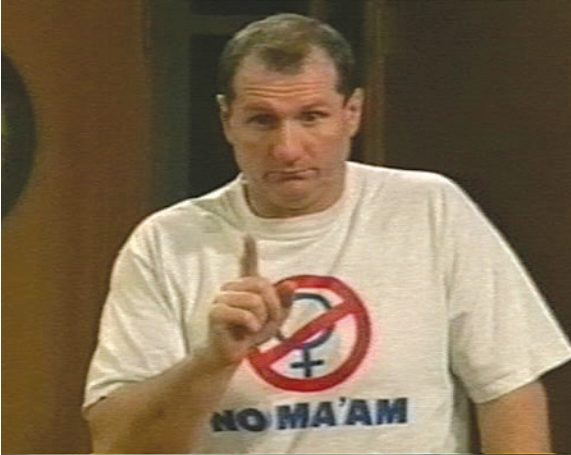


# CLASS DISMISSED

HOW TV FRAMES THE WORKING CLASS



Based on the forthcoming book by Pepi Leistyna, *Class Dismissed* navigates the steady stream of narrow working class representations from American television's beginnings to today's sitcoms, reality shows, police dramas, and daytime talk shows.

Featuring interviews with media analysts and cultural historians, this documentary examines the patterns inherent in TV's disturbing depictions of working class people as either clowns or social deviants—stereotypical portrayals that reinforce the myth of meritocracy.

*Class Dismissed* breaks important new ground in exploring the ways in which race, gender, and sexuality intersect with class, offering a more complex reading of television's often one-dimensional representations. The video also links television portrayals to negative cultural attitudes and public policies that directly affect the lives of working class people.

#### FEATURING INTERVIEWS WITH:

Stanley Aronowitz (City University of New York); *Nickel and Dimed* author, Barbara Ehrenreich; Herman Gray (University of California-Santa Cruz); Robin Kelley (Columbia University); Pepi Leistyna (University of Massachusetts-Boston); Michael Zweig (State University of New York-Stony Brook). Also with Arlene Davila, Susan Douglas, Bambi Haggins, Lisa Henderson, and Andrea Press.

*"Fast paced, hard hitting, and timely, Class Dismissed employs sophisticated theory to critically analyze the way media shapes how people understand and misunderstand class in American society."*

LEE D. BAKER | Editor, *Life in America: Identity and Everyday Experience*

*"Essential viewing for students and researchers who are interested in the political economy of media, media and social change, media portrayals of social groups and issues, and media influence."*

MARY BETH OLIVER | Professor of Communication, Penn State University

*"Revelatory. Brings to light the political and economic forces that imperil workers, but rarely appear in sitcoms: the loss of millions of industrial jobs, depressed wages, and declining union membership, all at a time of drastic cutbacks in governmental expenditures on health, welfare and education."*

STEPHEN STEINBERG | Author, *Turning Back: The Retreat from Racial Justice in American Thought and Policy*

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# CONTACT & CREDITS

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MEF is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization and contributions are tax-deductible as allowed by law.

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Opening Music Performed by **2600**

*Fortunate Son*

Written by **JOHN C. FOGARTY** | Published by **JONDORA MUSIC** | Courtesy of **CONCORD MUSIC GROUPS INC.**

Performed by **THOM MONAHAN** (acoustic version) and **DROPKICK MURPHYS** (electric version)

[www.dropkickmurphys.com](http://www.dropkickmurphys.com) | DropKick Murphys appear courtesy of Epitaph/Hellcat Records

UNITED STATES • 2005 • 62 mins • Color

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#### LORETTA ALPER | DIRECTOR, CO-PRODUCER, CO-WRITER

Loretta Alper has been on staff at MEF since the summer of 2000, when she was hired as a freelance producer. Since joining MEF full-time in 2001, she has produced a number of titles and served as the executive producer on several others.

Alper graduated from the University of Massachusetts with a B.A. in English and Communication. She also holds a Master's degree in Secondary English Education from UMass. She became interested in media literacy while a high school English teacher. After having taught for six years, Alper joined the staff at MEF eager to produce video resources for teachers to utilize in their work as media educators. Since coming to MEF, she has produced videos on topics ranging from the media coverage of female athletes to advertising in schools.

Alper has also done some independent print and radio journalism, programmed an independent film series, worked as a projectionist and too many other odd jobs to mention. In addition to being a media producer, she is also an avid media consumer.

#### PEPI LEISTYNA | CO-PRODUCER, CO-WRITER

Pepi Leistyna is an associate professor of Applied Linguistics Graduate Studies at the University of Massachusetts-Boston. He coordinates the research program and teaches courses in cultural studies, media literacy, and critical pedagogy. Leistyna has spoken internationally on issues of democracy, education, and social justice. His books include *Breaking Free: The Transformative Power of Critical Pedagogy*; *Presence of Mind: Education and the Politics of Deception*; *Defining and Designing Multiculturalism*; *Cultural Studies: From Theory to Action*, and *Corpus Analysis: Language Structure and Language Use*. Associate editor of the *Journal of English Linguistics*, Research Fellow of the Education Policy Research Unit, Vice President of Curriculum Development for Action Coalition for Media Education, and co-founder of the Human Rights Working Group, Leistyna is also on the editorial boards of *Public Resistance*; *Radical Teacher*; *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*; *Simile: Studies in Media & Information Literacy Education*; and *The Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*.

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#### STANLEY ARONOWITZ

Stanley Aronowitz is Distinguished Professor of Sociology at the Graduate Center at the City University of New York, where he has taught since 1983. His areas of study include labor, social movements, science and technology, education, social theory and cultural studies. He is also the director of the Center for the Study of Culture, Technology and Work at the Graduate Center. He has written or edited 23 books including *How Class Works* (2003).

#### ARLENE DAVILA

Arlene Davila is Associate Professor of Anthropology and American Studies at New York University. Her research examines the relationship between cultural identity and the national and global commodification of culture with a focus on Puerto Rican and U.S. Latino/a culture. The author of *Latinos, Inc.: The Marketing and Making of a People*, her areas of interest revolve around issues of identity, art, popular culture, and cultural politics as they are manifested in the mass-mediated context of contemporary society.

#### SUSAN DOUGLAS

Susan Douglas is Department Chair and Catherine Neafie Kellogg Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Michigan, where she has been a professor in the Communications Department since 1996. She is the author of a number of books including *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How it has Undermined Women* (with Meredith Michaels) and *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*, as well as a column for *In These Times* called "Back Talk".

#### BARBARA EHRENREICH

Barbara Ehrenreich earned her Ph.D. in Biology from the Rockefeller University in New York, but did not pursue a career in science. Instead, she became involved in politics as an advocate for social change. She is also a political

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essayist and social critic. Dr. Ehrenreich is a columnist for numerous publications and the author of many books, including her most recent, *Bait and Switch: The (Futile) Pursuit of the American Dream* and *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America* (2001), which became a national bestseller, selling over 1 million copies.

#### HERMAN S. GRAY

Herman S. Gray earned his Ph.D. from the University of California, Santa Cruz where he is currently a Professor in the Sociology Department. He has published widely in the areas of cultural studies, popular culture, mass communication, and minority discourse, and has written a number of books including *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness* (1995).

#### BAMBI HAGGINS

Bambi Haggins is Assistant Professor with a joint appointment in Communication and Film and Video Studies at the University of Michigan. She received her doctorate in Film and Television Critical Studies from UCLA for her work in television and cultural studies. Her publications include *The American Dream...By Any Means Necessary: Television Lay Theories From Urban Suburbia* and she is currently finishing her book *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Contemporary American Comedy*.

#### LISA HENDERSON

Lisa Henderson is Associate Professor of Communication at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. She earned a joint Ph.D. in Sociology and Communication in 1990 from the University of Pennsylvania. Her research and teaching interests include social, cultural and communication theory; media studies; cultural production; the politics of sexual representation; and class cultures. She is the author of numerous journal articles and book chapters in the areas of queer communication studies and cultural criticism.

#### ROBIN D. G. KELLEY

Robin D. G. Kelley is Professor of African-American Studies and Anthropology at Columbia University. He has won high honors for his work on popular culture and African American and labor history. He is the author of many books including the award winning *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and The Black Working Class*. His research focuses on the African diaspora, urban studies, working class radicalism and cultural history with an emphasis on music.

#### ANDREA PRESS

Andrea Press is Professor of Communication and Cultural Studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Her work examines the convergences between feminism and other theoretical traditions, with a focus on the influence of media in contemporary cultural life. Her first book, *Women Watching Television*, was a study of multi-generational working-class and middle-class women's use of television as entertainment.

#### MICHAEL ZWEIG

Michael Zweig is Professor of Economics and Director of the Center for the Study of Working Class Life at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. He has received the SUNY Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Teaching and is the author or editor of many books, including *What's Class Got To Do With It? American Society in the Twenty-First Century* (2004) and *The Working Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret* (2000). Dr. Zweig is also an active member of the United University Professions (Local 2190, American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO).

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#### SOCIAL CLASS

The working class is the clear majority of the labor force, 62 percent. At the top of the class order, controlling the big business apparatus is the capitalist class, about 2 percent of the labor force... Between the capitalist class and the working class is the middle class, about 36 percent of the labor force. <sup>12</sup>

Even though the middle class is only about 36 percent of the workforce, almost every aspect of politics and popular culture, with help from the media, reinforces the idea that "middle class" is the typical and usual status of Americans. <sup>12</sup>

In the last two decades the working class has experienced lower real incomes, longer hours at work, fewer protections by unions or government regulations, and inferior schools. <sup>12</sup>

Class is about the power some people have over the lives of others and the powerlessness most people experience as a result. This way of approaching class is different from looking at income or status or lifestyle. <sup>12</sup>

"Working class kids are being priced out of college. Tuition costs have been rising faster than inflation and are projected to skyrocket in coming years. Due to cutbacks in state funding (the primary revenue source for public colleges), many public colleges are projecting tuition increases in the double digits and cuts in need-based financial aid programs." <sup>14</sup>

Tuition and mandatory fee charges at four-year public institutions rose in every state, startlingly so, in some cases. In Massachusetts, for instance, tuition jumped from \$3,295 to \$4,075, an increase of 24 percent, largest in the nation. Iowa, Missouri and Texas increased tuition and required fees by 20 percent, North Carolina by 19 percent, Ohio by 17 percent. Sixteen states increased tuition and fees by more than 10 percent. <sup>26</sup>

If the average pay for production workers had risen at the same level as CEO pay since 1990, the annual salary would be \$120,491, not \$24,668. <sup>15</sup>

Wal-Mart employs 1 out of every 115 workers in this country at an average full-time pay of around \$17,000. The Walton family now makes 771,287 times more than the median U.S. income. And yet, regardless of its colossal wealth, and its image of 'looking out for America and Americans', this is a corporation that has a health care plan that covers fewer than half of its workers-46% of employees' kids rely on socialized medicine in the form of Medicaid. <sup>16</sup>

Working families have experienced a 3.4% decrease in median family income between 2000 and 2002-but corporate profits grew by 25% in 2003. <sup>17</sup>

Warren Buffett, one of the wealthiest people in the country, said, 'If there's been class warfare in this country, my class won.' He says he pays a lower tax rate than his secretary pays. <sup>18</sup>

49% of employers openly threaten to close a worksite when workers try to form a union. <sup>19</sup>

Jobs in industries that are growing as a share of overall employment pay 33% less than jobs in industries that are shrinking. <sup>17</sup>

Only the District of Columbia and three states--Alaska, Hawaii and Wyoming--have added enough jobs between January 2001 and September 2004 to keep up with their population growth. <sup>17</sup>

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#### WOMEN & WORK

In a class action lawsuit against Wal-Mart, Judge Martin Jenkins stated that “women are paid less than men in every region, pay disparities exist in most job categories, that the salary gap widens over time and that the higher one looks in the organization, the lower the percentage of women.”<sup>20</sup>

Four out of five mothers of school age children are working jobs that do not pay wages that meet the ‘cost of living’ standards and do not have health benefits. It is these women that are the first employees cut from the ranks during times of economic downturn.<sup>20</sup>

Women make up 60% of low wage workers.<sup>20</sup>

72% of Wal-Mart sales employees are women who make, on average, \$7.50 with no benefits and who are the sole providers for their families.<sup>20</sup>

In the suit against Wal-Mart it was alleged that women earn approximately \$1,400 less a year than men.<sup>20</sup>

#### UNEMPLOYMENT

10.4 % of African Americans, 6.7% of Latinos and 4.8% of Asian Americans are unemployed.<sup>17</sup>

4.8% of women are unemployed.<sup>17</sup>

17.2% of young workers are unemployed.<sup>17</sup>

Some 14 million workers are unemployed, underemployed or have given up looking for work.<sup>17</sup>

#### MINIMUM WAGE

If the minimum wage had risen at the same level pace as executive pay since 1990, it would be \$25.50 an hour, not \$5.15.<sup>15</sup>

A couple with two kids would have to work a combined 3.3 full-time minimum-wage jobs to make ends meet.<sup>21</sup>

An estimated 7.3 million workers (5.8% of the workforce) would receive an increase in their hourly wage rate if the minimum wage were raised from \$5.15 to \$7.25 by June 2007.<sup>1</sup>

The earnings of minimum wage workers are crucial to their families’ well-being. Evidence from the 1996-97 minimum wage increase shows that the average minimum wage worker brings home more than half (54%) of his or her family’s weekly earnings.<sup>2</sup>

A 1998 Economic Policy Institute (EPI) study failed to find any systematic, significant job loss associated with the 1996-97 minimum wage increase. In fact, following the most recent increase in the minimum wage in 1996-97, the low-wage labor market performed better than it had in decades (e.g., lower unemployment rates, increased average hourly wages, increased family income, decreased poverty rates).<sup>3</sup>

Between 1979 and 1989, the minimum wage lost 31% of its real value. By contrast, between 1989 and 1997 (the year of the most recent increase), the minimum wage was raised four times and recovered about one-third of the value it lost in the 1980s.<sup>3</sup>

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#### **POVERTY**

4.3 million more people fell into poverty between 2000 and 2003. <sup>17</sup>

You have to be really poor to fit the government definition of poverty—the average poverty threshold for a family of four in 2003 was \$18,810; for a family of three, \$14,680; for a family of two, \$12,015; and for individuals, \$9,393. The number of people below the official poverty thresholds numbered 35.9 million in 2003—1.3 million more than in 2002—for a 2003 poverty rate of 12.5%. <sup>14</sup>

#### **MINIMUM WAGE & GENDER**

Women are the largest group of beneficiaries from a minimum wage increase: 60.6% of workers who would benefit from an increase to \$7.25 by 2007 are women. An estimated 7.3% of working women would benefit directly from that increase in the minimum wage. <sup>2</sup>

If single women earned as much as men in comparable jobs, their incomes would rise by 13.4 percent and their poverty rates would be reduced from 6.3 percent to 1 percent. <sup>4</sup>

#### **MINIMUM WAGE & FAMILIES**

Among families with children and a low-wage worker affected by a minimum wage increase to \$7.25, the affected worker contributes, on average, half of the family's earnings. Thirty-six percent of such workers actually contribute 100% of their family's earnings. <sup>2</sup>

A substantial portion (38%) of low-wage workers in March 2003 lived in families with incomes below 200% of the poverty line, in 2002 an income range in which people are often unable to afford basic necessities (less than \$29,000 for a family of three in 2002). <sup>5</sup>

If married women were paid the same as men in comparable jobs, their family incomes would rise by nearly 6 percent, and their families' poverty rates would fall from 2.1 percent to 0.8 percent. <sup>4</sup>

If single working mothers earned as much as men in comparable jobs, their family incomes would increase by nearly 17 percent and their poverty rates would be cut in half, from 25.3 percent to 12.6 percent. <sup>4</sup>

#### **MINIMUM WAGE & RACE**

Blacks and women are more likely than white males to spend significant portions of their career in minimum wage jobs. <sup>25</sup>

A disproportionate share of minorities would benefit from a minimum wage increase. African Americans represent 11.1% of the total workforce, but are 15.3% of workers affected by an increase. Similarly, 13.4% of the total workforce is Hispanic, but Hispanics are 19.7% of workers affected by an increase. <sup>2</sup>

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#### **IMMIGRANTS**

Immigrants comprise one-fifth of the nation's low-wage workforce. Although some immigrants do well economically, many others work long hours at low-wage jobs with no health insurance or other benefits. In fact, nearly half of immigrant workers earn less than twice the minimum wage, and only 26 percent of immigrants have job-based health insurance.<sup>5</sup>

1 in 4 low-wage workers is an immigrant.<sup>6</sup>

43% of immigrant and 44% of refugee families with full-time workers have incomes below 200% of poverty, in comparison to 26% of native-born.<sup>6</sup>

As a recent Human Rights Watch report found, "Federal laws and policies on immigrant workers are a mass of contradictions and incentives to violate their rights."<sup>6</sup>

An Associated Press investigation found that the Mexican death rate has reached 1 in 16,000 workers even as the death rate steadily decreased for the average U.S.-born worker to about 1 in 28,000 workers. Mexicans now represent about 1 in 24 workers in the United States, but about 1 in 14 workplace deaths in the U.S.<sup>6</sup>

#### **WORKING CLASS & MEDIA REPRESENTATION**

A survey conducted by City University of New York found that in two years of PBS prime-time programming, 27 hours addressed the concerns and lives of the working classes - compared with 253 hours that focused on the upper classes.<sup>7</sup>

A study by Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), a liberal media-watchdog group, found that the evening news programs of CBS, ABC and NBC recently devoted only 2 percent of their total air time to workers' issues, including child care, the minimum wage, and workplace safety and health. Working people are also nearly invisible in television entertainment programming. Heads of households were working-class characters in only 11 percent of prime-time network family series from 1946 to 1990, according to a study by Rider University professor Richard Butsch.<sup>8</sup>

When it comes to a comparison of business voices to worker voices, the gap is also pretty substantial. Worker voices are generally heard once a lay-off has occurred, but not when economic policy is being discussed. In a 6 months study conducted [by the Grand Rapids Institute for Information Democracy] between September 1999 and February 2000, there was almost a 5:1 ratio of business per worker voices. When looking at how often labor union voices were heard, it was almost non-existent.<sup>22</sup>

#### **WORKING WOMEN & MEDIA REPRESENTATION**

The National Commission on Working Women reported that current television portrayals of women fail to represent the pressures of balancing work with family, finding childcare, and stretching family budgets. The study notes that on television, all single mothers are middle-class (or wealthier) and almost half of all families are at least upper middle-class; there are no poor families. In reality, 69% of all homes headed by women are poor, and the annual median income for a family with two working parents in 1990 was just over \$30,000.<sup>9</sup>

More and more, advertisers dictate what we see on TV. The corporations who manufacture products favor targeting viewers ages 18-34...It doesn't matter that 64% of primetime viewers on an average night are 35 or older. If you are a middle-aged woman, a lesbian, a Latina, a woman with a disability, a woman of size, a low-income mom struggling to get by ... good luck finding programming that even pretends to reflect your life.<sup>27</sup>

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#### RACE & MEDIA REPRESENTATION

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) pointed out that of the four major networks' 26 new prime-time shows for the 2000 season, none featured people of color in lead roles. There are only two American Indians on prime-time television and they are only in supporting roles.<sup>11</sup>

Latino characters were the least represented among these high status occupations, with just 1.3 percent of the characters portrayed as doctors and none clearly portrayed as lawyers.<sup>28</sup>

When minority people do show up in the news it is often at a crime scene. Roughly 50% of the minorities represented on the late local news in our study were involved in a crime. This statistic, however, is terribly misleading. Most recent studies have shown that, proportionately, Whites commit more crimes in the U.S. than minorities.<sup>23</sup>

The world of prime time broadcast television does not reflect the diversity that is apparent in the world outside the screen, particularly the world of children. Men outnumber women almost two to one. There are fewer Latinos, Asian Pacific Americans, and Native Americans than in the general population, especially among the youth characters.<sup>24</sup>

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