented) her ability to make the show a success. She had her doubts about Barr's ability to perform as they wished. Characterizing Barr as a "rube," Carsey later

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<sup>208</sup> Carsey and Werner interview.

explained that the producers surrounded Barr with an ensemble of respected theater actors to temper any lack of acting ability she might display.<sup>209</sup> In fact, the producers gave more lip-service to class inequity in the United States than they did actual *service*: the program was produced in a non-union studio, which enabled them to start taping well ahead of other programs for the 1988 season, since union sets were held up by the Teamsters' strike that summer.<sup>210</sup>

Carsey and Werner would pitch *Roseanne* to Barr as her own star vehicle.<sup>211</sup> At the time, they had already hired Matt Williams, one of the writers for *The Cosby Show*, to develop the program. Williams went back to his hometown of Evansville, Indiana, to research an idea about working-class women juggling jobs and home responsibilities. He interviewed approximately fifty working-class women in the area to create the proposed script for a program called *Life and Stuff*, about three working-class women at various points in their lives.<sup>212</sup> Meanwhile, after catching one of her performances on the *Tonight Show*, Carsey and Werner decided Barr would be ideal for the concept Williams had pitched to them. The inevitable clash of wills emerged between the college-educated, male head writer and the working-class feminist actor who saw her message to the American public as coming from a working-class feminist perspective that gave a voice to the real experiences of real women. Williams argued constantly with her about what Roseanne Conner would or wouldn't do.<sup>213</sup> Williams stated, "The problem was who was going to have the final say on stories, scripts and the over-all

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<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> Judith Mayerle, "Roseanne—How Did You Get Inside My House?: A Case Study of a Hit Blue-Collar Situation Comedy." *Journal of Popular Culture* 24 (1992), 84.

<sup>211</sup> Arnold, 2.

<sup>212</sup> Mayerle, 72.

<sup>213</sup> Arnold, 4.

thrust of the show. As the creator and executive producer, I automatically assumed, rightly or wrongly, that I would have the final say. And, obviously, Roseanne thought she had the final say. And that, in essence, was the central conflict.<sup>214</sup> Williams saw his research on working-class women and his status as one of the celebrated writers on *The Cosby Show* as leaving him better qualified to control the program's creative development than did Barr's thirty-five years of experience as a working-class woman. But Barr wanted desperately to speak for herself as a working-class feminist, and she knew *exactly* what she wanted to say: "It's about housework being a political thing. It's about never being included in the gross national product, it's about the segregation and apartheid of women 's work, and women's energy."<sup>215</sup>

As Barr garnered more popularity, she was able to use her star power to control personnel changes at first, then eventually to take over the role of executive producer. Several accounts indicate that the battle began with the pilot episode. Barr claims that Williams's first draft had essentially written her character out of the show and focused much of the screen time on D.J., the son in the Conner family.<sup>216</sup> While that claim cannot be substantiated, Carsey and Werner do offer (another unsubstantiated story) that the first showdown between Barr and the producers came after the filming of the pilot. Carsey recalled, "Roseanne called me during the editing and said that she hated the experience and she was going to quit and she wasn't going to do the series." Carsey recalls a list of seven people Barr wanted fired before she would agree to stay on.

Although that struggle was averted, Werner posited in the same interview, "She was

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<sup>214</sup> Marc Gunther, "What's Bugging Roseanne Barr?" *Toronto Star*, August 17, 1989.

<sup>215</sup> Liz Lufkin, "No Holds Barred: Roseanne Lives Like a Reckless Train," *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 10, 1989, Sunday Datebook.

<sup>216</sup> Arnold, 3-5.

always playing chicken with us.”<sup>217</sup> Stories began appearing in the media about Barr’s struggles for power within a month after the program first aired. Joy Horowitz of the *New York Times* reported on October 16, 1988, that Barr saw the portrayal of Midwestern working-class people as stereotypical, unrealistic, and unfair. When she complained about the lack of racial diversity, for example, Barr told the *New York Times* that “they just hired a whole bunch of black people to stand in the background in the factory,” and declared, “All those things will change.”<sup>218</sup>

By January 1989, when the show had become a bona fide hit and she had ratings to support her, Barr announced to Carsey and Werner that either she or executive producer and head writer Matt Williams would have to leave the show. Described by Barbara Walters as “the most talked-about person of the new season” and hyperbolically described by *Slate* in retrospect as having “been on the covers of more magazines in 1989 than anyone in history,”<sup>219</sup> Barr was able to use her newfound fame as leverage, despite Williams’s reputation as one of the hottest commodities in Hollywood, and Carsey-Werner capitulated to her demand.<sup>220</sup> Williams was replaced by Jeff Harris, but Harris’s reported undermining of Barr’s authority, particularly with the writers, made the situation worse. Most accounts of the conflicts on the set implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) blamed Barr for the troubles. However, one account by a columnist from Toronto who was temporarily hired to write for the show suggests that the animosity was flying in both directions and that the primary problem was the staff’s unwillingness

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<sup>217</sup> Carsey and Werner interview.

<sup>218</sup> Joy Horowitz, “June Cleaver Without Pearls,” *New York Times*, October 16, 1988, Section 2, Page 1, Column 2, Arts and Leisure Desk.

<sup>219</sup> David Plotz, “Domestic Goddess Dethroned: How Roseanne Lost It,” *Slate*, May 18, 1997, <http://www.slate.com/id/1820/>.

<sup>220</sup> Jeremy Gerard, “TV Notes,” *New York Times*, January 12, 1989, Section C, Page 26, Column 4, Cultural Desk.

to share ideas and scripts with Barr—once again, it was a question of content control.<sup>221</sup>

Harris eventually was very publicly fired (as described at the beginning of this essay).

In the same season, ABC executives inserted themselves in the battle for control on the set. After quietly conducting a “popularity study” in response to a rival network’s poll that suggested Barr was losing ground with the public, ABC defiantly announced that Barr’s popularity showed no signs of slippage. However, they hired an additional executive producer, Jay Daniel, because of his reputation for working with “difficult” stars, with one unnamed ABC executive stating “If he can keep her in sync, it would justify any salary we have to pay him.” Even though Rod Iger, president of ABC’s entertainment division, publicly expressed his support for Barr in the same article, the tone of the piece, and of several others in that time period, suggested that the television industry wasn’t giving ground to Barr without testing the strength of her support from the public first.<sup>222</sup>

By the end of the second season, Barr’s star power was sufficient to leverage official control of *Roseanne* both from the network and from Carsey-Werner as well. Iger granted Barr and her then-fiancé Tom Arnold executive producership over the show. And importantly, ratings for the program remained high. *Roseanne* remained in the Top Five in the Nielsen ratings for a remarkable six years, continuing to be a ratings success for the network through the end of its run. At the end of the third season, the first in which Barr held full creative control, *Roseanne* was the number 3 show of the

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<sup>221</sup> Barbara Klaus, “The Big Break,” *Toronto Star*, November 4, 1990, People, D1.

<sup>222</sup> Bill Carter, “A New Producer Is Hired for *Roseanne*,” *New York Times*, January 11, 1990, Section C, Page 22, Column 4, Cultural Desk. A great example of the typical tone of articles on Barr by early 1990 is Anne Taylor Fleming’s piece, which opens with the question, “Is the ubiquitous Roseanne Barr in danger of losing it?” Anne Taylor Fleming, “*Roseanne’s Tough Act: Is It Too Harsh?*” *New York Times*, January 17, 1990, Section C, Page 10, Column 3, Living Desk.

season according to the Nielsen ratings, moving ahead of *The Cosby Show* for the first time. One might argue that the old adage “any press is good press” was the reason for the consistency in viewership, but the 1990 season was, in fact, praised by John O’Conner, longtime television critic for the *New York Times*, as the first season the show truly developed its own style and identity. Significantly, Barr hired writers who worked outside the television industry, favoring “comics that are off the beaten track, real left, real out of it, real angry,” and going for a working-class sensibility. At the end of the season, the *New York Times*’s O’Conner observed that the failure of the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences to even nominate *Roseanne* for an Emmy simply made the case for the award being “irrelevant.”<sup>223</sup> Barr’s goal to have full control over *Roseanne*’s content had been achieved. But this was no simple power grab; Barr was determined to express an opinion about the intersecting nature of class and gender identity in American culture, and that resonated with the American public as a direct result of the shifting cultural and political landscape immediately after the Cold War. Audiences responded overwhelmingly not only to *Roseanne* but also to the slobcom in general; by the early 1990s there were more working-class representations on American television than at any other time in history.<sup>224</sup> *Roseanne*, while not the first of the slobcoms, was by far the most successful, ending up as the 18<sup>th</sup> most popular program in American television history as of 2003. Roseanne Barr had tapped into something important in the shifting dynamics of class and culture in American society, and American audiences were responding in significant numbers.

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<sup>223</sup> John O’Conner, “By Any Name, Roseanne Is Roseanne Is Roseanne,” *New York Times*, August 18, 1991, Section 2, Page 1, Column 2, Arts & Leisure Desk.

<sup>224</sup> Richard Butsch, “A Half Century of Class and Gender in Domestic TV Sitcoms,” *Circles* 8 (2003), 26.

## What's so Radical About *Roseanne*?

I wanted to make television that is not a tool of corporate America, television that is instead in direct opposition to corporate thinking altogether. The “*Roseanne*” show is a show about America’s unwashed unconsciousness . . . filtered through a working class language that claims every MALE-defined thing from family to economics, to God, as belonging, rightfully, at last, to the realm of women.

—Roseanne (Barr) Arnold, 1994<sup>225</sup>

How did Roseanne Barr intend to get her point about women and work across without alienating or overwhelming a viewing audience unused to seeing these viewpoints on television? Although the primary intent of the show was to create a political platform for addressing the lives and needs of working-class Americans and working-class women in particular, casual viewers of the program might not have consciously picked up on this theme as the focus. One might point to the popularity of, for example, the Halloween episodes<sup>226</sup> to demonstrate that this sitcom, like almost every other, was primarily concerned with fluffy entertainment in a fantasy-like setting, rather than critiquing the hegemonic and gendered notion of a “classless” America. But the program was a soft-sell of this critique. And that approach was less motivated by what Fredric Jameson has noted as a tendency within popular culture to acknowledge anxieties in an attempt to manage or repress them<sup>227</sup> than it was an attempt to gently and effectively raise awareness and acceptance of the political issues of working-class Americans, and working-class women in particular, without alienating a viewing

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<sup>225</sup> Arnold, 234-235.

<sup>226</sup> *Roseanne* was well-known for its Halloween episodes. As Barr explained in her commentary on a DVD release, she had always preferred Halloween over any other holiday because of the candy and the permission to pull pranks, and so when she gained executive producership, she insisted upon elaborate Halloween shows, which she claims were extremely popular with the audience. "Trick Me Up, Trick Me Down," DVD commentary by Roseanne Barr, *The Complete Fourth Season of Roseanne*, 2005.

<sup>227</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 25.

audience. When asked specifically about how *Roseanne* managed to handle such politically volatile subjects on the program, Barr stated in 1994,

I think we have to walk a real tight line when we go into shows that have some sort of depth or some kind of socially significant value to them, because we don't want . . . people to start thinking of us as like a preachy, you know, the show you watch instead of the religious channel on Sunday. So when we do pick our subjects, we pick them real carefully, and we try to time them, real spaced, in between a lot of funny ones, so . . . we just go slowly. But there probably is nothing that we wouldn't do.<sup>228</sup>

Specifically, *Roseanne* varies from its predecessors in its presentation of class, gender, and politics in three primary ways:

1. Middle-class characters no longer have moral and social authority, thereby turning class hierarchy on its head;
2. Political issues are presented as part of a “slice of life” rather than dominating episodic storylines;
3. Working-class characters, rather than being monolithic representations of their class identity, are allowed to be simultaneously liked/respected and flawed, usually to explore politically-charged issues in ways that avoid alienating the audience.

As discussed in earlier chapters, the working-class character in popular culture has clung to strong stereotypes: white, male, blue-collar, uneducated, and altogether deserving of his failure to achieve the so-called American Dream of financial security and material comfort. Working-class characters were furthermore often demonized for the societal ills of any given era, blamed for the rocky assimilation of white ethnics in the immediate post–Cold War era and for racism during the cultural revolutions of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Previous eras of programming with high numbers of working-class characters generally featured the stereotype, surrounded by middle-class (or thus visually coded) characters teaching them the “proper” way to behave (*The*

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<sup>228</sup> "Roseanne," 11th Annual Television Festival. Museum of Television and Radio, March 12, 1994, Beverly Hills, Cal..

*Honeymooners* or *The Life of Riley* from the late 1940s; *All In the Family* from the early 1970s, etc.). There has historically been an almost uniform tendency to paint working-class Americans in this two-dimensional way.

However, as Jefferson Cowie and Lauren Boehm have argued, “Working people resist any formulaic or singular representation of themselves.”<sup>229</sup> They point to the work of political scientist Adolph Reed, who calls for scholars of working-class identity “to dispense with essentialist conceptions of working-class identity and recognize that there is no single route decreed by history, God, or any other force.”<sup>230</sup> Accordingly, *Roseanne* is strongly autobiographical, never claiming to speak for all working-class experiences. Instead, the story lines and the family on the program closely and intentionally parallel her own life and family. Further, and more importantly, *Roseanne* presents working-class characters who are not uniformly “saints” or “sinners”; they often struggle with their own understandings of class, race, gender, and sexual identity, in ways that allow the viewer to avoid feeling condemnation for his or her views on a subject but that still call for self-examination. In the following examples, I show how *Roseanne* challenges the notion of middle-class values and behaviors as the “norm,” how it illuminates class-inflected feminism and feminist-inflected class in the context of Carsey and Werner’s classic “slice of life” format (presenting “a day in the life of” the central characters rather than necessarily centering the program around an overt theme), and how it uses a lack of resolution and flawed characterization to keep the audience open to examining their own identities and politics.

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<sup>229</sup> Jefferson Cowie and Lauren Boehm, “Dead Man’s Town: ‘Born in the USA,’ Social History, and Working-Class Identity,” *American Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 356.

<sup>230</sup> Adolph Reed, “Reinventing the Working Class: A Study in Elite Image Manipulation,” *New Labor Forum* 13 (Fall 2004), as quoted in Cowie and Boehm.

The pilot of *Roseanne* is an excellent example of the “slice of life” format, opening in the kitchen before the work/school day begins. Roseanne juggles each child’s crisis, sending them off to school after promising to replace Becky’s book bag and finding out that Darlene’s teacher wants a conference that afternoon. Roseanne and Dan get a few minutes after the children leave to negotiate their schedules; Dan insists he only has time to fix the sink (not to buy the book bag or go to the conference). Roseanne crankily concludes, “Okay, fix the sink. I’ll do everything else, like I always do. I’ll have to get off work an hour early, lose an hour’s pay, totally rearrange my whole schedule. But I don’t mind!” She heads to her factory job, where her boss gives her grief about getting off work early (when he remarks that he’ll have to dock her pay, she retorts, “Well, there goes the Porsche!”).

Her meeting with the teacher also highlights her struggles to juggle work and a family; the young teacher, clearly marked as middle class, is miffed that Roseanne’s lateness is keeping her from her squash game. After directing the overweight Roseanne to squeeze herself into a child’s desk, thereby clearly establishing the power relationship between them, she condescendingly theorizes that Darlene’s decision to bark like a dog throughout class is “an aggressive manifestation of a deeper internal problem,” to which Roseanne responds “Huh?” After explaining that she thinks there might be a “problem at home,” the teacher asks how much time Roseanne spends with Darlene. Roseanne sneers “You mean, like, *quality* time?” and then explains that she works fulltime outside the home, there is no problem, and furthermore “Our whole family barks!” The scene seems designed to appeal to those double-shift mothers who have been made to feel inadequate by the “experts” for “neglecting” their children; the

viewer comes away from the scene cheering the teacher's discomfort and Roseanne's spunky defense of her child and her own schedule. In that sense, this "slice of life" scene also positions working-class daily life and behavior as preferable to that of the middle-class behaviors the teacher represents.

In the final scene of the episode, Roseanne and Dan scream at each other in the kitchen about shared responsibilities in a way that would have given Ozzie Nelson a heart attack. Not only has Dan not fixed the sink, but he has spent the entire afternoon with friends (ostensibly networking for a contracting job). Roseanne yells, "I put in eight hours at the factory and then I come home and put in another eight hours. I'm running around like a maniac, taking back book bags . . . talking to teachers and everything else, and you don't do NOTHIN'!" Dan hollers back "You want me to fix dinner? I'll fix dinner!" to which Roseanne sarcastically replies "Oh, but honey! You just fixed dinner three years ago!" Although the program closes with a diversion, in which the parents work together to bandage a cut on Darlene's finger, the implications are clear: the struggles of a working-class woman to balance work and family are part of an ongoing process that working-class women face on a continuing basis. And while Dan's flaws are clearly presented, he does not emerge as the "villain" for his shortcomings.<sup>231</sup> In conclusion, we see the three elements of *Roseanne*'s approach to presenting a political frame on class and gender within the program in this episode: no attempt to characterize this family's life as "representative" of working-class culture, a willingness to present political issues via flaws in primary characters' behaviors without

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<sup>231</sup> "Life and Stuff," *Roseanne*, ABC, October 18, 1988.

neatly resolving them, and turning the standard of middle-class behavior and lifestyle as “proper” on its head.

Season 2 includes a long story arc about Roseanne’s quest to find a job—one that highlights the particularities of working-class women’s struggles. Season 1 had ended with a feel-good moment in which Roseanne led a walk-out at the factory where she had worked for eleven years,<sup>232</sup> but by the opening of the next season, Roseanne and Dan are struggling to make ends meet. She starts the season with a job as a home-based telemarketer, selling magazines out of her home, but the tedious nature of the job, unreliable income, hostility she encounters from potential customers, and near impossibility of working out of her chaotic home lead her to look desperately for another option. She interviews for and gets a job as a secretary at a meat-packing plant. But as she’s leaving the interview, her employer discovers she has no computer skills and rescinds the offer.<sup>233</sup> Her next job possibility seems promising, as Burt, who’s contracted Dan’s services on a construction job, offers to hire Roseanne as his office manager. But it becomes almost impossible to separate work from home when the emotionally needy Burt starts showing up at their home uninvited for “family time,” and besides, it’s understood upfront that the duration of the job is only six weeks.<sup>234</sup> Roseanne then works two jobs, one at a fast-food restaurant and one bartending at the local bar. After her oldest daughter Becky complains that “you’re neglecting me,” Roseanne quips, “I know, honey, but it’s nothing personal. I’m neglecting your brother and sister, too.” As her relationship with Dan and the children deteriorates, Roseanne

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<sup>232</sup> “Let’s Call It Quits,” *Roseanne*, ABC, May 2, 1989.

<sup>233</sup> “Guilt By Disassociation,” *Roseanne*, ABC, September 26, 1989.

<sup>234</sup> “Somebody Stole My Gal,” *Roseanne*, ABC, October 3 1989.

realizes that she can't possibly continue to work 16-hour days.<sup>235</sup> So she stays with the fast-food job, but her 17-year-old boss insists on scheduling her on weekends, her only time with her family. When her sister Jackie suggests she should quit, she retorts "And do what? Go back into medicine?" Although she tries various ways to persuade him to change his mind, she refuses to agree to sacrifice weekends to the job; he fires her.<sup>236</sup> Her next job is as a "shampoo girl" at a local salon; although she likes her coworkers, she feels belittled, especially when Mrs. Wellman, the owner of the factory where she worked for eleven years, comes in, tips terribly, and can't even remember her name.<sup>237</sup> So within a season, the program was able to tackle technology's effect on blue-collar work, the impact of educational access on work opportunities, the increasing inadequacy of service-industry wages and dignity on the job, and the complications for women of juggling work and family, all without making the political statement the focus of each episode.

By season 3, Barr was running the show. The focus shifted from a labor-specific look at working-class life to the complicated dynamics of working-class culture in a nation that rewards middle-class behavior. Barr, once again relying on autobiography, began looking for ways to express her current struggles as a working-class person in the midst of wealth in Hollywood. Her solution was to have middle-class neighbors move in next door to the Conners, in order to juxtapose not just economic disparity between classes but also values, norms, and manners. So, in season 3, the Bowman family moves in next door. Kathy and Jerry Bowman are yuppies from Chicago who've moved to

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<sup>235</sup> "Lobocop," *Roseanne*, ABC, December 5, 1989.

<sup>236</sup> "Chicken Hearts," *Roseanne*, ABC, January 2, 1990.

<sup>237</sup> "Hair," *Roseanne*, ABC, February 6, 1990, and "Fender Bender," *Roseanne*, ABC, March 20, 1990.

Lanford to raise their son Todd in a small-town atmosphere. The character of Kathy Bowman is especially significant, because once again it parallels Barr's real life experiences. As Barr explains in the DVD commentary for "Trick Me Up, Trick Me Down" (the season 4 Halloween episode), "In the fourth season, I really wanted to talk about what happens when you get around rich people after you've been poor your whole life, which happened to me because of this show, and [Kathy] kind of was, uh . . . I wanted a neighbor who was like all the people I was starting to meet in Beverly Hills."

Later in the commentary, she remembers: "Actually, I think this character was patterned after my boss on this show, Marcy Carsey, who's very East Coast and, uh, classy."<sup>238</sup>

While Jerry and Todd assimilate into the working-class neighborhood quickly, Kathy can't abide her neighbors and hates Lanford altogether. Her first visit to Roseanne and Dan's home illustrates her disdain for their lifestyles, as she looks around disgustedly at the decor, is horrified by their manners, refuses to sit down, and begins sneezing daintily as she explains "I'm allergic to dust." When the Conners attempt to make a better second impression by bringing over baked goods to the Bowman home, they find it has the same floor plan as their own but is exquisitely furnished and decorated. When Roseanne remarks to Kathy that coming into their home was "like walking into my own house," Kathy sniffs "Well, we're not finished decorating." Kathy then pretends she doesn't have coffee and generally does everything she can to get them to leave.

But it's not just material belongings that divide Roseanne and Kathy: expectations for "good" mothering are class-specific as well. Todd is cut while playing

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<sup>238</sup> "Trick Me Up, Trick Me Down," DVD commentary by Roseanne Barr, *The Complete Fourth Season of Roseanne*, 2005.

at a construction site with the Conner's son D.J., and while Roseanne lectures them about going to such a dangerous location to play, Kathy finds this inadequate.

**Roseanne:** Well, I just don't believe it! You're finally coming over here, but it's just to tell me that you're a better mom than I am.

**Kathy:** I always know where my son is, Roseanne.

**Roseanne:** Well, I've got three kids, and a job, and I can't be everywhere, okay? I've gotta trust my kids, and they're still alive, so obviously I've done something right.

Kathy then threatens to end Todd's friendship with D.J. by forbidding him to come over to the Conners' home. Roseanne's response is to point out that Kathy's middle-class attitude is as damaging her son as is Roseanne's lack of vigilance when Todd is at the Conners':

**Roseanne:** Oh, yeah? Well, I'm gonna go you one better, Kathy. I'm not sending DJ over to your house either, because I don't need him picking up any of your attitude!

**Kathy:** And just exactly what "attitude" is that?

**Roseanne** (*mimicking Kathy's tone*): That one, right there. You know, the one where you think you're too damn good to live next door to me. Well, you're not! You're just some stressed out, overprotective *snob* who paid way too much for her house.<sup>239</sup>

Throughout seasons 3 and 4, Kathy makes it clear that she thinks Roseanne is crude, irresponsible, and a slob; by the end of the fourth season, Kathy has harassed Jerry into moving back to Chicago.

Barr in retrospect claims that her spoof of Marcy Carsey came from Carsey's status as a role model for Barr in her attempts at upward class mobility: "I was trying to learn a thing or two from her at that time. I was trying to learn how to go out to lunch

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<sup>239</sup> "Troubles with the Rubbles," *Roseanne*, ABC, March 26, 1991.

and not eat with my fingers.”<sup>240</sup> But Kathy’s presentation makes this claim suspect. Occasionally, the women are seen coming to a truce, particularly when their goals and values as women are in sync (they want their children to be happy, they want their neighborhood to be safe, etc.). This seems to parallel Carsey and Barr’s joint support of feminist issues. But the true entertainment value of the Kathy Bowman character’s presence comes from watching Roseanne Conner figuratively skewer her for her middle-class rigidity. The season 4 Halloween Special, “Trick Me Up, Trick Me Down,” opens with Kathy wandering timidly into the Conners’ house, looking for Roseanne. She finds Dan “dead,” apparently cut to pieces on the kitchen table; Roseanne comes up behind her and explains that she got tired of all the complaining, housework, and lack of appreciation, but that this homicide was more difficult than the last. As Kathy begs for her life, losing all vestiges of her middle-class comportment, Dan quietly gets up off the table behind her, proffers a plastic body part, and enquires over Kathy’s shoulder, “liver?” Kathy runs screaming out of the house, and the Conners celebrate gleefully over having “gotten” their snooty neighbor.<sup>241</sup> The final episode with the Bowmans also demonstrates the show’s attitude toward the Kathy Bowman character, as Roseanne gets in trouble for telling D.J. the Bowmans are moving back to Chicago so Kathy can get “that stick out of her butt.”<sup>242</sup>

Perhaps the most important contribution *Roseanne* makes to changing the ways that working-class characters are presented, however, is the way in which the program allows characters to be simultaneously likeable and respected as working class while

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<sup>240</sup> “Trick Me Up, Trick Me Down,” DVD commentary by Roseanne Barr, *The Complete Fourth Season of Roseanne*, 2005.

<sup>241</sup> “Trick Me Up, Trick Me Down,” *Roseanne*, ABC, October 29, 1991.

<sup>242</sup> “The Commercial Show,” *Roseanne*, ABC, March 3, 1992.

flawed as human beings. These characters are therefore able to explore challenging political topics without becoming the scapegoats for why these political issues are problems in American culture. Unlike in previous eras of working-class programming, the failure of working-class characters to assimilate into middle-class norms is not posited as the reason the problem exists in the first place. Further, rather than resolving these issues neatly in the half-hour format and providing a moral for the audience, the program leaves resolution to the viewer. This is in direct conflict with the general rules of sitcom format, as explicated by Mick Bowes:

[T]he most characteristic feature of the classic situation comedy is narrative closure. In other words, each story is resolved within the 30 minutes of the programme. In addition this closure is generally circular—it returns the characters to the positions they occupied at the start, thus allowing the next week's programme to start afresh.<sup>243</sup>

But *Roseanne* frequently ends without closure. This creates an atmosphere in which the primary characters—the ones with which the audience is supposed to identify on one level or another—are positioned as culpable for the ways in which their behavior is rooted in the biases ingrained in everyday culture: working-class, middle-class, or otherwise. In a sense, then, *Roseanne* allows for the audience to look inward at their own shortcomings without “preaching” about those flaws, therefore creating a willingness to question those attitudes and an opportunity for dialogue about these issues in everyday life.<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> Mick Bowes, “Only When I Laugh,” in Andrew Goodwin and Garry Whannels, eds., *Understanding Television* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 129, as quoted in Stephen Maddison, *Fags, Hags, and Queer Sisters: Gender Dissent and Heterosocial Bonds in Gay Culture* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 110.

<sup>244</sup> Maddison, 110.

For example, in “White Men Can’t Kiss,” Roseanne and Dan discover that D.J. has refused to kiss a little girl in the school play. When Roseanne visits the school to ask if there’s an alternative to the kiss, D.J.’s teacher informs her that ‘I’m not going to change the entire play because of certain people’s values.’’ Roseanne is confused until the little girl, who is African-American, walks into the room.

**Roseanne:** That wouldn’t be THE Geena, would it?

**Teacher:** What, you can’t tell them apart?

**Roseanne:** Oh, you thought that that’s why D.J. didn’t want to . . . and you thought I knew and that I support that . . .

**Teacher:** I see a lot of this around here [in the working-class town of Lanford]. It always starts with the parents. (*She walks away.*)

Roseanne is appalled and rushes home to insist that D.J. has to kiss the girl in the play. Her biggest concern is that everyone will see them as racists, a concern that is particularly strong, given the stereotype of the white working-class as the well from which racism in American culture springs. “Everybody will think [D.J. isn’t kissing her] because she’s black and I will NEVER be able to buy sheets again!” Furious with D.J., she lectures him, shaking her finger and informing him their family is better than “a bunch of banjo-picking, cousin-dating, barefoot embarrassments to respectable white trash like us!”<sup>245</sup> It is significant that Roseanne employs a similar tactic to that described by John Hartigan in his explanation for why the term “white trash” gets bandied about by working-class whites as a way of positioning themselves higher in the class hierarchy. In discussing the function of the term “white trash” (a term used self-referentially, albeit often in jest, by Roseanne Conner on the program), Hartigan notes “the general view held by whites that there are only a few extreme, dangerous whites who are really racist or violently misogynist, as opposed to recognizing that racism is an

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<sup>245</sup> “White Men Can’t Kiss,” *Roseanne*, ABC, November 16, 1994.

institutional problem pervading the nation and implicating all whites in its operation. In this naming operation, ‘bad’ whites perform as examples by which the charges of racism can be contained.”<sup>246</sup> In other words, Barr is well aware of the historical tendency to shift the blame for racism onto people like the Conners, and she is eager to contradict the association of their class status with racism, especially as it applies to the town’s perception of the family.

At the same time, Barr takes care to avoid idealizing the Conners as “saints” who are not culpable for the role they play in maintaining the racism deeply ingrained in American culture; not only does the program argue for the inclusion of working-class white Americans into the positive elements of national cultural identity but it also associates the working class with its flaws. Roseanne is furious when Dan lets D.J. off the hook, rationalizing that only five percent of the Lanford population is Black and that D.J. is probably just uncertain about kissing a “Black girl instead of one of his own. I did not just say that!” Roseanne uses this statement as evidence that Dan, and not she, is to blame for the attitude D.J. is demonstrating, especially since Dan’s father was infamous for his claims to have no problem with “the coloreds.” Dan’s discomfort with D.J.’s racism is increased when he realizes his own attitudes are likely to blame for D.J.’s behavior. He asks Chuck, a poker buddy who is African American, what his opinion is on the matter and whether D.J.’s lack of “exposure to other cultures” might be a better explanation for D.J.’s actions than Dan’s example. “Other cultures?!?” his friend retorts, “Why? Is the Black girl from China?” Dan is reduced to muttering half-

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<sup>246</sup> John T. Hartigan, Jr., *Odd Tribes: Toward a Cultural Analysis of White People* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005), 118.

sentences, and Chuck points out several racist assumptions underlying Dan's support of D.J.

Although Dan goes back to D.J. and tells him he has to be in the play and kiss the girl, the program doesn't end neatly with Dan having learned a lesson about latent racism; rather, the final message is about the insidious nature of racism in every person's life. The final scene opens with Roseanne and Jackie closing up the diner early because they're tired and have had a busy night. A Black man comes to the door just after Roseanne has locked it, and she refuses to let him in. He stalks off angrily, and Roseanne asks Jackie uncertainly, "I did the right thing, didn't I?" The man returns and bangs loudly on the door, causing Jackie to jump and grab the cash drawer off the counter. He yells through the door "I'm Mr. Williams, Geena's father!" Roseanne opens the door and lets him in, but he's clearly infuriated by her actions.

**Roseanne:** Why didn't you just say that you were Geena's father?

**Mr. Williams:** You need to know all your customers' names before they come into your restaurant?

**Roseanne:** Hey, Mr. Williams, you think that you know what happened, but you don't know what happened.

**Jackie:** No, she didn't do that because you're an African American. She did that because you're a man.

**Roseanne:** Yeah, and I'm prejudiced against all men equally.

**Mr. Williams:** That's real funny.

**Roseanne:** Hey, we're women, you know, and it's night. This is like a matter of safety. And in situations like that I've just gotta go with my gut instinct.

**Mr. Williams:** Well, I guess your kid inherited your instincts.

**Roseanne** (*unconvincingly*): What? There's no way that that's anything like this.

**Jackie:** Mr. Williams, come on, I'm sure you didn't come here to fight.

**Roseanne:** Well just forget about it anyway. There's probably just no way that you're ever gonna see where I'm coming from.

**Mr. Williams:** You know, that's funny. I was going to say the same thing to you.

Mr. Williams stalks out of the restaurant and Jackie tries to reassure Roseanne that she made the right decision in refusing him entry. “Well, I’m glad one of us is sure,” Roseanne mumbles dejectedly. The final shot is of Roseanne leaning against the cash register, looking troubled about what she’s just seen in herself.<sup>247</sup>

The episode exemplifies *Roseanne*’s approach to tackling complicated political issues without positioning its working-class characters as guilty because of their class status. By acknowledging and subtly refuting the stereotype of the white working class as somehow exclusively responsible for American racism, yet not requiring these same characters to be unrealistically innocent of the racism that pervades American culture, *Roseanne* reintegrates working-class culture into mainstream American culture, in a sense turning on its head the notion that upward class mobility is a fundamental characteristic of cultural assimilation into the “norm” and the solution to societal problems.

### **Demystifying the American Dream**

In season 4, the Conners have seized the opportunity afforded them by their friend Ziggy’s gift of \$20,000 by opening up a motorcycle shop. The “bike shop,” as the Conners refer to it, is the physical manifestation of Dan’s American Dream; “That’s stuff we used to dream about when we were growing up!” Dan enthuses when Ziggy first broaches the subject. But the \$20,000 isn’t enough to open the business; the Conners would have to take out another mortgage on their home. Dan turns Ziggy down, saying, “I can’t risk it, I’ve got a family.” But Ziggy responds that Dan can’t

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<sup>247</sup> “White Men Can’t Kiss” *Roseanne*, ABC, November 16, 1994.

continue to do what so many working-class Americans do: “What are you going to do, you going to spend the rest of your life doing something you hate?” Roseanne sees how important the idea is to Dan and decides, against her better judgment, that she needs to support his dream.

But the American Dream soon turns into the American Nightmare for the Conners, as the bike shop begins to fail. Set in 1992 as the United States was mired in a recession and just prior to the presidential election, the story arc suggests that those who might have patronized the bike shop in Lanford simply can’t afford to do so. Further, the department store restaurant where Roseanne is working shuts down as a cost-saving measure for the corporation that owns the store, and so the supplemental income that was enabling the Conners to keep the bill collectors at bay is now gone. In one of the last episodes before they lose the bike shop, Dan is on the phone staving off the banker to whom they owe money while Roseanne answers the doorbell. It’s a politician, Mike Summers, running for the state legislature and going door-to-door to garner votes from his constituency.

**Roseanne:** Door-to-door, huh? That takes a lot of time. Why don’t you just go down to the unemployment office and see everybody at once?

**Summers:** I hear you. And you’re right; we can’t let this area’s work force lay idle. That’s why bringing in new businesses is my number one priority.

**Roseanne:** How?

**Summers:** Through tax incentives. See, we’re going to make it cheaper for out-of-state businesses to set up shop right here in Lanford.

**Roseanne:** So they get a tax break?

**Summers:** Yeah, that’s why they come here.

**Roseanne:** Well, who’s gonna pay the taxes that they ain’t paying?

**Summers:** Well . . . y-you will. BUT, you’ll be working. Good, steady employment!

**Roseanne:** Union wages?

**Summers:** Well, now, part of the reason these companies are finding it so expensive to operate in other locations is—

**Roseanne:** SO, they're gonna dump the unions so they can come here and hire us at scab wages, and for that privilege we get to pay their taxes!

Summers, now terrified of the politically astute working-class woman he thought he could woo, asks Roseanne if her husband is home. “Well, he’s on the phone trying to keep us from losing our house. Hey, let’s talk about that! See, we’re broke. I can’t even afford to go buy groceries unless it’s double coupon day.” Summers tries to back out the door but Roseanne grabs her coat and goes with him to meet the neighbors. At the end of the program, Roseanne’s adamant working-class politics have so frightened him that, when he enters Dan’s bike shop in a later scene and sees her standing behind the counter, he turns and flees.<sup>248</sup>

### **Warts and All**

But even the explicit politics expressed in this “Aliens” episode are tempered by humor and by the fact that this plot line is secondary to the overall plot line for the episode. Another way in which the politics of the episode are tempered is by avoiding positioning the main characters as “perfect” examples of what would have been called in that era “political correctness.” The Conners are flawed products of their own environment, and when politically charged topics are addressed on the program, there is no omniscient father figure (as there typically might be in a contemporary middle-class program like *The Cosby Show*) that presents the “correct” viewpoint on the issue of note. The two primary topics that *Roseanne* tackles in this manner are equal rights for

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<sup>248</sup> “Aliens,” *Roseanne*, ABC, May 12, 1992.

women and equal status for gay and lesbian characters within their family and social circle. *Roseanne* is well-known for its feminist and queer-friendly atmosphere. But it is important to note that, although the politics of the program are fairly clear through character development and the plot lines the show prioritizes, these representations don't come with a pronouncement on what position the viewer should take; rather, they present complex issues for the purpose of making them more visible to the viewing public. Perhaps the best example of this comes in the episode in which the girlfriend of Roseanne's friend Nancy kisses Roseanne.

Jackie and Roseanne want their friend Nancy to believe they're accepting of her sexuality; in fact, they want to believe it, too. But when Nancy's girlfriend Sharon invites them to a gay bar, they can barely contain how taken aback they are at the notion. Nevertheless, in an effort to prove their supposed open-mindedness, they accept. While there, Jackie huddles at the bar, freaked out, while Roseanne pretends to be Jackie's girlfriend just to torture her. After dancing with Sharon, Roseanne sits down at a table with her to chat and is shocked when Sharon kisses her. The next day, she struggles over whether to tell Nancy, then decides to do so. It turns out that Sharon has already told Nancy, because she's afraid she's upset Roseanne. Nancy scolds Roseanne for being homophobic, and Roseanne gets defensive:

**Roseanne:** I-I'm not afraid of any, um, small percentage of my gayness inside, you know what I mean? I am, uh, totally okay with, uh, whether I'm, like, three percent, or four percent . . . or lower.

**Nancy:** You are a total hypocrite!

**Roseanne:** I am not a hypocrite! A hypocrite doesn't go to a gay bar and teach 40 people how to do the monkey!

**Nancy:** Oh, and—and we're supposed to admire you because you went to a gay bar? I'm supposed to think you're cool because you have gay friends?

**Roseanne:** I don't care if you think I'm cool, because I know that I am cool, baby! I'm probably the coolest chick you've ever met. And for your information, I have friends that are way gayer than you.

Meanwhile at home, D.J. has questions for Dan about Roseanne's "dancing with other women":

**D.J.:** Isn't that wrong?

**Dan:** No, son, it's perfectly fine. And anyone who tries to tell you different is wrong.

**D.J.:** Does that mean you dance with other men?

**Dan:** Yes. Yes, I do.

**D.J.:** Really?

**Dan:** No. Never, not once.

**D.J.:** Well I don't want to, either.

**Dan:** That's your choice. (*D.J. leaves*) Hallelujah.

Later on, Roseanne tells Dan about the kiss, and rather than get angry (as she fears he will), Dan is turned on by the thought and asks her to describe the bar, to which she replies "You would really love it at that bar, Dan. They've got a lot of men there, too. You know, and they're rubbing their hard bodies up against each other and kissing each other." Dan decides he's no longer turned on and goes to get something to eat.<sup>249</sup>

What are we to make of this complicated presentation of negotiating queer sexuality in working-class culture? Dan is generally positioned as an admirable man and yet there are clearly homophobic tendencies on display in his attitudes. Likewise, Roseanne, the lead character and heroine of the program, doesn't exactly portray a progressive attitude toward sexuality. Yet the overall tone of the program not only puts sexuality on display for public consumption but positions queer sexuality within the confines of everyday life and friendships on the program. As Barr herself explained two

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<sup>249</sup> "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," *Roseanne*, ABC, March 1, 1994.

years after the episode aired, “I think homophobia is something everybody has, and on that night Roseanne Conner dealt with her own homophobia.”<sup>250</sup>

## Conclusion

What *Roseanne* seemed to do best was bring out deeply-ingrained flaws—our blindness to class hierarchy, our willingness to put up with daily sexism in our workplaces and homes, our deeply imbedded phobias about other categories of identity such as race and sexuality, and our unmerited faith in the American Dream—in ways that didn’t alienate the audience, but rather recognized these anxieties and shortcomings with a sense of humor and lack of judgment that made it palatable. She managed to bring feminist theory and politics to an audience that was more likely to take its cues from television than from a college textbook or scholarly article. As Barbara Ehrenreich noted of the woman she called the “zeitgeist goddess” in 1990,

Barr’s theoretical outlook is, in the best left-feminist tradition, dialectical. On the one hand, she presents the family as a zone of intimacy and support, well worth defending against the forces of capitalism, which drive both mothers and fathers out of the home, scratching around for paychecks. On the other hand, the family is hardly a haven, especially for grown-up females. It is marred from within by—among other things—the patriarchal division of leisure, which makes dad and the kids the “consumers” of mom’s cooking, cleaning, nurturing, and (increasingly) her income. . . . This is a bleak and radical vision. Not given to didacticism, Barr offers no programmatic ways out. Surely, we are led to conclude pay equity would help, along with child care and so on. But Barr leaves us hankering for a quality of change that goes beyond mere reform; for a world in which even the lowliest among us—the hash slinger, the sock finder, the factory hand—will be recognized as the poet she truly is.<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> Sue Carswell, “Roseanne for Queen of the Universe,” *Out* (February 1996), 114.

<sup>251</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, “The Wretched of the Hearth: The Undainty Feminism of Roseanne Barr,” *New Republic* April 2, 1990, 30-31.

In conclusion, *Roseanne* made visible the struggles of those who didn't fit into an idealized version of the American Dream—the working class, women, people of color, people of varying queer sexualities, and more—without idealizing the “other” or positioning them outside of the bigotries that are interwoven into all subject positions. Without offering a neat solution to the social and economic issues it criticized, it facilitated conversation around those issues and made connections between them in ways that made sense to the general public. But that message was relatively short-lived. As the United States and the global market moved into an era in which neoliberal economic policies gained hegemonic acceptance, *Roseanne*'s vision of a multifaceted and diverse world was altered. In the process, the radical multiculturalism of the program became subsumed under a hegemonically acceptable multicultural neoliberalism that eventually led to the program's demise.

## Chapter Four

### The Politics of *Roseanne*: Neoliberalism, Class, and Gender in the 1990s

*Roseanne* was part of the influx of working-class family sitcoms, known as slobcoms, which made up a significant proportion of primetime television in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Although the program in many ways epitomizes how the slobcom framed the Culture Wars through the lens of class, it was also somewhat unique in its blatant political intention and the authorial drive behind its content. This makes *Roseanne* an especially useful tool for understanding the rising awareness of class in the post–Cold War era—a notable development in a country that had relied for over forty years on its “classlessness” as an inherent part of its national identity. The program posited an interrelatedness between racial, gender, sexual, and class inequities that understood their relative movements as part of a “culture of downward redistribution,” to use Lisa Duggan’s term. In other words, *Roseanne* embodied the notion that had dominated social movements since the 1960s: oppression occurs at economic, social, and political levels simultaneously and requires a balanced attack that recognizes this fact in order to effect real change.<sup>252</sup>

As discussed in chapter 3, the neoliberal economic policies of the Reagan administration were a primary factor in the events that made possible the primetime appearance of a sitcom like *Roseanne*, resulting in a critique on primetime of the very

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<sup>252</sup> See Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), xvii–xviii, for a detailed description of “cultures of downward redistribution” within social movements originating in the 1960s.

same system, in that these neoliberal policies were framed as an attack on the working class. But ironically, *Roseanne*'s radical message was eventually absorbed by the rise of a more developed neoliberalism in the 1990s, what Duggan calls "multicultural neoliberalism." The political developments of that decade, hailed by many progressives as a turn away from conservative values, held that class was no longer a pressing issue that lay at the heart of racial, gender, and sexual inequalities; this "multicultural neoliberalism," seemingly so in-step with the politics of *Roseanne*, contributed to a significant change in the tenor of the program and reflected a waning attention to class as a recognized category of identity in the United States as the twentieth century drew to a close.

This chapter explores how multicultural neoliberalism's prominence in the 1990s narrowed the political conversation about rights and citizenship to a debate between neoconservatives and neoliberals, shutting out significant consideration of class in American culture and focusing these debates around the notion of "values." Using shifting trends in feminism as an example of how neoliberalism changed public conversations about the interrelatedness of class, race, and gender, the chapter reveals parallels between the altered rhetoric in feminist circles and the refocused terms of political debate in *Roseanne* in later episodes. On a larger scale, it explores how the shift in message that occurred in the final seasons of *Roseanne* mirrored the neoliberal trends in public conversation. Much like the nation's hegemonic embrace of multicultural neoliberalism, these changes in *Roseanne* minimized economic and social representations of class and replaced them with Culture Wars–inflected rhetoric about the power of money in the battle for social equality. In doing so, it followed the "New

Democrat” policy of positioning class as “culture” rather than as a fundamental component of inequity in American society.

### **Multicultural Neoliberalism and the Culture Wars**

In Duggan’s framing of the neoliberal turn, the 1980s were part of a phase in neoliberalism that worked to separate social movements from their economic wings. What had previously been one element of larger social movements became the entire body of the movement. Known as the “civil rights lobby,” these organizations focused almost exclusively domestically, relying on the legislative and legal processes rather than seeing those avenues as part of a more complex plan of action. Duggan cites the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) as examples of “practical wings of broad-based mobilizations” that “succumbed to liberalism’s paltry promise—engage the language and institutional games of established liberal contests and achieve equality.”<sup>253</sup> The women’s movement in particular, especially by the late 1980s, seemed almost exclusively represented by these organizations: NOW (National Organization for Women), EMILY’s List,<sup>254</sup> and Feminist Majority<sup>255</sup> either originated or gained

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<sup>253</sup> Duggan, xviii.

<sup>254</sup> EMILY is an acronym for “Early Money Is Like Yeast,” referring to their organizing premise that funding pro-choice, female politicians at the outset of their campaigns will increase the likelihood that these politicians will be elected to office. See EMILY’s List. “Our Mission,” *EMILY’s List*, <http://www.emilyslist.org/about/mission/> (accessed March 2, 2008).

<sup>255</sup> According to Feminist Majority’s web site, “The Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF) was created to develop bold, new strategies and programs to advance women’s equality, non-violence, economic development, and, most importantly, empowerment of women and girls in all sectors of society. All programs of the FMF endeavor to include a global perspective and activities to promote leadership development, especially among young women. Along with reproductive rights and access to reproductive technology, the FMF’s programs have focused on the empowerment of women in law, business, medicine, academia, sports, and the Internet. Its sister organization, the Feminist Majority (formerly Fund for the Feminist Majority), has focused on empowering women in public policy-making as well as gender

momentum in the late 1980s, at the same time that scholars and cultural observers bemoaned the “backlash” against feminism in public culture.<sup>256</sup>

Common perception by the late 1990s was that the culture had entered a “postfeminist” era, in which the legal advocacy supplied by these organizations was sufficient to maintain and protect the rights that had supposedly already been achieved by and for women. Although media scholar Bonnie Dow points to the defeat of the ERA as the impetus for postfeminism, she also couches the rise of postfeminism in explicitly classed terms: “Little government support for feminist ideas, combined with an increasingly troubled economic life for the middle and lower classes (including the feminization of poverty), provided motivation for the retreat from radical feminism.”<sup>257</sup> Further, Dow concurs with Duggan that, whatever the cause, the 1980s saw a shift in feminist activism from “grassroots membership” to “specific but varied feminist issues” being championed by “specific organizations that functioned more as interest groups than as activist collectives.”<sup>258</sup>

Angela McRobbie suggests that, around 1990, feminist issues gained public visibility in popular media in a way that simultaneously suggested hegemonic acceptance of basic tenets of second-wave feminism *and* no need to continue to use the typical modes of engagement established by second-wave feminists to achieve these tenets. The problem was that, while the notion that things like equal pay, access to

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balance in elective and appointive offices.” Their campaigns typically center around pro-choice advocacy, funding women’s career advancement, and political lobbying Feminist Majority. “Mission and Principles,” *Feminist Majority*, <http://feminist.org/welcome/mandp.asp> (accessed March 2, 2008).

<sup>256</sup> Those elements of feminist activism that operated outside the political mainstream were targeted as the cause of social and cultural ills like increasing divorce rates and the so-called “dissolution” of the family. See Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Crown, 1991).

<sup>257</sup> Bonnie Dow, *Primetime Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women’s Movement since 1970* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 92.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid., 91.

reproductive options, and sexual empowerment were legitimate rights for women, the reality of these rights for most women did not exist. Instead, McRobbie theorizes that female achievement occurred “predicated not on feminism, but on ‘female individualism,’ on success which seems to be based on the invitation to young women by various governments that they might now consider themselves free to compete in education and work privileged subjects of the new meritocracy.”<sup>259</sup> In this sense, then, McRobbie’s notion of postfeminism also fits well into Duggan’s notion of multicultural neoliberalism, in which market competition defines and determines equality for all raced, gendered, and sexualized subjects.

Naomi Wolf’s bestselling 1993 book *Fire With Fire*, for example, promoted a view of feminism that was more interested in engaging with the market than in challenging the ways it continued to render women second-class citizens or challenging the notion that facilitating business ownership or elite women in politics would affect working-class women in any significant way. Wolf championed a primary facet of neoliberalism within her vision of feminism: individualism—a concept that, while present in second-wave feminism via the focus on agency and voice for women, hardly gained primacy in the midst of the focus on collective action. Wolf points to the 1992 “Year of the Woman” elections that brought major female politicians such as Barbara Boxer and Nancy Pelosi to office as evidence that women had entered a new era of empowerment that negated the necessity of continuing the patterns of activism that had characterized the second-wave women’s movement. Wolf declared boldly that the new “power feminism” (her term), among other things:

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<sup>259</sup> Angela McRobbie, “Postfeminism and Popular Culture,” *Feminist Media Studies* 4, no. 3 (2004), 258.

- Encourages a woman to claim her individual voice rather than merging her voice in a collective identity, for only strong individuals can create a just community.
- Seeks power and uses it responsibly, both for women as individuals and to make the world more fair to others.
- Knows that poverty is not glamorous; wants women to acquire money, both for their own dreams, independence, and security, and for social change.<sup>260</sup>

Wolf's version of feminism was part of the larger rejection of collective action. As Deborah Seigel and others have noted, this seemed to be a culmination of the 1980s focus on the “superwoman”; Seigel points out that even *Ms.* magazine was running articles like “Exactly What to Say to Get the Salary You Want” and “How To Know When You’re Stuck and Other Career Tips.”<sup>261</sup> Indeed, power feminism seemed aimed at white, middle- to upper-middle-class women to the exclusion of working-class women and women of color. The move away from collective action and identity, as Robin Goodman has argued, supported a privatization of public power that particularly harmed working-class women<sup>262</sup> As bell hooks notes, “In the 1990s, collusion with the existing social structure was the price of ‘women’s liberation.’ At the end of the day class power proved to be more important than feminism. And this collusion helped destabilize the feminist movement.”<sup>263</sup>

David Harvey explains this as part of the geography of the neoliberal state; as the dividing line between politics and corporations becomes increasingly porous, Harvey

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<sup>260</sup> Naomi Wolf, *Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How It Will Change the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (New York: Random House, 1993), 137.

<sup>261</sup> Deborah Seigel, *Sisterhood, Interrupted: From Radical Women to Girls Gone Wild* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 105.

<sup>262</sup> Robin Goodman, *World, Class, Women: Global Literature, Education, and Feminism* (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2004). On a more global scale, David Harvey writes, “The loss of social protections in advanced capitalist countries has had particularly negative effects on lower-class women, and in many of the ex-communist countries of the Soviet bloc the loss of women’s rights through neoliberalization has been nothing short of catastrophic.” David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 170.

<sup>263</sup> bell hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 2000), 41-42.

argues, oppositional politics have resorted to relying on the (very expensive) judiciary process as their primary means of doing battle. “Since most needy individuals lack the financial resources to pursue their own rights,” Harvey concludes, “The only way in which [the neoliberal ideal of individualism] can be articulated is through the formation of advocacy groups.” Harvey’s example of such a group is the non-governmental organization (NGO); NGOs have increased “spectacularly” since 1980, often stepping in to fill the void left when government-sponsored social programs have been terminated, thereby creating *de facto* privatization—an ideal result under the politics of neoliberalism, and an explanation for the marked increase in these kinds of groups in social movements.<sup>264</sup>

The result in the 1990s was that “progressive” issues were championed by a call to embrace the very economics that brought conservatives to power: neoliberal faith in the market to “naturally” regulate individual freedom. But the “emergent ‘multicultural’ neoliberal ‘equality’ politics” (Duggan’s complicated-but-articulate label for 1990s neoliberalism) of the 1990s, in which many Americans began to accept the idea that economic stability would address violations of human rights and other inequalities for classed, raced, and gendered “others,”<sup>265</sup> was also part of a brilliant move by the self-described “New Democrats” of the era to reaffirm notions of American “classlessness” and unity (themes that 1980s conservatives had very successfully emphasized) in an effort to regain control.

In his study of the development of right-wing think tanks, historian Jason Stahl quotes Chuck Robb, one of the founding members of the Democratic Leadership

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<sup>264</sup> Harvey, 78, 177.

<sup>265</sup> Duggan, xii.

Council (DLC), as acknowledging his group's characterization as neoliberals as early as 1985, the year they were founded. A term conceived by the DLC, "New Democrat" was the self-imposed name of Democrats who wanted to move their party away from "populist, coalitional, social-movements based politics" and toward a more economically and militarily conservative stance.<sup>266</sup> Stahl characterizes the vision of the New Democrats thus:

[A] "New Democrat" was said to recognize that government needs to be more effective by doing less, "streamlining," and leaving as much activity as possible to "market mechanisms" which would work better to alleviate social and economic problems. . . . [I]t was a technocratically-based politics whereby policy wonks would define proper forms of legislation to help people but would largely not need the input of those people through more populist forms of political action.<sup>267</sup>

Decrying what they called "liberal fundamentalism," New Democrats called for a "soft populism" that would attempt to retake the middle-class (and predominantly white) voting bloc while essentially abandoning what they deemed to be "special interest groups," such as the poor and people of color (categories that overlap with great frequency). Rather than maintain social programs, for example, the DLC advocated an embrace of "new technologies" that would supposedly foster opportunities for all and leave as much as possible to "market mechanisms."<sup>268</sup> While in reality a continuation of neoliberal economic policies put in place in the Republican-dominated 1980s, multicultural neoliberalism allowed the Clinton administration to pay lip service to social equality and even pass laws friendly to diverse populations while ignoring fundamental economic reasons for that inequality. With an economy that seemed to be

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<sup>266</sup> Jason Stahl, "Selling the New Right: Think Tanks and the Revolt Against New Deal Liberalism, 1945-Present" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 2008), 124-125.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid. See also Harvey, 68-69.

in better condition than any U.S. economy since the 1930s, many Americans accepted the notion that the “New Economy” was the answer to, rather than the reason for, inequality in their communities. As Doug Henwood writes,

Arising in the midst of what looked like a period of unrestrained capitalist triumphalism, New Economy discourse expressed hopes for something rather different from our predominant economic reality. In a time of massive wealth polarization, it talked about the democratization of ownership. In a time of mass overwork, it dreamt of meaningful, enjoyable work, self-management, and flattened hierarchies. In what seemed like a profoundly conservative time, it appropriated language of revolution. . . . Amidst a vast speedup of the social factory's assembly line, it evoked fantasies of abundance.<sup>269</sup>

The people that *Roseanne* represented on air were therefore presented with an image of their lives as *empowered* by the “New Economy” rather than *threatened* by it. But not only was more work expected from each worker in an era of downsizing; that same downsizing (and the emphasis on “global” economy) meant that working-class jobs were less stable than at any time since World War II. In Bill Clinton’s “A Vision of Change for America,” which was the report accompanying his first State of the Union address, the administration acknowledged that job security for U.S. workers was fragile at best;<sup>270</sup> further, the tables within the document showed significant gaps in income for college-educated versus high-school-educated workers that began in the 1980s and continued to widen up to the point of the paper’s publication in 1993.<sup>271</sup> Yet the point of the piece was to argue that the “New Economy” would bring new job opportunities to the same people, as funds previously earmarked for military expenditures were rerouted

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<sup>269</sup> Doug Henwood, “The New Economy and After,” *Left Business Observer*, <http://www.leftbusinessobserver.com/NewEcon.html> (accessed March 21, 2007).

<sup>270</sup> William J. Clinton, “A Vision of Change for America,” February 17, 1993, 27. [http://eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/custom/portlets/recordDetails/detailmini.jsp?\\_nfpb=true&\\_&ERICExtSearch\\_SearchValue\\_0=ED351810&ERICExtSearch\\_SearchType\\_0=no&accno=ED351810](http://eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/custom/portlets/recordDetails/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&_&ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=ED351810&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=no&accno=ED351810) (accessed February 25, 2008).

<sup>271</sup> Clinton, 18.

for construction, highway improvement, and other jobs focused on shoring up infrastructure.<sup>272</sup> In fact, the “Rust Belt” phenomenon continued in the 1990s, as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and other neoliberal policies initiated by the Clinton administration moved blue-collar jobs to other countries and greatly weakened the power of unions (and by extension, the ability of many working-class Americans) to advocate for better working conditions and compensation.

Part of the New Democrat discourse was the dismissal of class as anything more than cultural difference. The New Democrats carefully constructed a notion of class that was based on culture rather than on economics. Publishing articles with titles like “Workers of the World, Globalize,” New Democrats deflected any perceived impact of a neoliberal approach to economy on working people by characterizing class as a cultural phenomenon only; as Stahl has suggested, “the white middle/working class would be wooed less with an eye towards enhancing their economic circumstances than towards issues which supposedly reflected their ‘values.’”<sup>273</sup> This is one reason we see such an emphasis in the Clinton administration on challenging the Cold War values that make up most of the positions of those on the right wing of the Culture Wars.

But another reason is that neoliberalism and neoconservatism, while sharing very similar economic approaches, have a slightly different response to the potential impact of neoliberalism’s privileging of the individual. Harvey suggests that, because of the necessary paradox that neoliberals face of sometimes militarily enforcing a “free market” while championing individual freedom, the potential for individualism to create chaos within a neoliberal environment is a constant and real threat. Neoconservatives,

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<sup>272</sup> Clinton, 21-22.

<sup>273</sup> Stahl, 162.

on the other hand, evoke nationalism and a narrow standard of morality as methods for controlling individualism. “Their aim is to counteract the dissolving effect of the chaos of individual interests that neoliberalism typically produces. They in no way depart from the neoliberal agenda of a construction or restoration of a dominant class power. But they seek legitimacy for that power, as well as social control through construction of a climate of consent around a coherent set of moral values.”<sup>274</sup>

And therein lies the answer to the question of why the Culture Wars mattered so much in a two-party system in which fundamental principles of government seemed so similar in both party platforms. Although both were seeking a similar economic result, the question of obtaining consent from the public was answered in markedly different ways by each party. As a result, neoliberals championed the primacy of the individual while doing little to facilitate individual agency, and neoconservatives decried (Clintonian) multicultural neoliberalism as rendering asunder the very fabric of American society. The terms of the debate between “liberals” and “conservatives,” then, became focused down to a simple difference in “values” rather than a broader difference in economic approaches to leading the nation. Both Democrats and Republicans espoused essentially the same economic policies, with the primary difference between them being the notion of individual agency versus the reinforcement of “traditional family values,” as neoconservatives put it. Neither group, however, was addressing how neoliberal economic policies were restricting the liberty and agency of working-class Americans nor, for that matter, workers across the globe; instead, the market was seen as a liberating factor that required little to no critical assessment or regulation. Looking

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<sup>274</sup> Harvey, 82-84.

back at the Clinton administration in 2001, in fact, the *Independent Review* characterized its policies as very much in line with the New Democrat economic policies that “meant that Clinton intended to stake out positions more conservative than those adopted by previous Democratic presidents.”<sup>275</sup> Their findings confirmed that, indeed, Clinton’s economic policies were significantly different than those espoused by Democrats in the past, and in fact, positioned him as more of an extension of Reagan/Bush economic policy, with the exception of his stance of balancing the federal budget.<sup>276</sup> Further, in confirming Clinton’s New Democrat credentials, the authors note his antagonistic relationship to labor unions during his administration: “Clinton’s performance looks like that of a different kind of Democrat. As if to underscore the point, the president has been a vocal advocate of free trade. Labor unions have assailed the North American Free Trade Agreement, the World Trade Organization (WTO), and permanent normal trade relations with China as costing jobs in the United States.”<sup>277</sup>

Much of third-wave feminism (with some notable exceptions in branches of the movement such as Riot Grrrl, which will be discussed in greater detail below), and definitely the strain of women’s-rights advocacy that came to be known as postfeminism, fell in line with this new, neoliberal approach. Mary Vavrus suggests that the so-called Year of the Woman, in which a significant number of women were elected to national office in 1992, provided an opportunity for a postfeminist ideology to dominate mainstream media narratives of female power and public engagement. Vavrus

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<sup>275</sup> John W. Burns and Andrew J. Taylor, “A New Democrat?” *Independent Review* 5, no. 3 (Winter 2001): 387.

<sup>276</sup> It should be noted, however, that this budget balancing was more in line with traditional Republican approaches to the economy, as deficit spending was certainly not exclusive to Republican administrations.

<sup>277</sup> Burns and Taylor, 391.

describes the postfeminist identity as “part neoliberal, part cultural feminist” and as characterized by “an economically privileged subject with corporate and political savvy.”<sup>278</sup> In many ways, the Year of the Woman epitomized where the New Democrats were going: because of the emphasis on individual power and agency within a postfeminist ideal, neoliberal policies advocating for “personal responsibility” and focusing on a faith in market participation to foster equality facilitated the destabilization of the third-wave women’s movement and the disassociation of working-class women and women of color from the very notion of feminism. Seigel singles out Wolf’s “innovative” ideas for furthering women’s equality as “including organized political action that worked within the system.” But she goes on to point out that “they depended less on the existence of an advocacy-based mass movement and more on the isolated behavior of generous women with capital.”<sup>279</sup> Grassroots action was no longer the focus of the women’s movement, and as a consequence, there was little or no room for participation by those economically or racially disenfranchised from the mainstream political system.

It is especially significant, then, that with the 1994 season *Roseanne* began to move away from its explicit class-inflected message about women and into a much more generalized feminist message that was compatible with neoliberal tenets. Barr’s campaign contributions in the early- to mid-1990s indicate that she donated money to causes Wolf champions as bastions of power feminism. Between 1992 and 1996, Barr gave almost \$25,000 to female candidates associated with the Year of the Woman

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<sup>278</sup> Mary Vavrus, *Postfeminist News: Political Women in Media Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 76.

<sup>279</sup> Seigel, 123.

election in 1992,<sup>280</sup> EMILY's List, the Hollywood Women's Political Committee, and Bill Clinton's election campaign.<sup>281</sup> In addition to what appears to be Barr's own embrace of power feminism (or even postfeminism), changes in the tenor of the program might have been attempting to acknowledge the changing cultural climate in an effort to maintain ratings. The messages emanating from the final few seasons of *Roseanne* certainly aren't antithetical to its earlier ones, but they simply remove the class-specific angle from their feminist commentary.

As Barr had always claimed, *Roseanne* was largely autobiographical.<sup>282</sup> In drawing from her own life for inspiration, it would logically follow that she would use her almost overnight success in the entertainment industry to explore the struggles she encountered in moving from one class identity to another. In fact, as I've argued in chapter 3, Barr does address the notion of class as more than economics in a fundamentally insightful way. She avoids the potential pitfall of attempting to represent a coherent set of "truths" about working-class culture by presenting the working-class as monolithically white and blue-collar. But Barr's insistence on individuality and autobiography as the core of her storytelling also fed right into what Seigel calls the "feminist badass" ethos of the mid- to late-1990s—that postfeminist ethos of individual power. Seigel quotes Barr herself: "The thing women have yet to learn is that nobody

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<sup>280</sup> Wolf opens *Fire With Fire* by claiming that "power feminism" was facilitated by the movement of several women into positions of power in Congress in 1992, later arguing that the key to equality for women is electing more women to public office. *Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How It Will Change the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (New York: Random House, 1993). Seigel also recalls the "Year of the Woman," 117-118.

<sup>281</sup> *Newsmeat.com*, [http://www.newsmeat.com/celebrity\\_political\\_donations/Roseanne.php](http://www.newsmeat.com/celebrity_political_donations/Roseanne.php) (accessed May 20, 2008). Newsmeat.com is a news and information website known for its searchable database detailing every federal campaign contribution in the U.S. of \$200 or more since 1977.

<sup>282</sup> Roseanne Arnold, *My Lives* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 7.

gives you power. You just take it.”<sup>283</sup> The “hyper-individualistic”<sup>284</sup> tone of postfeminism, while demonstrating the physical, political, and economic power of a handful of American women, also left behind those working-class women who were struggling under the burden of “free trade” and the welfare reform of 1996, who failed to benefit from the dot-com boom of the late 1990s, and who were blithely told by cultural icons like Roseanne Barr to “just take” power rather than to rely on collective action and visibility to make their voices heard. While they might agree with the pro-feminist, liberal stance of *Roseanne* in its final years broadcasting original episodes, they would likely have also agreed with the critics who, as the final episode drew nigh in spring of 1997, dismissed Roseanne Barr and her program as having “nothing left to say.”<sup>285</sup>

### A New, “Improved” *Roseanne*

So how, exactly, did the content of *Roseanne* change in the final seasons? First, while feminism is still the issue at the forefront of the sitcom’s politics, the sophisticated way that Barr presents a class-inflected feminism (as discussed in chapter 3) is now missing. Adamant or even angry assertions of women’s rights are still at the center of the program’s humor, but it no longer exposes the particular ways that working-class women experience or assert these rights in comparison to the (middle- and upper-class) dominant feminist narrative. The program began to present feminism without the class content, which reduced the impact of what made the program so remarkable in the first

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<sup>283</sup> As quoted in Seigel, 125.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid.

<sup>285</sup> David Plotz, “Domestic Goddess Dethroned: How *Roseanne* Lost It,” *Slate*, May 18, 1997, <http://www.slate.com/id/1820/>.

place. Second, the wealthy are no longer positioned as clear enemies. As we saw in chapter 3 with Kathy Bowman (the judgmental middle-class neighbor), the teacher from the pilot episode (who was unsympathetic to Roseanne’s work schedule), and with Roseanne Conner’s former employer, Mrs. Wellman (who treated Roseanne dismissively), previous seasons had always positioned middle-class and wealthy characters as operating in a paradigm that didn’t account for working-class difference and as worthy of derision. Contrastingly, in the final season the Conner family’s encounters with wealth are both personal and (mostly) positive. Third, there are significantly more fantasy episodes and plot lines that push the boundaries of the realism for which *Roseanne* had won awards.<sup>286</sup> Although the fantasy scenes are frequently used to make a statement on a particular Culture Wars issue, they also take the Conner family outside of the mundane, removing the necessity to address the daily issues of working-class people that were central to the programs earlier seasons. Fourth and finally, there is a much more “preachy” tone to the program, as it not only tackles politically charged subjects much more directly, but also positions Roseanne to deliver a moral at the end of several episodes (a tactic traditionally associated with the middle-class sitcom, as described in chapter 1). The following examples explore each of these changes in the program’s dynamics, linking them to changing attitudes about class in American culture in the mid-1990s.

## Feminism Without Class

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<sup>286</sup> In particular, *Roseanne* won a Peabody Award for having “the courage to look unflinchingly at contemporary family life.” Alex McNeil, *Total Television* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 709.

The best example of the changing message about feminism comes from early in the eighth season. There's a consistent pro-feminist sentiment across seasons, but in later years these sentiments aren't nuanced by the economic and cultural realities of the working class. In "The Getaway . . . Almost,"<sup>287</sup> Roseanne and Jackie go out for a day-long shopping spree, even though several episodes in the season also depict the Conners as still struggling financially. Despite Jackie's misgivings, Roseanne offers a ride to a hitchhiker who's a self-proclaimed Riot Grrrl. Riot Grrrl was an outgrowth of the 1980s post-punk, DIY (Do It Yourself) underground music scene that had its heyday in the late 1980s; Riot Grrrl gained national attention in the early 1990s as an underground element of third-wave feminism and a female space for alternative music and culture.<sup>288</sup>

This Riot Grrrl, played by Jenna Elfman (who later made a name for herself as the pseudo-hippie Dharma Montgomery on *Dharma and Greg*), is on her way to a concert and enthuses to Jackie and Roseanne about the power of Riot Grrrl music. "See, we're about taking control, not trashing yourself, you know? Chicks . . . that ROCK." She names several progressive Riot Grrrl bands and plays them part of a song by Bikini Kill, calling it "freedom rock." After the hitchhiker gets out of the car, Jackie and Roseanne try to make sense of a music they don't understand. Roseanne reads some of the lyrics from the tape ("Don't need you to say we're cute/don't need you to say we're alright/don't need your protection/don't need no kiss goodnight"), and after reminiscing about the music of their own youth, admits that perhaps the feminism that grounds Riot Grrrl music is an improvement over what they had. "All our music *was* guy music,"

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<sup>287</sup> "The Getaway...Almost," *Roseanne*, ABC, November 14, 1995.

<sup>288</sup> For an outstanding, succinct overview of Riot Grrrl, see Stacy Thompson, *Punk Productions: Unfinished Business* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 58-70.

Jackie moans. But then Roseanne reminds Jackie of Janis Joplin, Linda Ronstadt, Pat Benatar, Joan Jett, Crissy Hynde, and Patti Smith.

Roseanne is distracted by a trucker with sexually explicit mud flaps and a bumper sticker that reads “Save the whales—harpoon a fat chick!” She and Jackie, invigorated by their music discussion, pull up to the trucker, yelling obscenities and pro-feminist statements and making rude gestures, until the trucker runs off the road. They hide in a rest area, but a police officer pulls up to them and asks them whether they were involved in the accident. Roseanne manages to make the officer go away by breastfeeding in front of him.

Perhaps there is no better example of the melding of the “badass ethos” of the era and a cultural feminist essentialism than the scene described above. The presentation of Riot Grrrl music and culture on a mainstream television program is not in and of itself problematic. But the episode fails to present the hitchhiker or her beloved culture as anything more than a youthful version of the past. Riot Grrrl was created as a space for women to empower themselves outside of mainstream culture. This aspect of Riot Grrrl is complementary to the goals of postfeminism. But forms of expression within Riot Grrl were explicitly and intentionally anti-capitalist. They included zines, concerts and festivals advertised by word-of-mouth, and writing terms like “bitch” and “slut” on one’s body in an effort to disassociate the terms from their original, misogynistic intents. The reclamation of traditional modes of expressing feminism on the body (clothing, hair styles, etc.) was central to the movement, as its adherents often combined stereotypically feminine expressions with jarringly non-feminine expressions as a way to complicate hegemonic readings of these symbols. It is notable, then, that the presentation of this

movement on *Roseanne* occurs at the end of a shopping spree and concludes with Roseanne using her breastfeeding to ward off the police. Roseanne and Jackie don't really violate gender expectations or seem to notice this element/challenge of Riot Grrrl in their encounter with the culture (as embodied by a truly gorgeous Jenna Elfman, who doesn't exactly look the part, either). Only a surface explanation of the true nature of Riot Grrrl is ever provided. In this sense, it fits into neoliberal sentiment, presenting a kind of "feminism-lite" for the audience, devoid of economic factors, unironically juxtaposing an explicitly anti-capitalist wing of third-wave feminism with activities associated with stereotypical femininity (shopping and breastfeeding), and which are in keeping with a postfeminist aesthetic. The economic factors in women's oppression are completely absent in a story line where an exploration of how money and culture join to foster women's oppression could have been the focus. And in earlier seasons, just such a story line would have been more likely.

### Wealth Without Shame

In the final season of *Roseanne*, the Conner family wins \$108 million in the Illinois state lottery. Roseanne and Jackie receive an invitation to the Lanford Country Club. They gleefully discuss the failings of the wealthy people they're about to meet: the mayor with his court-enforced ankle bracelet, the owners of the factory where they used to work ("No, I don't think [they'll be present], because it's Saturday, and Saturdays are 'Flog the Worker Day'"), and even the alcoholic wife of a local businessman. Although they are certainly looking forward to being on equal social footing with Lanford's elite, they're more interested in rubbing their newfound wealth in the elite's faces. Further,

the Culture Wars come into play when they meet Mrs. Jack Tate (“as in, the lumberlord Tates!” Jackie states gleefully after their introduction), who is eager to have the Conner’s money behind her pet project, the Committee for Moral Decency: “You see, we’ve been working very hard to stop Ebonics from infecting our schools!” Roseanne can’t help herself, wisecracking, “Why? That’s the one shot my son has of being bilingual!” followed by “my charity dollars are already earmarked for bailing out Death Row Records.”

Then they meet a man in jeans and instinctively trust him, especially when he helps them make fun of the mayor. When they find out he’s actually Edgar Wellman, Jr., son of the boss who made their lives miserable at the factory for twelve years, they’re shocked. But they find that his politics are in line with their own, to the degree that he’s back in town trying to figure out a way to keep the Wellman Plastics factory in town so that job losses won’t devastate the town. A significant portion of the episode is dedicated to reinforcing Roseanne’s and Edgar’s progressive credentials. While the viewer is treated to a few flashbacks from the first season, in which Roseanne leads a walkout at the factory, Edgar explains that his father didn’t like anything “common” and that his conflicts with his father typically came from Edgar’s refusal to follow the rules of the elite. (For example, Edgar says his father wouldn’t let him swim at the quarry with the other kids because “he was afraid I might catch something, like poverty.”) Eventually, Edgar “grew my hair long, got kicked out of this club,” and traveled the world in search for spiritual enlightenment. After Roseanne and Edgar agree to bail out the factory with her money and turn it over to the workers, Jackie remarks on the irony of teaming up with a Wellman. “Well, you can’t judge people by

where they come from,” Edgar responds. “Money is the reflection of its possessor.”

Roseanne delivers a moral for the episode (in keeping with the established tropes of middle-class family sitcoms, established in chapter 1):

Well, I have to tell you that I learned something. You know, because, um, well the way we, my sister and I, were raised, living hand-to-mouth and everything, we never even thought that there could be any rich people who even had the slightest clue about life. It’s just good to know that, you know, you’re really a decent guy, you’re just really, really cool. That’s a good thing for me to learn.”<sup>289</sup>

And the lesson learned in the final season is just that: wealth isn’t a bad thing, as long as the wealthy support progressive politics. This is precisely in line with the changing attitudes about class in American culture that accompanied the rise of multicultural neoliberalism in the same era.

### **Working-Class Culture Without a Working Class**

At the same time, much of season 9 centers around a central message: wealth does not necessarily buy happiness, and in fact elite culture can be ethically treacherous. Again, this is fitting in an era when Democrats were trying to woo back working-class white voters in a way that nevertheless left them open to neoliberal economic policy, in the sense that working-class culture and values are separated from economic hierarchy. In a major story arc for the season, Dan reveals to Roseanne that he is having an emotional affair with his mother’s nurse. Roseanne responds by blaming money for his unethical behavior:

Well this never would have happened if we hadn’t won that money, would it? So what now, Dan? We’re part of the privileged class? And I get to give you the typical response of the numb society wife? Like I’m

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<sup>289</sup> “Lanford’s Elite,” *Roseanne*, ABC, February 1, 1997.

supposed to look the other way when I catch you in a hotel room with some call girl? Well I don't have that blindness that only money can buy, Dan; I'm not Rose Kennedy. I'm working class. And that means there's right and there's wrong, there's black and there's white, and no amount of money's going to get me to see gray.<sup>290</sup>

In the next episode, Roseanne drives around town thinking and eating her feelings away, while Dan packs to leave. All Roseanne can find on the radio are things that make her sad or angry; significantly, these include cultural conservatives. After a sad love song, a report of a man saving his wife from drowning, and the reassurance of a talk-show therapist that married men never leave their wives for the other woman, the final straw for Roseanne has nothing to do with her rocky relationship. A political pundit wails "The government is funding the rec leagues to keep inner-city youth off the streets. They have enough energy to play midnight basketball, but they're too tired to say a prayer at school in the morning! Where's our America going?" to which Roseanne responds by clicking off the radio and muttering, "Shut up, you fat ox."<sup>291</sup> The scene is incidental to the story arc, but it's indicative of a pattern in the later seasons in which Culture Wars issues are squeezed into the larger stories about the family.

This story arc ends when Dan finds he's unable to leave his roots for a new life with the other woman in California. After a period of depression, Roseanne is able to forgive him, especially when he admits that winning the money so soon after his heart attack seemed to provide him with a chance to do all the things he felt he had missed by being a working-class father and husband. The Conners embrace their working-class values and reject the notion that money has irrevocably changed what they hold most dear. In the end, the moral of this story arc is that working-class cultural values will keep a

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<sup>290</sup> "Say It Ain't So," *Roseanne*, ABC, January 7, 1997.

<sup>291</sup> "Hit the Road, Jack," *Roseanne*, ABC, January 14, 1997.

person grounded. Individual financial gain provides an opportunity to tackle the economic disparity that continues to be a problem for the people immediately around them who share those working-class cultural values, but it does not necessitate broader political action or change. Again, wealth is no longer positioned as the enemy; anti-family cultural values are.

### **Culture Warrior Without Apologies**

The emphasis on Culture Wars issues is perhaps at its most blatant in “The Last Thursday in November,” in which D.J.’s history teacher (played by Native American comic and activist Charlie Hill) facilitates a theatrical performance by D.J. and his peers that attacks the national myth of the Thanksgiving story. This episode is almost completely devoid of any allusion to class; instead, it serves as a type of morality play that directly addresses the Culture Wars in ways that are reminiscent of the heavy-handed “lessons” taught in the 1950s middle-class family sitcom conventions explored in chapter 1. The Thanksgiving play and the fantasy sequence that follows illustrate the struggle over national identity and historical memory that was central to 1990s Culture Warriors, as they primarily clashed over the notion of “traditional family values” and how those “values” were (or were not) ingrained in the historical character of the nation. In the play, the Indians invite the Pilgrims to feast with them, and the Pilgrims (to a soundtrack from *Pulp Fiction*) shoot the Indians in a gruesome death scene. The parents in the audience alternately are shocked or enthusiastically applaud the performance. After the event, Roseanne gets into an argument with parents over what they call the “revisionist” elements of the play:

**Roseanne:** I can't believe that you guys still believe all the stuff they taught us in high school. Man, I'm just glad I was out in the smoking area the whole time.

**Parent 2:** Listen, believing that stuff in those history books is what got me where I am today: Assistant Director of Sales for the Midwest division, Mohawk Mutual and Life. (*audience howls*)

**Parent 1:** American history comes down to a few words: people came here for the freedom.

**Parent 3** (*who is African American, overhears the last remark*): Excuse me?

Hill walks up, and Parent 3 and Roseanne congratulate him on the play.

**Roseanne:** Yeah, but some of the people here are kind of upset because the story doesn't seem to agree with the Thanksgiving story they read on the Butterball wrapper.

**Parent 1:** Excuse me, but it just so happens that my great great great grandmother was an authentic—

**Hill and Parent 1 (together):** Cherokee princess.

**Hill:** I'm sorry, there's no such thing as a princess among Native people.

**Roseanne:** You are so busted. And your roots are brown.

**Parent 2:** You gotta admit those Pilgrims were brave; they came over here and discovered America!

**Hill:** How could they discover America if my people already lived here? You know what that's like? Me going outside and discovering someone else's porch.

**Roseanne:** Yeah, that's like the time my husband shimmied up the telephone pole and discovered cable.

Hill offers to explain to them what actually happened at the first Thanksgiving, and the episode then moves into a fantasy sequence, in which the Conner family play intolerant (and anachronistic) Pilgrims. Practically every line is a jab at the Right; the Pilgrims discuss how they might turn the Indians' land into a golf course and make them caddies, while Roseanne explains the sinfulness of sexuality to David:

**Roseanne:** You see, male/female interactions, they are but for one purpose only: the production of children. Besides, I've heard it is nothing to be enjoyed.

**Bev (Roseanne's mother):** Not if it's done right.

**Roseanne:** Luckily I'm barren, so my husband and I have never been forced to have sex. Praise be to God!

**Bev:** Amen.

**Dan** (*looking sorrowful*): Yea, praise be to God.

Then the Pilgrims explain to the Indians that the women eat after their husbands and obey their commands. “To the system!” Dan toasts. “There goes the hemisphere,” an Indian mutters. Roseanne wanders into an Indian home, where the three sisters (who represent beans, corn, and squash, which grow taller when grown together—a symbol of female solidarity) scold her for dishonoring God (referred to as “she”) by her servility. Roseanne responds “That’s nothing but heathen talk! I’ll tell you how it is. There is one God. He’s up in heaven sitting on his throne so he can damn everything. The End.” The elder sister then expresses a view of the spiritual that positions heaven and earth as the same and earth as the giver of life and therefore feminine. Dan calls Roseanne away before she can hear more, and when the sisters ask her what the commotion is about, she responds “That’s my husband, Newton Gingrich Conner.” The fantasy sequence concludes with the Conner and Hill families gathered in the Conners’ living room, concluding the story. Roseanne and Dan thank Hill: “This may be a little late, but on behalf of the Pilgrims, thanks for feeding us” and “thanks for helping us understand more about your culture.” The Conners and their guests dance a friendship dance together to close the episode.

This episode continues to address Culture Wars issues at the heart of progressive politics but, again, it is devoid of any mention of the economic factors that lead to the kinds of oppressions that are foregrounded in the episode. In fact, as the fantasy portion of the episode draws to a close and the viewer is brought back into the Conners’ living room, Roseanne’s mother Bev remarks about how happy she is that the Indians now

have casinos to counterbalance years of oppression and poverty.<sup>292</sup> This statement ignores the fact that poverty rates on some reservations are absolutely horrific<sup>293</sup> and that the corresponding rates of domestic abuse, suicide, and substance abuse are also shockingly high.<sup>294</sup> In general, the class issues facing Native Americans are ignored while historical racism and sexism remain at the forefront of the intended moral of the episode. Once again, class is removed from the progressive equation in a way that fits very well within multicultural neoliberalism's parameters.

### **Beyond *Roseanne*: Class in American Television Enters the New Century**

Shortly before the final episode of *Roseanne* aired in May 1997, David Plotz of *Salon* opined about what the legacy of the program and of Roseanne Barr (who at that point was simply using the name Roseanne, with no last name) would be. Entitled “Domestic Goddess Dethroned,” the article echoed several others from the mid- to late-1990s in their claim that the show and the star had by that point become largely “irrelevant.” Plotz acknowledged the historical importance of *Roseanne* to raising the visibility of what he called “lumpenproletariat” and the astonishingly wide fan base the program had (noting that perhaps the only show better than *Roseanne* in the early 1990s

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<sup>292</sup> “The Last Thursday in November,” *Roseanne*, ABC, November 21, 1995.

<sup>293</sup> Statistics vary, but even the conservative estimates are alarming. The Navajo Nation Division of Economic Development estimated an unemployment rate of 43.3% on the Navajo Reservation in 1998. Estimates by the Oglala Sioux Tribe and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) in 1998 were that unemployment on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota was around 73%, while the BIA estimated a 46% unemployment rate in 1995, and the 1990 Census reported 28.9% unemployment in 1990. Bambi Kraus, “Wealth, Success, and Poverty in Indian Country,” in *Challenges to Equality: Poverty and Race in America*, ed. Chester W. Hartman (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2001), 115. The *Roseanne* episode “The Last Thursday in November” came out in 1995, so the statistics are concurrent with the episode.

<sup>294</sup> American Psychological Association, “Suicide: A Crisis Within the American Indian and Alaskan Native Community,” Submitted to U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs Hearing on Native American Youth Activities and Initiatives, May 26, 1999.

was its fellow slobcom *The Simpsons*). But he pointed out that the program had lost relevance in later years. Although Plotz spent a significant amount of space criticizing the public behavior of Roseanne (Barr) as part of the reason the show's popularity went downhill in its final seasons, he pointed out that the disconnect of the program from its working-class roots was the primary reason for its demise. And, he sadly concludes, this departure from what made the show great also damaged its legacy:

What may be saddest about *Roseanne*'s decline is that the show won't leave the legacy Roseanne intended for it. It *didn't* usher in a golden age of real-life sitcoms. It *didn't* open the airwaves to blue-collar characters. Its single accomplishment—if it can be called such—is that it legitimized the stand-up comedian as sitcom star: from *Roseanne* to *Seinfeld* to *Ellen*.<sup>295</sup>

Indeed, Plotz was both right—in that the sitcom as a vehicle for the stand-up comedian was a major result of *Roseanne*'s success—and wrong. *Roseanne* did in fact open up the airwaves to working-class characters: Drew Carey (*The Drew Carey Show*), Will Smith (*The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*), Grace Kelly (*Grace Under Fire*), Jeff Foxworthy (*The Jeff Foxworthy Show*), Fran Fine (*The Nanny*), Robert Barone (*Everybody Loves Raymond*), the Hill family (*King of the Hill*), Jack Malloy (*Unhappily Ever After*), the Heffernans (*King of Queens*), Jesse Warner (*Jesse*), Jimmy Stiles (*Ladies Man*), the Finnerty family (*Grounded for Life*), Hal and Lois Wilkerson (*Malcolm in the Middle*), Jimmy and Christine Hughes (*Yes, Dear*), Jim (*According to Jim*), Peter Griffin (*The Family Guy*), Bill and Judy Miller (*Still Standing*), and George Lopez (*The George Lopez Show*), all within the five years after *Roseanne* left the air.<sup>296</sup> However, with very

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<sup>295</sup> Plotz.

<sup>296</sup> This trend continued up until approximately 2007, when the most recent incarnations of the working-class sitcom, such as *Rodney* and *The War At Home*, failed to impress in the ratings and were subsequently cancelled. Nevertheless, the popularity of Larry the Cable Guy from the *Blue Collar*

few exceptions, these characters reverted back to the Lovable Loser formula described in chapter 1. Once more, working-class television characters served as warnings to the general public that failure to assimilate into middle-class norms resulted in scathing condemnation and loss of respect from one's family and community. Most of these programs feature husbands who are childish caricatures, relying on unrealistically attractive wives that act as both mother and sexual partner and, inexplicably, forgive abominable behavior by their (sometimes literally) cartoon counterparts.<sup>297</sup> These programs don't explore the daily struggles of getting by on a less-than-living wage, finding acceptance in a culture obsessed with material markers of class, and juggling the expectations of a "hurry-up" culture with the demands of a family. Instead, they simply present characters visually and narratively coded as working-class who never experienced class-related issues in their fictional lives at all.

These characters, in many ways, represent the continuation of the battle over white, working-class voters that has been raging since the early 1970s (see discussion in chapter 2). While Clinton was able to reclaim a segment of white, working-class Southern votes in the 1990s via his "Bubba" image and use of the New Democrat characterization of class as culture, the twenty-first century has seen an increasing emphasis on the kind of white, working-class culture that George W. Bush supposedly represents. The term redneck has historically been used both as a derogatory reference to working-class whites (especially in the South) and self-referentially for a remarkably

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*Comedy Tour* was significant enough for the comedian to land multiple movie roles and have several successful comedy albums. It seems that the white working class—at least, its redneck version—is still maintaining popularity in American culture and media.

<sup>297</sup> Alex McNeil, *Total Television* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), last page of intro.

wide variety of political purposes. Most recently, the rise in popularity of the redneck label has been associated with the kind of unapologetic, “Ugly American” brand of behavior and culture that does not incorporate tolerance, global perspective, or racial diversity into its logic. Rather than acknowledging the disproportionately minority status of most working-class Americans, redneck culture posits working-class identity as almost exclusively white. This is, of course, in keeping with the earlier images of the American working class, discussed in chapter 1, but it is also a useful way to continue to disarticulate class from other major categories of identity.

In this sense, then, popular representation of class has been reclaimed by neoconservative forces. Comparing the comments of Roseanne Barr in 1988 (discussed in chapter 3), complaining about the lack of diversity in the sitcom prior to her takeover, to the quotes of Larry the Cable guy’s act in *Rolling Stone* in 2005, underscores this shift:

- I was more pissed than a queer with lockjaw on Valentine's Day.
- This is a song about an illegal Mexican hitchhiking through Texas. I call it “El Paso.”
- There'll be a new show out next week called *Black Eye on the Queer Guy*.<sup>298</sup>

Larry the Cable Guy’s live act was the top-grossing comedy tour in the United States in 2004, and he has developed enough clout to have starred in multiple movies in recent years, in addition to being the top star on Jeff Foxworthy’s

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<sup>298</sup> Gavin Edwards, “Larry the Cable Guy Bared: The new king of comedy plugs into red state fervor,” *Rolling Stone* (26 April, 2005), [http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/7277749/larry\\_the\\_cable\\_guy\\_bared/](http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/7277749/larry_the_cable_guy_bared/) (accessed August 16, 2008).

FOX television show, *Blue Collar Comedy Tour*. In many ways, he is currently the twenty-first-century version of Roseanne Barr, underscoring just how dramatic the change in content has been for representations of working-class characters.<sup>299</sup>

Nevertheless, working-class visibility in American television and in other mass media is much higher than it was two decades ago, when *Roseanne* first aired. The impact of the program and its slobcom compatriots on how Americans view their class identity (and that of their neighbors) is significant, even if the direction in which many of these representations ventured might not have the progressive bent of the original programs. As such, understanding how and why slobcoms, and *Roseanne* in particular, played such a dominant role in early 1990s television is key to better understanding how American television intersects with Americans' understandings of their own class identity.

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<sup>299</sup> Larry the Cable Guy is the creation of Dan Whitney, who grew up on a pig farm in Nebraska and developed his Southern accent as part of his act. *Ibid.*

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