

## PRIME TIME: HOW TV PORTRAYS AMERICAN CULTURE

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*In 1994, S. Robert Lichter, Linda S. Lichter, and Stanley Rothman, academics who have long studied the influence of TV on American viewers, published Prime Time: How TV Portrays American Culture. This selection is from a chapter in that book. Like other writers in this section, these authors have clear ideas about how TV influences Americans' views of social life. Moreover, their argument reflects recent academic research on the effects or influences of TV. They ask, Whose agenda determines the kind of TV we watch and the social relations we see there—the establishment, the New Left, or the New Right?*

*As you read, pay attention to how they answer this question and what else they have to say about the representation of social life on TV.*

The world of prime time is preeminently a social world rooted in the interactions and institutions of American society. Even shows set in the Old West or outer space bear the marks of contemporary America in their plots, characters, and dialogues. And the changing schedules and program genres, from the squeaky clean suburban sitcoms of the 1950s to the steamy miniseries of the 1990s, have carried changing messages about personal relations, occupational roles, moral values, and social structures. To some degree these changes reflect parallel developments in American society. But they also show an internal consistency that can be at odds with external reality. . . .

Thirty years ago television's content reflected a more traditional social order, more conservative assumptions about how society works, and more restrictive standards about the propriety of program material. This distant world was dominated by the private lives of traditional families and the protection of society by high-minded law enforcers. It was a world in which social institutions worked, and political concerns rarely intruded into the private lives of the populace. The military assured our national security, and the churches looked after our spiritual values. Moral codes were clear cut and transgressors were punished. Business executives were good guys, and even when bumbling bosses offered amusement, backtalk from workers was a rarity. In general, life's problems were manageable, and the people in charge could usually be trusted to manage them pretty well.

This world began to disappear in the middle 1960s, as television discovered political issues, social conflict, and populist appeals.<sup>o</sup> By decade's end some characters were calling for social change, others were confronting newly hostile authority, and still others were posing moral dilemmas in the sphere of

sexual behavior, race relations, and professional conduct. Within a few years, pointed social and political commentary had become as integral a feature of successful sitcoms as wacky redheads and slightly precocious kids once were. The gangsters and low-lives who were once the main threat to law and order were joined by a phalanx of evil executives and crooked cops. The establishment became a villain, and the good guys had to fight the system in order to make it work. Private life was laden with conflict, as families had to face a new range of social problems and workers and bosses exchanged sarcastic barbs. As surcease from this increasingly conflicted world, television offered its characters new opportunities for sexual gratification. But even the current epidemic of heavy breathing is punctuated by debates over the boundaries of normal behavior and the appropriateness of moral standards.

This, then, is the world that survives in the current prime-time schedule—sarcastic, sometimes cynical, and apt to cast a jaundiced eye on the very standards and sensibilities the medium embraced so enthusiastically a mere generation ago. To call this a less conservative or more liberal version of reality contains some truth but probably carries more weight than these unwieldy labels can safely bear. Some of the change is best characterized as populist—an anti-establishment upsurge of resentment against the rich and powerful. But populism itself has partisan variants, which were expressed in the rise of both a "New Left" and a "New Right" on the recent political landscape.

The New Left's anti-establishment flavor was directed against institutions like business, the military, and religion. Government, in the guise of "old politics," was depicted as a tool of the military-industrial complex and derided for its failure to control economic powers or to protect civil liberties.<sup>o</sup> New Left populism scorned traditional moral restrictions and endorsed "alternative lifestyles," including sexual experimentation, feminism, and more egalitarian<sup>o</sup> family groupings. It castigated the "system" as an instrument of upper-status white males that oppressed blacks, women, homosexuals, and other minorities outside the charmed circle of wealth and power. It embraced the banner of society's victims and endorsed strong government action to make politics more open (the "New Politics") and society more egalitarian and pluralistic.<sup>o</sup>

The New Right was equally anti-establishment, but its goals and villains were quite different. Its target was the liberal Eastern establishment, comprised of government do-gooders, activist judges, woolly-headed intellectuals, and an adversary media. This populism mistrusted government not as the handmaiden of repressive capitalism but as an intrusive tax collector on a quixotic mission of economic redistribution and social leveling.<sup>o</sup> It embraced "tradi-

<sup>o</sup> populist appeals: Appeals to the interests and values of ordinary people.

<sup>o</sup> civil liberties: Examples are freedom of speech, the right to live anywhere, the right to vote, the right to meet with other people for any purpose.

<sup>o</sup> egalitarian: Promoting equality.

<sup>o</sup> pluralistic: Having different ethnic, social, or religious groups pursuing their own interests within one common culture.

<sup>o</sup> social leveling: The phenomenon of people in different social groups becoming more alike.

tional values," including a patriarchal family<sup>9</sup> and more restrictive standards of sexual morality. It condemned the coddling of criminals and catering to minority "special interests" at the expense of hard-working, God-fearing middle Americans. It called for a return to old-fashioned virtues like free enterprise,<sup>10</sup> personal responsibility, patriotism, and religious faith.

These competing strands of populism diverge sharply in the values they uphold and the "establishments" they oppose. Both arose as self-conscious movements in the 1960s, although the populist Right attracted little media attention except in its incarnation as a "silent majority" until the Reagan years, when it became very vocal indeed. Meanwhile, the contemporaneous rise of populist material in television entertainment clearly drew upon the left-wing variant far more than the right-wing. The changes in television's social agenda—increasing criticism of business, the police, and the military; endorsement of sexual diversity and experimentation; women's rights, racial and cultural pluralism—have paralleled the development of Left populism.

This is not to say that TV entertainment has followed this agenda unservedly or has engaged in anything like a radical critique of American society. As we have seen, the "politics" of TV entertainment are mainly a matter of either legitimizing or criticizing social norms and modes of conduct. But beginning from a relatively apolitical and traditional perspective on the social order, TV has meandered and lurched uncertainly along paths forged by the politics of the populist Left.

We can demonstrate this point more systematically with regard to social institutions. To illustrate TV's changing view of the establishment, we combined . . . 139 shows that addressed the theme of honesty vs. corruption in business, politics, and the justice system. Before 1975, 47 percent of these shows indicated the system and 53 percent exonerated it. After 1975, 70 percent condemned the institution as corrupt, and only 30 percent upheld its honor. Moreover, nearly as many shows (sixty-nine) raised this issue in the study's last decade as in the first two decades combined (seventy). So establishment corruption has become a much more common theme of TV entertainment in both relative and absolute terms since 1975.

Although the direction of change is evident, the extent of change varies from one topic to another. For example, television is still relatively traditional in the roles it assigns to female characters but aggressively feminist in the plots that directly address the status of women. Similarly, shows rarely cast such traditional authority figures as clergy or policemen as bad guys, but scripts are increasingly likely to attack religious intolerance or corruption in the criminal justice system.

<sup>9</sup> patriarchal family: A family in which the father has authority over other family members. <sup>10</sup> free enterprise: An economic environment in which private businesses operate for profit with minimal

These examples illustrate more than that the politics of TV entertainment is a mixed bag. They also reveal something about the nature of the mix. The conservative side of television appears mainly in the aspects of life it takes for granted. Few would argue that writers and producers are consciously trying to keep women in their "place" by casting decisions that place them in traditional roles. They are simply populating the screen in terms of social arrangements and interactions that they take for granted, at least until activist groups protest.

This is one complaint of critics on the Left, who argue that television reinforces the status quo<sup>11</sup> by portraying it without criticism. As Donald Lazere puts it, the messages of TV entertainment (and other mass media) "assure us that there are no irreconcilable conflicts within the present social order and that those presently in power are capable of resolving every social problem if we just trust them." Similarly, Larry Gross of the Annenberg School of Communications argues that "the basic reality of the television world is the reality of the American middle-class establishment; its morality is the conventional and rigid Sunday-school morality of the middle class; its heroes and villains are those of the great silent majority." Just by presenting the world as it is without criticizing it, the argument goes, mass entertainment legitimizes its imperfections and thereby helps to perpetuate them.

There is still some truth in this criticism, but it applies far more to the program schedule of a generation ago than to today's prime-time world. Some series, especially traditional family comedies like "Full House," represent holdovers from the early years. But they are not pervasive enough to reverse the trends that began in the late 1960s and have continued unabated since then, as our statistical analysis shows. In fact, the absence of any measurable "Reagan reaction" during the 1980s belies the assertion that television follows the election returns. The internal dynamic of social trends on prime time remained impervious to conservative trends in public discourse on the other coast. If anything, the ascendance of conservative politics in Washington may have accelerated television's leftward tendencies by alarming and mobilizing the predominantly liberal Hollywood community. . . .

Similarly, the networks' much-ballyhooed sensitivity to outside pressure has undoubtedly acted as a brake on the engines of change, but it cannot shift them into reverse. For some pressure groups have been more successful than others. It is difficult to imagine producers submitting their scripts to the fundamentalist Coalition for Better Television for prior review, as they have done for the Gay Media Task Force. Hollywood's response to special interest complaints is dictated not only by the amount of pressure these pressure-groups generate, but also by the perceived righteousness of their cause.

Television's America may once have looked like Los Angeles' Orange County writ large—WASPish,<sup>12</sup> businesslike, religious, patriotic, and middle American.

<sup>11</sup> reinforces the status quo: Maintains social and economic arrangements just as they are. <sup>12</sup> WASPish: Like white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, presumably the most favored group in American society.

Today it better resembles San Francisco's Marin County—trendy, self-expressive, culturally diverse, and cosmopolitan. Some aspects of this world, like the casual acceptance of recreational sex, turn the Left's argument on its head. One could just as easily argue that television is reflecting controversial social changes and, by presenting them as legitimate, accelerating their acceptance across the country.

In many other areas of life, moreover, television offers a picture of life that clearly does not reflect the status quo. One example is the workplace, where workers tell off bosses and warm personal relationships are infinitely more important than economic productivity. Another is ethnic relations. In prime time's pluralistic paradise all racial and ethnic groups live and work together harmoniously; threatened only by the occasional bigot, who is either defeated or sees the error of his ways. Perhaps the clearest divergence from reality is in television's portrayal of criminals, which inverts the real-world portrait of FBI crime statistics. In real life violent crimes are committed disproportionately by blacks, youths, and low-income groups. In prime time violent criminals are mainly wealthy white, mature adults, especially businessmen.