Lifestyles of the Not So Rich and Famous: Ideological Shifts in Popular Culture, Reagan-Era Sitcoms and Portrayals of the Working Class

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Abstract

My research indentifies, through examination of popular culture, a major shift in meanings and values surrounding the working class at a vital time in US history: the Reagan years. During the Reagan Era, the working class was weakened economically, politically and ideologically. I explore three salient themes evidenced throughout the family-centered sitcoms analyzed in my research: Minimization of Working-Class jobs, Working Class Self-deprecation and Defeat, and the Stigmatization of aid/assistance. These themes emerged from an inductive analysis of family based sitcoms (airing 1980-1988) which encompassed main characters who were both representatives of the corporate elite and had direct interactions with working class characters. During the Reagan Era, nearly the entirety of working class characters in US sitcoms were servants, laborers or adoptees of upper middle class families; whose only meaningful role was as a foil for the values, work ethic and behavior of the corporate class. Through my research I found that during the Reagan era, class representations on television contributed to an enervation of working class issues and thus bolstered Reagan administration policies.

Ask a group of first generation college students in the U.S. to raise their hands if they identify as working class, and there will be a pause, an uncomfortable shift in seats, and a few hesitant hands in the air. This experiment is enlightening since it is indicative of how American society perceives class. Most Americans are unsure about class and we are hesitant to discuss it. This is not surprising, since class is not "a central category of cultural discourse"[1] throughout American society. Since the discussion of class is missing and misrepresented in cultural discourse this in turn makes "class *as class"* difficult to understand.[2] Class is an integral part of identity so these misunderstandings have a cumulative and negative effect not only on individuals but also in communities. Therefore, it is critical for historians and media scholars to analyze how class is reflected and defined over time and throughout culture.

Rick Fantasia poignantly asked, what are the "cultural practices, collective actions, processes of organizational construction (and destruction)—that have been central to the sustenance (and weakening) of class cohesion and definition, yet that have been largely ignored in the study of class consciousness?"[3] One of the many answers to this thought provoking question is the way in which class is presented throughout popular culture, and most especially, how it is presented on television. During the Reagan era, class representations on television contributed to an enervation of working class issues and thus bolstered Reagan administration policies. Although many media and cultural scholars have examined class representation on television, only a few studies have concentrated on the class related messages of particular programs.[4]

This paper analyzes the representation of class difference and interaction in US primetime sitcoms from 1980-1988; focusing specifically on personifications of corporate capitalism and the working class. The shows

[1] Julie Bettie, "Class Dismissed? Roseanne and the Changing Face of Working Class Iconography," *Social Text* 45 (Winter 1995) 125.

[2] Ibid. 142.

[3] Rick Fantasia, "From Class Consciousness to Culture, Action and Social Organization," *Annual Review Sociology* 21 (1995) 276.

[4] Museum of Broadcast Television, "Social Class and Television," Museum of Broadcast Television, http:www.museum.tv/eotvsection.php?entrycode=social class (accessed August 22, 2010).

analyzed were the only family based sitcoms[5] (airing 1980-1988) which encompassed main characters who were both representatives of the corporate elite and had direct interactions with working class characters. To define the social class of fictional characters the work of O'Guinn, Shrum, Ehrenrich, and Kendall was followed. According to O'Guinn and Shrum, "Television commonly uses consumption symbols as a means of visual shorthand; what television characters have and the activities in which they participate mark their social status with an economy of explanatory dialogue."[6] In this research, the characters' occupations were also used as markers of social status, with upper-class characters being defined as "owners of substantial enterprises, investors with diversified wealth, heirs to family fortunes and top executives of major corporations."[7] The working class characters were not only defined as "industrial workers in hard hats" but all the characters who were not professionals, managers, or entrepreneurs; who worked for wages rather than salaries; and who spent their working hours variously lifting, bending, driving, monitoring, typing, keyboarding, cleaning, providing physical care for others, loading, unloading, cooking, [and] serving."[8] This type of classification is further supported by the Museum of Broadcast, "since data on occupations can be used as a measure of the class distribution of television characters."[9]

Before analyzing these particular shows, it is important to understand how class has presented itself throughout television's history. Since the invention of television, with minimal ebbs and flows, there has been an underrepresentation of working class characters on television. For example, a study of 262 domestic sitcoms, from 1946-1990, found that only 11 percent of those shows had blue collar, clerical and service workers as heads of household.[10] Unfortunately, when working class people are portrayed they are generally portrayed in a negative way. Pepi Leistyna, analyzing representations of class on TV, found that working class individuals are overwhelmingly portrayed as failures who lack intelligence, a strong work ethic, healthy family values and who possess an ideology defined by reactionary politics.[11] Even more, according to Barbara Ehrenreich, "working-class people are likely to cross the screen only as witnesses to crimes or sports events, never as commentators or—even when their own lives are under discussion—as experts."[12] TV's history however does present distinct cultural shifts regarding the exposure working class characters receive. These social shifts implicitly reflect shifts in cultural values.

According to George Lipsitz, in the 1950s, there were several popular shows about working class families.[13] However, Lipsitz found that as consumer culture began to readily define American family life and cultural norms, family sitcoms about the working class were altered to fit consumerist values. One reason was, that "sponsors hardly relished the prospect of shows situated in lower class environments" because sponsors were "trying to 'upgrade the consumer," and they "preferred beautiful people in mouth-watering décor to convey what it meant to climb the socioeconomic ladder."[14] Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, although few in number, primetime shows still included working class main characters, whose lives existed in a world of working class perceptions and experiences, seen for example in shows such as *Good Times*, *Sanford & Son* and *Alice*. Although fraught with stereotypes, the working class characters inhabited a space of their own; the world of bosses and corporate America was a distant and nebulous one. These more complex working class characters coincided with a time of changing attitudes and policies toward people living in poverty and the working poor.

[5] "A series was designated as family-focused if it met two criteria. First, the majority of its continuing (regular) cast had to portray genetically or legally related individuals. Second, its primary 'set' and/or dramatic focus had to revolve around the family domicile." (Thomas and Callahan 1982).

[6] Juliet Schor, "What's Wrong with Consumer Society?: Competitive Spending and the New Consumerism," in *Consuming Desires*, ed. Mark Rosenblatt (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1999), 44.

[7] Diana Kendall, *Framing Class: Media Representations of Wealth and Poverty in America,* (Lanaham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005) 13.

[8] Barbara Ehrenreich, "The Silenced Majority: Why the Average Working Person Has Disappeared from American Media and Culture," in *Gender, Race and Class in Media* ed. Gail Dines and Jean McMahon Humez (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2003) 40-41.

[9] Museum of Broadcast Television

[10] Bettie, "Class Dismissed?" 127.

[11] Pepi Leistyna and Loretta Alper, *Class Dismissed: How TV Frames the Working Class*, DVD, Directed by Loretta Alper (Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation, 2005).

[12] Ehrenreich," The Silenced Majority*,"* 40.

[13]George Lipsitz, "The Meaning of Memory: Family, Class and Ethnicity in Early Network Television Programs," *Cultural Anthropology* 4 Vol. 1 (November 1986) 355.

[14]Ibid, 372.

In 1964, Lyndon Johnson's war on poverty introduced several new responses to the struggles facing many Americans. These responses included the Housing and Urban Development Act in 1965, the Model Cities Act in 1966 and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the Higher Education Act in 1965.[15] The Housing and Urban Development act sought to help people living in poverty, but also benefited construction workers. Further, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, "designated more than $1 billion dollars for educationally deprived children," while the Higher Education Act "established scholarships and low interest loan programs."[16] In 1967, food stamp distribution began and the free school lunch program was implemented.[17] However, for many, especially women of color, the "changes of the 1960s meant nothing." Instead, they found themselves affected more than ever by the "triple whammy of race, class and gender oppression."[18]

In contrast, during this time, the industrial working class experienced relative stability. For example, although industrial unions were shrinking due to numerous factors, union activity was still prevalent and by 1970 membership in public employees' unions exceeded 4 million making it ten times larger than it had been fifteen years earlier."[19] Concomitantly, in the early 1970s, working class characters showed up in primetime; displaying complexity within storylines seeking to reflect a realistic working class lifestyle. Shows such as *Good Times*, *Sanford and Son*, *All in the Family*, and *Alice* showed working class characters as flawed, truthful and relevant; and in an era not yet introduced to the sarcasm of Roseanne Arnold, "the Fonz and Laverne and Shirley retained their dignity in their everyday struggles against class biases."[20]

In direct contrast with Leistyna's work, during this narrow window of time, working class characters were also shown positively. For example, a study of family centered shows done by Callahan and Thomas in 1982 concluded that:

> The television family generally enjoys stronger interpersonal harmony, more agreeable personalities, greater felicity and good will, and better problem outcomes when it is located in lower socioeconomic strata. This tendency appears strikingly in the distinction between working-class families and their unharmonious, unhappy and problem riddled upper-class counterparts.[21]

However, this paper does not seek to propose that these were the halcyon days of television with regard to class issues and especially racial issues. For example, the show *Good Times*, "In order to negotiate its 'authentic' representation of black inner city poverty and the attending white racism… had to soften the representation, making it more palatable to white, middle-class viewers..."[22] Further, the Mexican-American, Asian-American, Native-American, Arab-American and Latino working class were also significantly underrepresented on television during this time. The white working class character, Archie Bunker developed by Norman Lear, had the potential to be a catalyst for social discussion on things like race, but instead became a stereotypical and negative representation of the white working class male. Additionally, from 1955 to 1971 "not one new working-class domestic sitcom appeared."[23]

These working class sitcoms of the 1970s also appeared in a time with significant class conflict. In the US, class tension had started to build in the 1960s during Vietnam when privileged men received draft deferments.[24] Working class Americans also began to feel the effects of an 18% inflation rate, while "prices for food, housing, energy and medical care rose appreciably faster than for other items."[25] Additionally, working class jobs continued to be exported in large numbers[26] and "even when jobs were not exported industrial production in many segments

[15] Myron A. Marty, *Daily Life in the United States, 1960-1990: Decades of Discord* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997) 46.

[16] Marty, *Daily Life in The United States,* 46.

[17] Ibid, 130.

[18] Aniko Bodroghkozy, "Good times in race relations? CBS's *Good Times* and the Legacy of Civil Rights in 1970's Prime-Time Television," *Screen* 44 no. 4 (Winter 2003) 413.

[19] Marty, *Daily Life in the United States,* 100.

[20] Museum of Broadcast Television.

[21] Sari Thomas and Brian P. Callahan, "Allocating Happiness: TV Families and Social Class," *Journal of Communication* (Summer 1982) 189.

[22] Bodroghkozy, "Good times in Race Relations?" 413.

[23] Museum of Broadcast Television.

[24] Marty, *Daily Life in the United States, 1960-1990,* 29.

[25] Ibid, 195.

[26] Ibid, 196.

of the economy suffered," most notably the auto industry. By the end of 1980, 200,000 auto industry workers had been laid off.[27] Struggles for the working class continued into the 1980s and became more pronounced as Reagan took office. In 1981, auto layoffs increased to 215,000. By 1985, the economy measured by sales looked deceivingly better "but workers were not hired back in the same numbers in which they were laid off."

As US workers experienced these economic upheavals, a drastic shift developed in the way working class characters were portrayed on TV. Such a shift reflects the fact that television is a key part of social change and shifting ideological values. Television is not the cause of social change but rather the effectiveness of television will "either hasten or delay" change.[28]

As seen in Figure 1, the peak of this major shift in TV comes at the height of the Reagan administration. During the Reagan years, there was both an increase in family sitcoms and an almost complete erasure of standalone working class characters. "The movement of working-class people to the periphery of television's dramatic worlds produces what Gebner called 'symbolic annihilation' i.e. they are invisible background in the dominant cultural discourse."[29] Thus this shift is salient since it comes at a time when the working class was weakened economically, politically and ideologically.

In the 1980's, the working class was growing and the middle class shrinking. Between 1983 and 1988, unemployment decreased and while "the number of Americans employed rose, wages and incomes failed to rise sufficiently for most workers to improve their real standards of living."[30] This was due impart to the increase of service occupations. In 1985, only 26 percent of workers "produced goods while service occupations increased to 74 percent."[31] Between 1981 and 1986 "roughly five million Americans who had held their jobs for three years or more lost them after plant closings or layoffs."[32] Unions also suffered under the new administration. In 1981, Reagan introduced the nation to his feelings regarding unions when he broke up a workers strike by firing 12,000 members of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization.[33] Reagan era anti-labor rhetoric would continue throughout the 80s, when during the campaign of 1984, "the Republicans succeeded in indentifying organized labor as a selfish special interest whose programs came at the expense of the majority of citizens."[34] Throughout Reagan's terms, it became clear that "Unions could not expect cordial or deferential treatment from the new administration…."[35]

Although a child of the Great Depression, Reagan did not favor government help for the poor. Reagan bragged "that he and his family endured poverty in the twenties, when there were no government programs that might have provided relief."[36] As president, Reagan "preached that welfare had created 'a kind of bondage' in which the people are made subservient to the government that is handing out the largesse."[37] During Reagan's presidency, the family based sitcoms—*Silver Spoons*, *Who's the Boss?* and *Diff'rent Strokes* helped produce ideologies congruent with Reagan's policies regarding unemployment, unions and welfare. In these shows, the major tropes of minimization of working class occupations, working class self defeat and shame, and the demonization of dependency reflect and justify the social and political climate of the Reagan era.

The show *Silver Spoons*, (1982-1987) is premised around a billionaire toy maker, Edward Stratton III, who acquired his money through a family fortune. With money from his family's auto plant factories he opened up a toy factory. On the show, Edward lived with his son Ricky and was visited by reoccurring characters based in the corporate world including his secretary/love interest (Kate), his lawyer (Leonard), and his father and auto industry magnate (Edward Stratton II). Episodes of the show included such topics as private military schools, outsourcing a lug nut factory for cheaper labor costs, and acquiring a larger fortune through marriage. In many episodes, Edward Jr. is often framed through what Diana Kendall describes as a "poor little rich boy" lens. Edward is filthy rich and

[27] Marty, *Daily Life in the United States*, 196.

[28] John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London:Methuen &Co. Ltd., 1987) 45.

[29] Museum of Broadcast Television.

[30] Foster Rhea Dulles and Melvyn Dubosky, *Labor in America: A History* 5th ed. (Arlington Heights: Harlan Division, Inc., 1989) 387.

[31] Bettie, "Class Dismissed?" 132.

[32] Gil Troy, *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005) 225.

[33] Marty, *Daily Life in the United States*, 271.

[34] Dulles and Dubosky, *Labor in America*, 392.

[35] Marty, *Daily Life in the United States*, 271.

[36] John Patrick Diggins, *Ronald Reagan: Fate, Freedom and the Making of History* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2007) 58.

[37] Troy, *Morning in America*, 91.

incompetent to boot, he is seemingly undeserving of his wealth because he is so clueless, yet the creators of the show paint him as a victim of a lonely childhood and Edward retains an endearing childlike innocence in raising his own son and thus in a way becomes endearing to the viewer.

Who's the Boss? (1984-1992) revolved around WASP Angela Bower, president of one of the largest advertising firms in the nation. The pilot episode shows Angela's decision to hire a male housekeeper; Bronx-based Tony Macelli, an out of work baseball player who is now struggling to make a living. Angela's class status is coded into her occupation, the location and decoration of her Connecticut home and her physical appearance. Angela is Anglo-Saxon, blond and thin; matching "the thin and normatively beautiful characters of middle-class sitcoms."[38] Tony is also coded physically; Tony is Italian, with olive skin, and dark hair. Tony is muscular and several lines of dialogue reduce him to a sexual object. Tony brings his daughter Samantha (Sam) to live with him in the Bower household, which also includes Angela's son Jonathan and her mother Mona (who lives next door). Most of the episodes deal with the novelty of a male housekeeper and gender role commentary is reoccurring. Angela is portrayed as a strong and powerful woman who "has it all" as Samantha tells her father in the pilot episode, but Angela represents a "bourgeois and careerist feminism" not the "gritty feminism" portrayed in the later sitcom Roseanne.[39] The sexual tension existent between Tony and Angela dominate many of the episodes, but issues of class are equally pronounced.

The show *Diff'rent Strokes* (1978-1985) is premised around the adoption of two working class boys—Arnold and Willis. Adopted by Phillip Drummond, (the CEO of a transnational corporation) as a favor to Arnold and Willis' late mother who was also Drummond's old housekeeper, the show is not only classist, but racist. Arnold and Willis are African-American while Drummond is white and the show is coded with symbols of paternalism and color-blind racism. Many episodes bring out the tiniest sliver of social commentary regarding discrimination in hiring, destruction of low cost housing and environmental devastation. However, while these things are momentarily brought to the surface, the connection between the role of corporate capitalism and these social problems are quickly reconciled or obfuscated. Above all, Drummond, like the other upper-class characters in these shows are portrayed as kind, interesting and important.

There are social and political reasons that "the media portray people who *produce* goods and services as much less interesting" than those who *consume* them.[40] Throughout these shows not only are working class jobs portrayed as uninteresting they are depicted as irrelevant and there is a constant devaluing of working class labor. In the pilot episode of *Who's the Boss?* Angela is hesitant to hire Tony as a housekeeper; Mona reassures her, "Don't be sexist; men can do *meaningless*, unproductive work" [emphasis added]. As presented in these popular sitcoms, the minimization of working class jobs contributed to the ideological erasure of the working class by devaluing the labor they perform and their subsequently related struggles. In these shows, working class jobs are portrayed as expendable. Workers are fired and hired on the whims of the corporate class and workers are traded like supplies. This is reflective of a cultural attitude displayed between employers and employees. During the 1980s, "Employers had increasingly come to regard their employees as a 'contingent' workforce to be retained or dismissed depending on immediate circumstances."[41]

The *Silver Spoons* episode "The Best Christmas Ever" (12/18/82) implicitly portrays the conflict between US labor and the corporate elite. In this episode, the Stratton family comes into contact with a homeless family living in a cave in the wealthy area where the Stratton's live. The homeless family, Jack, Ellen, and Joey have become displaced after Jack is fired from his job at a steel mill. Jack and Ellen's son Joey enters the episode early, knocking on the Stratton's door and asking for a job. Because of what he is wearing, his desire to earn a dollar and his quaint colloquiums it is easy for the viewer to identify Joey as a representation of the working class. In the initial dialogue between the two boys (Joey and Ricky), there is an immediate deference to Ricky by Joey. Joey addresses Ricky as "mister" not due to any formalities or difference in age but because Joey is the coded worker, while Ricky represents capital and the means that control it. Ricky goes on to "hire" Joey to hang a Christmas ornament and later on in the episode (after the Strattons donate their Christmas tree and gifts to Joey's family), Ricky's father Edward (disguised as Santa Claus) "hires" Joey's father Jack.

> Jack: Listen, who are you?
> Edward: Edward Stratton III
> Jack: You know, my first instinct was to throw you out of here.

[38] Bettie, "Class Dismissed?" 137.
[39] Ibid, 142.
[40] Kendall, *Framing Class,* 233.
[41] Marty, *Daily Life in the United States*, 273.

Edward: (looking worried) What's your second instinct?
Jack: To say thank you. You really made my son happy. I'm gonna pay you back for all of this.
Edward: No, it's not necessary. It's Christmas. In the spirit of…
Jack: I don't take handouts. I'll find you some way to pay you back.
Edward: Well, I respect that. I'll tell you what we'll take it out of your first week's paycheck.
Jack: My what?
Edward: Your first week's paycheck. See I own a factory and I can really use a man like you.
Jack: Yeah?
Edward: Yeah, definitely. What do you do?

Because the two fathers represent worker and capital, (first established when Ricky "hires" Joey and then when Edward hires Jack), there is an unresolved conflict implicit in this scene. The implicit connection between the outsourcing of the Stratton factory in a previous episode and Jack's lay-off in this episode is reconciled by Edward hiring Jack. Shows that acknowledge class are often presented with these kinds of conundrums, since:

> [U]nresolved, active contradictions working in the reader's consciousness would destroy the unified position of dominant specularity, and the complacent acceptance of omniscience that goes with it, and produce instead discomfort uncertainty, and an active desire to think through these contradictions not just in textual terms but in terms of the readers social experience.[42]

In the above scene, the way in which the class tension is addressed both minimizes Jack's role in the economy while simultaneously presenting the wealthy as generous. Although Jack is adamant about not accepting assistance, the writer conveys to the reader that this charity is acceptable as it presents the wealthy as generous at a time when their generosity is allowed, such as Christmastime. Seasonal generosity in the media offers temporary resolutions and is common across all forms of media.

According to Diane Kendall:

> …television entertainment story lines using charitable framing focus on the need for a helping hand on 'special occasions' but do not suggest that a more focused effort should be made on a daily basis to help alleviate the larger societal problems that contribute to individual problems of poverty, hunger, and homelessness.[43]

In *Silver Spoons*, the exchange between the two fathers provides important information about both classes by stating the importance of work and unimportance of working class jobs. For Edward, all workers are the same. Edward is not simply placating Jack by telling him he is right for the job, in the Stratton factory, menial labor is performed and could be performed by any able-bodied worker. However, for Jack, work is *the* most important thing as it eliminates any benefits, such as welfare or what Jack refers to as a "handout" in this scene. This episode aired at a time of substantial layoffs in the industrial sector and Jack's plight echoes the uncertainty workers may have felt regarding their own future. As stable jobs in manufacturing decreased jobs in service industries increased and for many these low paying service jobs "were simply a dead-end way to maintain a marginal existence."[44] Service jobs symbolized this new kind of working class uncertainty, since service jobs were often part-time and offered few benefits. As once well-respected and skilled jobs in manufacturing were being lost and replaced by unskilled labor, the minimization of any working class occupation in this show reflect Reagan's attitude towards these shifts.

Reagan's heroes of the 1980s were entrepreneurs[45] not the working class. Regarding the plight of workers, Reagan attacked reporters asking "Is it news that some fellow out in South Succotash someplace has just been laid off that he should be interviewed nationwide?"[46] Reagan instead toasted the "trailblazers mastering computers and other modern miracles." In his 1984 inaugural address he stated: "Hope is reborn for couples dreaming of owning homes and for risk takers with vision to create tomorrow's opportunities."[47]

[42] Fiske, *Television Culture*, 35.
[43] Kendall, *Framing Class*, 17.
[44] Marty, *Daily Life in the United States*, 271.
[45] Troy, *Morning in America*, 131.
[46] Troy, *Morning in America*, 112.
[47] Ibid, 120.

Minimizing the jobs performed by working class characters carries over into the characters' internalized feelings of unworthiness. Both Tony in *Who's the Boss?* and Jack in *Silver Spoons* are presented as defeated and shamed, thus they feel shame in being poor, and feel responsible for their poverty. Both men complain of being failed providers and Tony frequently compares himself to the upper-class and self deprecates when he doesn't measure up.

In the *Who's the Boss?* episode "Keeping up with the Marci's" (4/9/85), Tony is put in a position where he is unable to participate in upper-middle class modes of consumption, which lead to his feelings of failure. In the episode, Tony's daughter Sam hopes to go on a ski field trip. Before school, in front of Sam's friend Marci and Marci's father Dr. Ferguson, Sam asks Tony to sign her permission slip. When Tony is hesitant to sign it Dr. Ferguson understands, but a look of consternation crosses Marci's face. "Oh" she says, "Maybe we can pay for it." Tony tries everything he can to earn the $250 it takes to send Sam on the trip; including disastrously cleaning a chimney, and finally, by selling his autographed '62 Mets baseball collection. At one point in the episode he tells Sam that "he blew it," explaining to his daughter that she will have to be honest with her friends about the fact that her father doesn't make the same kind of money as people in Connecticut. When Sam throws a typical childlike fit, Tony goes into a rant of self-deprecation in front of his boss, Angela. He compares himself to Dr. Ferguson with a laundry list of why he is a bad father. He tells Angela, "He's a big time surgeon and I'm just a lousy housekeeper."

He continues:

Tony: Maybe we shouldn't have come to Connecticut; I just wanted to show my daughter a better life.
Angela: You have.
Tony: I've shown her, I just can't give it to her.

It is after this conversation with Angela that Tony decides to sell his most prized possession—the autographed baseball collection that belonged to his father.

Not only does Tony self-deprecate he is humiliated by Marci, Mona, Angela and Jonathan's cavalier attitudes towards money. The final blow to Tony's self esteem comes with selling his baseball collection for less than what it is worth in his desperation to please his daughter. Tony displays the now well known hidden injuries of class: "the social psychological burden of class status anxiety, 'the feeling of vulnerability in contrasting oneself to others at a higher social level, the buried sense of inadequacy."[48]

Jack (*Silver Spoons)* on the other hand, conveys his self defeat through body language and dialogue. As his wife consoles him about losing his job, Jack stares at her incredulously. With his arms lifeless and shoulders slumped he is, in essence, an animated Dorothea Lange photograph. Jack's feelings of defeat present themselves orally when he must tell his son Joey that Santa will not be visiting their family.

Joey: You mean he's gonna leave my gifts at our old house. We better go back!
Jack: We can't, it belongs to the bank now. Look, Joey, next year, I promise you Santa will know exactly where we are and we'll have the best Christmas ever.

Jack's and Tony's feelings about themselves as failed providers act as a source of shame for the characters; while for the viewer, Jack and Tony's defeat is representative of the defeat that many unemployed workers may have felt during this period of instability. The promise Jack gives Joey that Santa will come next year puts an unsubstantiated faith in Reagan's trickledown economic policy.

Socially and ideologically, the misrepresentation of the working class on TV helps to "create a reality that seemingly justifies superior positions of the upper middle and upper classes and establishes them as entitled to their privileged position in the stratification system."[49] Thus, "the manner in which class is framed by the media has a major impact on how people feel about class and inequality."[50] Television often skews our perceptions of inequality in the US by frequently glorifying the affluent. According to a study conducted by O'Guinn and Shurm "heavy" TV viewers "are more likely to believe the social world to be an affluent place." This belief in the affluencey of society affects the consumption patterns of viewers. O'Guinn and Shrum also revealed data which indicated "where consumption markers of affluence are concerned, those with less income and education are the most affected by

[48] Bettie, "Class Dismissed?" 131.
[49] Kendall, *Framing Class*, 2-3.
[50] Ibid, 2.

televised representations of the consumption practices of others." In short, "'knowing' how others live informs consumer expectations, satisfaction, motivation and desire."[51]

Further connected with issues of class, feeling sad coupled with self focus, a study found, leads to increased consumption.[52] The working class of the Reagan era, focused on its perceived shortcomings and feeling depressed because of them was in a vulnerable state of induced consumption. Even as wages fell during the 1980s, the working class still felt pressure to overcome "consumer inadequacy" in order to be a full-fledged participant in a consumer society,[53] and credit offered a quick fix.

While characters like Tony and Jack struggle to get by, the upper-class characters practice conspicuous consumption. In the pilot episode of *Who's the Boss?* Angela and her date joke about spending $300 on a fistful of food, while in another episode Angela takes Samantha on a shopping spree at high end department stores and gets "carried away." In the show *Silver Spoons* Edward hires Mr. T to be Ricky's bodyguard when Ricky becomes the object of ridicule at a public school.

It is easy to overlook the importance of these shows within the 1980s primetime lineup or to brush aside the importance of the class portrayals within them, however, like any other cultural group, representation in the media has individual psychological and social responses. According to Sociology Professor Barry Gordon, "in a multicultural society, the most well adjusted people are those who have some realistic perspective about what other groups are like. It's also crystal clear that in our society that it's important for people to see others like themselves on TV. It validates you."[54] Additionally, the media plays a key role in defining cultural tastes, locating ourselves in history, establishing our national identity, as well as ascertaining a range of national and social possibilities.[55] Thus it is clear how the overarching themes of class in these popular shows need further examination regarding their place in the social and political climate of the Reagan Era.

Viewers coming of age in the context of these popular sitcoms were especially vulnerable to their effects. "Ward and Wackman (1971) report that heavy television viewing among adolescents is associated with the belief that 'material goods and money are important for personal happiness and social progress."[56] This correlates even further with a study by Hoffner and Buchanan (2005) which found identification with fictional characters often led to incorporation of the character into the self; culminating in Bandura's modeling process where people go far beyond simple imitation of fictional characters "to include the changing of attitudes, values, aspirations and other characteristics to match those of a model."[57] In terms of class, viewers only tended to identify with characters similar to themselves in the demographics of gender, race and age, never economic status. Part of this non-identification with working class characters may be due in part to the media's portrayal of the working class within such narrow and overwhelmingly negative frames; thus viewers who are working class have a hard time seeing themselves reflected in popular culture since they transcend many of these stereotypes.

Working class viewers who do not recognize their own class contribute to what is one of the most damaging aspects to class consciousness, an inability on the part of workers to "see their interests as individuals in their interests as members of the working-class."[58] What is more disturbing is that in several psychological studies, children imitated or wanted to be like successful characters even if the character's behavior conflicted with their own personal values.[59] This is striking considering that the children and adolescents of the 1980s are the adults of

[51] Thomas C. O'Guinn and L.J. Shurm, "The Role of Television in the Construction of Consumer Reality," *The Journal of Consumer Research* 23 Vol. 4 (March 1997) 290-291.

[52] Jason Marsh, "Spent: New Research Explores Why Sadness Makes Us Splurge," *Utne* (March-April 2009) 76-77.

[53] Zygmunt Bauman, "From the Work Ethic to the Aesthetic of Consumption," in *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1998) 38.

[54] Jennifer Jacobs Henderson and Gerald J. Baldasty, "Race, Advertising and Prime-Time Television," *The Howard Journal of Communication* 14 (2003) 98.

[55] Gregory Manstios, "Media Magic: Making Class Invisible," in *Mapping the Social Landscape: Readings in Sociology* ed. Susan J. Ferguson (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 2005) 464.

[56] James M. Carlson, "Television Viewing: Cultivating Perceptions of Affluence and Support for Capitalist Values," *Political Communication* 10 (1993) 246.

[57] Cynthia Hoffner and Martha Buchanan, "Young Adults' Wishful Identification with Television Characters: The Role of Perceived Similarity and Character Attributes," *Media Psychology* 7 (2005) 327.

[58] Bertell Ollman, "Toward Class Consciousness Next Time: Marx and the Working Class," http:www.pipeline.com/~rougeforum/towardclassconsciousness.pdf (accessed October 31, 2009).

[59] Hoffner and Buchanan, "Young Adults' Wishful Identification with Television Characters," 331.

today, and little has improved in terms of class discourse while consumer culture has remained steady and possibly increased.

At the intersection between non-working class identification and portrayals of consumption throughout popular culture, there is a sea of easy credit, rampant consumerism and a mall lifestyle which not only offers escapism but a road to identification with the middle-class. In the 1980s, this identification with middle class ideas and values helped bolster Reagan's policies and his support of capitalist interests. "While he was not quite Gordon Gekko in Oliver Stone's 1987 movie *Wall Street* proclaiming 'greed is good,' Reagan felt that "the chief business of the American people is business."[60] Under Reagan, Vice-President George Bush, "worked on reducing the growth of federal regulations by more than 25 percent," [61] while "the costly and corrosive savings and loan scandals ballooned as a result of Reagan's determination to get government off the back of business so that the 'magic of the market' could show its stuff."[62] Reagan also enjoyed spending in a capitalist economy. Reagan's inauguration garnered a price tag of $16 million with Nancy Reagan's dress alone costing $10,000.[63] With his costly inauguration Reagan set a precedent for 1980s popular culture which became preoccupied with *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. The creators of the show *Dallas* said they had in fact "picked up on the glitz and glamour of the Reagan era."

"Althusser (1979) stresses that any psychologistic identification, whether multiple or not, must be preceded by an ideological identification."[64] During the 1980s, viewers were placed into a subject position which made identifying with upper class characters relatively easy. Television is able to construct subject positions effectively with the help of social agencies that "have been working all our lives to construct our subjectiveness in equivalent ways."[65] The study by Hoffner and Buchanan on Young Adults and Wishful Identification with Television Characters found that people "indentified more strongly with successful and admired characters."[66] As already established by Leistyna, the most successful and admired characters on television are not working class. Thus, in TV we are invited into a subject position and then rewarded ideologically when we identify with that subject.

Part of the reason upper-class characters are appealing is the way in which the low self esteem expressed by working class characters is contrasted with the extreme generosity of upper-class characters. Angela is a stern but, above all, kind employer; not only is she overly generous she often romanticizes poverty. However, it is in *Diff'rent Strokes* that the generosity is most pronounced in the paternalism of Phillip Drummond. He, like Angela, is only stern when the working-class Willis and Arnold "disobey." However, in some of the shows the wealthy characters' generosity is framed negatively. In one episode of *Diff'rent Strokes,* Mr. Drummond buys uniforms for Arnold's football team as a bribe for Arnold's admission. In *Silver Spoons*, Edward Stratton Sr. confesses to his son Edward Jr. that he was only admitted to a prestigious university because he funded the building of the school's gymnasium. However, it is still easier and more rewarding for the viewer to identify with Angela, Phillip and Edward even though each of these characters represents corporate capitalism, as evidenced by their fictional occupations within the corporate world. This association acts as a powerful ideological tool.

Since:

> The workers, with relatively few exceptions—depending on the country and the period—don't really and deeply hate capitalists, because they cannot distinguish them sharply enough from themselves, because they have never been able to set off a sufficiently unencumbered target to hate.[67]

Viewers of these shows in the 1980s know they don't live like the upper-class characters of these shows, but they identify with them. To criticize capitalism would be to criticize the generous Angela, Phillip and Edward. There is a direct link between television viewing and views on capitalism, according to Carlson, "It is reasonable to hypothesize that heavy television viewing is associated with unrealistic perceptions of American affluence and support for capitalist values."[68] Moreover, "Heavy viewing of situation comedies is… correlated with positive

[60] Troy, *Morning in America,* 52.
[61] Ibid, 133.
[62] Diggins, *Ronald Reagan*, 342.
[63] Troy, *Morning in America*, 50.
[64] Fiske, *Television Culture,* 178.
[65] Fiske, *Television Culture,* 51.
[66] Hoffner and Buchanan, "Young Adults' Wishful Identification with Television Characters," 325.
[67] Ollman, Toward Class Consciousness Next Time: Marx and the Working Class.
[68] Carlson, *Television Viewing*, 246.

attitudes toward capitalism."[69] Even though the wealthy characters are extremely generous, these shows also make it clear that their generosity should not be accepted unconditionally by the working class.

In these popular sitcoms, working class characters reiterate throughout individual episodes the negativity of any "charity" or "handout" illustrating the final theme—Stigmatization/Demonization of Dependency. The working class characters in these shows are proud and they will do anything to avoid assistance. They will not borrow money and they will not accept gifts without offering to pay for them. This theme is richly layered and is rooted deeply in middle-class notions of the deserving and undeserving poor. We can trace back these negative feelings towards assistance to the cultural genealogy of the word dependency and all of its negative connotations. "The senator Daniel P. Moynihan prefigured today's discourse when he began his 1973 book by claiming that 'the issue of welfare is the issue of dependency' "[70] Thus, in order to make the working class characters in these shows devoid of a middle-class audience's contempt, it becomes important for producers to distance these characters from the stigmatized world of welfare and so-called "dependency."

In "Keeping up with the Marci's" (*Who's the Boss?),* when Mona, Angela and even 7 year old Jonathan offer the Macelli's (both Sam and Tony) money, their pride prevents them from accepting the money even as a loan. In the episode, "Paint Your Wagon" (1/15/85) Tony must work off every dime of the wrong paint job he allowed on Angela's Jaguar, even after Angela's neighbor Mrs. Wilmington (who wants to hire Tony) brings out her checkbook to settle the matter. Tony thanks her but says "nobody pays my way." Ricky, coded as generous throughout *Silver Spoons,* paid Joey $20 to hang a single Christmas ornament. This is contrasted later in the episode when Joey sneaks back into the Stratton house, leaves the "earned" $20 bill on the table, and then with his head down in shame takes a gift basket. In the following scene Joey's dad interrogates him on the status of food:

> Jack: Where'd you get all this stuff? We don't take handouts, son.
> Joey: This is not a handout. I met this really rich guy in this big house. I asked him for a job and he gave it to me.

This exchange tells us that pride is not sustained by taking welfare or anything that might be perceived as welfare. The only way this gift basket is acceptable, to Jack, and the audience is the fact that Joey supposedly *worked* for it.

This attitude toward welfare presented in this small piece of dialogue is congruent with arguments made by the Reagan administration. The Reagan approach to welfare was a "'new federalism', a plan to make the down-and-out in society a local and state responsibility."[71] Reagan purported that "government aid was not needed," and "that private enterprise would take care of poverty."[72] This private response to poverty is reflected in the way Angela and Edward attempt to help the less fortunate characters. Reagan had a history of anti-assistance for the non-elites; as governor in 1966, Reagan "questioned the concept of free tuition for students at state colleges and universities."[73] According to historian Dulles, Reagan's second term had a clear mandate of economic policies which "took from the poor and gave to the rich." This type of trickledown economics created a degree of income and wealth inequality not seen since the Great Depression.[74] However, the administration's emphasis on work implied that the true responsibility of eradicating poverty lay on the poor. Instead of looking at root causes of poverty, "Congress attempted to reform the welfare system, with specific measures aimed at giving the poor job training or education needed to get off welfare."[75] The obvious problem with these programs, and the way poverty is presented in shows such as *Silver Spoons*, is that poverty is systemic not individual, as Reagan's policies and the dialogue in the shows would have us believe. Poverty "is a direct result of economic and political policies that deprive people of jobs, adequate wages and legitimate support."[76]

These shows are not unique in supporting the notion of individualized poverty. Through the media "we are told that the poor live in a personal and cultural cycle of poverty that hopelessly imprisons them." We also see this

[69] Ibid, 253.

[70] Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, "A Genealogy of *Dependency: Tracing* a Keyword of the U.S. Welfare State," *Signs* (Winter 1994) 309.

[71] Marty, *Daily Life in the United States 1960-1990*, 268.

[72] Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1995) 566.

[73] Marty, *Daily Life in the United States 1960-1990*, 21.

[74] Dulles and Dubosky, *Labor in America,* 392-393

[75] Marty, *Daily Life in the United States 1960-1990*, 269.

[76] Manstios, "Media Magic," 466.

conveyed in other popular shows from the 1980s such as *Taxi* and *Cheers*, where the failure of the working class characters is based on a lacking in their own culture.[77]

For the Reagan administration, instituting new welfare policies in this cultural context is welcomed since eliminating something that is portrayed as negative would be considered a positive response by the administration. With welfare being cut and reformed and working class jobs being eradicated or outsourced, equating solving these problems with a "handout" or "charity," (portrayed as negative throughout popular culture), helped exonerate Reagan and his administration.

This kind of "discursive power, that is, the power to make common sense of a class based sense of the real,"[78] clearly worked to bolster Reagan Administration policies. The connection between the messages coming out of Washington and Hollywood were inextricable. "The classes who dominate social relations also attempt to dominate the production of meanings that underpin them: social power and semiotic power are two sides of the same coin."[79]

It is fairly common knowledge that corporate interests drive media content:

> More than 40 years ago Lazarsfeld and Merton (1949) asserted that the mass media are financed by the business establishment, which rests on assumptions of capitalism, and contributes to the maintenance of that system. The same argument has been articulated more recently by Ginsberg (1988) and Parenti (1986) among others.[80]

A direct correlation between media content and Ronald Reagan began when Reagan appointed Mark Fowler to head the FCC. Fowler "regarded television as just another appliance…that should be treated like a business, nothing more or less. Under Fowler's leadership, the FCC discontinued rules limiting the number of minutes per hour that could be devoted to advertising and stopped requiring television stations to play a public service role."[81] "The superstructure of media ownership" purposefully benefits the upper classes.[82] "A mass media that did not have its own class interests in preserving that status quo would acknowledge that inordinate wealth and power undermines democracy and that a 'free market' economy can ravage a people and their communities."[83] Further, working class interests and strength are a direct threat to capitalist-class interests.[84] Thus it is clear that network leaders and executive producers, as members of the corporate class, would either consciously or unconsciously shed a negative light on the working class or fail to portray working class empowerment, and this is a sub theme in many of the shows' episodes.

In "Paint Your Wagon" (*Who's the Boss?*) Tony teaches an aerobics class to the other housekeepers in the neighborhood since they cannot afford gym memberships. When the housekeepers start to form solidarity because of Tony's attitude toward work and his friendly relationship with Angela, a neighbor of Angela's (Mrs. Wilmington) becomes concerned. The power Tony has in the household has disrupted the power balance in the neighborhood between capital and labor. Since Tony's classes, Mrs. Wilmington tells Angela her housekeeper has become "unsatisfied." She tells Angela: "You've given to many special privileges to your live in.…and you're making it tough for the rest of us." The pressure from her neighbor causes Angela to start devaluing Tony and their friendship wanes. In one scene, Angela raises her voice to explain to Tony: "I pay you to do the damn floors! You are just the maid around here and don't you forget it!" Later, when Angela seeks a comfortable relationship with Tony, Tony uses her humiliating tirade to prove a point by altering their usual eating arrangements:

> Angela: What are you doing?
> Tony: Just my job ma'am.
> Angela: (Angela looking down at the table.) Why are there only two place settings?
> Tony: One for you and one for Master Jonathan. The hired help will eat in the kitchen."

[77] Leistyna, *Class Dismissed*.
[78] Fiske, *Television Culture*, 42.
[79] Ibid, 326.
[80] Carlson, *Television Viewing,* 243.
[81] Marty, *Daily Life in the United States*, 277.
[82] Kendall, *Framing Class*, 239.
[83] Manstios, "Media Magic," 471.
[84] Erik Olin Wright, "Working-Class Power, Capitalist-Class Interests, and Class Compromise," *American Journal of Sociology* 105 no. 4 (2000) 977.

Tony is one of the few working class characters, (others include Benson and Roseanne) who are able to exude confidence and smugness regarding class issues, and the often awkward Angela is an easy target for his remarks. This becomes especially clear in the episode where Angela is forced to maneuver through Tony's neighborhood in the Bronx ("Angela's First Fight").

However, in other shows the notion of working class confidence and solidarity is quickly destroyed through humor and powerful symbology. In the Christmas episode of *Silver Spoons* one telling exchange of dialogue between Edward (dressed as Santa) and Joey, signifies resistance to working class solidarity:

> Edward/Santa: Does a Joey Thompson live here?
> Joey: (jumping up and down) Yeah, that's me! That's me!
> Santa: If I hadn't gotten that telegram I wouldn't have known you were here. How are you Joey?
> Joey: Great, Santa. I mean, how are you?
> Santa: Well, I'm—I'm a little tired. This is my busy season you know. Plus, I got a power struggle going on. The Teamsters are trying to unionize my elves. Well, you don't wanna hear my troubles. Ho! Ho! Ho!

This scene in particular is reflective of Reagan's sentiments on union activity while the delivery of this anti-labor diatribe by the iconic image of Santa Claus reaches deeply into the audience's subconscious. The story of Santa Claus is one in which "consumer, capitalist, and laborer were idealized: Commodities (toys) were manufactured by happy elves working in Santa's workshop…."[85] This symbolism must have had a powerful effect in 1982 in light of recent workers' strikes and Reagan's subsequent response. This presidential attitude coupled with loss of manufacturing jobs, which held strong unions, created reluctance towards union membership.[86] Just like television helped erode political activity among American workers in the 1940s [87] these shows had a similar effect. In the larger picture, the symbolic and cultural shifts of working class characters also affected class identity in the nation, since "Classes are social configurations structured from without…and from within…but classes are also always *partial* social configurations to the extent that they are constantly in a process of organization, disorganization, and reorganization in relation to their conflicts with other classes."[88]

"People lack confidence in the future, essentially, because they lack confidence in themselves; but nothing in the lives of workers has enabled them to acquire such confidence;"[89] especially their representation in the media. For television viewers of the Reagan era, *Silver Spoons, Who's the Boss?* and *Diff'rent Strokes* provided a powerful discourse that reflected Reagan administration policies, thus contributing to a weakening of the working class. In the mid 80s almost the only working class characters in US family based sitcoms were servants, laborers or adoptees of upper middle class families; the working class in these shows only became meaningful as a foil for the better values, work ethic and behavior of the corporate class while representations of class during the Reagan era reflected, justified and helped create new class positions in an era of class conflict.

Using Clark and Berry's theory regarding the four stages of media representation for minority groups,[90] popular sitcoms of the 1980s moved the working class from ridicule to regulation but even today characters who represent the working class have still not reached the final stage of respect. Although Post Reagan some new Primetime sitcoms about the working class emerged to challenge television's classist past, most notably Roseanne, the previous class paradigm set by the Reagan era continues to reverberate today.

The powerful and often overlooked role of television can not only affect a viewer's life goals and occupational aspirations,[91] but can also affect "social beliefs about the material well-being of others" informing "social and political discourse about everything from welfare reform to class envy."[92] Television is powerful. "In terms of exposure, television rivals many traditional socialization agents such as school, church and even parents." [93] It is imperative then as critics of television, that we are never "content with asking and revealing what view of the

[85] Richard Robbins, *Global Problems and the Cultural of Capitalism 4th ed.* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2007) 30.

[86] Ibid, 271.

[87] Lipsitz, "The Meaning of Memory," 382.

[88] Fantasia, "From Class Consciousness to Culture," 275.

[89] Ollman, Toward Class Consciousness Next Time.

[90] Amber B. Raley and Jennifer L. Lucas, "Stereotypes or Success? Prime-Time Television's Portrayal of Gay Male, Lesbian and Bisexual Characters," *Journal of Homosexuality* 51 no. 2 (2006) 19.

[91] Hoffner and Buchanan, "Young Adults' Wishful Identification with Television Characters" 327-328.

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[93] Ibid, 279.

world is being presented, but must recognize that someone's view of the world is implicitly or explicitly, obviously or subtly, inscribed within it."[94]

When we understand the roots of the class paradigm set by television we can look at our own roles within it and seek change where it is needed. Like Fredric Jameson stated history can be what hurts, but Lipsitz said it best when said "history can also be what helps, what takes us back into the past in order to break its hold on the present."[95]

Figure 1. Graph illustrating shift in family-based sitcoms based on class, from 1974-1994.

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[94] Fiske, *Television Culture*, 42.
[95] Lipsitz, "The Meaning of Memory."

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