**It’s ‘All in the Family’: Portraying America’s Working Class on TV**

ANALYSIS

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The topical focus of our research project is the portrayal of socio-economic class in the United States. At the heart of the American dream lies the promise of moving up the social and economic ladder. Although this promise has been a distant dream for many citizens, our nation’s ongoing recession has reformatted class structure in a major way. For the first time in many years, the playing field as been considerably altered; many of those who were at the upper tier four years have dropped down the economic ladder, those who were on the lower rung have plummeted even further. Author Diana Kendall (2005) reveals, “we can more clearly see how ideology and everything that passes for knowledge in our society can affect our thinking about inequality and our personal identity in regard to class structure” (p. 6).

The object of study I am focusing on is portrayal of America’s working class within television sitcoms and, more specifically, how this particular class was framed in the show *All in the Family*. I believe this is an important show to analyze because, according to Melissa Williams it “reflected a drastic shift that developed in the way working class characters were portrayed on TV” (2009, p. 66). Throughout my research I discovered that *Family*’s framing of this socio-economic slice of America negatively represented this particular group and, through character representations, supported and facilitated the acceptance of working class stereotypes.

The majority of my data was collected from secondary sources, specifically scholarly articles, books, and magazine articles. I primarily used World Cat through the UW Library website, searching with key terms like ‘working class’, ‘television’, ‘sitcom’, ‘representation’, and ‘archie bunker’. The data I selected for analysis fit those parameters and were current pieces, written within the last 20 years. Both of the primary sources I used were videos, including footage from *All in the Family* episodes, from which I drew observations and recorded specific parts from their transcripts.

Because I primarily gathered and analyzed secondary sources, I synthesized my data by highlighting specific themes within those sources and looked for commonality throughout the collection at large. Steven Chaffee and Debra Lieberman explain, “the author has to devise a sequence that suits the content and decide which themes to highlight” (2001, p. 30).

Throughout my research it became clear that, prior to 1970, the representation of working class Americans on television were cliché and generalized. Changes within the sitcom’s portrayal of this particular class “coincided with a time of changing attitudes [in the country] and polices toward people living in poverty and the working poor” (Raine, 2011, p. 65). Joe Allen (2008), columnist for the publication *Socialist Worker*, regards *All in the Family* as “the show that most solidified the popular stereotype of the white working-class man,” which he characterizes, as “loveable buffoons, inevitable failures, and ranting bigots.” The latter has become synonymous with *Family*’s blue-collar protagonist Archie Bunker, a character “whose prejudices would be revealed as illogical and senseless;” a ridiculous figure who is also a “well-intentioned, loving husband and father who is simply too inept to succeed” (Butsch, 1992, p. 393). Perhaps the best summary of Archie Bunker’s character is that “[he] 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” (Raine, p. 65).

Social and political issues that had once been taboo in entertainment television were debated among the Bunker family, their friends, and neighbors (Williams, p. 60). Race, sexism, religion, drugs, taxation, and immigration – major social issues of the time (and presently) were all fair game. The relationship between Archie and his live-in, son-in-law, Mike, represented conflicting mentalities that were present in the 1970s; “Mike, who is explicably identified as Polish-American, represents the Baby Boomer generation of white ethnics, whose parents would have moved into the suburbs after World War II in an embrace of the American Dream’s promise of upward class mobility,” versus Archie’s ‘average working-class white man’ who was “uniformly ignorant and racist” (p. 63). In the episode where Mike and Archie meet for the first time, their conversation quickly progresses into clash of ideals as each expressed what they believed ‘America’ stood for:

**Mike:** What, are you saying America, love it or leave it?

**Archie:** That’s right, it’s a free country. So am-scray!

**Mike:** Well that would include me too, Mr. Bunker.

**Archie:** Then toodle-e-oo to you too.

**Mike:** Well, what would our leaving solve? I mean, with or without protests

this country would still have the same problems.

**Archie:** What problems?

**Mike:** Well the war, the racial problems, the economic problem, the pollution

problem.

**Archie:** Oh, come on! If you wanna nitpick…

**Mike**: Nitpick?! Let me tell you something, Mr. Bunker…

**Archie:** No, let me tell you something, Mr. Stivic! You are a meathead!

**Mike:** What did you call me?

**Archie:** A meathead, dead from the neck up. Meat! Head!

**Mike:** Oh, yeah, now I see what your idea of a free country is! You’re free to

say anything you want, but if anyone disagrees with you they’re either

thrown into jail or called a meathead, right!

**Archie:** That’s right ‘cause this is America, lan’ that I love!

**Mike:** Well I love it too, Mr. Bunker, and it’s because I do that I protest when

I think things are wrong.

**Archie:** Then stan’ beside her! An’ guide her! Through the night, wit’ the light

from above!

**Mike:** Listen to me! It’s in the Bill of Rights!

**Archie:** From the mountains.

**Mike:** Why do you think we broke away from England to begin with, huh?!

**Archie:** To the parries!

**Mike:** Because we didn’t agree with them! We demanded freedom!

**Archie:** To the oceans, white with foam!

**Mike:** See, it’s guys like you! Guys like you that won’t listen to reason! I

mean you won’t let us say anything! You’re totally closed minded!

**Archie:** God. Bless. America, you dumb Pollack!

**Mike:** You’re prejudice! You’re prejudice! You are prejudice! I’m leaving!

**Archie:** God bless America!

**Edith:** Archie!

**Archie:** Get away from me! [singing] My home, sweet, hoooome!

In another episode, after Mike has been agitating about civil rights once again, Archie replies “if your spics and your spades want their rightful share of the American dream, let ‘em get out there and hustle for it, like I done” (Seitz, 2011). In addition to his resistance to societal change, Archie Bunker’s frequent employment of racial slurs and derogatory terms only furthered his representation of working class citizens as racists and bigots. Joshua Ozersky (2003) noted, “once the novelty of dinner-table discussions of war and Watergate wore off, *All in the Family* came more and more to use topical issues merely as a springboard for character-driven humor” (p. 78).

My research has taken me from portrayals of socio-economic class in the United States to, specifically, the portrayal of the working class in the television sitcom *All in the Family*. My findings have revealed just how pivotal the Bunkers were, not only in representing the working class on TV but also, in framing the behavior and attitudes possessed by “typical” working class Americans. As mentioned in the film *Class Dismissed,* “blue collar shows have undeniably played a pivotal role in shaping our perceptions of working-class people.” Archie Bunker and *All in the Family* live on in popular culture, exemplifying why the representations of lower social classes in sitcoms are troublesome; they construct and reinforce generalizations and stereotypes about a group of people that continue to be the majority in our country.

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