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## **CLASS DISMISSED**

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HOW TV FRAMES THE WORKING CLASS

# TRANSCRIPT

# **Class Dismissed**

## *How TV Frames the Working Class*

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# INTRODUCTION

[Opening Music] *Fortunate Son*

[Television clip] *How do you do? My name is Dave Garroway and I'm here, and gladly so, to tell you that television is ready for you. The fun and the excitement of all of the world that it brings into your living room. Let me show you a few of the many things and places and people that race through the tubes and the wires and end up before your very eyes every time you reach out and turn the little knob with your TV set on.*

**NARRATOR:** While television has provided a comfortable home for the middle class for over fifty years, many of its most memorable characters have been working class. Though producers insist that television is meant to entertain and not to educate, blue collar shows have undeniably played a pivotal role in shaping our perceptions of working class people. But because we see television as just entertainment, we readily disregard its impact on our thinking. It's precisely because we believe television is merely entertainment, that we need to take its image of the working class seriously.

Class matters because the subject of class is so taboo in the United States, we lack a conceptual framework for understanding television's portrayal of the working class. Having a basic definition of class will not only give us insight into why people occupy their class positions, it will also enable us to make sense of TV's representations and their broader social implications.

**BARBARA EHRENREICH:** There are no absolutely fixed mathematical definitions of social class. I mean, partly it's something based on income, right, and we can just slice people up that way. But I think that we usually recognize that there's another dimension too, which depends on your occupation, on your life style, on your expectations, your education.

**PEPI LEISTYNA:** Class is experienced on three separate but interconnected ways: economic class, political class, and cultural class. Economic class is your income and the amount of wealth that you've accumulated. Political class is the power that you have to influence the larger public, political process. Cultural class pertains more to education, tastes, lifestyle, you know, what we call cultural capital. While the economic, the political, and the cultural are always in flux, so is the definition of class, especially in this post-industrial society.

**ROBIN D.G. KELLEY:** Capitalism is not the same as it was 50, 60 years ago. And so if you think about what the working class is today, service industry, nurses, physical plant workers, workers at universities who clean up, this is what the working class looks like. I mean, you will always have a working class as long as there's capitalism.

**HERMAN GRAY:** The sort of classic, white, male, urban, industrial, proletariat, that model of class, of working class is one that runs right up against what I am calling the new realities of class in the United States. And those realities are often female. They are often immigrant.

**MICHAEL ZWEIG:** It turns out that in the United States about 62% of the labor force are working class people. That is people who go to work, they do their jobs, they go home, they go to another job, but they don't have a lot of control or authority over their work. These are people who are blue collar, white collar, pink collar. That's the working class majority. Those are most people in this country.

**PEPI LEISTYNA:** The working class is the majority and no matter how we define it, it's seen as a stigmatized class. Workers themselves often internalize this stigma. They may see themselves as working men and women, working families. But they reject the label "working class". As a result they often don't have a sense of class solidarity or class-consciousness.

**STANLEY ARONOWITZ:** Class-consciousness is not about statistics. Class-consciousness is about whether you understand yourself as a social, political, economic actor. That you actually have an effect, that what happens to you happens to many, many other people who are in a similar position, and that you are ready to act on that understanding.

**ROBIN D.G. KELLEY:** Class politics is based on the idea that people share a common experience as working people, as an oppressed class. The fact is that they don't share a common experience. Black workers and other workers of color tend to have the worst jobs, lower pay for the same work, sometimes the more dangerous jobs, higher unemployment rates. And it's not because they're just part of the working class, it's because of the way in which the working class is racially segmented, and the same thing with gender.

**HERMAN GRAY:** I think that we need to open all of this up and try to have a conversation about the new faces of class, and the new complexities between class and race and gender in the United States.

**BARBARA EHRENREICH:** Well the frustrating thing is that every time you try to bring up the subject of economic injustice and the fact that so many Americans work full-time and don't make enough to live on, etc. Some conservative is going to say, "That's class warfare. You can't say that!"

**[NBC: Meet the Press]** *The Bush campaign blasted Gore's new populist approach.*

*Karl Rove: Rather than relying on a positive agenda, they are going to rely on a divisive class warfare tone.*

**George W. Bush:** *Some would like to turn this into class warfare, well, that's not how I think.*

**BARBARA EHRENREICH:** There is a class war going on in the United States, but I think that it is a very one-sided class war that was initiated by the corporate elite, by the employers and so on.

**[CBS: Market Watch]:** *"...is cutting 4,400 jobs and closing 1/3 of its factories."*

**MICHAEL ZWEIG:** Class in this country has become kind of a dirty word. We don't talk about class except that everybody is the middle class or it's a classless society, that we don't have to worry about class, but to really talk about the working class and the capitalist class, is something that is outside of polite company, really in the popular press and the media.

# THE AMERICAN DREAM MACHINE

**NARRATOR:** While the working class is missing from the public discourse, it has always had a place in the world of entertainment TV. In fact, in the early days, working class and immigrant families were a regular part of the television repertoire on shows like *I Remember Mama*, *The Goldbergs*, and *Life With Luigi*, which featured Norwegian, Jewish and Italian families.

**[TV show: *I Remember Mama*]:** *I remember this album on our parlor table at home. I remember the old pictures from Norway that Mama and Papa brought with them when they came to this country.*

**NARRATOR:** As TV evolved as a commercially sponsored medium, advertisers began to play an increasingly important role in creating programs. Their impact went far beyond on screen sponsorship to having a hand in the actual production, including script writing and hiring of talent. Due to their power and influence advertisers were able to redefine the meaning of the American Dream, from the search for a better life to the pursuit of a consumer lifestyle.

**BAMBI HAGGINS:** Particularly, in the late 40's and the early 1950's there is a very specific instruction on consumerism that takes place within narratives. That if we have these products then we can move into this different place on this socio-economic hierarchy. *The Goldbergs* is an excellent example of the ethnicom that starts out in urban America that moves to the suburbs. And in that movement you get a very specific idea of the things you need to have in order to gain access to the suburban American dream. Even in a show like *Amos 'n Andy*, which is problematic for a lot of reasons, you have Sapphire wanting to buy a new dining room table because that table is going to afford her access to a higher social and intellectual strata.

**[TV show: *Amos n' Andy*]:** *I was ashamed of that old set. Man: Yeah, anybody worthwhile don't have to come to dinner, they can afford to buy their own. Woman: I'm talking about intellectual people, authors, musicians, artists, scientists.*

**PEPI LEISTYNA:** Unlike on radio, where many of the earlier shows got their start, on television you can really see what this assimilation process is supposed to look like according to the advertising-driven media. It's the acquisition of consumer goods, becoming less ethnic and looking more like these aspirational middle-class American families.

**NARRATOR:** Working together, producers and advertisers understood that associating products with middle and upper-class lifestyles would increase both ratings and sales. The stark contrast between the gritty image of working class life and the shiny sanitized world of consumer advertising proved to be irreconcilable. As television became more consolidated in the late 50's and the early 60's the working class and immigrant families would gradually disappear.

**SUSAN DOUGLAS:** If you want people to be thinking that they need to keep buying products that will identify them, will mark them as being members of the middle-class and not the working-class or the lower-classes, you need to provide them with a setting that makes those products seem like they are absolutely tied to success and happiness.

**[TV show: *I Love Lucy*]:** *I'm going shopping. Is there anything I can get for you? They are having a*

*sale at Saks.*

**SUSAN DOUGLAS:** I think it's important to remember that because the moment of television coincides with the birth of Levittown, of ranch house suburbia.

**[Commercial]:** *For workers anywhere else in the world, this would be a miracle in itself.*

**SUSAN DOUGLAS:** This idea, this promise that home ownership, having these things, moving to suburbia, all of this is going to enable you to have, what for better for worse, became known as the American Dream for that time period.

**[Commercial]:** *Basic freedom of the American people, which is the freedom of individual choice.*

**SUSAN DOUGLAS:** We began to see Leave it to Beaver, Father Knows Best, the white nuclear family, upper-middle class living in houses that most of us couldn't possibly afford. And class was really erased.

**PEPI LEISTYNA:** Part of the reason why the working class seems to disappear is because there was a real economic boom going on at the time. Where many workers, particularly white workers did achieve a better standard of living. And that was due to organizing and collective bargaining. And to government programs that provided a real safety net. But there is also an ideological reason for the disappearance of class from the public eye. Now we should remember that we are moving into the cold war, the McCarthy era. And what's ironic is unions, the very organizations that enabled workers to achieve that better standard of living, are seen as a real threat now. And so any effort to further democratize industry, technology, economic and social relations, gets branded as communist and has to be crushed.

**[Film Industry Representative testifies before House Un-American Affairs Committee]** *The communists are a disruptive force in American industry and labor. And that their constant undercover movements are designed to create chaos and conflict and cripple our productive system in every way that they can.*

**MICHAEL ZWEIG:** So what we had was this presentation of living standards as the measure of class because the old notion of class as power was being wiped out, was being crushed. That was the left that was the communist, oh you are a communist. Let's not talk about class that way. What we really want to talk about is that you are doing better than you ever have before. Workers in this country are all middle class now. And even union leaders talk about how their members, we made our members middle class. Well they didn't make their members middle class. They made their working class members have a better standard of living. That's a very different thing.

**ROBIN D.G. KELLEY:** It's very hard for people who see themselves as middle class to re-conceive themselves as working class. Because somehow, in this culture, being working class is a failure.

**HERMAN GRAY:** It's much more commonsensical that we think of ourselves as individual members of an imaginary middle class rather than collective members of a working class. And to that extent, I don't want to just put it on television and on images, but I think that part of the larger cultural memory, part of the larger cultural discourse in which class itself has taken a fairly strong beating.

# FROM THE MARGINS TO THE MIDDLE

**NARRATOR:** In the 1950s as the white working class was disappearing into the classless middle, African Americans were still only visible as servants or entertainers. In order to gain broader access to television, blacks and other marginalized groups would have to learn to play by TV's rules, namely to have faith in the American Dream. While this logic has served television's commercial imperatives, it has also reduced struggles for economic justice and social equality to a simple matter of inclusion. In the post-civil rights era, the arrival of African Americans onto primetime suggests that there is no need for the redistribution of wealth and power, because on TV there is plenty of room for everyone.

**ROBIN D.G. KELLEY:** In *Good Times* all of the characters knew that they were being exploited. They were always struggling against "the man".

**[TV show: *Good Times*]**

-- *Nah man, I'll tell you the way it is. I got a family and they need food on the table and clothes on their backs. I got to pay rent! Now I need that job!*

-- *Government rules can't be broken.*

-- *Unless you're running the government.*

**ROBIN D.G. KELLEY:** But they always had these dreams, these classic American Dreams that if they work hard they can finally get out of the Projects and they'll succeed.

**[TV show: *Good Times*]**

-- *Baby, without money, people like us ain't got no chance at all.*

-- *But it ain't always going to be that way, James.*

**ROBIN D.G. KELLEY:** And of course that doesn't happen until the very end of the program, the last episode which is sort of like *Gilligan's Island* where they get off the island, and they escape the Projects.

**BAMBI HAGGINS:** Many of the ghetto sitcoms that came during and after the run of *Good Times* really pastoralized ghetto life. In a time period when there were so many African Americans living in poverty in cities that the notion of what it's like on *What's Happening* where everything was pretty happy, pretty safe, you can say "well look the ghettos aren't that bad".

**ROBIN D.G. KELLEY:** The 1970's was a period of anti-affirmative action, of heightened joblessness among African Americans, and a backlash against black people and people of color generally.

**PEPI LEISTYNA:** The other storyline running through black sitcoms at the same time deal with this idea of moving on up. But these shows don't deal with economic hardships at all. The best know example is *The Jeffersons*. With the self-made man, George Jefferson.

**[TV show: *The Jeffersons*, theme song]** *"Movin' on up, to a deluxe apartment in the sky. Movin' on up!"*

**BAMBI HAGGINS:** George is a Horatio Alger story. He has pulled himself up by his bootstraps. His dry cleaning business has enabled him to move away from Archie Bunker on Houser Street, and to

the East Side. He is gaining access and all the trappings that go along with moving on up.

**[TV show: The Jeffersons]** *George dear, I'm glad for your success too, but let's not forget you are still the grandson of a sharecropper and I'm the daughter of a janitor. We are just plain folks.*

**ROBIN D.G. KELLEY:** He proves that black people are successful, so therefore the civil rights movement is over. He proves that there is no need for affirmative action, because he is a self-made man. He proves that there is no need for welfare because these people can make it on their own.

**[TV show: The Jeffersons]** *Your family started at zero and look at what you've got now. A son going to college, a lovely wife, successful business and a beautiful apartment. And you did it all by yourself.*

**ROBIN D.G. KELLEY:** Another example of "moving on up" suggests that what black youth need are white people to come in and step in with superior parenting skills and resources to basically bring them out of the ghetto. *Different Strokes* is a classic example.

**[TV show: Different Strokes]**

-- *Ah ha! You're here! Welcome gentlemen.*

-- *You talking to us?*

-- *Of course!*

-- *How about that Willis? Downtown two minutes and already we're gentlemen!*

**BAMBI HAGGINS:** *By the time you get to *Cosby*, moving on up takes on an even different dimension. Because I would argue that *Cosby* isn't about moving on up, they are already there.*

**ROBIN D.G. KELLEY:** It's a show in which you have a "normal family", very strong, committed father figure who's a good father who has all the right answers, who has all the elements of the white fathers in shows like *Different Strokes*. You have a mother who is a working mother, an attorney, a doctor and an attorney together. And they're comical but they are not buffoons. I think that one of the attractions of the *Cosby* Show to black viewers at least was that here's normal life, here's something that is not a cartoon character. At the same time it has basically erased for the most part the kinds of struggles and realities that the black poor and the working class are dealing with at the very moment.

The *Huxtables* represented the kind of black people that you could be friends with. They are safe in the age of crack, in this age of ghetto violence, it normalizes black people in some ways.

But it also, again, in some ways did what *The Jeffersons* did. It convinced viewers that look, if you work really hard you know, you don't need help from the state.

**HERMAN GRAY:** It continues to do the general work of affirming the openness of a kind a middle class society and an arrival of racial difference into that. It continues to do the particular work of saying to African Americans, "see your image is here."

And besides, you know the networks know how to do that well. They know how to make middle class, upper class shows about urban life and affluence. They do it well, they've done it well for 30 years.



**PEPI LEISTYNA:** There have been some black working class characters, for example you have the Fresh Prince who's this character who is played by Will Smith who is having some trouble in the ghetto and so he's shipped off to live with his rich relatives in Bel Air. And leaves his single mom behind in the hood. This show recycles the old story line of taking poor black youth out of the ghetto, but in this post-Cosby world, the rescuers now are the black families who have made it. There are other shows like Roc that have taken up some of the complexities of race and class politics. But the networks have done such a crappy job of promoting these shows and building audiences for them that they don't last long.

**NARRATOR:** With the exception of a few prominent roles, Asian-Americans and other non-white ethnic groups are still largely excluded from prime time or relegated to bit parts. And while the growing importance of the Latino demographic has resulted in a small increase in representations, most Latinos are still confined to cable and Spanish language networks and are overwhelmingly middle class. Really the only show to feature a working class character since Chico and the Man is The George Lopez show. But unlike the characters of the ghetto sitcom era who are trying to move out of the working class, George Lopez has already left it behind and moved up to the comfortable familiarity of the middle class family sitcom.

**[Theme song to The George Lopez Show]** *Low Rider*

**HERMAN GRAY:** I do think that The George Lopez Show operates in the same model of arrival and familiarity. Some of what the work these shows do is to introduce people and to say, "this is your neighbor, this is your friend, you are going to visit them fairly often every week." And comfort, there is a level of comforting about difference.

**ARLENE DAVILA:** Always of course, following the American dream. Latinos are always said to be following the American dream in the mainstream media as if to say look they're not as foreign, you having nothing to be of afraid of them. They really believe in the American Dream.

**PEPI LEISTYNA:** The George Lopez Show is a perfect example of how the dream is supposed to work. Here's this guy who is an assembly line worker and he gets promoted to manager of the factory. And suddenly he has no problems. He lives in a beautiful space. His family has no problems except for what typical American middle class families go through. And the only thing that marks him as working class is his mom and his buddies back at the factory that refer to him as "Mr. Clipboard."

It's funny because they use the song Low Rider as the theme song for the show. Which is a song about urban Latino culture. There's this total disconnect between the song and who this middle class character is. There's nothing Low Rider about George Lopez.

**[TV show: The George Lopez Show]** *Temperature gauge, rotisserie attachment, did I need it? No. Do I use it? No. Happy I got it? You bet your ass!*

**ARLENE DAVILA:** So all of these discussions that feed this idea of the affluent Latino are very problematic because they sort of veil the incredible discrimination around issues of immigration, the incredible exploitation of working class, the lack of jobs, the lack of employment. And Latinos become good in so far as they consume.

**NARRATOR:** Since the early 1990s, television has cautiously opened the door to a few gay and lesbian characters. Queer visibility on primetime as with other marginalized groups is due in part to changing social conditions and also to the networks' need to spice up existing repertoires with small variations, but at the exclusion of working class, gender variant, and other non-conforming individuals.

**LISA HENDERSON:** When we put queerness together with class, in many ways the terms of admission are as they are for other historically underrepresented character groups. The tickets for the entrance of queer characters onto television are the following: first, control your body. Eat well, groom well, don't be physically excessive. Next, appeal to families and to familialism. The very idea of family is the root of everything good. Finally, acquire the good life but in a legitimate way.

It's not that all queer characters do that. Some of them don't. And they become certain kinds of comic relief. We can take Jack, for example, on *Will and Grace*, who's there very much in contrast to Will. Will is a schooled professional. He's sexually modest. Jack on the other hand is freeloader. He is full of delusions about his talent and his artistic prospects and is casually sexual.

**[TV show: *Will and Grace*]** *You're simple, you're shallow and you're a common whore. That's why we are soul mates.*

**LISA HENDERSON:** They both come from upper middle class in Will's case, arguably less visibly, middle class in Jack's, but they have a different kind of class character.

So *Will and Grace* manages to inject class judgment even in the absence of working class queer characters who are pretty much absent on primetime.

# WOMEN HAVE CLASS

**NARRATOR:** While they have never been excluded like other underrepresented groups, TV largely ignores the way that gender discrimination affects women's class position. Across the board women earn less than men regardless of education. And they often work a double shift as part of the paid labor force and as unpaid caretakers of the home and family. The leading occupations for women are all lower middle, and working class jobs. In addition, the majority of jobs at the bottom of the economic scale are held by women, especially women of color. Not only does television disregard these realities, it rarely even depicts work as an economic necessity. The fact is, most women work because they have to.

**SUSAN DOUGLAS:** You know, there has always been a gap between the lived experiences of women and particularly mothers and what we see on television. Even in the late 1950s, when people think that there was some kind of comparability between June Cleaver and everyday women, there wasn't. There were more women in the workforce than ever before when Father Knows Best, et al, were on the air. Now, by the time we get to the late 70s and early 80s there is a revolution in family life. The rise of single headed families, 90% of them headed by women, explodes in the 1970s and there was only one show on then, One Day at a Time, that began to reflect the reality of single mothers' lives.

**NARRATOR:** In the last three decades, the number of households headed by single moms has remained fairly constant. With an average income of only 24,000 dollars a year, single mothers experience poverty at a rate which is substantially higher than the national average.

**BAMBI HAGGINS:** You have a single mom in The Parkers living in a kind of 'schwa-schwa' apartment in Santa Monica which I know personally is not inexpensive and yet her source of income seems unclear at best.

**PEPI LEISTYNA:** We've only seen a handful of working class female characters. Most women, even single moms, have been middle class characters in career jobs where money isn't paramount.

**SUSAN DOUGLAS:** Most women don't have those jobs. Most women work in dead-end jobs or low paying jobs or relatively circumscribed jobs. They're waitresses, bank tellers, they work in factories. They work in a range of jobs that we do not see on television.

**PEPI LEISTYNA:** The few shows that have portrayed women struggling economically don't deal directly with class issues. These are women who are simply down on their luck, they've lost their husbands or they made a really bad choice for a husband. A perfect example of this is Grace Under Fire. She's divorced, she's got two kids, she's a recovering alcoholic. She's got this ex-husband Jimmy, who's an alcoholic and who abandoned the family. And so while she deals with serious issues, what this show is really about is one woman's determination to not make the same mistakes that she made in the past. So in other words, her obstacles are self-imposed. And so it is her responsibility to transcend them.

**[TV show: Grace Under Fire]** *I really want you to get a fair shake out of life and that's not going to happen if you take the easy way out. It's a bad habit to get into, because then you will get into some relationship that you don't want, or some job, and the next thing you know you'll be doing the hootchie-coo on top of a Formica table wearin' a bunch of blue eye shadow in front of a bunch of tractor sales men that don't even tip really good...*

**PEPI LEISTYNA:** Really the only show to put gender and class together is Roseanne.

[TV show: **Roseanne**] *Hi, I'm Roseanne.*

**PEPI LEISTYNA:** It aired in the late 1980s at a time when network ratings were down and so ABC was willing to take a risk on it. It also appears in the midst of a feminist backlash. And the ideology is essentially that women have won equal rights. They've arrived. They don't need feminism anymore. What's really going on here is an attack against all working women who were being blamed for the destruction of the family for going to work.

**SUSAN DOUGLAS:** Well, Roseanne the person, not the television character, was very insistent that her show be a feminist show and that it be a working class show.

[TV: **E! Television: Roseanne Barr**] *I think that any discussion of class in America really freaks people out, and we're not supposed to talk about it. I've always talked about it and it's a scary thing. And all the time I was thinking inside my head, soon as it goes to number one, I'm kickin' all of these mo'fo's outta here, you know. I just bid my time, had a lot of fights and fired a lot of people. And had to dig my heels in a lot, not come out of my dressing room a lot, and threaten to quit a lot.*

**SUSAN DOUGLAS:** But the price she had to pay for constantly pushing a feminist and working class agenda was that in the press she was skewered. And when she was involved in deep struggles with the producers about keeping the class component of that show, she took a lot of heat.

**ANDREA PRESS:** I think Roseanne is a great show, because it shows how badly working class women need feminism. Roseanne is a show that addresses issues that are basic to feminism, the division of labor in the family.

[TV show: **Roseanne**]

-- *Oh, I'm sorry honey. I was just goofing around cookin' dinner for eight.*

-- *You know, seeing as how you're the only one around here who has a job, I'll see if I can do the housework tonight to your satisfaction, your royal highness.*

**ANDREA PRESS:** The need for good childcare for women who work, the need for working class women to work and on Roseanne you saw an image of a working class mother who felt she was a great mother. She worked around some of the challenges she faced not having a lot of extra money, not having a lot of extra time and not really being able to purchase a lot of advantages for her children.

[TV show: **Roseanne**] *Every parent tries to improve things at least 50% for their kids and if they can do that then they are a total success.*

**ANDREA PRESS:** Now and then it would actually follow Roseanne into her workplace, her confrontations with her bosses.

[TV show: **Roseanne**]

-- *You sound angry Roseanne.*

-- *You told me if I told the line that you'd drop the quotas! Why are you doin' this?*

--Because I can.

-- No you can't!

-- I did. And when I broke you I knew you were just like the rest of them. And you'll stay and you'll do your 8,000 and so will your loser friends or they're gone.

-- Well this ain't the way you motivate people. And you know what? Any manager would know that. And you are a lot of things, but you ain't no manager.

-- Sweetheart, you just bought yourself a lot of trouble.

-- No, sweetheart, you did.

**BARBARA EHRENREICH:** That's a rare event on TV. Might give people ideas I guess so they don't show it too often.

# CLASS CLOWNS

**NARRATOR:** In order to reinforce its middle class ideology, television must account for the members of the working class who haven't made it. TV reproduces the deeply ingrained belief that workers' inadequacies are to blame for their lack of advancement. In reality, most Americans do not change their class position and the boundaries of social class are now more restrictive than ever.

**STANLEY ARONOWITZ:** For a very long time, I believe ending in the early 1980's or the late 1970's, it was possible for a quarter of the working class to move beyond its class origins to professional and managerial categories. And that developed into both mythology as well as an ideology. The mythology was that everybody in American can gain social mobility. The ideology was that it's a personal question.

**BARBARA EHRENREICH:** Because there is such a strong ideology that says that anybody can make it. So if you haven't made it and you're not wealthy there's something wrong with you.

**MICHAEL ZWEIG:** So the idea that we are who we are because of what we have done, I think is so limited. It's not completely wrong that people are individuals and have responsibilities, and have possibilities and potential. But that's limited and constrained and influenced by the social circumstances in which we grow up.

**NARRATOR:** Television representations either perpetuate the idea that the cream always rises to the top or they reinforce stereotypes about workers' failure to succeed due to their inferior qualities such as bad taste, lack of intelligence, reactionary politics, poor work ethic, and dysfunctional family values.

# Bad Taste

**PEPI LEISTYNA:** One of the flaws that is supposedly characteristic of the working class that is widely circulated in popular culture, and TV plays an important role in that circulation, pertains to taste, lifestyle and leisure. And the stereotypical image that we get is a bunch of slobs sitting around on some cheesy couch drinking beer, preferably brown bottle or can beer. Staring at the tube. They love junk culture, and we don't get this sense that they are deserving of the finer things in life. They wouldn't appreciate them anyway.

**[TV show: The Drew Carey Show]** *You can't try to save money by not having the right beer. You know you can skip out on medical insurance, you can buy everything you own at a swap meet, but the right beer is what makes living like this possible.*

**LISA HENDERSON:** This is something that is expressed through the idea of taste. It's something you either have or you don't. Well, no one either has it or they don't. Everybody acquires it.

**BARBARA EHRENREICH:** If you are a lower income person, you are not going to be buying micro-brew beers. You more likely are going to be buying something like Budweiser or even a cheaper brand. You may not be getting artisan bread from the local bakery, you may be getting Wonder Bread or something like that. That has to do with economics.

**SUSAN DOUGLAS:** You know being working class seems kind of like a lifestyle choice where people like pink flamingos and tacky furniture in their house, and don't have much taste.

**[TV show: Yes, Dear]** *I'm just trying to give your family a little culture. Bet if I shoved it in a Hot Pocket and smothered it in Velveeta the four of you would be out back wrestlin' over it.*

**SUSAN DOUGLAS:** As if people choose to have lower incomes. When class, in reality, is powerfully structured by social forces.

**PEPI LEISTYNA:** When they do try to move out of this space and hob-knob with the middle and upper classes, it's made really laughable, because they're so awkward in this new environment. They don't have the cultural capital to navigate it. And TV plays off this in particular sitcoms.

## **[TV show: Laverne & Shirley]**

-- Ms. Shirley Feeney and Ms. Laverne DeFazio!

-- Do we tip this guy?

-- On the way out.

-- You'll get it later.

## **[TV show: The King of Queens]**

-- It's really nice of you to have us over.

-- Yeah thanks, this is for you. Scotch, hope you like it.

-- Like it? He loves it! Big scotch guy right here.

-- Scotch is great. Love the drink. Love the tape.

## **[TV show: The Simpsons]**

-- So, what ya think of the new joint?

-- I don't get all this eyeball stuff. What are they supposed to represent, eyeballs?

-- It's Po-Mo! Post-modern! Yeah, all right. Weird for the sake of weird.  
-- Ohhhhhh!

**PEPI LEISTYNA:** One way to fit into this upper class world is to get a personal make over. And there are a slew of reality shows that are dedicated to this process.

**[TV show: I Want to be a Hilton]** *I want to trade in my blue-collar life.*  
*Other speakers: I want to be a Hilton...I want to be a Hilton...I want to be a Hilton*

**[TV show: Joe Millionaire]** *What will happen when this average Joe is transformed into a multi-millionaire?*

**PEPI LEISTYNA:** Take Joe Millionaire for example. Where you take these working class guys and you give them the necessary social skills and etiquette to pass as moneyed.

There's a bunch of other shows that are about physical transformation. There's this idea that bodily perfection leads to upward mobility, and not only that, now you can make over your house and you can make over your car. Then there's Queer Eye For The Straight Guy, which goes for the whole package, the house and the body. It's one of those rare shows with gay representation. Though stereotypically it's white, male and upper middle class.

**LISA HENDERSON:** Television is doing with the Fab Five what culture has done with gay men for a very long time. Which is in the sense pushing them to the precincts of taste, where they are allowed to be.

**[TV show: Queer Eye for the Straight Guy]**  
-- *Doesn't he look amazing?*  
-- *He looks great! He looks better then before.*  
-- *Yep. You know he's tucked in.*  
-- *Those pants fit really well.*  
-- *The pants are great.*

**LISA HENDERSON:** Where, historically, could gay men be both employed and openly gay? For the most part, in the style trades. And so I want to be careful with critics' dismissal of the program as just a product placement orgy.

I also think that the critique of Queer Eye comes partly because the made-over people are straight men and straight men historically have been the arbitrators of all things serious. And they are in a sense being reduced as people who have to buff their nails to be more acceptable lovers or employees. In contrast women have long been accustomed to the idea that you need to better appoint yourself in order to expect social mobility.

So we might ask the question, what is it about contemporary labor circumstances that demand that of men as well, rather than saying what is about gay that can't stop selling things to the rest of us?

**PEPI LEISTYNA:** None of this changes a person's class position nor the economic conditions that have created their situation in the first place. If you want a real class make over you are going to have to radically change the economic system. That's a reality show that I would love to see.



# Lack of Intelligence

**PEPI LEISTYNA:** Another debilitating characteristic of this group of people, according to the stereotype, is that working class men lack intelligence.

**[TV show: Yes, Dear]** *One day they are going to look back and realize how stupid their father is. Or more likely they will have my genes and be so stupid they won't even realize it!*

**PEPI LEISTYNA:** It's obvious they weren't good students. They often fumble the language. And a lot of basic stuff just goes right over their heads.

**[TV show: The Beverly Hillbillies]**

-- *It's gotta be a doctor. What they call an MD.*

-- *What's that stand for?*

-- *Mr. Doctor, I reckon.*

**PEPI LEISTYNA:** The classic character of the lovable but laughable buffoon that is still very much with us today is played by Jackie Gleason in *The Honeymooners*, in the character of Ralph Cramden. He's a city bus driver who hates his job. He's loud and blustery. He's always coming up with these hair-brained schemes. And the real joke is we know that he's not that smart. He has this sidekick, Ed Norton, who's this dimwitted, but lovable, happy-go-lucky sewer worker.

**[TV show: The Honeymooners]** *I'm telling you if pizzas were manhole covers, the sewer would be a paradise!*

**PEPI LEISTYNA:** These class clowns get reproduced in the 1960's with *The Flintstones*. Even though it's set back in the Stone Age, Fred is the direct descendant of Ralph Cramden and Barney is definitely the son of Ed Norton. And what follows is a whole parade of dumb working class guys. Whose stupidity is the brunt of the joke.

**[TV show: The King of Queens]**

-- *What do you do?*

-- *I run CBS.*

-- *Ah, CVS. Nice. My wife shops there. In fact she just picked up a couple 12 packs of Charmin. Saved a bundle. (Laughs).*

**PEPI LEISTYNA:** *The Honeymooners* is also an important prototype for a particular gender dynamic. Because their guys are so lacking in common sense, and the wives are obviously smarter, it's the women who end up ruling the roost.

**[TV show: The Honeymooners]**

-- *Now you listen to me, Ralph. You are not going bowling!*

-- *I gotta go Alice, I promised the guys!*

-- *The guys? What about me Ralph? What about your job? What about our future?*

**PEPI LEISTYNA:** What we end up with is a reversal of traditional gender roles. Where these guys are essentially incapable of taking their place at the head of the households.

**[TV show: Rodney]**

-- *I just gambled away my paycheck, that's all.*

-- *You lost that too? Rodney, we don't have money to gamble!*

-- *I know, that's why I was trying to get it back.*

-- *Rodney, we agreed that you were going to use that paycheck to pay off our property taxes.*

-- *Trina, I have a problem.*

-- *You do not have a problem! I have a problem. I'm married to an idiot!*

**SUSAN DOUGLAS:** On the one hand, the bumbling father gives space for working class women who are really the low people on the totem pole to have some kind of power and to look like they have knowledge that matters.

**[TV Show: Yes, Dear]** *So basically, to counter Greg's argument that you would be like a kid in a candy store you went out and invested all the money in pies.*

**ANDREA PRESS:** We do tend to think paradoxically about working class women as being very powerful in their families, as being the rational ones compared to the irrational behavior of their husbands. Where as in real life, I'm not sure we could say that about gender dynamics in working class families.

**PEPI LEISTYNA:** It's not just the wives. In a typical working class household, even the kids are smarter than the dad.

**[TV show: Still Standing]**

-- *So what are you doing?*

-- *Playing a computer game. It's called Existence. You slowly build a civilization by acquiring inventions, solving national problems, building an economy.*

-- *Got anything that blows stuff up?*

**PEPI LEISTYNA:** This is constant representation that the working class has no interest in education.

**[TV show: Welcome Back Kotter]** *This ain't easy for me, you know? I've never opened a book before.*

**PEPI LEISTYNA:** They wallow in anti-intellectualism. They have no interest in reading, of course unless it's the sports page or the comics, or some tabloid of some sort.

**STANLEY ARONOWITZ:** Why do we get this image of the anti-intellectual and the stupid worker even though workers historically were the reasons we have public education because their organizations among others were people who fought for the public education system? And that working class kids now go to community colleges and four-year colleges in record numbers.

**PEPI LEISTYNA:** There's a reason for these stereotypes. They distract us from the structural realities, especially the unequal distribution of resources in public education. But what I think is worse is they disregard the fact that the overwhelming majority of working class parents really do care about their kids' education.

# Reactionary Politics

**PEPI LEISTYNA:** The working class is also represented as being disinterested in politics, which is crazy if you think about working class history, and the struggle for basic rights and a living wage. You know when we do get characters that are interested in politics they're almost always staunch conservatives, and closed-minded. The archetypal figure here is Archie Bunker from All In The Family.

**STANLEY ARONOWITZ:** Archie represents in some sense our collective image of the worker. He's a yahoo, which means he's a right-wing racist.

**[TV show: All in the Family]** *Let me tell you something! If your Spics and your Spades want their rightful share of the American dream, let them get out there and hustle for it just like I did. And Edith, watch your bag.*

**STANLEY ARONOWITZ:** He's basically anti-student, anti-hippy, anti-intellectual.

**[TV show: All in the Family]** *All this pinko stuff, well that's what they are fillin' em up with in the schools nowadays, eh?*

**STANLEY ARONOWITZ:** On social issues he's horrendous.

**[TV show: All in the Family]** *I never said a guy who wears glasses is a queer, a guy who wears glasses is a four-eyes, a guy who is a fag is a queer. Oh no you ain't applying for no job. A women's place is still in the home.*

**STANLEY ARONOWITZ:** In the household he's domineering.

**[TV show: All in the Family]** *Will you stifle! What do you mean you can't...*

**PEPI LEISTYNA:** Archie Bunker is the worker in that show. Now Meathead also comes out of a working class background, he's in that milieu, but he's not allowed to be the worker because the worker is supposed to be a buffoon.

**[TV show: All in the Family]**

*--You could never do what I did today.*

*-- Oh yeah?*

*-- What was you doin'?*

*-- Thinking.*

**BARBARA EHRENREICH:** So, while we laughed, it also made me very uncomfortable because Archie Bunker was a stand in for so many blue-collar guys. But the upper middle class and the upper classes have always liked to believe they are the enlightened ones and it's the working class that is full of these bozos.

# Poor Work Ethic

**PEPI LEISTYNA:** Perhaps the most blatant representational crime against the working class by this corporate media is this image of this lazy incompetent worker, who's complacent and who is not interested in proving his or her lot in life.

**[TV show: Still Standing]**

-- *Actually, I'm a psychologist. If I wanted to be a psychiatrist, I'd have to go through medical school and residency and all that.*

-- *Yeah, I know how you feel, buddy. I was going to take the management course at work, but it was like three Saturdays.*

**[TV show: Cheers]**

-- *Today I had to choose between two really great jobs. Couldn't make up my mind.*

-- *So what did you do?*

-- *Skipped them both and came in here. I think I made the right choice.*

**PEPI LEISTYNA:** They are in constant need of supervision. They have no leadership skills. They basically do a half-assed job.

**[TV show: King of the Hill]** *Something's wrong.*

*Yeah it's the darn unions. Come on boys, finish up them Little Debbies and get back to work!*

**[TV show: The King of Queens]** *I'm on that damn picket line six hours a day in the blazing sun and you know what? Every day I die a little bit more inside. All right if you want double cheese, now's the time to say it.*

**PEPI LEISTYNA:** Now this representational assault isn't new, but in this era of globalization with enormous job loss and outsourcing and off-shoring, corporations need a scapegoat and the scapegoat is the working class, who's not working hard enough and yet productivity is way up, who's asking for too much money and yet wages are stagnant, and profits are through the roof.

# Dysfunctional Family Values

**PEPI LEISTYNA:** In the late 1980's and early 1990's there's this major counter representation there's this shift away from the happy homogenous nuclear family. This era that is often referred to as "Loser TV," gave birth to shows like Married With Children, The Simpsons, Jerry Springer, and Beavis and Butthead. These shows appear at the tail end of eight years of Ronald Reagan, when the country was going through some serious economic turmoil. But instead of looking at downsizing and layoffs, unemployment and corporate greed, these working class couples are seen as the poster child of bad parenting, and hence the source of all society's ills.

**BAMBI HAGGINS:** In Married With Children, it's so over the top in the fact that this family, the Bundys themselves, are totally disenfranchised, that they simply do not have access to the American dream.

**PEPI LEISTYNA:** These families give rise to a couple kinds of kids, either they are smart and talented which reinforces the myth of meritocracy. These kids are going to make it out regardless of the circumstances. Or the kids are deviant in a number of ways, the Bart Simpson type.

[TV show: The Simpsons] *Hmm...*

[TV show: Beavis & Butthead]

-- *Let's go break something.*

-- *Yeah. Uh, huh.*

**PEPI LEISTYNA:** The two biggest troublemakers are definitely Beavis and Butthead. These guys celebrate stupidity and they live for sex and violence.

It plays on a generation of youth raised in a media saturated society of junk culture, commodity and alienation. Where the parents are driven out of the home and into the labor force and where the TV becomes the babysitter and the role model.

There is an element of working class revenge for these two guys who surely come from broken homes in a disintegrating community where school and work in the fast-food industry are meaningless. They are downwardly mobile with a bleak future, if any.

Shows like The Simpsons and Beavis and Butthead do offer a critique of our corporate-driven society. These guys know that something is wrong. But the problem is that their actions are just individualized acts of rebellion, their response is to trash stuff. And so it ends up being self-destructive rather than transformative.

# NO CLASS

**NARRATOR:** Outside of the comic frame, there is a different and more threatening image of the working class on cop shows and reality TV. Because these shows do not use class as a lens to view criminal behavior, deviance is most often framed in racial or cultural terms.

**ROBIN D.G. KELLEY:** Something happens in the 70s and 80s where all these cop shows really put a lot of emphasis on working in ghetto communities. They are the most dangerous places to work. And it coincides again, with this image that the black poor, or black criminal behavior is a result of a lack of guidance, the lack of strong father figures, a matriarchy that explains crime and violence because these mothers are not able who can control their youth. And in a criminal culture, it also reinforces, I think, white, and black fears in some ways, that youth, particularly young males in inner city communities, are dangerous. They are all suspect. They deserve to go to jail.

**HERMAN GRAY:** There is a certain kind of criminalization of the black body so that black masculinity is seen as a place of fear. It's a way of trying to use race as a substitute to talk about class since so much of our tradition is about individual mobility and sort of making it through the American dream.

Some of what I think cop shows do is to reinforce this universe about not only who is criminal in the kind of collective imagination, but the inevitability and the naturalness about it. Even the attempts to mediate it by having black authority figures like black lieutenants and black judges, doesn't necessarily change the logic by which these two forms of meaning come together that is to say, blackness and criminality.

We have to also think about the role of whiteness and the contrast that you don't see or hear the evocation of white poverty as the proxy for class. It doesn't carry the same sort of symbolic weight. Nor does it evoke the same kind of policy responses.

**PEPI LEISTYNA:** Cop shows also do important ideological work. They justify the growing prison system that now has a record 2.1 million people behind bars. 70% of who are non-white.

**ROBIN D.G. KELLEY:** And this explains why there's continued persistent poverty. The black poor are poor because of their own behavior, not because of structural dimensions of capitalism, not because of the continuance of white supremacy and racism, none of these things. Now no one is willing to sit up there and say that the black working class, or the black poor should take no responsibility at all for their circumstances, but every responsibility that they take, you have to understand, that what ever they do is under circumstances not of their own choosing.

**HERMAN GRAY:** There's a whole host of indicators that require not simply solving the problem of arriving in the black middle class by more initiative and more responsibility, but the ways in which people are really up against very complicated and powerful structuring forces in their lives.

**NARRATOR:** The largest group of poor people in the United States is white. Yet we have a very limited understanding of who they are because their images historically have been so few and far between. And because whiteness is associated with a dominant culture, poor and working class

whites are usually portrayed as cultural outcasts or a subculture. And while TV mocks their condition, it gladly uses their image to entertain us.

**PEPI LEISTYNA:** The rural working class is nearly invisible in mainstream culture. What we find on television are these twisted comedic images, which like the ghetto sitcoms, really pastoralize poverty. The early images were of hillbilly characters popularized on shows like *Ma & Pa Kettle*, *The Real McCoys*, and *The Beverly Hillbillies*. And these are followed by the idiot sitcom era, with country bumpkin shows like *Andy Griffith* and *Gomer Pyle*, which featured characters who were simple-minded, nonthreatening, and really easy to laugh at.

**[TV show: The Andy Griffith Show]** *What are you doing in here?*

**[TV show: Green Acres]**

-- *Should I take this?*

-- *No, that belongs to the new owners.*

-- *We was just cleanin' out the place.*

**PEPI LEISTYNA:** The guy who resurrected the hillbilly image and gave it new life as redneck pride was Jeff Foxworthy.

**[TV show: The Jeff Foxworthy Show]** *Sophisticated people invest their money in stock portfolios. Rednecks invest our money in commemorative plates. Yeah, that's the legends of NASCAR series right there.*

**PEPI LEISTYNA:** From comedy tours to films to a cable show, Blue Collar TV, being a redneck seems like a lifestyle with NASCAR and country music. So what Foxworthy has done, is to take what in reality is an economic position and make it look like a lifestyle choice.

Co-opting redneck pride is also a way that the Republican party has tried to brand itself as a friend of working people and to develop its political clout in the so-called red states.

**[NBC News: George W. Bush]** *This is more than an event; it's a way of life for a lot of people.*

**[NBC News: Lindsay Taylor]** *This is the first time that we have done this. We recognize that this is a happy hunting ground for new Republican voters.*

**PEPI LEISTYNA:** Now, not that the Democrats have done much for the working class lately, but the Republican agenda has always been a war against the working class.

**MICHAEL ZWEIG:** The whole conservative political agenda for the last 30-40 years has been to attack the poor. Which is really to attack the workers, because most people who are poor are workers. They work for a living, but they have low wages or they have experience of unemployment. So if we talk about the poor as something that is separate from workers, we are making a big mistake.

**PEPI LEISTYNA:** As the effects of the economic downturn become more visible, so is this more threatening image of the white poor who're being popularized as white trash. All these types, the hillbilly, the redneck, and white trash are racially-coded terms to describe a genetic subset of white

people—lowlifes. So Jerry Springer, who introduces his show with a television in the trashcan is where all the qualities associated with white trash are on display.

**[TV show: Jerry Springer]**

-- *You ain't got a job do you?*

-- *You don't have a job either!*

It's interesting because this is a multiracial world. It's a sort of equal opportunity spectacle. Because the common link here is social class.

**SUSAN DOUGLAS:** And behind the scenes of course, by the producers, these people are referred to as trailer trash. So they are condescended to behind the scenes and they are sought out and coached to behave in a particular way.

**[TV show: The Maury Show]**

-- *Whatever you skanky <beeeeeep>!*

-- *You watch your mouth.*

**SUSAN DOUGLAS:** And what images of the working class do we see there? These people are out of control. They have no discipline. Their sex lives are all over the place.

**[TV show: Jerry Springer]**

-- *What do you do?*

-- *I sleep with homeless women.*

-- *Audience: Ahhhhhhhhhhh.*

**SUSAN DOUGLAS:** They fight with each other. They are violent. They are aggressive. They are fat and sloppy. They do completely weird taboo things.

**[TV show: Jerry Springer]** *Clown: I want sex!*

*Woman: Had my first lesbian experience...*

*Man: Yeah?*

*Woman: ...and it was with my cousin.*

*Audience: Ahhhhhhh, ohhhhhh.*

**LISA HENDERSON:** Guests on tabloid talk shows have been very successful in playing the trash roles assigned to them by producers. And that's what they are, roles. I think that it's important to recognize that all those so-called deviant practices, airing dirty laundry, fighting, cheating, are things that middle class people do too, but when they do them, they are screwed up. When working class people do them, especially on television, well, that's just the way they are. They're trash.

So a class standard gets articulated, but it doesn't get spoken. And I think that that's very common on TV and off about how class difference is recognized especially in the domain of comportment like how we behave, in the domain of taste. So part of the ways in which class exercise its force and sometimes its cruel force is precisely by not being named.



# CLASS ACTION

**NARRATOR:** While television has long used the image of the working class to entertain us, current labor conditions are no laughing matter. Today's workers face a declining standard of living, the loss of job security, and the largest gap between rich and poor since the Great Depression. Corporate media's narrow, unrealistic images conceal the extent of this assault on America's workforce, so we can no longer afford to ignore TV's framing of the working class or see it as just entertainment. In fact, media literacy campaigns and the media reform movement have already begun to challenge the FCC and Congress to democratize the airwaves and new technologies and to diversify representations that reflect both the new realities of work and the changing face of the working class in the United States.

**ARLENE DAVILA:** It's an issue of citizenship, of cultural citizenship, of cultural belonging in the nation. And how do we define the people who belong culturally to a nation? Well, by making their faces part of that cultural representation.

**HERMAN GRAY:** The new structural global realities of the television coalition system have some cracks and fissures that allow images makers to have access points that weren't so possible, you know, 20 years ago, 30 years ago, or 10 years ago even.

**PEPI LEISTYNA:** Media activists can't do this without being connected to a larger movement of working people. And that movement has to reflect the diverse interests and experiences of the working class. And it has to be a broad coalition because we can't make the same mistakes of the past by only fighting economic injustice. This has to be also a fight for racial and social equality.

**STANLEY ARONOWITZ:** This is not a narrow working class interest. We are losing essentially a century of industrial and economic progress, even as we speak. And that's a good way to form a class alliance. It means restraining capital. It means restraining the large corporations who are controlling the destiny of the United States to the detriment of the American people.

**ROBIN D.G. KELLEY:** We can't change the portrait of corporate television to make us look more realistic, and more complex, and more humane without changing the inhumane situation that we live in. And so social movements and social struggles around other issues in our society are tied directly to media representations. So it's not enough to fight at the level of media. You've gotta do everything at once. And when you do that, when you make new people, you gotta make new television.

## **Music Over Credits:**

*Some folks are born silver spoon in hand,  
Lord, don't they help themselves, oh.  
But when the taxman comes to the door,  
Lord, the house look a like a rummage sale, yes,*

*It ain't me, it ain't me,  
I ain't no millionaire's son.  
It ain't me, it ain't me,  
I ain't no fortunate one, no.*

*Some folks are born made to wave the flag,  
ooh, they're red, white and blue.  
And when the band plays "Hail To The Chief",  
oh, they point the cannon at you, Lord,*

*It ain't me, it ain't me,  
I ain't no senator's son,  
It ain't me, it ain't me,  
I ain't no fortunate one, no,*

*Yeh, some folks are born silver spoon in hand,  
Lord, don't they help themselves, oh.  
But when the taxman comes to the door,  
Lord, the house look a like a rummage sale, yes,*

*It ain't me, it ain't me,  
I ain't no military son,  
It ain't me, it ain't me,  
I ain't no fortunate one,*

*It ain't me, it ain't me,  
I ain't no fortunate one, no no no,  
It ain't me, it ain't me,  
I ain't no fortunate son, no no no,*

*- John C. Fogerty*