WHO LET YOU IN HERE? SOCIAL CLASS, SITCOMS AND THE NEW NORMAL

Diana DePasquale

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Committee:
Dr. Ellen Berry, Advisor
Mr. Robert Sloane
ABSTRACT

Dr. Ellen Berry, Advisor

An example of social class stratification in sitcoms can be seen when a working-class character attempts to gain entry to an upper-class social environment, a formal dinner party, or an environment signified to read higher class - the opera, a museum, a fancy expensive restaurant - and they reveal their working-class status by their failure to assimilate. They use the wrong fork to eat the salad, they talk loudly in the audience during a performance, or, more frequently, they use visual and physical humor to convey how their bodies do not belong in the upper-class space. The working-class character’s clothes do not fit - a tuxedo too baggy or too tight - an awkward attempt to extend a pinky while sipping a cocktail, the adoption of a fancy walk, an affected accent to feign “breeding” or mispronunciation of a word to reveal a lack of “breeding”, or some other behavior that is supposed to inform the audience that this person is trying to fit in, but failing at doing so. The message is clear; some people just don’t belong and they should know their place. An example of this would be a restaurant maître d' who sneeringly informs the working-class character that a reservation is required, or jackets must be worn by gentlemen dining in the restaurant. In most sitcoms, there is an upper-class character who tries to maintain the segregation of the upper-class environment by denying access to the working-class character. It is worthy of mention that frequently this character is also working-class - the maître d' or another type of support staff character who gains access to an upper-class environment by serving the upper-class occupants. These characters are not actually included in the upper class, but they are allowed entry
to the environment as they help to enforce the boundaries which maintain the segregation between upper and working classes, thereby facilitating and maintaining hegemony. These working-class characters differ from the excluded working-class in that they recognize a rigid distinction between the classes and even though they are not officially included into working class, they are allowed adjacent access, as long as they observe and enforce the class boundaries. In doing so, they demonstrate to the upper-class that they are willing to exclude members of their own social class in order to be granted entry - if only as a servant - to an environment in which they do not belong. This character also interrupts the myth of the American Dream and social mobility by demonstrating to both upper and working-class characters that there are ways to circumvent class stratification, albeit in a voyeuristic way - by excluding other working-class characters from this environment. Is the audience laughing at the failure of working-class characters to move out of their social class and ascend to middle or upper class, or are they laughing at the semiotics of the boundaries that exclude working-class characters from being allowed entry into upper-class environments? Probably both, as the boundaries work to reify the ideology that class status on television is usually static, (with a few notable but problematic exceptions) and the working-class character, by failing to realize this, makes a fool of himself by attempting to become upwardly mobile and fails to do so.
To television, my faithful friend.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I started writing these acknowledgements as a way to put off the “real work” of writing the actual thesis. While doing so, I considered what a shame it would be if my failure to finish would prevent the acknowledgements from ever being seen. If they are being seen by you that means I have finished my thesis and let me say to you, dear reader; thank you for being here!

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WHO LET YOU IN HERE? AN INTRODUCTION

This project intervenes in the discourse of representations of social class mobility on American television sitcoms. My interest in this topic grew out of an idea I had over the summer of 2011 while taking Robert Sloane’s *Consumer Society* course at Bowling Green State University. A class discussion of Pierre Bourdieu’s work on consumerism evolved into a discussion of the significant ways in which cultural capital contributes to the hierarchy of social classes in the United States. We discussed exclusion and inclusion relating to individual tastes in entertainment, leisure, and environment. As my classmates and I asked for and offered reasons why and how class markers create a distinction about those who belong and those who do not for reasons related to social class stratification or the hierarchy of socioeconomic status in the United States, I began calculating how many times I had seen television situation comedy premises based on socioeconomic status used as a marker of inclusion and exclusion over several decades until I finally asked out loud, “So, why is this funny?”

I will be looking specifically at what I will call a narrative plot element. This element focuses on social class immobility - the failure to ascend your social class position - and I will provide multiple examples from sitcoms over the past sixty years. This plot element has been used repeatedly in American sitcoms, and is featured as the primary narrative in each of the episodes I closely read. What is of particular interest to me is the examination of how sitcoms work to reinforce ideas of social class stratification, the clearly delineated socioeconomic boundaries between lower, middle and upper classes, and achieving, or not achieving the American Dream; working-class characters attempt to transcend their social status - in other words, to become upwardly mobile - and fail to do so, thereby providing a comedic premise at which the audience laughs. For example, a working-class character applies for a white collar job
that would lift him or her out of the working-class into the middle-class. After much consternation and doubt, the working-class character - usually encouraged by friends and family - applies for, but is eventually denied the job. The working-class character then usually has a conversation with another working-class character, or sometimes just herself or himself (via a monologue) and decides he or she is better off just staying put.

Another example of this narrative plot can be seen when a working-class character attempts to gain entry to an upper-class social environment, a formal dinner party, or an environment signified to read higher class - the opera, a museum, a fancy expensive restaurant - and they reveal their working-class status by their failure to assimilate. They use the wrong fork to eat the salad, they talk loudly in the audience during a performance, or, more frequently, they use visual and physical humor to convey how their bodies do not belong in the upper-class space. The working-class character’s clothes do not fit - a tuxedo too baggy or too tight - an awkward attempt to extend a pinky while sipping a cocktail, the adoption of a fancy walk, an affected accent to feign “breeding” or mispronunciation of a word to reveal a lack of “breeding”, or some other behavior that is supposed to inform the audience that this person is trying to fit in, but failing at doing so. The message is clear; some people just don’t belong and they should know their place. The dominant point of view in these narrative plot elements support the interests of the upper class: there are workers (labor) and there are owners (capital) and the structures set up to demarcate and protect these distinctions must constantly be (re)produced and enforced.

Frequently used in these narrative plot elements is a gatekeeper character whose job it is to remind and enforce these social class boundaries. An example of this would be a restaurant maitre d' who sneeringly informs the working-class character that a reservation is required, or jackets must be worn by gentlemen dining in the restaurant. In most sitcoms, there is an upper-
class character who tries to maintain the segregation of the upper-class environment by denying access to the working-class character. It is worthy of mention that frequently this character is also working-class - the maître d' or another type of support staff character who gains access to an upper-class environment by serving the upper-class occupants. These characters are not actually included in the upper class, but they are allowed entry to the environment as they help to enforce the boundaries which maintain the segregation between upper and working classes, thereby facilitating and maintaining hegemony. These working-class characters differ from the excluded working-class in that they recognize a rigid distinction between the classes and even though they are not officially included into working class, they are allowed adjacent access, as long as they observe and enforce the class boundaries. In doing so, they demonstrate to the upper-class that they are willing to exclude members of their own social class in order to be granted entry - if only as a servant - to an environment in which they do not belong. This character also interrupts the myth of the American Dream and social mobility by demonstrating to both upper and working-class characters that there are ways to circumvent class stratification, albeit in a voyeuristic way - by excluding other working-class characters from this environment.

Is the audience laughing at the failure of working-class characters to move out of their social class and ascend to middle or upper class, or are they laughing at the semiotics of the boundaries that exclude working-class characters from being allowed entry into upper-class environments? Probably both, as the boundaries work to reify the ideology that class status on television is usually static, (with a few notable but problematic exceptions) and the working-class character, by failing to realize this, makes a fool of himself by attempting to become upwardly mobile and fails to do so. This narrative plot was even referenced by New York Times writer Jason DeParle in his January 2012 column on the mobility gap, “‘Movin’ on up,’ George
Jefferson-style, is not only a sitcom song but a civil religion” (DeParle). While DeParle may not be examining this narrative plot in the same way I am, he clearly acknowledges this narrative plot in the discourse of American social mobility, its expectations, and its limitations, on television as well as in real life.

I am adding to this discourse of the mediation of social class on sitcoms and argue that while the narrative plot element of a working-class character failing to elevate their social class has remained static for decades, this plot element has changed significantly in the past two years. I argue that a historical shift in American sitcoms has occurred since 2010, only a short time after the financial crises of 2008 and 2009. According to many television and humor theorists, upon whose scholarship I will construct a theoretical framework, the effectiveness (being funny, producing laughter) of a narrative plot element depicting working-class characters being excluded from upper-class environments, and therefore the ability to become socially mobile reveals the attitudes of its audience.

Therefore, if the use, direction, and effectiveness (being funny, producing laughter) of the narrative plot elements have changed, the audience must have changed as well. I argue: as culture changes, humor changes and that change is reflected in contemporary American sitcoms which no longer just depict social class boundaries and exclusion as the failure to ascend social class by an individual working-class character; sitcoms now lampoon the entire social class hierarchy with a very deliberate and self-aware cultural critique.

Do viewers think these sitcom depictions are clichés because of their verisimilitude or their absurdity? Perhaps it is a little bit of both, and trying to put a fine point on whether laughter stems from recognition of something familiar and comforting, rather than from something discomforting and foreign to us, is certainly worthy of examination but this thesis is more about
the change in the narrative plot elements of social class boundaries and the lack of social mobility depicted in sitcoms within the last two years immediately after the financial crises of 2008 and 2009.

Sitcom audiences have watched social class narratives on sitcoms over and over since the 1950s. But we have also watched lots of other sitcoms offer situations and premises that we don’t necessarily buy into: housewives as witches and genies, space aliens happily living with humans in cramped apartments, overweight, oafish husbands with sexy, smart, loving wives, and yet those comedic formulas do not necessarily instill a belief in a fantastical world of the supernatural, the extraterrestrial, or the deserving slob husband. Maybe they do a little, but not as much as the sitcom’s depiction of the hard boundaries established by social class in America and the implied lack of social mobility within the U.S.

While there is vast scholarship of social class stratification on British television sitcoms, Great Britain also has a rigidly defined class hierarchy and Britons speak openly about social class. So naturally, social class conflict and boundaries could be explored to produce “situations” ripe with comedic possibilities. But my interest, and the focus of this thesis, is in the use of sitcoms to illustrate the myth of the American Dream, and lack of social mobility within the U.S., a country without such a rigid and permanent class structure as in Great Britain, even though our chances for social class mobility seem roughly the same. Not only does the U.S. not have a formally established class structure as Great Britain does, but the myth of the American Dream claims to provide every American with the opportunity to move up in class.

My methodological framework for this thesis consists of textual analysis of several sitcom episodes, especially ones which feature a premise based on class conflict predicated on exclusion and inclusion of working-class characters trying to assimilate into middle or upper-

I found examples from each decade, and while I had to limit my examples because of the scope of this project, I feel the examples chosen are remarkable. The episodes chosen as research each feature a premise based on exclusion of a working-class character to a middle or upper-class environment or ascension into middle or upper-class position. The earlier episodes are included because they deal explicitly with these narrative plot elements, there are no subplots in these episodes, and the only situation that is resolved at the end of the episode is that the working-class character(s) remain working-class in a working-class environment. The episodes from the last two years have been chosen because they are remarkable in the way they directly critique social class hierarchy in America, the recent financial crises, and the public discourse surrounding income inequality in the U.S.

I have segmented the thesis into three parts: Chapter 1: “That Was Then,” Chapter 2: “As Culture Changes, Humor Changes,” and Chapter 3: “This Is Now,” In Chapter 1, I offer examples of an established pattern of sitcoms using these narrative plot elements - the depiction
of working-class characters being excluded from upper-class environments or ascending into a higher social class. In attempting to delve into the scholarship of media studies and audience reception of understanding and negotiating social class boundaries and limitations, this thesis uses previously established scholarship of Brett Mills, John Fiske and Michael V. Tueth to provide a theoretical framework to analyze the patterns which have emerged related to television sitcoms, social class, audience reception, and their implications.

In “Chapter 2: As Culture Changes, Humor Changes,” I offer ways in which representations of social class on sitcoms can be understood to create perceptions about class conflict within American culture and why that is significant in understanding American culture and relevant in the field of television studies. I use my readings of the texts in conjunction with secondary sources to understand how a sitcom’s production, the use of humor to alleviate frustration and struggle with the myth of individual opportunity, as well as audience reaction and reflexivity work together to reaffirm social class boundaries, and the limitations of upward mobility in this country. In doing so, this thesis will show the profound impact sitcoms have on American identity and the negotiation of social class identification and stratification within the U.S. Additionally, it will show that while there has been an established narrative plot element for over half a century, it has changed dramatically in the past two years due to a larger, cultural change affecting class consciousness of the American sitcom audience.

In Chapter 3, “This Is Now,” the concluding chapter, I elaborate on the significance of television to acculturate audiences with concepts of upward mobility and social class stratification within the U.S. by analyzing a variety of sitcoms from the past two years. I provide examples of a new trend in sitcoms which combine a working-class character -- although not a fool and not a hero -- and an upper-class character, a scoundrel occupying the same living and
working environments as well as the self-awareness they each possess of their class status.

Throughout the history of the sitcom this has only happened a handful of times; most notably *Gilligan’s Island* (1964 - 1967) and *Cheers* (1982-1993).

Chapter 3 also addresses the use of a far more self-aware and metanarrative format by contemporary sitcoms *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, *2 Broke Girls*, and *30 Rock* to critique class stratification within the U.S., and the opportunities, or lack thereof, for social mobility, and the discourse on class warfare during the current economic climate. The examples will show how the traditional comedic situation of a “fool” character being denied access to an environment beyond his social class to a “scoundrel” character occupying an environment “beneath” his social class is far more critical in contemporary sitcoms than in previous depictions. In only a few years since the economic collapse in September 2008, several new scoundrels have popped up on sitcoms, and they’re being presented as misunderstood and lovable, despite the fact that they are filthy rich, and quite often unethical. Is it merely a coincidence that in the past few years political candidates are urging us to refer to the wealthiest individuals as “job creators” and not just as “rich people?” If the wealthiest Americans are looking for a re-branding of their image then there are a few new sitcoms which seem willing to step up to the challenge.

I still feel a little queasy when telling someone my research interests are the study of comedy and humor in American culture; analyzing what makes something funny can be anything but fun. Quite often, it is frustrating and seems like my soul is being sucked directly out of my funny bone. Don’t believe me? Try explaining a joke to someone who tells you, “I don’t get it.” The effort made seems tedious and esoteric. Trying to get at the subjectivity of what makes people laugh is tricky, there are assumptions that could easily be made about individuals as well as systems of power and influence. Additionally, overcoming the perception of comedy studies
in academia is challenging. Drama, because it “matters”, is seen as an effective art form capable of critiquing social issues. Many scholars have pointed out the effectiveness of satire as a catalyst for social change. Philosophers and scholars have written on the use of satire, and its critique of the dominant culture. Television sitcoms however, are perceived to be less effective when critiquing social issues. In fact, this thesis uses previous scholarship in television studies to analyze the ways in which successful sitcoms work to maintain the status quo.
THAT WAS THEN

In order to provide a foundation on which my thesis rests I use previous scholarship by Michael V. Tueth, Jonathan Fiske, Jason Mittell and Brett Mills, all of whom are media scholars who have published extensively in the field of television studies and American culture. Television was introduced to a mass American audience in the early 1950s and the bulk of programming was comedy, either sitcoms or variety shows. To provide a historical context for understanding the cultural impact television has made, and is expected to make on American culture, I am using as secondary sources: Harry Skornia’s, *Television and Society: An inquest and agenda for improvement* (1965), and George Lipsitz’s “The Meaning of Memory: Family, Class, and Ethnicity in Early Network Television Programs” (1986) Richard Butsch’s "Five decades and three hundred sitcoms about class and gender” (2005) and T.W. Adorno’s essay, “How to Look at Television” (1954). By providing a range of historical and theoretical perspectives, this thesis will consider a range of approaches within the field of television studies and cultural studies.

According to Michael V. Tueth, author of *Laughter in the Living Room: Television Comedy and the American Home Audience*, “Comedy on television, for instance, to be fully understood, deserves to be studied in the context of American social, religious and literary traditions. Each of these elements has helped to create the distinct atmosphere that the comic writer or performer attempts to enter” (Tueth 1). Describing television’s categorization as a “fun house mirror” of culture, Tueth argues that comedy is an art form that is unique from other art forms in “its need to verify its effect with the unmistakable response of laughter” (Tueth 1). It has been demonstrated by Tueth that the viewing audience certifies television comedy’s success by responding as expected, with laughter.
Jason Mittell supports Tueth’s analogy of television as a funhouse mirror in *Television and American Culture*, stating, “Television does not reflect as much refract the world, altering its appearance through its particular techniques and forms of conveying meaning” (Mittell 270). Mittell explains further that this process of representation alters the meanings of the real world simply by televising them. John Fiske offers insight into the sitcom audience’s reception of how subjectivity, class consciousness, and socialized learning of visual texts create meaning and significance to audiences and how their negotiation of sitcom messages about social class immobility can be understood. Fiske writes in *Television Culture* (2011) that, “Not all television viewers read television programs according to the textual strategies encoded in them” (Fiske 2011 p. 45). This statement rests on an assumption of the viewer’s relationship between individualism and subjectivity. Fiske continues:

A piece of discourse is not only uttered or received by the subjectivity but also produces it. Our subjectivity is the site of the sense that we make when we are speaking or listening but the sense that we make is not only a sense of the text or discourse, but is also a sense of our self, of our subjectivity itself...this separation of the subject from the individual allows us to understand why members of the working-class can understand themselves and their social experience in ways that serve the interests of the middle classes (Fiske 2011 p. 49-50).

But how do either of these factors implicate the audience in the reification of social class stratification within the U.S.? Fiske’s work implicates the audience in acting against its own self-interests and by supporting the idea that social class is static and individuals should accept the social class position in which they are born, audiences are tacitly (and maybe not so tacitly) supporting and facilitating hegemony. Much of what Brett Mills’ *Television Sitcom* (2005) does is question why so many people assume the form and content of the sitcom are known and immediately understood. Their understanding, argues Mills, rests on a set of assumptions about the simplicity and unimportance of the sitcom narrative. Mills explains that these assumptions
are formed from a dearth of academic examination of the sitcom as a genre and points out that previous theorists have commented on this as well, citing Jonathan Bignell, author of *An Introduction to Television Studies*, “Theorists of television genre have found it very difficult to establish clearly how television comedy programmes, especially sitcoms, work” (Mills 2).

Mills, however, does go further than previous theorists and provides a multivalent perspective on why television and media scholars have ignored sitcoms—their research tends to focus on drama and documentaries. Mills asserts that scholars avoid sitcoms because they are primarily, and often only, understood as entertainment. While Mills does admit that there has been scholarly work done in television studies surrounding genres of soap opera and news, he points out that in terms of genre, the sitcom falls under the rather large and generic category of comedy. Meanwhile, “drama, news and documentary aren’t similarly grouped under what Mills describes as ‘seriousness.’” Mills also addresses the comparison of scholarly work in film studies and comedy but points out that the sitcom cannot be situated comfortably within the parameters of film analysis which has traditionally looked at cinema within a framework of psychoanalytic theory. What is apparent, Mills concludes, is that the sitcom has been overlooked and that the causes of this could be many: a belief that the sitcom is simple and already understood; the belief that, as a comedic form, it has little to ‘say’ about social concerns and the cultures it entertains; the belief that the examination of more “serious” forms is more pressing; the belief that it’s ‘only sitcom’ (Mills 3).

Furthermore, Mills contends that these beliefs are not simply held by television and media studies scholars, but that they are held by members of the television production industry as well as the viewing audience. The social position of the sitcom then, contributes to the way audiences make sense of the meanings and signifiers within the sitcoms. Additionally, Mills compares the ratings success of sitcoms in the U.S. with the U.K., where soap operas have consistently outperformed sitcoms in the ratings. Mills attributes this to cultural identity and
offers insight from Mark Thompson, Director General of the BBC, “[who] has stated that the Corporation should invest more time and effort in comedy, because it builds genuine public value’ and plays a critical part in reflecting our national culture and the way we live now” (Mills 5). Thompson’s comment is offered by Mills to strengthen his argument that sitcoms have a much larger and more profound impact on culture and are used by the industry to create sites of identification to which an audience can relate.

For example, Mills uses the case of NBC’s Thursday night lineup, or “Must See TV”. By filling an entire night of sitcoms-including varied and disparate narrative structures using different technical elements and styles -NBC sought to create a relationship with “younger urban audiences.” This formula was then copied by other networks to create targeted core audiences with their sitcom offerings. UPN offered sitcoms featuring young, urban, upwardly mobile African-Americans: The Parkers (1999-2004), Girlfriends (2000-2006), and The Hughleys (2000-2002) . FOX offered sitcoms which featured “trashier” themes: Married with Children (1987-1997), Babes (1990-1991, Down the Shore (1992-1993). This targeted approach to sitcom development and audience reception, according to Mills, “can be investigated as an industrial tool for cohering specific audience groups, with the implication that such groups find similar things funny, and have similar responses to particular character types” (Mills 5). More importantly, in order for the comedy to work, the characters must be an “immediately recognizable type, a representative embodiment of a set of ideas or a manifestation of a cliché” (Mills 7).

It is precisely that immediacy and the reliance on the audience’s recognition of character types that some would argue makes comedy easier to pull off, and its effectiveness rather simple; the audience sees a buffoon character, it reacts with laughter. This cannot be argued convincingly
however, as the area of humor theory is an emerging discipline and still has much to offer to topics related to audience reaction and the subjectivity of humor. Some scholars have analyzed joke structure, others have examined how the joke teller relates to an audience, but few have looked at sitcoms in the way Mills proposes. In fact, Mills argues, “It does seem perverse to explore sitcom without making some sense of the ways in which the comedy within it works” (Mills 8). To examine sitcom as a genre, the production and reception must be examined, but the way the sitcom utilizes comedy and makes it work (by producing laughter) should also be considered as Tueth argues, “Acknowledging the era and location in which television debuted -- post WWII America -- is crucial to understanding the audience reception of , and reaction to television.

Capitalism, hegemony, national cohesion and identity imbricated the production and reception of the earliest television comedy delivered to a mass audience in the U.S. If we take Tueth’s advice and look at sitcoms created in a time of unprecedented economic prosperity and nationalism, a unified dominant culture (on television) emerges. Also consider that this emerging dominant culture is resolute in its commitment to re-purpose military technology to create dream homes with every available modern convenience, including a television set. These earliest sitcoms were created at a time when they served other purposes than simply entertaining a television audience. Sitcoms also provided models of American identity, lifestyles to emulate, and opportunities for consumer spending. These sitcoms invited (or urged) viewers to quickly forfeit their ethnic identity and “become” American. Implied in that message was the understanding that American identity was synonymous with white, heteronormative, and situated comfortably within the middle class. *The Honeymooners, Hazel,* and *Laverne & Shirley* use the embarrassment and humiliation of working-class characters to establish a boundary between
them and the environment, and subsequently, social class, which they desperately aspire to ascend.

Much like the 1950s shifting its value to “the mental worker, the middle class” as David Grote argues in *The End of Comedy: The Sit-Com and the Comedic Tradition*, this new shift depicts the rich as successful but misunderstood overachievers, deserving of our sympathy. Additionally, this shift is giving us representations of social mobility; however, it is downward mobility, something usually not examined on television or in public discourse surrounding social class in the U.S. Richard Butsch writes in his essay, "Five decades and three hundred sitcoms about class and gender” that television has used a stereotype of an inferior lower class character since the medium was introduced on a mass scale to post-War America, “Television sitcoms have continued the tradition of representing lower status groups as inferior...this dramatic mechanism has been a central part of television sitcoms throughout the form's history” (Edgerton and Rose 112). Prior to the advent of television however, the working-class and manual laborers were represented as strong, proud and patriotic. Somewhere between the Depression and the early 1950s, a cultural shift occurred that began casting the working-class as buffoons. This began in the early 1950s with characters like Ralph Kramden and continues into the present day with characters such as *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*’s Charlie Kelly, who is frequently depicted as illiterate, and whose co-workers habitually humiliate him by referring to the work Charlie performs around Paddy’s Pub -- killing rats and fixing toilets -- as “Charlie work.”

As we look at other historical shifts from the 1930s to the 1950s, it is not hard to conclude that strong working-class figures associated with the labor movement, socialism and strides in a more egalitarian society made in the 1930s were found to be distasteful and even threatening in the 1950s.
Butsch continues in his essay, “the sitcoms' predominance on prime-time television throughout its history and their consequent share of the television audience over this history mean that they are preeminent examples of dominant culture, steadily presented to the largest population over the longest time. Pervasive and persistent images crystallize as cultural types” (Edgerton and Rose 113). If this is true then it prompts the question of how television makes meaning. Is it merely by repetition of a formulaic premise or situation, or does it make a formulaic premise or situation seem normal? If there is a difference between the two, how do audiences perceive the difference?

Throughout the history of the sitcom characters occupying different social class positions co-existing together has only happened a handful of times; most notably Gilligan’s Island (1964-1967) and Cheers (1982-1993). The inhabitants of Gilligan’s Island were shipwrecked, the premised based on catastrophe and thereby forcing the occupants of varying social class positions to interact with each other on an uncharted desert isle. According to the series theme song the seven stranded castaways will, “Have to make the best of things, it’s an uphill climb.” Cheers also depicted characters of various social class positions interacting; however, the series’ episodes are set in a bar, either a place of employment for the working-class characters or a place of leisure and entertainment to the upper-class characters. Cheers does include some variation as the upper-class character Diane Chambers is a cocktail waitress, however, many jokes are made at her expense as she is characterized as an over-educated snob. Additionally, at no time during the run of Cheers do any of the other working-class characters transcend to any position other than working class.

The narrative plot of social class, and the signifying practices of inclusion and exclusion between working-class and upper-class characters has existed on television sitcoms for at least
sixty years. It has already been established by previous television and media scholars that the earliest sitcoms originally began as radio programs and made the transition to television in the late 1940s. By the 1950s these types of programs had disappeared from radio but would remain a television programming staple for the next sixty years. Sitcoms have consistently been dominant in the ratings since the late 1950s with the exception of a few westerns. Let me provide examples of a few early sitcoms that went from radio to television.

Probably the most successful sitcom that went from radio to television is *The Goldbergs* (1929, originally titled, *The Rise of the Goldbergs*). Produced by NBC radio, this series was a dialect comedy of a working-class Jewish family living in the Bronx. Like other radio programming, much of the humor relied upon the use of accents and dialects to differentiate ethnicities, class, and race. Both sitcoms and variety programs (sketch comedy, comedic monologues and songs) used stereotypes to create humorous situations of attempts by immigrants to assimilate into American society, class boundaries (hillbillies and aristocrats), or racial inferiority. Produced by Gertrude Berg, *The Goldbergs* consistently used the Eastern European dialects of its characters to illustrate the differences in language, culture, tradition and identity between the older family members and the younger, American born family members. The series ran on television from 1949 to 1954.

Another successful sitcom, *Amos ‘n’ Andy*, debuted on radio in 1928. Adapted for television, it premiered in 1951, and used racial stereotypes and dialect for humor. The NAACP succeeded in its efforts to get CBS to cancel the series in 1953. It is important to note however, that at the time of its cancellation, *Amos ‘n’ Andy* was a commercial success, enjoying “bankable Nielsen ratings” (Dalton and Linder, 17).
Amos 'n' Andy and The Goldbergs are two examples of television’s earliest successful sitcoms, but there are many more that employ similar types of narratives: I Remember Mama (1949-1957), Beulah (1950-1952), Life With Luigi (1952-1953), and The Honeymooners (1955-1956). These earliest sitcoms were predicated on exploiting difference, assimilation and superiority and featured working-class characters. After the initial wave of sitcoms featuring dialect humor, the immigrant experience, or the working class, sitcoms started featuring suburban families already situated within the middle class: Leave it to Beaver (1957-1963), The Donna Reed Show (1958-1966), Father Knows Best (1954-1960) and The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet (1952-1966).

Over the years, there have been a few noteworthy exceptions that feature narratives about achieving the American Dream through social class mobility on sitcoms: The Beverly Hillbillies (1962-1971), Roseanne (1988-1997), and The Jeffersons (1975-1985). While all of these shows include families of working-class status, the Clampetts are farmers, The Jeffersons are dry cleaners, and the Conners are employed in a variety of blue collar professions: construction contractor, factory worker, waitress, motorcycle repair, and a variety of other service and labor occupations, each family’s social status is changed as a result of luck and by a number of job promotions or shrewd entrepreneurial venture. The Clampetts discover oil on their land, and the Conners win a $108 million lottery jackpot. In The Beverly Hillbillies, we are introduced to the Clampetts after they have already struck it rich. The show’s theme song includes, “the first thing you know ol’ Jed's a millionaire, kinfolk said Jed move away from there, they said Californy is the place you ought to be, So they loaded up the truck and moved to Beverly” (The Beverly Hillbillies 1962). In a reverse of the narrative plot of exclusion of working-class from upper-class environments, Jed Clampett’s relatives advise him to move to California as the family’s
new-found oil wealth presents him with an opportunity to “move away from there.” In fact, Clampett’s relatives acknowledge that he no longer belongs with them, in poverty, since according to the show’s theme, Jed, “barely kept his family fed.” In most of the series’ episodes, Granny, Jethro, Jed and Ellie May are depicted as backwoods rubes. The swimming pool is referred to as a cement pond, and the family continues to wear the clothing from back home: Jethro’s belt is a length of rope, Jed’s hat is tattered and worn. Granny cooks squirrel and possum stew much to the chagrin of Mr. Drysdale, the family’s banker who only seems to tolerate the Clampetts because of their substantial wealth, which he now manages.

Likewise, the Conner family strike it rich by winning the lottery after tumultuous financial conditions over nine seasons. The characters on *Roseanne*, including, but not limited to the Conner family, endure a multitude of financial setbacks: job loss, layoffs, unemployment, and bankruptcy. The lottery plot line in the last of nine seasons seems forced and hopelessly desperate.

Only George and Louise Jefferson, by starting a small business and succeeding, seem to have made it by hard work. However, when we are first introduced to the Jeffersons, they are already situated within the middle class and are rapidly ascending into upper class. As neighbors of Edith and Archie Bunker on *All in the Family*, we are introduced to George and Louise Jefferson as the owners of Jefferson Cleaners, a successful chain of dry cleaning stores. As *The Jeffersons* open more and more locations, George decides to move them from Queens to Manhattan. And yet, a recurring theme of *The Jeffersons* is George’s inability to assimilate into his new environment, a penthouse apartment with a doorman and a live-in maid. Frequently George is given the opportunity to poke fun at stuffy Manhattanites at posh dinner parties, and in
almost every scene he comically punctuates his difference from the rest of the crowd by puffing out his chest, strutting over to someone and calling them a “honky.”

George might not be as humiliated as other series’ working-class characters at the failure to successfully mingle with the upper class, but the upper-class don’t accept him either. Many of the jokes seem to center on George being too “ghetto” for this new environment filled with WASPS. When pressured to fit in, he breaks out into James-Brown-style dance moves to wild applause from the studio audience. Even Florence, his live-in maid, doesn’t acknowledge the class difference between her and George. Despite George’s wealth and success, she and George often argue about her failure to clean the apartment or her attitude, and she openly criticizes George, insulting his short stature or many of his other personal flaws. If George had truly assimilated into upper-class and was accepted into this environment would Florence speak to her employer with such open disrespect? She doesn’t speak that way to any of the other characters on the show. But much of the problematic narrative plot elements in *The Jeffersons* episodes deal with both race as well as class. While *The Jeffersons* definitely aligns with the narrative plot element I deal with in this thesis, a working-class character excluded from an upper-class environment-*The Jeffersons*’ problematic themes should be examined within a framework of the intersectionality of class and race, something beyond the scope of this project.

Historically, it has been the practice of U.S. network television production executives to create reliable, commercially viable programming to ensure advertising revenue thus ensuring the return on investment in the product. Analyzing the decade-old trend of pilfering international reality TV programming such as *Big Brother* and *American Idol*, Gary R. Edgerton and Brian G. Rose point out in *Thinking Outside the Box*, “the eagerness with which U.S. programmers looked abroad during the last few years may be a new trend, but in many ways it stems from the same
spirit [and anxiety] that has always led networks to search for some novel aspect of formula
production to exploit or in most cases rework and cycle” (Edgerton and Rose 6). The perpetual
awareness of television producers to create content that ensures, “the equilibrium of the
situation” also reduces discomfort or disruption of the status quo to the sitcom audience.
Television sitcoms though, according to David Grote, deviate from ancient comedy in the way it
is used to reaffirm dominant culture and suppress any progress towards social change. According
to Grote, comedy’s “most common weapon is ridicule...there is no doubt, that over the centuries,
comedy has used humor as the bludgeon with which to assault the rigid, authoritarian and
hypocritical aspects of public society” (Grote 30-31).

TELEVISION: THE NEW FAMILY HEARTH

In Make Room for TV, Lynn Spigel writes, “In the span of roughly four years [1951 -
1955], television itself became the central figure in images of the American home; it became the
cultural symbol of par excellence of family life” (Spigel 38-39). While television had only just
emerged, its potential as a medium with the power to influence and acculturate its audience was
already introduced by T.W. Adorno, cultural theorist and critic of the culture industry. Writing in
1954, Adorno suggested, “The potential effect of television -- its impact upon various layers of
the spectator's personality -- could be studied...the public at large may be sensitized to the
nefarious effect of some of these mechanisms.” (Adorno 218). His essay, “How to Look at
Television” critiques the cultural industrial practices in the production of, and audience reception
to, television.

Using Adorno’s critique as a jumping off points to examine some of those “nefarious
effects” as they relate to the depiction on American sitcoms of social class and the lack of social

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1 Used by Lynn Spigel in Make Room for TV
mobility within the U.S. this thesis examines what might the repeated use of seeing this comedic formula employed on sitcoms have on the American television audience

In his essay, "Five decades and three hundred sitcoms about class and gender” Richard Butsch writes:

Innumerable studies have focused on the text of a single television show. Almost none have examined the pattern of images across many series and over several seasons, what we might call the historical tapestry of television culture. Analysis across many shows and many years can reveal persistent and pervasive images. It also enables us to discover important contrasts that otherwise would not be noticeable. (Butsch 114).

In 1964 Harry Skornia wrote Television and Society: An inquest and agenda for improvement. Included in his critique was data from a U.S. Bureau of the Census study, “TV SETS IN UNITED STATES HOUSEHOLDS”, conducted in May 1964. According to the data, of the 56.2 million households in the U.S., 92.8%, or 52.1 million households had a TV set. These figures are included in Skornia’s chapter, “The Hidden Economics of Broadcasting” in which he argues that despite the widely held belief television is free, it is in fact a substantial investment by the consumer. Unlike print media, television requires the purchase of equipment, the added costs of electricity, not to mention the repair and maintenance of your set. Skornia’s larger argument is that the perception of television being free is embraced by the industry. Unlike Great Britain, we do not require consumers to purchase a television license and our programming is not created by government. Not only due to the investment in equipment but because the advertisers, sponsors, and producers of content have a clearly defined goal in mind, “By giving the public the impression that television’s costs are paid by advertisers rather then by viewers, broadcasters hope to create a passive audience” (Skornia 89-90). This creates a reciprocal expectation between American audiences and the producers of television programming. An
American television viewer, in exchange for free content, understands that they have little say in the way of industry practices.

**TELEVISION AS SOCIAL EDUCATION**

In Sonia Livingstone’s *Making Sense of Television: The Psychology of audience interpretation*, she discusses social learning theory and effects-research with television audiences. Livingstone argues that an effects-research approach is problematic for many reasons: historical effects-research experiments approached via a theoretical framework of social learning theory are outdated, the approach is myopic; the testing environments artificial. Traditionally, effects-research experiments have primarily focused on specific target groups alongside specific “problems”, compiling data on: children and violent programming, men and imagery of violence against women, and children and gender stereotype programming. Both John Fiske and Livingstone further argues that social learning theory has adapted to understand ways an audience cognitively understands television programming by including contexts of narrative and genre, variables absent from previous effects-research experiments.

For example, a child is shown a violent clip from a cartoon, and is then given a doll. The child may interact with the doll violently emulating what he/she has just seen on screen, but if shown an entire episode in which a heroic character uses violence to solve a conflict or to defend someone who cannot defend themselves the child is apt to take into consideration the entirety of the narrative. Livingstone also points out that effects-research studies have traditionally been carried out in labs, “non- natural viewing conditions” (Livingstone 16) isolating the individual. The social learning theory approach is further complicated by the distinction between literal and symbolic meaning and understanding of television programming by its audience.
The proliferation of comedic images surrounding exclusion and inclusion, and class stratification have existed far longer than the scope of this thesis is designed to examine; however, consider the impact of television sitcoms on each generation since the early 1950s. The message to the sitcom audience has been repeated over and over, reifying an understanding among all classes within the U.S. that some people belong in a particular class and others do not. It would be easy to make an assumption about how this socialization would benefit the upper classes in the U.S., but as Fiske points out, the working-class sitcom audience acquiesces to the hegemonic standards and expectations with which they are presented.

This thesis also uses established scholarship in humor theory (Mulkay, Lewis, Thomas and Callahan) to explore reasons why humor works or doesn't and why it is so frequently used to alleviate discomfort with subjects or try and make sense of the repeated use of the depiction of social class boundaries and lack of social mobility in the U.S. Many authors have already examined the use of comedy and humor as a society’s collective coping mechanism, a way to alleviate stress or tension surrounding particularly uncomfortable or painful social issues. If American sitcom audiences have understood and made sense of this narrative plot element as a way of coping, it appears that this strategy is wearing thin.

The contemporary sitcoms examined in Chapter 3 may be television’s “new normal” (to borrow the Wall Street phrase for the present and possibly future economy), as it relates to the depiction of social class immobility and the frustration of income inequality in the U.S. on television as it relates to the depiction of social class immobility and the frustration of income inequality in the U.S. on television. Based on textual analysis of contemporary programs, it is apparent that the narrative plot elements have changed. I argue that this historical shift is due to a larger cultural shift surrounding attitudes of class, income, wealth and opportunity. I argue this
shift is concurrent with the trend in political discourse to mask the wealth gap in the U.S. by putting a sympathetic face on the wealthy (job creators) and is another historical shift in the depiction of social class conflict and stratification in sitcoms.
HITTIN’ THAT HIGH NOTE

While I cannot provide textual analysis of each and every sitcom episode which employs this type of narrative plot element depicting a working class character attempting to elevate his/her social class position and failing to do so, I have chosen sitcom episodes from different decades, but as you will see, the script (as dialogue) didn’t evolve much for the first thirty years of sitcom programming. My choices for textual analysis also consider the show’s popularity (then and now) or sentimental value, longevity of production (number of seasons), and nostalgic significance or canonical place in sitcom studies. I have also tried to choose series with varied representations of gender, location (urban, suburban and somewhere in between), and the dynamics of the characters’ relationship to one another (spouses, employee-employer, friends and roommates). All the lead characters in each series are working class, and remain so throughout the entirety of the series run.

The first textual analysis is of “Young Man with a Horn”, episode 26 from The Honeymooners’ first season, which first aired on March 24, 1956. In this episode, and in many other episodes from the series, Ralph Kramden is presented with an opportunity to change his present economic circumstance, thereby allowing him and his wife Alice to move out of their bleak apartment in Brooklyn. In this example, he is encouraged to apply for a civil service job as Senior Clerk in the Transit Authority. Ralph’s current position as a city bus driver isn’t mentioned in this episode, but it is frequently mentioned in other episodes of the series. In fact, throughout the run of the series Ralph usually wears his bus driver uniform during each entire episode.

Ed Norton enters the Kramden apartment.
ED: Hey there Ralphie Boy!

RALPH: I thought you were gonna meet me this afternoon and have lunch with me?

ED: Oh, I couldn’t make it Ralph, I’m sorry. I had to be down there at City Hall to fill out an application so I could take one of them civil service examinations for a new job.


ED: I know, I know, I know, you’re like a lot of people. They all say to me, you got a very good job in the sewer. They think just because my job is unusual ya know, its glamorous and exciting. Well it ain’t true, Ask any sewer worker, all that glitters is not gold.

RALPH: What kind of a job are you trying out for?

ED: Sewer Inspector. (Big laugh from audience)

RALPH: Well, good luck.

ED: Good luck, I’m gonna need it. While I was down there, I noticed there was a lot of civil service jobs open, and there was one in particular that would fit you to a tee, just right in your alley, Senior Clerk in Transit Authority.

RALPH: Transit authority?

ED: Certainly!

ED: Look, I brought an application here so you could fill it out. Good pay, easy hours, steady advancement, in no time you could be boss of the whole company!

RALPH: Nah they probably want a businessman you know a guy that can run an
organization.

ED: You could try it couldn’t ya?

RALPH: What’s the sense of tryin’, I wouldn’t make it.

This exchange between Ralph and Ed set up the plot of the episode, but if the episode concluded here, there wouldn’t be any conflict and there wouldn’t be any opportunity for the characters to raise the stakes in risk or tension. The narrative of Ralph’s opportunities and lack of ambition is used for comedic effect further by the visit of Mr. Gunther, an elderly gentleman who used to live in the Kramden’s apartment, and Alice’s attempt to throw out Ralph’s cornet. Ralph balks, and tells Alice:

RALPH: You’re not throwing out my cornet are ya?!

ALICE: Why not, you never play it anymore, it’s just gathering dust.

RALPH: What’s that got to do with it. There’s a lot of tender memories attached to that cornet. My father gave it to me, I grew up with it, it’s part of my youth.

ALICE: Oh Ralph, you act as if I was throwing out your pool cue.

RALPH: I don’t care Alice, I wanna keep it.

ALICE: Will you be sensible Ralph, you don’t play it anymore.

RALPH: That’s got nothing to do with it, I wanna keep it!

ALICE: Allright Ralph, but you haven’t touched it in years.

RALPH: I wanna keep it.

Ralph then attempts to play the cornet with great comedic aplomb. As Kramden contorts his face and Alice and Ed mock him. Kramden manages to squeak out a few notes, but he fails to
play a tune. As Ralph admonishes himself for his poor playing, the cornet transforms into a metaphor for Ralph’s ambition and desire to succeed at something. He tells Alice that he made a big mistake by not pursuing cornet lessons; he tells Alice he could have become a famous musician with his own orchestra like Harry James, “That’s the story of my life, I could never hit the high note on anything I tried” (*The Honeymooners*). He also claims he could have become an architect and built the Empire State building if he had accepted his uncle’s offer to, “make me an architect” (*The Honeymooners*). Suddenly there is a knock at the apartment door. The Gunthers, an elderly couple and former occupants of the apartment, want to look around the old place. Gunther is in fact August Gunther, famous founder of Gunther’s Donuts. “Are you that guy? They’re my favorite donuts, I eat them all the time” Kramden exclaims, and asks Gunther what he feels were the secrets to his success. Gunther explains to Kramden that he made a list of his strengths and weaknesses and decided to never let an opportunity pass him by.

Adorno, quoting David Reisman’s *The Lonely Crowd* argues that a cultural and generational shift in the U.S. caused large groups of people to become “other directed” who had been previously been “inner directed”. Perceptions of authority changed from an individual internalized expectation and perception to an external source of authority and validation. This is evidenced by Ralph’s sudden decision to become a success after speaking with Mr. Gunther. After the Gunthers leave, Ralph begins to pace the floor. He tells Alice:

RALPH: Alice, I am gonna be a success!

ALICE: (Surprised) You are?

RALPH: I know I said it before, but this time I really mean it. Now I know why I haven’t been a success up til now. Now I know! That Mr. Gunther opened my eyes. It’s my fault
I haven’t been a success. My fault, but things are gonna be different from here on in.

Much different.

RALPH: I’m going after success. I’m not gonna wait til it hits me, I’m gonna go out and grab it. This application that Norton brought in, that job - that job as Senior Clerk - that’s me. I’m gonna take this that job, and I’m gonna pass this test. And I’m goin up, I’m gonna work hard and I’m goin’ up, up, up, up. I’m gonna hit that high note Alice.

RALPH: (Grabs the cornet and begins to play and doesn’t hit the high note. The audience reacts to his failure with a big laugh.)

The following scene begins with Ralph at the kitchen table listing his strengths and weaknesses. Ed Norton enters the apartment and despite Ralph’s instructions not to be disturbed, Ed moves about the apartment making noise and distracting Ralph from his goals.

Ed loudly plays the cornet in Ralph’s ear. Kramden explodes:

RALPH: COME ON! (Huge applause break from the audience).

RALPH: This is pretty important to me, this time Norton. I don’t wanna fail, I wanna make a success of myself, I wanna hit that high note.

The comedy of this scene is derived from keeping Kramden from achieving his goal. The audience reacts with laughter and applause when Kramden is shown as failing, not succeeding. The assumption should not be made that this particular audience has a cruel streak. Rather, they are complicit in reaffirming Kramden’s appropriate environment: situated permanently within the working class.
In the episode’s final scene, Ed tells Ralph the results of the civil service exam. Neither he or Ralph passed the exam.

RALPH: I didn’t pass the test, huh? Failed again.

ED: (Crying) I guess you and me is just a couple of hangnails on the fickle finger of fate.

(Norton leaves)

RALPH: What a mook I am...I’m gonna be a success, I’m not gonna be a failure anymore. Boy that’s a laugh.

The episode ends with Alice telling Ralph that just because he failed the test this time, doesn’t mean he “won’t pass it the next time, and the next time and the next time.” Their kiss ends the scene.

The earliest text I analyzed, “Young Man With a Horn,” provides several opportunities to closely read the text for implications of social class, inclusion and exclusion and individual opportunity. Initially, Kramden rejects the possibility of being hired for the position of Senior Clerk because he is certain the Transit Authority wants a businessman already familiar with running an organization. It is Kramden’s own self-fulfilling prophecy; he won’t get the job because he’s never had the job. While at first he seems to accept this limitation, it is only after meeting the apartment’s previous occupant, Mr. Gunther, that he is inspired to apply for the Senior Clerk job. As Kramden explains to his wife (and the audience) his failure to be successful is entirely his own fault. He describes his inability to follow through with previous goals and places the blame squarely at his own feet. Vowing to Alice that those days are over, he commits himself to becoming a success, to hitting that high note. What happens in the episode between
this declaration and the revelatory final scene where both Kramden and the audience learn that he, has in fact, not succeeded, are the funny bits. The audience’s most raucous reactions come as a result of Norton’s accidental sabotage of Kramden’s attempts at studying for the exam. In the final scene it is Alice’s reminder to Ralph to never give up trying to succeed that distracts him from blaming himself, albeit until the next episode when he’ll give success another shot. And therein lies the rub -- and quite a few might say the magical comedic formula of *The Honeymooners* and especially Jackie Gleason’s portrayal of Ralph Kramden -- the continued attempts by Ralph to achieve upward social mobility despite never having succeeded before or after. While the character of Ralph Kramden could be superficially interpreted as an eternal optimist bent on providing a better life for himself and Alice, Gleason’s performance of Kramden -undeniably nuanced and sophisticated - offers us the sitcom’s working-class male prototype.

**THE ART OF CONCEALING THEIR DISTASTE**

The second text, “Hazel’s Cousin” Season 2, Episode 1, aired on September 20, 1962. *Hazel* starred Shirley Booth, the show’s main character and namesake. *Hazel* originated in a comic strip featured in the *Saturday Evening Post* and debuted as a television series in 1961. Hazel was a live-in maid to the Baxter family, an affluent suburban family; Mr. Baxter is a lawyer; Mrs. Baxter is an interior decorator. They have a young son, Harold. Many of the plots involve Hazel’s interactions with the family and neighbors with Hazel frequently taking charge of a neighborhood project or meddling in someone else’s affairs. Mr. Baxter (Mr. B.) often chides Hazel for this, sometimes Hazel is remorseful, sometime she and Mr. B. argue, and Hazel gets the upper hand. For a maid, Hazel seems to have a great deal of autonomy in the Baxter household, and in many ways, this is used to cultivate the idea that she is in fact, part of the
Baxter family. In the episode “Hazel’s Cousin” Susie, Hazel’s favorite cousin, is about to be married; her fiancé is definitely upper class, described as an ancestor of one of the country’s founding families. The wedding is also described as “the social event of the year!” Dialogue from the episode’s opening scene is loaded with implications of wealth and success.

HAZEL: Mr. B! You wanna see my cousin? She’s on television!

MR. B: Who?

HAZEL: You heard me speak of my cousin Suzie, the one that’s in the cosmetic business.

MR. B: Oh yes, of course, she’s the one in your family who made good.

Mr. B’s use of the phrase “made good” is charged with implications of achievement and social class mobility. By making good, in other words, Susie has become upwardly mobile, and ascended to upper class. What remains unsaid of course is the presumption that if you fail to become upwardly mobile, or make good, do you remain “bad”?

However, when Susie’s (whose name is now Sybil because according to Hazel, “it’s more elegant”) social secretary, Miss Lowell, learns Hazel is a maid, she removes Hazel’s name from the guest list. The episode begins with the necessary exposition introducing Hazel’s cousin to the audience. Through the use of an on-screen television interview, Sybil announces her engagement to John Lucius, an affluent diplomat. Despite several passive and unsuccessful attempts to keep Hazel at bay, Miss Lowell finally explains to Sybil why Hazel should stay away. Sybil and Miss Lowell attend a tea party Hazel has thrown which included several friends of Hazel, many of whom are also maids.
MISS LOWELL: (Disdainfully) Do you realize who these women are? They’re all cooks and maids and cleaning women.

SYBIL: Your whole motive in this seems to have been to keep Hazel away from my wedding.

MISS LOWELL: Allright, I don’t deny it. But you hired me as your social secretary and I am making every effort to see that this is a gracious and refined social event.

SYBIL: Well I certainly don’t see any objection to Hazel’s presence.

MISS LOWELL: Even after attending a tea for maids and cooks and cleaning women?

SYBIL: I never had so much fun in my life!

MISS LOWELL: You may not see any objection to her being at that wedding but...

SYBIL: I know my fiance and his friends and family will love Hazel.

MISS LOWELL: They will give you every reason to believe they do. They are ladies and gentlemen and they know the art of concealing their distaste.

Miss Lowell’s use of the word distaste is powerful. Her assertion that certain people (upper class) find other people (working class) distasteful depicts her as a scoundrel without a doubt, but this premise is far from fantastical -- a wedding planner wants to create an atmosphere, and that atmosphere is influenced greatly by the crowd present during the event. Miss Lowell attempts to enlist Mr. Baxter, Hazel’s boss, in her goal.

MISS LOWELL: Mr. Baxter, there is a very delicate matter in which I need your assistance. I will be very direct at the risk of being blunt. Frankly, [Hazel] is not wanted
at her cousin’s wedding.

MR. B.: Not wanted?

MISS LOWELL: She is completely unacceptable.

MR. B.: But why?

MISS LOWELL: I should think that would be fairly obvious to anyone with taste and breeding.

Mr. Baxter flatly refuses to help Miss Lowell. Using the reliable sitcom device of eavesdropping as exposition, Sybil hears the entire conversation out of frame, and when she enters the scene, she fires Miss Lowell on the spot. In order to further exploit the class conflict, the next scene shows us Miss Lowell calling Hazel from an airport pay phone. Miss Lowell explains to Hazel that, in much of the same elitist and classist language she uses with Sybil and Mr. Baxter, Hazel must not attend the wedding. In this scene, Hazel appears alone on screen and begins to cry as Miss Lowell tells her to stay away. The very next scene Hazel offers a weak excuse to Sybil about why she can’t attend the wedding.

Like many scenes in “Young Man With a Horn” Hazel simply accepts the limitation. Similar to the episode of “Young Man With a Horn”, “Hazel’s Cousin” bookends the episode with an introduction of socially upward mobility and ends the episode with the rejection or denial of that mobility, “the equilibrium of the situation” is restored. In the middle however, are the comedic scenes which highlight the machinations of Miss Lowell to prevent Hazel from attending the wedding. While not as explicit as Kramden’s declarations of personal failure, Hazel listens to Miss Lowell tell her stay away and then accepts it without question and without protest. I would be remiss if I didn’t also point out Miss Lowell’s attempt to enlist Mr. Baxter’s help in
her plan. Baxter, a businessman running an operation, is chosen by Miss Lowell because she assumes Baxter subscribes to the same ideology that distinguishes between those who do and do not belong. Baxter is relieved from having to rebuke Miss Lowell’s assumptions though because Sybil enters at that point in scene and rebukes Miss Lowell. The audience has been made aware through exposition that Sybil and Hazel are first cousins; they were born into the same social class. The rebuke of Miss Lowell’s classism comes from Sybil - a character who used to occupy the same social class as Hazel and not by middle-class Mr. Baxter. Perhaps the writers used Sybil as the rebuker because her character was not regular or recurring, as Baxter’s is. By writing the scene in this way, with Sybil delivering the rebuke, and removing the responsibility from Baxter to draw attention to the class conflict, the the equilibrium of the situation is once again restored. Like Ralph Kramden, the character of Hazel is brash and loud, I would argue that those traits are what endears Hazel to her audience, much like Gleason. Neither are shrinking violets, but being excluded from an upper-class environment, and therefore being personally rejected and unwanted, reduces both characters to passivity. Eventually they both accept their unchanged as well as unchanging, social class position.

**GONNA DO IT OUR WAY, YES, OUR WAY, MAKE ALL OUR DREAMS COME TRUE**

On January 24th 1976 ABC debuted *Laverne & Shirley*, a spin-off of *Happy Days*, the network’s hit sitcom. ABC hoped to repeat the success they had had with *Happy Days*, a comedy set in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in the 1950s. Centering around the Cunningham family and the ensemble of friends that inhabited their suburban world, most of the plots involved youngest son Richie going on dates, hanging out with friends, and family conflict. The unexpected breakout character of the show, Arthur “Fonzie” Fonzarelli, a leather jacket wearing motorcycle mechanic
was inserted into more and more story-lines despite originally being written as a supporting character. Much of Fonzie’s dialogue exploited the disparity in social class between him and the Cunningham family. Frequently, Fonzie was put in situations where he would have to use his street-smarts and working-class cool to defuse conflict that the Cunninghams were unable to resolve themselves. Fonzie’s character was elevated to lead character status on the show, but he was never assimilated into the middle class lifestyle the Cunninghams enjoyed throughout the duration of the series.

The characters of Laverne and Shirley were first introduced on *Happy Days* as two of Fonzie’s dates. Hoping to emulate the popularity of Fonzie’s character with sitcom audiences, unlike the Cunninghams, *Laverne & Shirley*’s two lead characters, Laverne DiFazio and Shirley Feeney were two single working-class women employed in the bottle-capping department of Milwaukee's’ Shotz Brewery. In the first few minutes of the pilot episode, “The Society Party,” we see Laverne and Shirley, in their work uniforms in the Shotz Brewery break room. They are gossiping about the tall, dark, mysterious employee in the department. It turns out to be Tad Shotz, nephew of Max Shotz, or as Laverne refers to him, “The Big Shotz.” Tad tells Shirley he has something important to ask them.

TAD: My Nana’s having a dinner party at the Shotz Manor tomorrow evening.

LAVERNE: He’s got a nana.

SHIRLEY: And a manor.

TAD: I was wondering if you two girls would like to attend.

LAVERNE; Why us?

TAD: Well, you see, my Uncle Max doesn’t think that I relate well to the workers. So I
thought that if I invited a couple of the workers to go to the party, then my Nana would talk to my Uncle Max and say what friends I was making with the little people and that he’d have me transferred out of this filthy department.

LAVERNE: What a charming invitation.

When Laverne tells Tad she can’t go because she has a date with Fonzie, Tad tells her to bring him along. Laverne says incredulously, “Fonzie, at a society party?” to which the studio audience (and what sounds like a laugh track) react with a big laugh. Tad leaves the break room, and Laverne and Shirley disagree about attending the party.

SHIRLEY: Feel this invitation, the words have bumps.

LAVERNE: Why should we go up there to represent the workers, the little people?

We’re only helping him out.

SHIRLEY: This is a chance to help ourselves out.

LAVERNE: How?

SHIRLEY: This is a perfect opportunity to meet the right kind of people. Didn’t you always wanna go inside one of those big beautiful homes? Laverne, the only kinda parties we’ve ever been to are “bring your own.”

LAVERNE: I like bringing my own, then I know what I’m gettin’. Why don’t you go by yourself?

SHIRLEY: I can’t go by myself, I’d be too scared to go by myself.

LAVERNE: Why’re ya’ scared? You’re as good as they are, we’re as good as anybody.
Laverne reluctantly agrees to go to the party after much cajoling from Shirley. The following scene takes place in the Pizza Bowl. When Laverne and Shirley turn down Lenny and Squiggy’s invitation to go see a “great makeout picture at the drive-in” telling them they are going to a formal society dinner instead, Lenny and Squiggy react with boredom. Squiggy tells them in a haughty voice, “I woulda worn my tuxedo but my polo pony ate it” and leave the conversation after a big laugh from the audience.

Preening in their apartment the next evening, Laverne and Shirley continue to disagree about going to Tad’s party.

SHIRLEY: You can drag your feet all you want to, but I’m going to this party and I’m gonna meet some nice gentleman.

LAVERNE: Like Tad Shotz, he’s a conceited dork.

SHIRLEY: No, not like Tad, some other nice society gentleman.

LAVERNE: A society gentleman would only go out with you for one reason: to have a good time, a few laughs, a little vo-de-oh-doh-doh.

LAVERNE: Say we go to this party and you meet this wonderful guy, you think he’s gonna marry you?

SHIRLEY: Stranger things have been known to happen and I can marry anyone I please.

LAVERNE: You don’t please that many people.

SHIRLEY: Mr. Right WILL come along!

LAVERNE: But he may not come to this neighborhood. Shirl, we work at a brewery, we date guys from the Pizza Bowl, face it, we found our niche.

SHIRLEY: But that doesn’t necessarily have to be our niche Laverne. It’s like that song.
LAVERNE: There’s a niche song?

SHIRLEY: No, no that song that Frank Sinatra sings, you know. [Shirley begins to sing “High Hopes”]

SHIRLEY: Just what makes that little old ant...

LAVERNE: Ant.

SHIRLEY: Think he can move that rubber tree plant?

LAVERNE: Plant.

SHIRLEY: Anyone knows an ant can’t move a rubber tree plant, but he’s got... what, Laverne?

LAVERNE: A hernia? (Big laugh from audience).

SHIRLEY: No, he’s got high hopes and I’ve got ‘em too and there is no reason on Earth why Prince Charming cannot walk through our door.

Unlike Ralph Kramden on The Honeymooners, Laverne and Shirley’s use of this comedic formula is heavily gendered; Shirley’s motivation for attending the party is to meet a wealthy, cultured husband. Set in 1959, yet produced in 1975, Shirley’s intended goal to enter the patriarchal bargain is also a feminist critique of patriarchy as well as social class.

LAVERNE: I just wanna say that I came here tonight because my friend wanted to see the inside of one of these beautiful houses, well believe me, they look a lot friendlier from the outside.

SHIRLEY: I’d just like to apologize for the little misunderstanding and say what a pleasure it is to meet you all, and LET’S DO IT AGAIN SOME TIME.
SHIRLEY: We didn’t stay at the party long enough to meet any nice gentleman but we
did allright otherwise. All in all, it wasn’t such a bad evening.
LAVERNE: What did you just say? Shirl, it was a bad evening.
SHIRLEY: The next one will be better.
LAVERNE: Shirl, I let you talk me into this whole night, right? Well at least learn
somethin’ from it. First of all your hopes are too high. An ant can’t move a rubber tree
plant. And second of all, Santa Claus is not gonna ho-ho- ho down our chimney and give
you a gentleman as a present. Get it? Got it. GOOD.

I chose the Laverne & Shirley pilot episode because it is possibly, the best example of the
established pattern of social class boundaries, exclusion and inclusion and the perceptions and
limitations of social class mobility within the U. S. This episode is also significant because of its
use of temporal dislocation; the series is set in the 1950s but produced in the 1970s. While it is
possible that creator Gary Marshall’s decision to set Happy Days and Laverne and Shirley in the
1970s could simply be nostalgic, the recurrence of social class themes in these shows provides an
opportunity to question the similarity between the dialogue in shows produced decades apart in
vastly different economic environments. According to Adorno, “The constant plugging of
conventional values seems to mean that these values have lost their substance, and it is feared
that people would really follow their instinctual urges and conscious insights unless continuously
reassured from outside that they must not do so” (Adorno 2). This is manifested in Shirley’s
unrelenting belief that ascending into another social class must be her life’s goal, and she can
only do so by, “meeting some nice gentleman.” This transgressive display of a 1950s patriarchal
bargain accepted by 1970s audiences indicates a nostalgic appreciation for what Adorno would
describe as “conventional values”. Shirley Feeney and Ralph Kramden are both eager to become upwardly mobile, however when Ralph articulates it, he frames it as an individual success. That continual reassurance that he avoid any type of class consciousness or that he consider the inequality of opportunity within the U.S., perpetuates Ralph Kramden’s behavior of blaming himself for his repeated failures. The repetition of these patterns within television programming - - and within the culture industry on the whole -- and continued use of sitcom characters failing to achieve upward mobility, and then blaming themselves, serves to reinforce the audience’s understanding:

That has by now become congealed and standardized. Above all, this rigid institutionalization transforms modern mass culture into a medium of undreamed of psychological control. The repetitiveness, the selfsameness, and the ubiquity of modern mass culture tend to make for automatized reactions and to weaken the forces of individual resistance (Adorno 216).

Critiquing television programming further, Adorno argues that in order to manage expectations and perception among consumers of mass culture, the possibility of surprise has been deliberately eliminated from television programming. Creating sitcoms and characters that provide a predictable and non-disruptive hegemonic narrative is what Adorno refers to as “feeling on safe ground” (Adorno 216). Adorno describes this cultural transition from content that provided possibilities, thrills because the consumer understood narratives as changing and undetermined. Adorno argues, like Fiske several decades later, this transition in the culture industry has moved from offering consumers products to consume that no longer offer an opportunity to relate to an individual, but now relate to an external understanding of identity, or subjectivity.
Let us not forget that each of these texts was made in a different decade, within a span of twenty years of American culture. Remembering to take into consideration the time of production for each text - the 50s, 60s and 70s - were vastly different in terms of economic and geopolitical climate. While “Young Man with a Horn”, takes place in the economic boom of the 1950s, when the U.S. enjoyed its role as an international power both financially and geopolitically. “The Society Party,” aired in 1976, a decade in American history that endured prolonged financial tumult and geopolitical instability. Laverne and Shirley, while produced in the 1970s depicts life in the 1950s, so perhaps this temporal device explains why characters from different decades still negotiate their social class position in much the same way. In all three textual examples shown, the characters negotiate their social class and how it relates to their identity from a place of deficiency and shame.

In each of the examples shown, the character reacts to their failure with feelings of humiliation. Additionally, the language that is used in each example to describe social mobility are not only positive, but superior to those of the characters’ working-class status. For example, Ralph Kramden describes his opportunity to become a Transit Clerk as “success.” He is, however, already enjoying a “successful” career as a city bus driver. He is not unemployed, rather, the occupation of bus driver is a class marker for working-class while Senior Transit Clerk is not. Similarly, in “Hazel’s Cousin”, Hazel describes her cousin Sybil as the family member who “made good.” In describing Hazel, (or maids, or the working-class for that matter) Miss Lowell uses language to describe Hazel not in terms of what she is, but in terms of what, as a maid, she is certainly not: elegant, gracious and refined. The most glaring example is the exchange between Tad Shotz and Laverne and Shirley in “The Society Party.” Tad describes Laverne and Shirley as the “little people” and that if he can show his uncle that he relates to the
workers he can get transferred out of “this filthy department.” There is absolutely no question in these examples. Clear and distinct lines are drawn between the wealthy and working class. Being wealthy is simply not desirable to these characters; it is shown to them (and to the audience) that they are flawed in a variety of ways, rendering them undeserving of respect from themselves or the audience.
**THIS IS NOW**

The Great Recession and the New Normal on Sitcoms

The term “new normal” was first used by market analysts as a way to describe the effects of the 2008 financial crisis on the economy, investing, and consumer confidence. According to Ian Davis, Worldwide Managing Director of McKinsey & Company, a global management consulting firm, the new normal can be understood as:

The current downturn is fundamentally different from recessions of recent decades. We are experiencing not merely another turn of the business cycle, but a restructuring of the economic order. For some organizations, near-term survival is the only agenda item. Others are peering through the fog of uncertainty, thinking about how to position themselves once the crisis has passed and things return to normal. The question is, “What will normal look like?” While no one can say how long the crisis will last, what we find on the other side will not look like the normal of recent years. The new normal will be shaped by a confluence of powerful forces—some arising directly from the financial crisis and some that were at work long before it began (Davis 2009).

In the March 9th 2010 issue of *USA Today*, Gary Levin wrote on the upcoming fall 2010 season and the aggressive development of sitcoms by networks, “An overarching trend: fewer wacky concepts, more tried and true. Levin quotes NBC’s programming chief Angela Bromstad, “It's much more middle of the road” describing the type of sitcom networks are looking to have ready to go for their fall lineups. Levin’s article also includes analysis from Carolyn Finger, president of tvtracker.com, which monitors program-development trends. According to Finger, “They're trying to play it safe” (Levin). The analysis provided by industry executives Finger and Bromstad offer us further proof that the goal of networks is to provide little risk in the way of television development. Programming choices are made to ensure commercial viability and the ability to generate ad revenue. When green-lighting pilots, development executives consider how
palatable the sitcom and its content will be to a potential audience. And then something unexpected happened.

The sitcom examples analyzed in the following chapter all aired between October 2010 and February 2012. I argue these examples indicate a cultural shift in America, specifically in the way sitcoms viewers negotiate attitudes about social class and the mobility gap. These shows are also adding to the current discursive strategies of politicians, economists, pundits and activists regarding class warfare and the growing inequity of wealth in the U.S. The fall 2011 television season kicked off during the same time as activists were demonstrating in Zuccotti Park in lower Manhattan. Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movements across the country sought to bring attention to the widening income gap in the U.S. OWS activists identified themselves as the 99% with the wealthiest Americans situated within the 1%. The economic, cultural and political implications of OWS demonstrations were being absorbed and analyzed in the way Americans were expressing frustration with the inequity of wealth and social class in the U.S. The media claimed that viewers were more comfortable than ever in engaging in class warfare, if only as a sitcom viewer.

TIME magazine writer James Poniewozik wrote on October 24th, 2011:

After the 2008 meltdown and the TARP bailouts, after Wall Street bonuses rebounded while mortgages stayed underwater, do Americans still hear class warfare as if it's a bad thing? Judging by the fall [2011] TV season, viewers may be up for, if not class warfare, at least some spirited class fisticuffs. This fall's highest-rated new comedy, however, is CBS's *2 Broke Girls*, about an economic odd couple: a street-smart Brooklyn waitress (Kat Dennings) and her new co-worker--roomie (Beth Behrs), whose dad--a Madoff-like scam artist--went to jail and left her to risk her manicure slinging burgers. After a decade-plus of sitcoms about the affluent (Modern Family's clan began this season with a trip to Jackson Hole, Wyo., because don't we all?), a comedy whose characters struggle to pay the rent is practically Brechtian theater” (Poniewozik).
The “News and Notes” section in the November 4th issue of Entertainment Weekly offered:

The entertainment industry's interest in the economic crisis is by no means limited to financial-district pilgrimages. Last weekend saw the release of Margin Call, which stars Kevin Spacey, Jeremy Irons, and Zachary Quinto, and concerns a stricken investment bank, loosely based on Lehman Brothers. The plot of Brett Ratner's Eddie Murphy--Ben Stiller comedy Tower Heist, which opens Nov 4, hinges on the collapse of a Ponzi scheme operated by a Bernie Madoff-style investor. If that sounds like a familiar plotline, you've probably been watching 2 Broke Girls. The new CBS sitcom stars Beth Behrs as a Manhattan socialite forced to work in a Brooklyn diner thanks to the Ponzi-scheme-running activities of her father (Staskiewicz).

Dorothy Rabinowitz reporting for the Wall Street Journal on October 14, 2011:

Caroline and Max [2 Broke Girls], on the other hand, are persuaded that the important thing in life is getting on, putting money aside for their dream, which is to be entrepreneurs. The fates have joined them, two tough cookies with cupcakes on the brain—cupcakes being exactly what they plan to sell in a business of their own. To do it they have to meet a financial goal whose progress is posted at the end of every episode. It promises to be a journey that should draw plenty of viewers (Rabinowitz).

While I do not attempt to argue a causal relationship as in sitcoms changed as a result of the economic crisis - I am merely identifying a cultural shift in attitudes about social class on American sitcoms following the financial crisis of 2008, or “The Great Recession.” However, the time and location of production must be considered in understanding messages and meanings communicated through television programming to its audience. In the wake of the financial crisis of September 2008, Americans have been bombarded with reports of financial crises, banking and insurance deregulation scandals, federal bailouts of banks and the U.S. auto industry, toxic assets, and record home foreclosures. Despite all of these economic disasters, corporations
continue to reap record profits, and CEOs continue to collect disproportionately large salaries.

Even Lloyd Blankfein, CEO of Goldman Sachs, one of the “too big to fail” firms which received federal bailout money told John Arlidge of London’s Sunday Times, "people are pissed off, mad, and bent out of shape" (Arlidge). The upper-class characters on 2 Broke Girl$, It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia and 30 Rock condescendingly rationalize the class divide and feel threatened by the current economic crisis and its vilification of the rich; the working-class characters are also aware of their class status and they’re getting angry.

Despite the numerous examples that could be offered in support of social class immobility on television, there are three recent sitcoms that not only critique social class mobility but critique the narrative plot element which has been used over the past sixty years in sitcoms to reaffirm class immobility. FX’s It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia (2005), CBS’s 2 Broke Girl$ (2011), and NBC’s 30 Rock (2006) are traditional in the sense that they employ a “situation” that is resolved at the conclusion of every episode, but their tone and style are quite different from previous depictions of social class on American sitcoms. For one thing all three shows involve characters of varying class stratification in a domestic and work setting. The characters on It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia and 2 Broke Girl$ aren’t trapped in a setting. In fact, these modern characters live, work, and socialize with each other by choice. By that I mean, they are not stranded on a tropical island as are the characters on Gilligan’s Island (1964 - 1967). Nor are they required to interact with each other in order to meet some type of contractual financial obligation of a will, such as the characters on Filthy Rich (1982).

Additionally, the characters possess an acute self- awareness of their social class position. Often, they use class conflict for laughs but in a much different way than traditional sitcoms such as The Honeymooners, Hazel, or Laverne & Shirley. I would like to point out however, that there
are two additional sitcoms, CBS’s *Filthy Rich* (1982) and UPN’s *The Mullets* (2003) that did not adhere to a traditional depiction of social class mobility in the U.S. These series and their anomalous depictions of social class conflict and particularly of exclusion and inclusion of working-class characters lasted only one season each.

However briefly, these shows offered an alternative depiction of class conflict. The pilot episode of *Filthy Rich* aired on August 9, 1982. The premise of the series centers around the death of a wealthy Southern patriarch, “Big Guy Beck”, and the heirs to his vast fortune. At the reading of Big Guy’s will an illegitimate son is revealed to Big Guy’s oldest son, daughter-in-law, and second - much younger -wife - all of whom reveal themselves to be scoundrels in various comedic ways. The will stipulates no one will receive any inheritance unless the illegitimate son is welcomed into the family. Big Guy’s son, daughter-in-law and second wife plot, exclude and display all around boorish behavior throughout the episode. The laughs are derived from the various duplicitous ways in which the “rightful” heirs attempt to thwart this lower class character -- a bastard no less! -- from inheriting Big Guy’s money. The illegitimate son however, is amiable and gregarious, anxious to get to know his new family.

I include this example for its use of class conflict in the most extreme ways seen up to that point. Although a comedy, *Filthy Rich* depicts the scoundrel characters in unprecedented ways. They scheme and plot murder for financial gain and one of the characters uses his bisexuality as a way to demonstrate selfishness, deviance, and unlikability. Is it any wonder that this show received scathing critical reviews and was pulled off the air in less than a year?

Additionally, UPN’s *The Mullets* (2003) is the story of two young men of lower class social status signified by their mullet hairstyles, clothing, love of professional wrestling and beer. Also a sitcom, *The Mullets’* comedy premises and plots relied heavily on laughing at the characters.
Unlike Ralph Kramden’s moment of redemption at the conclusion of each episode, The Mullets repeatedly humiliated the lead characters. The Mullets, unlike The Honeymooners or Hazel no longer featured lovable failures; but working-class characters worthy of the audience’s contempt and scorn.

During the years of production for Filthy Rich and The Mullets, the U.S. was experiencing a similar shift in the negotiation of American identity, the implementation and subsequent effects of President Reagan and President Bush’s economic policies between 1981 and 1992, a surge in the consumption of consumer products, a “bullish” stock market, and lavish displays of wealth. “Greed,” as Gordon Gekko was fond of saying, “is good.”

Filthy Rich and The Mullets seemed like a natural fit for the sitcom landscape of the time, and despite their short shelf lives, made way for a different type of depiction of social class in the U.S. Emerging in 2010, and continuing to evolve, it seems likely that this new depiction of social class conflict will endure, for at least a little while.

Because so much of this analysis is based on interpretive readings of visual texts and the class markers, I want to acknowledge the importance of semiotics in coding messages regarding social class. Media critic John Fiske writes in Reading Television, that the codes present in television are fluid, “continually changing to meet the changing needs and practices of their users” (Fiske 2003 p. 41). Between 1956 and 1976, the span of time between “Young Man With a Horn” and “The Society Party” aired, the message concerning social mobility has changed only slightly, if at all. However when analyzing the texts which aired between 2010 and 2012, there is a discernible and profound change in both the semiotics of the sitcoms and subjectivity of the characters.

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2 Gordon Gekko, the corporate raider antagonist from Oliver Stone’s 1987 film, Wall Street.
I’M SORRY SIR, BUT WE ARE “AT CAPACITY”

*It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia* debuted on FX in August of 2005. The show’s main characters are: siblings Dennis and Dee Reynolds, their father Frank Reynolds, (who was added in 2007) Charlie Kelly, and Ronald “Mac” MacDonald. All of *Sunny’s* characters work at Paddy’s Pub in Philadelphia. Dennis, Mac and Charlie are introduced in the pilot as co-owners of Paddy’s. Dennis and Mac are roommates, as are Frank and Charlie. The characters are unabashedly selfish and cruel. For example, there have been episodes which featured Dennis and Mac attending a ProChoice rally to meet and sleep with single women, whom they assume are promiscuous because the women are pro-choice. Dennis, Mac and Charlie abandon Dee in an alley to get mugged after running away from a man who brandishes a gun and demands they give him their money. Frank ran an underground Russian roulette game with Vietnamese immigrants in the basement of Paddy’s. Dee and Dennis pretend to be addicted to crack cocaine (which leads to their actual addiction to crack) and mentally retarded to collect welfare benefits. The list goes on. Most of the episodes involve poorly executed schemes to make money fraudulently, revenge fantasies, alcoholism, drugs and sloth. Running through all the episodes however are references to social class position. Dee and Dennis, grew up surrounded by affluence provided by their dad Frank, an unethical, but successful businessman who stole his company from a former partner. Dee and Dennis remind Charlie and Mac of their superior class position frequently. Mac and Charlie, both lower class, frequently resist Dee and Dennis’ characterizations, to which Dee and Dennis respond by laughing. Mac’s father is an incarcerated murderer and thief. Charlie’s father was eventually revealed to be Frank, but Charlie was raised by his single, working-class mother without support from Frank. Charlie is either illiterate or dyslexic depending on the episode.
“Mac and Charlie: White Trash”, the fifth episode from *Sunny*’s sixth season, originally aired on October 14th 2010. The opening scene begins with Mac and Charlie complaining about the heat wave in Philadelphia as they attempt to gain entry to the local swim club. Standing in front of the attendant, Mac and Charlie carry six packs of cheap beer and are wearing sleeveless novelty t-shirts and cut-offs. When politely told by the attendant there is no drinking in the pool area, Mac and Charlie “shotgun” their cans of beer:

ATTENDANT: I’m going to assume you guys aren’t members here.
MAC: Why don’t you just go ahead and sign us up. We’ll blaze through these (cans of beer) in no time.
ATTENDANT: Actually, if you’d like to join our swim club, you need to be sponsored by two existing members. But I’m sorry to tell you fellas, that membership is currently at capacity.
MAC: At capacity? (Mac belches loudly.)
ATTENDANT: Yes.
MAC: We’re in the middle of a terrible heat wave and you happen to be at capacity – FOR US.
ATTENDANT: You can try the public pool, but-
MAC: (Belches) NO THANK YOU. Thank you for your suggestion. We’re out of here, let’s go. Fuck you. (As they leave, Mac and Charlie toss empty beer cans on the ground and continue belching loudly.)
MAC: I cannot believe that that just happened; in this day and age!
CHARLIE: I know. I can’t believe there’s such a big list.
MAC: Uh-huh, don’t you get it dude? They’ll always be at capacity FOR US.
CHARLIE: I don’t get that at all, is that what he said?
MAC: Don’t you get it, we got big timed dude, he called us lower class.
CHARLIE: He called us lower class? Yeah, but I wouldn’t argue with that dude, we’re definitely lower class.
MAC: Yeah, I’m not disputing that fact dude. I’m saying we shouldn’t get boxed out for it. It’s bullshit.
CHARLIE: Honestly, I just wanna go swimming. Should we suck it up and go to the public pool?
MAC: Gross dude. I will not go to that disgusting public pool.
CHARLIE: (Laughing) People there are gross.
MAC: I got a good idea.

The following scene transitions to a new location; an abandoned diving pool filled with garbage bags, broken refrigerators and stained couches. Mac and Charlie discuss the reasons this diving pool was abandoned. Charlie assumes it is because a friend of theirs drowned there; however, Mac argues, “It was because of a pattern of discrimination because this was a pool for lower class people.”

As Mac and Charlie try to convince Frank to give money to invest in their attempt to restore the abandoned diving pool, Dee and Dennis insert themselves into the conversation. Dee and Dennis explain to Mac and Charlie in no uncertain terms that the pool attendant was justified in his actions; the swim club is not an appropriate environment for Mac and Charlie as they are lower class, unlike Dee and Dennis who are upper class.

DEE: Is this because you guys are still all pissed off about not getting into that swim club?
MAC: Look, If you guys were there, you would know how we feel.
DENNIS: Oh no, no, no. Stop yourself right there. See we would NOT know how it feels because Dee and I would have waltzed right into that swim club.
DEE: Yeah you don’t lump Dennis and me in with you. We’re high class.
MAC: You should have seen this guy; he would have lumped the shit out of you. Dennis, we live in the same apartment!
DENNIS: Let me explain a little something to you about how class works. You’re born into class: it’s about pedigree, it’s about upbringing, it has nothing to do with your present circumstances.

DEE: See, Dennis and I were born upper-class and therefore we currently are will forever remain upper class.

FRANK: We could pop a hydrant.

DENNIS: I’m not popping shit, that’s about as low class as it gets.

DENNIS: Swim club?

DEE: Swim club.

The next scene finds Dee and Dennis also getting denied entry to the swim club by the same pool attendant that dealt with Mac and Charlie.

ATTENDANT Sorry sir, we are at capacity.

DENNIS: Capacity? That is unbelievable that you would use the word capacity, WITH US? I don’t know what kind of idea you have about us but we sir, are like you. (Dennis attempts to bribe the pool attendant by handing him cash.)

ATTENDANT: Sir please – you’re embarrassing yourself now.

DENNIS: Oh, I’m embarrassing myself? (Scoffing) Said the elitist pool guy. You know Dee I don’t even think I want to be a part of some exclusionary pool club, propagated by this man, this hatemonger.

ATTENDANT: You are more than happy to try the public pool.

DEE: Oh can we? Well maybe we will.
DENNIS: Because we have class and having class means being able to mix with people that are beneath you.

After showing this scene in class to my students, I asked them why it was funny. I asked because they had laughed uproariously at Mac and Charlie trying to get into the swim club as well as Dee and Dennis attempting the same. The answer, according to most of the students is, “It’s funny because it’s true.” They tell me this in a resigned tone of voice. What is of particular interest to me is why they believe it to be true, but that discussion falls outside the scope of an undergraduate *Introduction to American Culture Studies* class. Distinctive to *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia* is its running gag of critiquing class hierarchy among the characters-- all of whom occupy the same social class --but throughout the series’ seven seasons we are reminded that Frank, Dennis and Dee’s former social class positions which were decidedly upper-class and Mac and Charlie have always been lower class.

For an American sitcom character to sneeringly tell his roommate, “Let me explain a little something to you about how class works...” produced within a country that historically has not enjoyed speaking of social class status and the limitations attached to it, this exchange between Mac and Dennis is new. Removed from this exchange was any mention of the American Dream, or individual opportunity. While literature and film have been exploring social class status in a critical way for many decades, television has-- up until this point --stayed away from such biting critique.

In this episode the phrase white trash is used fourteen times, low or lower-class is used eight times, upper or high class is used four times, fringe class is used twice, as is felon class, and finally, middle class is used once. This episode is different from the way all other sitcoms
have dealt with social class critique and quite possibly, the critique of the critique of social class. It is exactly this type of deviation from the traditional sitcom’s depiction of social class that prompted Jake Martin to write in August 2010, “It is no longer enough for a sitcom to tell a story with a few jokes; now both narrative and punch lines must be deconstructed, critiqued and referenced back to all previous TV shows in the span of 22 minutes. *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia* is emblematic of all that is wrong with sitcoms in a post-Seinfeld era” (Martin 24). It should be noted that Mr. Martin is a Jesuit scholar, and his critique of *Sunny* is as much about the morality, or lack thereof, of Sunny’s characters.

Now in its sixth season, *30 Rock* is a sitcom that creates an alternative family from a work environment; behind the scenes of a network sketch comedy television show. The show’s main character, Liz Lemon, is the head writer for *The Girly Show*, a series also developed and produced by NBC, although this is an alternate universe NBC, owned by Kabletown, not the actual media conglomerate NBC, owned by Comcast. I just want to make that clear since so much of *30 Rock*’s comedy is based on metanarrative intertextuality which is a thinly veiled critique of NBC and its parent company, Comcast.

**THE LOWER CLASSES ARE RISING UP**

Liz’s boss, Jack Donaghy is an extremely wealthy and powerful television executive, and their relationship features disagreements on many issues, the least of which is social class. Liz is an admitted liberal who advocates for progressive change and equality, Jack is severely conservative, often smugly letting Liz know he finds her optimism quaint and naive. Class warfare, or as Jack describes it, “the lower classes are rising up”, is the focus of “The Tuxedo Begins” the 8th episode from *30 Rock*’s sixth season which aired on February 23rd,
2012. After getting mugged at gunpoint, Jack has the following conversation with Liz and Tracy Jordan, one of the stars of *The Girly Show*.

JACK: I was attacked in a construction tunnel.

LIZ: Wait, you got mugged? Maybe you were asking for it dressed like that. (Jack is wearing a tuxedo in his office in the middle of the day).

JACK: I wasn’t wearing a tuxedo at the time, Lemon, the mugger took my cuff links, and all I have here are tuxedo cuff links and I’m not about to wear them with a suit and look like an idiot. (Jack scoffs as if this should be common knowledge.)

TRACEY: Give me the bad news. How black was this dude? On a scale from Lisa Bonet to Dot Com.\(^3\)

JACK: This is the thing that’s bothering me, my assailant was a middle aged white man, wearing a button down shirt and Dockers. DOCKERS?! Not some drug addict or gang aficionado. His knife was from Eddie Bauer. This is a sign; the lower classes are getting cranky about the rich earning all their money away from them. Can’t they see this is in their best interest? How could we pay THEIR salaries without using THEIR money? We’re on the verge of a class war. My attack was a wakeup call. The rich need to defend themselves. I want a show of force, a demonstration of who’s in control of this city. A cop on every corner. But the police have no interest in helping me despite the hundreds of dollars I pay every year in taxes. They think I’m the enemy. Even Tommy Hilfiger turned me down. You’d think that he, of all people, would understand how quickly the lower classes can ruin something.

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\(^3\) Dot Com is Tracy Jordan’s darkly complected African-American bodyguard.
While the characters on *30 Rock* do not engage in interpersonal class conflict as often or as viciously as the characters on *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, the scoundrel used over and over on *30 Rock* is the NBC network and their corporate overlords, General Electric after a corporate merger of media conglomerates, Kabletown. Jack Donaghy is the embodied voice of corporate profit and greed. He tells a visitor to his office that his leather sofa is made from Seabiscuit.⁴ Donaghy frequently derides Liz Lemon’s progressive politics and empathetic tendencies.

*30 Rock*’s Jack and *Sunny’s* Mac are the yin and yang of the new normal on sitcoms. Whereas Mac refuses to “get boxed out” because of his social class, Jack is committed to the stark distinction and segregation of lower class and upper class. Both comedies are funny because of the way their respective characters are abruptly confronted with class conflict and their ineptitude with which they deal with the situation. Extreme examples of both working-class and upper class, Mac and Jack provide cartoonish archetypes for the audience to laugh at, and possibly with. The examples of class conflict on *30 Rock* and *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia* don’t stop with the episodes I have used as texts. Class is often used as a comedic premise on several other episodes of each show. The episodes chosen were simply the finest and richest examples of class conflict used for comedic purposes in my opinion. More significant is their blatant critique of social class in the U.S.

That doesn’t mean however, that all new sitcoms are all critiquing social class in the same way as *30 Rock* and *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*. Last fall’s most successful freshman sitcom was CBS’s *2 Broke Girls*. Lead characters Caroline Channing and Max Black meet and embark on a friendship and quickly become roommates. Caroline is the daughter of Martin Channing, a character remarkably similar to Bernie Madoff, the man responsible for the

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⁴ One of the most winningest thoroughbred racehorses in American history.
largest Ponzi scheme in U.S. history. Currently serving a 150 year sentence in federal prison for defrauding investors of at least 65 million dollars, Madoff pled guilty to all charges and refused to cooperate with federal authorities. On the series, Martin Channing is also incarcerated and serving time in a federal prison for defrauding his affluent hedge fund customers of hundreds of millions of dollars. Caroline and Martin Channing are not depicted as greedy, elitist criminals though. Caroline is plucky and ambitious. She encourages and mentors working-class, unambitious Max to pursue her dream and open up a bakery. In fact, it is Caroline’s business savvy that enables the duo to start marketing their business and make a profit. Caroline sets the exorbitant price for Max’s cupcakes and sells them to Williamsburg hipsters who are willing to pay inflated prices for the next big foodie trend. Her lines are delivered with snark and the laugh track is cued. At the conclusion of the series pilot, Max asks Caroline to move into her tiny one bedroom Brooklyn apartment because Caroline’s penthouse has been seized by federal authorities and she has nowhere to live. Caroline is depicted as a character we should have sympathy for, not vilify. This is an important historical shift in the history of sitcoms. Traditionally, bankers and business tycoons have acted as the scoundrel and served as a gatekeeper to upper-class environments.

For example, The Beverly Hillbillies (1962 -1971) had Mr. Drysdale, a banker whom Jed Clampett hired to consult in matters concerning his vast oil fortune. In numerous episodes, Drysdale schemes to get Clampett to invest unwisely or to steal away Clampett’s wealth in some other unorthodox and possibly criminal manner. Drysdale is often discovered and foiled by one of the Clampetts, by his own unethical behavior, or by his assistant, Jane Hathaway, Drysdale’s assistant, who seems to admire and look out for the Clampetts, but I should point out, that the character of Miss Hathaway is also characterized as a dowdy spinster so her compassion for the
Clampetts comes off as a weakness, not a strength. In this traditional depiction of the scoundrel, Mr. Drysdale is sneaky, untrustworthy and just plain rotten. Miss Hathaway, who is honest and caring, is played as a sentimental old maid pining away for Jethro. Or take *Gilligan’s Island* character Thurston Howell, the character referred to in the series’ theme song simply as “the millionaire.” Thurston Howell is depicted as a selfish, greedy business executive callous to the needs of those around him. Even on the island, Mr. Howell, repeatedly offers Gilligan money for services as if he were back home living his real life. Karen Walker on *Will and Grace* (1998 - 2006) offers a more recent example of a conspicuously wealthy scoundrel. She is rude, vulgar, and inconsiderate of others, often attempting to buy friendship or her way out of uncomfortable situations. There are plenty of other examples of characters who would easily serve as an example of the traditional scoundrel on sitcoms.

Rather, this modern incarnation of the scoundrel is presented to us as Caroline Channing, someone with whom we should feel sorry for. In the episodes, “And the Very Christmas Thanksgiving” and “And the Rich People Problems” from season one of *2 Broke Girls*, Caroline and Max discuss Caroline’s father Martin Channing and Caroline’s desire to visit him in prison and spend the holidays with her dad. In “And the Very Christmas Thanksgiving” Caroline is excited about going to see her father in prison. Earlier in the episode she tells Max of her love for Christmas and describes the extravagant gifts she has received over the years from her father. Yet Max, a sarcastic pessimist, never makes a joke about those gifts being subsidized by Martin Channing’s Ponzi scheme. In fact throughout the series, Caroline is introduced to many people as Martin Channing’s daughter, in the context of being a “celebrity” but the reason why everyone knows who Martin Channing is never addressed. It is as if the series’ writers, Whitney
Cummings and Michael Patrick King, deliberately avoid any explanation of Channing’s conviction for defrauding thousands of investors.

Instead Caroline receives a call from her father to tell her not to visit. Caroline tells Max, “He doesn’t want me to see him like that.” The line is delivered somberly; there is no witty comeback from Max and the scene switches gears abruptly to Max and Caroline being hired to work in a department store during the holidays as elves in Santa’s workshop. As a viewer we are expected to feel bad for Caroline, all she wanted this Christmas was to see her Daddy, and also for Martin Channing; he can’t bear for his daughter to see him behind bars.

Another example of this characterization of the rich as sympathetic can be seen in the episode, “And the Rich People Problems,” which aired on October 10, 2011 contained the following exchange between Max and Caroline:

MAX: YOU ARE RICH! Like, I know you said you were rich, but you are RICH!  
CAROLINE: Max, you’re embarrassing me.  
MAX: Are you crazy? This is nothing to be embarrassed about.  
CAROLINE: Funny, you didn’t have a father and I didn’t have a mother so we’re sort of-  
MAX: Oh, we're alike? Look around, we have nothing in common.

Consider the tone in which Caroline delivers her lines. There is no audience reaction; there is no laugh track. Once again, Caroline and Max are somber. This is not the only distinguishing feature between 2 Broke Girls, 30 Rock, and It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia.

The only show which uses a laugh track as well as a multi-camera setup, tapes before a live studio audience, and writes its wealthy characters in a sympathetic way and endearing way is
CBS’s *2 Broke Girls*, which has been picked up for a second season by CBS. The show has been a ratings powerhouse since its debut which is also very different from NBC’s *30 Rock* and FX’s *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*. FX, a cable network does not have the wide distribution that CBS has, which probably contributes to *Sunny*’s “under the radar” tone. And *30 Rock* has struggled with ratings and time slots since its debut in 2006, despite winning Emmys for Outstanding Comedy Series in 2007, 2008, and 2009.

In his essay, “*2 Broke Girls* (Or, One American Dream with a Side of Alienation),” Doyle Greene writes, “The underlying drive of *2 Broke Girls* is rectifying the conflicts and contradictions of class society by sustaining the affirmative ideology of the American Dream and the Horatio Alger myths” (Greene). Greene relates the characters of Caroline and Max and their respective self-alienation in a Marxist reading of *2 Broke Girls*. Max, the proletarian class, and Caroline the possessing class, each experience alienation but in dramatically different ways. Where Caroline experiences power, Max experiences powerlessness. But by making Caroline and Martin Channing worthy of sympathy Max (and the viewer) align themselves with the character, and align themselves with the character’s behavior as well—making money, conspicuous consumption -- Max (and the viewer) now identify with, and aspire to transcend their social class position despite their experienced reality.

Greene writes:

For both Max and Caroline, the real relation is being members of the working poor while the imaginary relation is their mutual hope of social mobility. Framing this around Marx’s critique of alienation and social class, Caroline represents the possessing class suddenly demoted to the proletariat class. Her financially empowered “appearance of a human existence” is abruptly transformed into an impoverished and powerless “reality of an inhuman existence,” and her bourgeois alienation is now realized as proletariat alienation. Max is the proletariat class trapped in an economically impotent “reality of an
inhuman existence” with no apparent recourse until Caroline provides a glimpse of a better future; more correctly, a false consciousness generated around the allure of affluence as the “appearance of a human existence” where proletariat alienation is now imagined around bourgeois alienation. (Greene).

This can best be seen in “And the Rich People Problems,” immediately after the scene analyzed earlier. Max, who had previously ridiculed Caroline for her privilege and wealth, after seeing the abundance in Caroline’s closet, begins to covet and envy all that Caroline owns. Max’s false consciousness is played for comedic effect. The usually dour Max is thrilled by Caroline’s excess, standing in Caroline’s closet - which Max describes as, “a house for your clothes,” and upon seeing Caroline’s bathroom, “the Louvre of pooping.”

Despite the media hype of 2 Broke Girl$ drawing attention to class inequality in the U.S., this sitcom actually does accomplish what sitcoms have traditionally tried to do - restoring the equilibrium to the situation. If 2 Broke Girl$ is the most successful of the three shows analyzed in this chapter doesn’t that indicate that not much has changed with the larger American sitcom television audience? Admittedly, 30 Rock and It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia have a fan base and have both been on the air for seven and six years respectively, but in terms of ratings and audience, 2 Broke Girl$ wins over each of them. Reaffirming rigid social class stratification is but one of the ways in which 2 Broke Girl$ restores equilibrium to the situation. The show also reifies stereotypes of gender and sexuality, as well as race and otherness however that analysis is beyond the scope of this project. 30 Rock and It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia however critique the critique of social class without making its characters sympathetic or endearing. Does this make the critique any less effective? Perhaps not, but I do think it makes for more effective situation comedy if for no other reason than it provides a viewer with material that is unpredictable and radically different whereas 2 Broke Girl$ offers tired retreads of social class
stereotypes. Quite often, when comedy works it is like a guerrilla attack - striking out of nowhere and without warning to produce an unexpected expectation.

**SO WHAT’S SO FUNNY?**

Social class markers are used as comedic tools to emphasize the perceived strengths or weaknesses of a particular individual, or an entire social class. The use of these stock characters is certainly not new, theorists including Adorno, Grote and Butsch have pointed out the use of character types to indicate inferiority or superiority in comedy throughout history. Class markers indicate established social class boundaries and can range from clothing to cars to homes and apartments. They can also include language, level of education, family interaction and relationship dynamics. As a sitcom audience absorbs these markers they internalize an understanding of the characters that occupy the respective social classes within the U.S. They also internalize an understanding of where characters do or don’t belong based on consumer goods, material wealth, and environment. By witnessing sitcom characters get “put back where they belong” over and over again, a sitcom audience accepts the premise that working-class characters have a clearly defined and designated social class position from which they do not, or cannot move. Furthermore, if they attempt to ascend their current social class position, they are reminded of this boundary or class division, and must accept their failure at social mobility. Once the working-class character has returned to his/her original working-class environment, the scene will generally end with a realization by the working-class character that their original environment is where they truly belong.

In *Rebellious Laughter: People’s Humor in American Culture, “American Dream/American Laugh”* author Joseph Boskin writes, “From the beginning, American humor and the American Dream have been symbiotically entwined. Optimism and despair, tolerance and abuse,
refinement and tastelessness, faith and skepticism -- these polarities have defined thinking and laughter” (Boskin 15). This, Boskin asserts, is the basis of the “great American joke -- the incongruity between the cultural ideal and everyday fact” (Boskin 15). The critiques situated within the comedy of 30 Rock and It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia show that despite our assertions that the U.S. is a country based on principles of equal opportunity for one and all, this is at best an exaggeration, and at worst, a fabrication. But if it was true in 1983 when sociologist Paul Blumberg wrote, “Class is America's forbidden thought" (Blumberg 53) then the fact that sitcoms now are openly drawing attention to, and critiquing social class is a remarkable phenomenon worthy of further examination. I do not deny that awareness of social class and wealth have been around since the founding of this nation, however, a major shift in meanings and values surrounding social class in the U.S. has taken place within the past few years, if nothing else than in the way it is openly and aggressively critiqued in popular culture, entertainment and in the proliferation of narratives related to social class and wealth.

Finally, more and more economists and sociologists have declared the middle class dying or already dead. Chrystia Freeland, author of Plutocrats: The Rise of the New Global Super-Rich and the Fall of Everyone Else, said in her October 2011 Forbes magazine interview, “It’s just hard to get a job right now. And if you do have one, it’s hard to stay middle class. This is happening most acutely in the developed West. These people most affected are the ones who have been doing the best in the post-War era” (Freeland).

David Grote writes on the use of The Fool, The Innocent and The Scoundrel in ancient comedy in The End of Comedy: The Sit-com and the Comedic Tradition. Comparing comedy and drama and their ability to affect change, Grote writes, “In comedy change is possible, in tragedy it is not” (Grote 51). Grote asserts that situations must be written that create obstacles for the
characters to challenge, “The most ancient of these obstacles are social class and birth” (Grote 22). The comedic situations result from the characters’ inability to resolve anything, therefore the laugh lies within the challenge, not the resolution of any conflict. As long as the character remains in the same position at the conclusion of the ancient Greek comedy as the position they occupied at the beginning of the comedy, all is well. Comparing comedy and drama and their ability to affect change, Grote writes, “In [ancient Greek] comedy change is possible; in tragedy it is not” (Grote 51).

Grote uses that structure of ancient Greek comedy as the basis for a critique of television situation comedy, “The most important part of the sitcom is not what happens but rather what does not happen. All is returned to normal at the conclusion of the episode, the situation must stay the same” (Grote 66). Referring to this as “the equilibrium of the situation”, Grote’s assertions are further explored and supported by television scholars such as Brett Mills and Toby Miller to define one of the sitcom’s defining characteristics; everything goes back to normal at the conclusion of the episode. No matter what happens during the show, the conclusion of the episode always returns to normal. In relation to this thesis, that means that no matter how hard working-class characters try to become upwardly mobile or try to assimilate into a higher social class, the rules of the sitcom dictate that they must return to their original working-class environment at the conclusion of the episode. As far as sitcom production goes, reaching this goal equals success. In terms of creating a perception about social class in the U.S. the message is clear: no one moves into a higher social class, you stay where you belong. In fact, according to Grote, “Since the situation comedy is committed to the prevention of change, and the protection of the present, the hero must be different, someone who keeps things the way they are rather than who dares to alter them” (Grote 72). Unlike ancient Greek comedy, television sitcoms are not
about initiating or promoting progress in the form of social change. Conversely, the current
depiction of social class mobility on sitcoms can be analyzed from the “conflict theory” (Hall 2)
perspective, or what Michael Mulkay in On Humor: Its Nature and Its Place in Modern Society
calls “laughter as social action” (Mulkay 142). This perspective reveals a critical view of society
and seeks to bring about social change.

Grote and Mulkay offer opposing theories into what purpose comedy serves, if in fact, it
serves any purpose. While writing in 1983 and 1988 respectively, Grote approaches television
comedy from a psychological perspective and Mulkay approaches from a sociological one.
This scholarship however, applies to understanding sitcoms and their depiction of social status as
it was up until the last few years. It seems that the American sitcom viewing audience’s
negotiation of class conflict is, if not evolving, at least changing. Add to that, the delivery
method for television has dramatically changed so understanding audience reception also needs
to be adjusted. People just aren’t watching TV the ways they used to. DVR viewing, Netflix,
downloading and watching content on a computer screen all impact the immediacy of the
narratives, as well as the relationship between consumer and producer. According to Toni
Fitzgerald, Managing Editor of MediaLife Magazine, sitcoms recently "dominated the top
gainers" from DVR playback, meaning that, “the people who watch TV in non-traditional ways
are mostly watching comedy” (Weinman 3).

The jokes in sitcoms that once exploited the working-class character’s individual and
personal failure at ascending their social class position now hinge on the frustration and agitation
of the working-class and the fear and scorn of the wealthy on discovering the working class’
dissatisfaction. More specifically, the laugh is now about the widening gap between social
classes, the 99% and the 1%. And that gap is especially funny in a country that purports to offer
equality of opportunity to all its’ citizens. Perhaps this is where the “It’s funny because it’s true” part comes into play. How can this shift in attitudes about humor, comedy and social class be understood using humor theory?

According to Paul Lewis, author of *Cracking Up: American Humor in a Time of Conflict*, it IS funny because it’s true. If we use Mac and Jack from *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia* and *30 Rock* respectively, we can see that Mac thinks the following statement is true: “They’ll always be at capacity FOR US.” While Jack believes: “The lower classes are getting cranky about the rich earning all their money away from them...We’re on the verge of a class war.” Lewis argues:

“The paradox of American humor since 1980 appears in just such moments of conflict or perplexity: during the years in which the country has been drawn together in ever larger audiences via new technologies of communication, the jokes we’ve told and our responses to them suggest that we are deeply divided. We think about humor in contradictory ways. Split into subgroups, we are delighted and outraged by the comic treatment of different ideas” (Lewis 2).

Lewis further argues that humor today allows a distance between joke teller and listener. This distance - which can easily be applied to a television audience’s reception and understanding of the joke - creates a necessary space for assent or dissent. Therein lies much of what sets up a successful joke; one side automatically becomes the butt of the joke.

Subsequently, feelings of superiority and inferiority accompany these jokes and also get attached to sitcom characters as vehicles for comedy. Lewis’ book focuses largely on “amusement and resistance to it” (Lewis 3) and the examples he uses are mostly related to satire and the political sphere. However, expanding on Lewis’ idea of contemporary humor causing a polarization effect between “us” and “them” accentuating an existing cultural divide, I argue: sitcoms are exploring (or exploiting) a cultural shift in attitudes about social class mobility and the inequity of wealth in the U.S.
Unlike previous scholarship Lewis’ work reflects a negotiation and understanding of humor that is intensely subjective and quite cynical. Contemporary humor relies on a large group always being designated as the butt of the joke while another large group enjoys the ridicule of the other group subsequently causing the group being laughed at to feel attacked. Often ignored in analyses of humor is the consideration that it can sometimes be harmful. It does not always reduce stress; in fact, it sometimes can make you more anxious or tense. When it is not affecting social change, what negative effect is humor having on those same social issues? It serves as a way to diminish the “inferior” group or social issue addressed. So, if I pose the question at the heart of this thesis to someone, “What’s so funny about seeing television characters fail at social mobility, fail at achieving the American Dream?”, someone might throw out, “It’s just comedy, don’t take it too seriously”, when we should in fact, critically examine the factors that contribute the lack of social mobility in this country and the power inequities that stop people from achieving the American Dream. Especially if television sitcoms (and their sponsors) are complicit in socializing its audience into thinking the American Dream should be pursued via consumerism at all costs?

Looking at Sunny’s Mac and 30 Rock’s Jack through this lens of contemporary humor, it becomes clear that Mac’s failure is comical not because of a personal flaw like Ralph Kramden’s in “Young Man With a Horn,” but because, as his roommate Dennis would tell him, he is currently, and forever shall remain, lower class. Dennis has not gone to college, nor have his parents, his father is incarcerated and his mother is unemployed and suffers from chronic health problems. He has no family fortune to invest or live off and his economic prospects are virtually non-existent. Mac and Charlie sometimes try their hand at “entrepreneurial ventures” but are usually shut out by bankers or lawyers or some other upper-class character who determines they
should not be approved for a loan, or some other type of financial opportunity. Even though he is described as one of the owners of Paddy’s Pub, the bar is seldom busy and Mac is frequently broke. While Kramden’s failure was a result of personal deficiencies, Mac’s failure is part of our nation’s economic power structure that limits an individual’s ability to move out of the social class they were born into. Laughing at the depiction of class conflict on television sitcoms in 2012 is tacitly endorsing the widening gap between the 1% and the 99% and passively acquiescing to the hegemony that situates almost all of the wealth at the top.
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