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Citizen Bunker:

Archie Bunker as Working-Class Icon

Kathleen Collins

In 1968, American television producer Norman Lear read a *Variety* review of the British sitcom *Till Death Do Us Part*, which featured a bigoted working-class man and his family living in London's East End. The show's concept—especially the notion of a father and son-in-law in constant political and ideological conflict—struck a chord with Lear, and he went about getting the rights to produce an American rendition in the U.S. The result was one of the most popular television programs in U.S. history, *All in the Family* (1971–1979 CBS).

Elemental to any study of *All in the Family* is a survey of the time period in which it aired and which it conveyed. Working class representation on television was meager in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and Lear's project loudly broke the silence. The show provided opportunities for discourse about class, race, gender, ethnicity, and stereotypes of all stripes. It was a show about a working class man who—paradoxically or not—viewers saw only in the context of his family and who was ambiguously proffered as a hero and anti-hero. After two decades of an American functional-family, happy-ending sitcom stronghold where reality was intentionally kept at bay, *All in the Family* opened the floodgates.

The show did not achieve its status without considerable controversy from the start focused on the show's central character, Archie Bunker. The patriarch of the Bunker

family, Archie (Carroll O'Connor) has been referred to alternately as an “everyman” (Stein 1974, 311) and an “angry-man type” (Arlen 1975, 89) with “hard hat prejudice” (Bettie 1995, 142). The program had a galvanizing effect on mainstream culture and the national consciousness, with Archie symbolizing an era and a personality type. The name Archie Bunker itself, throughout the decades since, has remained synonymous with a blue-collar, racially chauvinistic mentality.

All in the Family premiered on CBS at a dynamic point in U.S. history. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the country as a whole was undergoing a tumultuous period politically and culturally, characterized broadly by conflicts over the Vietnam War, a sexual revolution, and a counterculture movement. Lear assembled the overriding feelings of the nation surrounding these issues and planted them in the show. *All in the Family* communicated “cynicism, satire, protest, anger, doubt, bitterness, despair, and nostalgia...[which] could not have succeeded at the apogee of the Kennedy New Frontier, the period of limitless hope, faith, optimism, vigor, and expectation,” writes Howard Stein. “*All in the Family* is a product of the twilight of the New Frontier, the Great Society, and Imperial America” (Stein 1974, 281). It was the negative afterimage of the American Dream seen on the 1950s sitcoms like *Father Knows Best* (1954–1960 CBS), *Leave it to Beaver* (1957–1963 CBS/ABC) and *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957 CBS) (as well as the conservative and/or family-values oriented shows in the 1980s like *The Cosby Show* [1984–1992 CBS]). “The Nelsons and Cleavers were advertising and embodying the American dream,” writes Ella Taylor, “portraying the middle-class family as an essential building block of a benign social order. ... The robustly working-class Bunker household was never a model of consumer vitality, nor did it aspire to be” (1989a, 17,

24). Where shows like these celebrated a consumerist ethic, *All in the Family* embraced a challenging agenda that meshed with the prevailing American mindset and the goals of some of the more forward-thinking television producers and sponsors.

All in the Family was groundbreaking on a number of levels (notably tackling contemporary issues of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, politics, etc.), but perhaps the most underappreciated factor was that it represented a return of the working class to American TV screens when it premiered in January 1971. Archie Bunker is in many ways reminiscent of his not-too-distant blue-collar 1950s predecessors Ralph Kramden, Chester A. Riley, and Jake Goldberg.¹ Between 1958 and 1970, however, there were no domestic sitcoms representing the blue-collar working class (Butsch & Glennon 1983, 80) with the exception of the animated Fred Flintstone (*The Flintstones*, 1960-66 ABC). Even outside of that particular dry spell working-class families were in short supply from the 1940s through the 1980s (Butsch 1992, 389).

Work—that is to say, Archie *at work*—is not actually visible on *All in the Family*. Lynn Berk writes, “While *All in the Family* has been touted and viewed as a show about working-class people, there is little about working-class life and culture in the show” (1977, 30). While this is accurate in that there is virtually no explicit work presented in the show, *All in the Family* is fully about working-class life and its enveloping culture. Though we never see Archie at his job (whether as a loading dock foreman or part time cab driver), work is the essence of the show, implied or discussed or worried about in every episode. The audience is privy to, as Howard Stein describes, “Archie’s uneasy preoccupation with work” (1974, 296). In this Archie resembles his forbears Kramden, Goldberg and Riley (Lipsitz 1986, 370, 377), where later shows, like *Roseanne* (1988-97

ABC) and *King of Queens* (1998-2007 CBS) would be more likely to occasionally show characters at work given technological production advancements as well as shifting sitcom trends. Viewers immediately understand the socioeconomic context presented on *All in the Family*, and the notion of Archie as a working man and as a working-class man underpins the show. Just as a character need not announce, “I am black” or “I am white,” nor does he need to announce his social class if indeed the conventions of character portrayal are well executed. Archie was “a palpable working-class figure, recognized by his syntax, his body language, his gruff, semi-articulate speech that parodied the results of working-class culture,” writes Stanley Aronowitz (1992, 199). Likewise, the aesthetics of the set design—worn-looking and drab furniture and clothing—disclose the lack of means within the Bunker household.

In spite of its scarcity in number, the working-class male has long been a television staple and broad character type. The stereotype, that of an immature, inept, bungling buffoon who is surpassed in competence by his spouse or other family members, is still embedded in American popular culture (Butsch 1992, 391; 2003, 575). Though television has offered a more inclusive and often more nuanced array of working class sitcom characters in the intervening decades (e.g. *Roseanne*, *Everybody Hates Chris* [2005-09 UPN/CW]), the buffoon has persisted in various degrees in the fictional characters of Homer Simpson (*The Simpsons*, 1989-present Fox), Hank Hill (*King of the Hill*, 1997-2009 Fox) and Al Bundy (*Married with Children*, 1987-97 Fox).

Indelible images exist for complex reasons. Barbara Ehrenreich describes the media’s late 1960s “discovery” of the existence of the working-class majority and their professed embarrassment at their own prior blindness. She theorizes that the media and

intellectual elite needed a “new folk hero” to essentially voice their own rising conservatism (1989, 99-101). While that dynamic may have some play, what is more obvious is that, as is customary for the medium, networks keep recycling the tried working class buffoon to avoid risk and ensure commercial success (Butsch 2003). *All in the Family* was a risk taken intentionally by CBS in 1970 because its president, Robert Wood, realized the network desperately needed to innovate in order to capture the desired youthful baby boom demographic (Butsch 1992, 388; Adler xx-xxiv; Gitlin 1985, 208-17). Though Archie did embody a number of the working-class buffoon characteristics—lack of education, malapropisms, imprudent schemes—Lear’s choice of subject matter helped mitigate an all out replica of the stereotype. This is but one of the ways that Archie differed from his blue-collar antecedents.

All in the Family was not the first sitcom to “break the blue-collar boycott” (Marc 1997, 178). *Arnie* appeared on CBS five months prior to Archie. Arnie, like Archie, was a loading dock worker. Unlike Archie, Arnie’s was a fish-out-of-water rag-to-riches tale (not unlike *The Beverly Hillbillies*) where the title character was promoted in his job and provided with the cultural trappings of the managerial middle class. “Lear, however, supplied no such *deus ex machina* to lift Archie Bunker out of load-dock Hades to the Olympus of white-collar bourgeois security,” writes David Marc. “Archie drove a cab part-time on weekends, got laid off, suffered inflation, got mugged, lost his homeowner’s insurance, and went on strike. ... Archie shlepped the baggage of mass man through an incomprehensible clutter of social contexts” (1997, 179-80). Arnie did not stand a chance on TV against Archie, who made an impact in large part because he could

not extricate himself from his class or his circumstances. This entrapment rang true with American viewers.

Just as Arnie's unrealistic class-jumping premise prevented him from taking hold, so the rural comedies (e.g. *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *Green Acres*, *Mayberry R.F.D.*) and superficial middle-class representations were losing ground with viewers. With *All in the Family*, "the 'age of relevance' was ushered in" (Taylor 1989a, 19). A close adherence to reality was important to Lear, as it had been to creator Johnny Speight in the British version (Miller 2000, 142). There were other shows that dealt with topicality previously: dramas *The Defenders* (CBS 1961–1965) and *East Side, West Side* (CBS 1964–1965) and variety shows *Laugh-In* (NBC 1968–1973) and *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* (CBS 1967–1968). Similarly *Dragnet 1967* (NBC 1967–1970) and *The Mod Squad* (ABC 1968–1973) incorporated news events into their storylines. But topicality in a sitcom, especially serious and contentious issues such as race, class, feminism, sexuality, politics, and generational conflict, was a novelty (and ironically, despite the reality-based matter, considered creative).

The issues and problems addressed on *All in the Family* were recognizable to many Americans, a marked departure from preceding sitcoms ("Do you recognize anyone on *Green Acres*?" asked one journalist in 1971 (Alan Bunce, "*All in the Family*: TV Social Departure," *Christian Science Monitor*, January 18, 1971, reprinted in Adler 1979, 83). Though critics argued that Archie's persona was hyperbolic,² thus much of the controversy about stereotyping the working class as bigots, the subject matter was not. Unemployment, hate crime, sexual assault, menopause, infidelity, addiction, religious intolerance, and mortality were real world issues all taken on by Lear.

All in the Family came along at a pivotal point not just in national history but in television history as well. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, executives made a concerted and calculated shift towards a demographic programming strategy. Without the realization that such an approach was seen as necessary to save faltering network ratings and reputations, *All in the Family* may not have been picked up by CBS. The show was expected to appeal to the young as well as to the disaffected. The timing was perfect since the media was anxious to hold up the working-class demographic after having admittedly ignored them for too long. The push and prominence of the labor movement in the country also added to the show's relevance. The working class was not only absent from television for a decade, but it was a neglected segment of the population who felt powerless and angry (Carroll 1990, 58).³ The reappearance of the working class in televised fiction—heralded by the presence of the Bunkers—corresponded to a revival in the nation at large where workers often took center stage. It seemed for a moment that the 1970s had the potential to be labor's decade. Labor historian Jefferson Cowie describes “a broad blue-collar revival in the 1970s, as working-class America returned to the national consciousness through strikes, popular culture, voting booths, and corporate strategy” (2010, 2).

Domestic sitcoms in the 1950s proffered, as Ella Taylor explains, “a postwar ideology breezily forecasting steady rates of economic growth that would produce abundance sufficient to eliminate ethnic and class conflict” (1989a, 17). Lear's program, on the other hand, reported real problems. Where 1990s sitcom *Seinfeld* (1989–1998 NBC) was “a show about nothing” and the minutiae of daily life, *All in the Family* was its polar opposite. For the Bunkers, Taylor writes, “almost every problem generated an all-

out war of ideas” (1989a, 25). The plots and themes resonated in both specific and larger, cultural ways. “...*All in the Family*, for all its flaws,” writes Richard Adler, “helped us to see what was happening to ourselves and our society” (1979, xxxix). Jefferson Cowie referred to the show as “a sort of national therapy session as the generations, the races, the genders, and the classes clashed over post-sixties values and politics” (2010, 9).

Therapy, of course, is not to be equated with an easy or painless cure, and the “session” coordinated by *All in the Family* was more akin to a combination of gestalt and primal scream varieties. The triumphant return of the working class to TV garnered relatively little contemporaneous attention. Despite the fact that Lynn Berk referred to *All in the Family* as “the first [working-class comedy on American television] in which class status is the dominant comic device” (1977, 29), the obvious fact of the Bunkers’ social class was overshadowed by Archie’s attitudes about race and ethnicity. Archie was frequently referred to as a “lovable bigot,”⁴ a term many critics argued was an oxymoron. Voluminous evidence on both sides—some believed that satirizing the character of Archie was a clever and effective approach to bigotry while others argued it was a legitimization—illustrates the firestorm that erupted upon meeting Archie Bunker in 1971.⁵

Nevertheless, Lear’s decision to make Archie a working-class character set the tone of the entire show and comprised its fabric. The Bunker family is referred to in turn as “working class” and “lower middle class,” (Dwight Newton, “Introduction to a Bigot,” *San Francisco Examiner*, January 12, 1971, reprinted in Adler 1979, 81), and indeed their circumstances invited varying perspectives. The Bunkers lived in a Queens, New York, neighborhood that seemed a place some working class members would see as desirable—

neighboring houses were close together, but they had space within, enough to house their grown children. “[T]he fact that the Bunkers live in a detached single-family dwelling is enough to bestow upon them the middle-class status of *alrightniks*,” writes David Marc (1997, 181). But these potentially mixed messages were not the stuff of letters to the editor or water-cooler talk the way that audiences two decades later seemed indignant over the minimally employed *Friends* (1994–2004 NBC) with their impossibly large apartments in Manhattan’s high-rent West Village.

Just before the show’s second season, American novelist Laura Hobson wrote a reproachful critique of *All in the Family* in the *New York Times* (“As I Listened to Archie Say ‘Hebe’ . . .,” September 12, 1971) focusing on the damaging effects of bigotry wrapped in comedy. Lear defended himself in the same publication a month later (“As I Read How Laura Saw Archie . . .,” October 19, 1971), but it was not until Hobson’s son wrote a letter to the editor in response to Lear that there was any mention of class. “[I]t is a peculiar irony that one of the most vicious stereotypes in our society is not a racial, but *class* stereotype—that of the racist worker, the reactionary hardhat,” wrote Christopher Hobson. “This is a stereotype very comforting to the middle and upper classes in their suburbs, so much more thoroughly segregated than, say, the working-class East Side of Detroit where I live. . . . This, perhaps, is *All in the Family*’s most notable contribution to the culture of bigotry in the United States” (*New York Times*, November 7, 1971). Christopher Hobson echoes Ehrenreich’s theory, implying that the working class was used as a patsy.

Because concurrent audience research studies explored reactions to Archie’s character based on respondents’ race, ethnicity, gender, and preexisting racial attitudes

without looking at respondents' social class demographics or income,⁶ there is a dearth of definitive evidence of working-class audiences' perception of Archie. Undoubtedly, some segment of the viewing audience was of Archie's blue collar and conservative ilk and laughed knowingly—approvingly or not—at his remarks and behavior. Others surely believed themselves to be “above” him, and they laughed—also, they believed, knowingly—at the unsophisticated, uneducated persona.

Scarce representations of working-class characters perpetuated the supposed irrelevance of the working class in the real world as well as a persistent lack of positive images. The portrayal of bigotry as a characteristic of the lower class did not sit well with some, and a scant few critics did address the elitist stereotype. “[I]t’s about time clever liberal writers started easing up their portrayal of working-class whites as bigots. Some are; some aren’t,” wrote civil rights leader Whitney M. Young, Jr. weeks after the show’s premiere. “Purveying that stereotype is just as objectionable as the racial slurs we’ve heard. Studies show that Wallacites are drawn from the middle class as much as from workers, and many of the upper-class men who control the racist institutions in our society are more deserving of exposure than workers.” (Whitney M. Young, Jr., “Irresponsible Television Production Aids Racism,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, February 4, 1971, reprinted in Adler 1979, 86). Likewise Lynn Berk writes, “When workers do encounter a blue collar character, he is Archie Bunker, the bigoted hardhat who reinforces workers’ most negative image of themselves. ... We find no bigots on the middle-class sitcoms, and the very idea of Bob Newhart calling someone a jungle bunny is appalling. Bigotry exists in the middle class, without doubt, but the racism of such a character would scarcely be considered humorous” (1977, 30-31).

Lear did demonstrate bigotry in the middle class in at least one instance. The Bunker's black next door neighbor, George Jefferson (Sherman Hemsley), a formidable contender in bigotry himself, "moves on up" after a few seasons into an upper class neighborhood thanks to the success of his dry cleaning business. But as audiences see on the *All in the Family* spinoff, *The Jeffersons* (1975–1985 CBS), George takes his prejudices with him. Interestingly, once the Jeffersons move on up and out, the main difference between the two families is class, not race. However, when Archie moved up into the petite bourgeoisie after becoming a business owner (*Archie's Place* 1979–1983 CBS), his bigotry all but dissipated, and audiences witnessed him standing up for the same downtrodden groups he formerly disparaged, e.g., his Jewish stepdaughter, Jewish business partner, Irish cook, and Hispanic bar workers (Ozersky 2003, 133). When *Archie's Place* began, he went from working class to entrepreneur class, "sapping the sitcom of a powerful tension it had spent years building" (Marc 1997, 186). Perhaps this attests to *The Jeffersons* better success than *Archie's Place*—tension and controversy are proven audience draws.

The view that Archie gives the working class a too-influential negative image is well documented and certainly arguable (despite the creator's intent). Another perspective, however, is that of Archie as a stereotype-buster, a "rearguard character" according to Stanley Aronowitz (1992, 199), if one subscribes to the also popular image of the working class man as good and heroic, a "clean-living, honest, hard-working person who is tolerant of his fellowman, God-fearing, perhaps a bit materialistic, but generally speaking a fine figure...[and] a reservoir of good sense and an upholder of our democratic values" (Berger 1976, 12). As Asa Berger posits, *All in the Family*

demythologizes. While such a sunny image did not need to be shattered as there was virtually no negative press about the likes of Jim Anderson, the insurance salesman patriarch of *Father Knows Best*, the confrontational situations in *All in the Family* were of a piece with the harsh realities abounding at the time of Archie's ascendance.

Aronowitz calls Archie "a moral agent suffused with evil, a direct violation of the code according to which the working class (however scarce the media image) was invariably a hero" (Aronowitz 1992, 198-99). David Marc also offers two interpretations of Archie as a symbol of the working class—either the working class was "slandered with hardhat hyperbole" or "the fears of the great ignored masses of wage earners [were] finally finding expression in the medium they had carried on their backs to cultural dominance" (1997, 177).

In addition to the readings of Archie's character, *All in the Family* provided other outlets for long-held prejudices. The fact of Archie's gender—again, unfortunate due to a scarcity of comparable examples in television—compounds a problem in the real world of labor. As Julie Bettie describes, labor unions often excluded women and people of color from their activities (Bettie 1995, 143). In cultural representations, too, not only was the working class invisible or buffoonerized, but women were generally invisible from the category. And in *All in the Family*, in keeping with the gendered stereotype of buffoon patriarch and juxtaposed with non-buffoon family members, Archie's wife is habitually the voice of justice and reason thereby furthering potential critiques of the negative working class male image.

Apart from Archie's continuous jabs at various ethnic groups, his own ethnicity is never made explicit. He is steadfastly not the *other*, in his own self-perception, but rather

pure America personified. He was the “first explicitly WASP hourly wage earner,” writes Marc (1997, 178). That he was a WASP was clear, given his anti-Catholic slurs and the fact that the church he occasionally goes to (when Edith can cajole him) is led by *Reverend* Felcher. While the actor, Carroll O’Connor, is Irish-American, that category is ruled out for Archie since he insults the Irish, too (tossing in “mick” along with “hebe”, “spic,” “polack,” “spade,” and other racial slurs). Since he has to engage daily with his Polish-American son-in-law, the Polish jibes are relentless. As Barbara Ehrenreich writes, at the time “a comedy targeting any particular white ethnic group might have faced pickets and boycotts” (1989, 115). But as an unspecified ethnicity, Archie was free to attack the greatest number of other groups (Miller 2000, 145), which, as objectionable as it sounds, was largely the point. Archie was paradoxically inclusive in his prejudices.

The title *All in the Family* reveals a great deal about the way the show’s content is presented. Though we don’t see Archie at work, we know much about his life as a worker, and though we don’t see on screen newspaper headlines and congressional hearings (though we do see, for instance, a crowded unemployment office and a degrading job interview), we know what is taking place in the country. These events are played out “in the family,” where that context provides a forum for the airing and debate of current issues. Because of the purposefully differing political and social perspectives under that one roof, 704 Hauser Street serves as a makeshift microcosm of society.

The family therein consists of Archie, his wife, Edith (Jean Stapleton), their adult daughter, Gloria (Sally Struthers), and Gloria’s husband, Mike (Rob Reiner). Par for sitcom form, the plot revolves around conflict, and given the constellation of characters, there are ample opportunities. Archie’s station in life and his attending values as the

breadwinning (oftentimes -losing) blue-collar patriarch are illuminated by the contrast to his liberal daughter and son-in-law. Class conflict within the household is a central theme. Because Mike is in college and then graduate school while living with Archie (who never completed high school), every day is a reminder to Archie and the viewer that Mike and Gloria are striving to leave the working class and, in certain non-fiscal ways, already have. In essence, Mike and Gloria are middle class citizens temporarily living among the working class. “With *All in the Family*, the connection of incompetence to class is strengthened by the contrast between Archie and his son-in-law Michael,” writes Richard Butsch. “Archie’s ignorance and foolishness are contrasted to his middle class son-in-law’s reasonableness and intelligence” (Butsch & Glennon 1980, 12). Archie’s malapropisms stand out even more against Mike’s academic-political speech (though they both tend to read from their platform’s figurative manual, and Mike is arguably a flat liberal stereotype). In the episode “Success Story” (air date March 30, 1971), Mike explains to one of Archie’s old army buddies that he is in college now but plans later to work with Ralph Nader to fight corruption in business. In the episode “The Bunkers and Inflation, Part I” (air date September 14, 1974), when Archie’s union is threatening to strike, Gloria explains to her father why workers/strikers deserve respect. As is the case in every situation where Mike, Gloria, or Edith tries to “enlighten” Archie, he rejects the lesson. “Respect is for the dead,” he replies. “The living need dough.” His response, while delivered belligerently, provides a dose of the thought-provoking reality and fodder for debate that garnered the show’s critical acclaim and historical precedence.

Work is a troublesome concern for all members of the family at one time or another—each struggles with finding or keeping gainful employment. Nevertheless,

virtually all of the talk of employment and its implications takes place at home, mostly in the living room and kitchen, the heart and the hearth. Because of work's specter in their lives (and because of TV production limitations⁷), work and home are justifiably merged. "Prior to *All in the Family*, social problems were portrayed as something that happened "out there,' in the public arena," writes Richard Adler, aptly summarizing the set-up. "By contrast, home was a refuge and the family was sacrosanct, the realm of the purely domestic. Lear ignored these conventions and portrayed the family as a political arena—as *the* political arena" (1979, xxxix).

The focus of the comedy and controversy may be on Archie, but he only exists as a reacting figure to his family and other characters. If Archie were competent and successful or accepting of the opinions of those around him, there would be no plot or dramatic tension (Stein 1974, 281; Butsch 1992, 391). Because the action takes place inside the Bunker household of which Archie is the head, he is ostensibly in charge. Indeed he fulfills the man-of-the-house role in traditional ways that help to maintain his fragile dignity. He is the protector (as he sees it), concerned when a black family moves in next door, vigilant about crime, suspicious of computers, focused on job security, aware (though frequently uninformed) of politics and the ways in which the external world presents challenges to the family. In turn the family assumes expected gender roles. Edith is a homemaker and accepts, for the most part, her jobs as assigned by her husband. Gloria, a motivated and burgeoning feminist, continually argues with her father—and sometimes even her husband—about women's equality.

Archie behaves as though he is master of his domain, the king of his "castle in Queens" (Stein 1974, 282). Stein views *All in the Family* through a family dynamics lens.

“[*All in the Family*]...is the dramatization of the vanishing and constricting world of *the man*, the self-reliant, self-activating frontiersman, now become captive. Everything in the series is a staging of this archetypal situation. It is a portrait of a man losing and holding on for dear life” (Stein 1974, 280). Various critics and academics have inferred the significance of the name Bunker, including the idea that the home is a bunker, a protected place during an attack, as well as someone who emits nonsense or “bunk” (McCrohan 1987, 38-40; Miller 2000, 144; Berger 1976, 24). Jefferson Cowie’s description sums up the situation well: “Archie is constantly under assault living with the vaguely New Left Mike and Gloria as well as his morally sincere wife Edith, struggling to remain king of his tawdry row house” (2010, 193).

Butsch and Glennon confirm the utility of the family context. In studying working-class representations on TV, they focus on family series, in part, because family life provides a view of “social class lifestyle” (1980, 11). While workplace sitcoms would become commonplace later—e.g. *M*A*S*H*, *Taxi*, *Barney Miller*, *WKRP in Cincinnati*, *Murphy Brown*, *News Radio*, *30 Rock*, *The Office*—in *All in the Family*, work woes were thrashed out at home among family. Presenting workplace scenarios, while rich with plot lines and a potential variety of characters, is in many ways too limited. To witness how characters interact with the world outside work, especially in the family milieu, is an effective way to observe real personas—Archie would not have as much freedom to voice his controversial opinions if he was in the presence of colleagues and supervisors. Archie has some semblance of being the boss at home, where it is understood that at work this is very not likely the case, even if he is a foreman. “The workplace is probably the most authoritarian environment in which the adult finds himself,” explains United

Auto Workers Vice President Irving Bluestone. “Its rigidity and denial of freedom lead people to live a double life; at home they enjoy substantially the autonomy and self-fulfillment of free citizens; at work they are subject to constant regimentation, supervision and control by others” (Carroll 1990, 65). This is even truer when it comes to blue-collar jobs. However, Archie’s home is, by design, both his refuge and an unwitting battleground. “Ultimately,” writes Stein, essentially summarizing Lear’s objective, “it is the portrait of a *whole family’s situation* in contemporary America” (Stein 1974, 281).

Aronowitz describes *The Honeymooners*’ (1955–1956 CBS) Ralph Kramden and *The Life of Riley*’s (1949–1950, 1953–1958 NBC) Chester A. Riley as “comic figures rather than tragic figures [whose] economic problems were almost insignificant compared to their family conflicts” (1983, 89). But in *All in the Family*, the family conflicts, while explosive at times, take a back seat to economic problems. Whenever Archie has a serious problem—e.g. job loss, illness—the fighting ceases, everyone rallies to comfort him, and the scene ends without laughter or applause from the live studio audience. Moments like these set the sitcom apart from its predecessors and plant it squarely in the realm of “relevant.” *All in the Family* was, in most ways, markedly distant from its 1950s antecedents that depicted a benign world both outside and inside the family (Taylor 1989a, 26).

While his character was ridiculed and to some degree a caricature, Archie’s beliefs represented many of the realities of a working-class American struggling to make a good life for himself and his family. Despite his intolerance and inflexibility (or perhaps including them), there are parts of his character that almost all viewers could relate to. Bigotry aside, the rest of Archie’s persona gave voice to many a working-class

citizen's tribulations. As David Marc comments, "Archie's animus is mitigated by the fact that he is the sole breadwinner of four adults, a relevant reminder ... that a contempt for hardhatism does not change the fact that workers like Archie are the people who make civilization and culture possible" (1997, 183).

For those who were crying *with* him rather than laughing *at* him, Archie resembled Barbara Ehrenreich's sketch of the worker as "both a throwback to childish, outmoded values *and* ... a collective superego, holding out for hard work, tract houses, and processed food against the mad drift of the psychedelized culture at large" (1989, 121). The title of the show's pilot and theme song, "Those Were the Days," emphasized Archie's dream of a simpler (though idealized) time, a world that he could understand and upon which he could exert some control. Archie's own home was a proscenium for the changing tide against which he continually battled. The theme song that he sang with Edith at the piano had him longing for another era, even that of Herbert Hoover (though in at least one episode he connected to his father's struggles during the Great Depression). In 1970s America, Archie seemed to feel that the world was against him—economically, socially, politically and culturally—and his angry attitude betrayed actual confusion, fear and a mounting sense of powerlessness. "He was the Sisyphus of the hardhats," writes Josh Ozersky, "constantly attempting to roll Meathead, Gloria, Edith, Norman Lear, his neighbors, the scriptwriters, and the political climate of the 1960s generally back up the hill of vanished time" (2003, 66). Many viewers likely found in Archie a figure who freely expressed their anger and frustration, thereby relieving their own tension. "[I]n idolizing a fictitious character," writes Peter Carroll, "viewers inadvertently accentuated their passive relationship to the larger society" (1990, 63).

Even though he does not represent any ethnic group, Howard Stein likens Archie to the ethnic-Americans and foreigners that he ridicules and sees him as “the hero of many silent ethnics, voicing the hopes and dreams that America has personified. . . . Archie and the ‘ethnic’ Everyman are equally the ‘little man,’ the underdog,’ the ‘kept child’ who has been exploited and never been encouraged to develop, the obedient and servile ‘peasant’ and ‘tool,’ everywhere a ‘silent majority’ who work someone else’s machinery” (Stein 1974, 311). Archie stood in for working-class citizens seeking their due. As *Newsweek*’s film critic wrote in 1971, “his popularity coincides with, and probably thrives on, a growing national awareness that the white, Middle American working stiff deserves more sympathy than he’s been getting: not for his bigotry, which may be present or absent according to the individual, but for carrying a disproportionate share of America’s social and economic burdens” (Joseph Morgenstern, “Can Bigotry Be Funny”, *Newsweek*, November 29, 1971 reprinted in Adler 1979, 111). (It is worth noting here, that despite the Bunker’s location in Queens, New York, his difficulties are representative of “Middle America” given the powerful common denominator of class.) He believes that he has done everything right but is still in search of his reward that he feels is “being given away by the government to racial strangers, sexual deviants, and ideological insurgents” (1997, 181). Folk hero though he may be for some, Archie *cannot* be separated from his bigotry. He needs someone to blame, so he accuses the most “other” in his midst—certainly not his president or other authority figures, as his foils do.

Archie is unrelenting in his tirades because of his enduring belief in the American Dream. He remains befuddled in every episode and does not see the error of his ways or grow wiser from his mistakes (as many earlier sitcom characters did, e.g. a grounded

Beaver Cleaver or an apologetic Ralph Kramden who tells his wife that she is “the greatest.”) That inability to learn is part of the source of his “iconic power” (Ozersky 2003, 66). Just as he never learns his lessons in each episode, he doesn’t seem to learn that working and doing what is expected of him will not necessarily result in “success.” He clings nostalgically to that belief. His optimism is moving, but his inability to see how he is trapped in his circumstances is pitiable, and it is something that everyone around him, even his family, sees clearly. He also fails to see the contradiction in his attitudes toward freedom (Stein 1974, 304). Ever at the ready to loudly sing any American anthem that cherishes liberty, when it comes to individuals’ freedom to live as they wish, he deems them “Commie pinkos.”

Archie is both ambiguous and ambivalent. In the episode “Archie is Worried About His Job” (air date March 16, 1971), when layoffs are threatened at the loading dock Archie professes concern for his subordinates, assuring Edith that he could get another job in ten minutes (again, to protect both his wife and his dignity) but worries about the other workers and their ability to find work: “Remember our mothers and fathers lived through the Depression,” Edith says to Archie. “You came through it real good.” Archie, looking beaten, responds, “My old man never got over it.” A short while later, he finds out his job is safe and his mood changes instantly. “No man starves who’s willing to go out and work,” he proclaims triumphantly. In this scene, the masterful O’Connor makes it clear that underneath his flag-waving, World War II veteran bravado, Archie is scared. This scene is also emblematic of his conflicted persona in that he perpetually wavers between pragmatism (“the living need dough”) and spouting patriotic rhetoric (“No man starves...”).

Likewise, on the “Unemployment Story” episode (air date October 6, 1976), Archie learns that he was fired but keeps the news from his family during a party to celebrate Mike’s first academic article being published. Gloria explains to Archie that the publication means that Mike is “on his way to a lifetime of security.” Archie responds, “I wish they’d give that to people who really work for a living.” As the rest of the partygoers sing “Happy Days are Here Again,” the camera trains on Archie’s pained face. On some level, Archie sees that he has lost, but he puts in great effort to hiding the realization from both his family and himself.

Out of touch with the new generation and a changing country, Archie desperately hangs onto outmoded values, notions of family, institutions, and platitudes. He “represents a class culture at bay, dispossessed by a brash, pluralistic world he comprehends only dimly but will fend off to the death,” writes Taylor (1989b, 70). Archie’s actual jobs provide examples of his powerlessness outside the home. He struggles with his bosses, unemployment and health insurance and is tempted by get-rich schemes. Harboring the American Dream, he hopes to follow in the footsteps, ironically, of his black neighbor, George Jefferson. “I wanna raise myself up,” he says to Edith. “I want my name on something’ more than just a lunchpail” (Episode “Archie Gets the Business,” air date February 2, 1977). Eventually he does manage to own a business—the bar where he spent many hours attempting to escape his uncomfortable reality—but even that experience provided him trouble and disappointment.

The crux of *All in the Family* is the life that Archie’s blue-collar jobs afford him, including the house and working-class neighborhood where he lives and the family over which he presides—even down to the daughter and son-in-law who oppose his values.

Archie's status as a hero is open to interpretation. While some paint him as "folk hero" (Bettie 1995, 128), others see him as an "anti-hero" (Cowie 2010, 192) or "hero as victim" (Stein 1974, 308). For a short while he was virtually the sole representative of the working class on American television. His appearance, however, was a watershed, and many other shows featuring blue-collar America followed in short order—*The Waltons* (1972–1981 CBS), *Good Times* (1974–1979 CBS) *Sanford and Son* (1972–1977 NBC), *Laverne and Shirley* (1976–1983 ABC), *Alice* (1976–1985 CBS). The story lines on *All in the Family*, writes Taylor "blazed a trail for the panoply of social problems that have since become standard television fare" (1989a, 19). The portrayal of such a character on TV led many to celebrate the show, and as one of the most recognizable and enduring characters in U.S. television history, Archie Bunker is undeniably an icon—one not just for the real working class but for TV characters as well.

The presence of Archie Bunker on American TV screens filled a gap where a swath of American demographic had been overlooked. The subject of class was finally given some attention, and though it was a comedy, it was treated in earnest. Archie's existence was a major force in moving both television and society forward. The issues addressed were vital to the lives of the working class, women, minorities and consequently, to television producers and politicians in their decision making.

Archie Bunker traded in stereotypes, both in how he perceived and reacted to others and in how his character was portrayed. With regard to the latter, a superficial critique would paint Archie as a two-dimensional figure himself, as the hackneyed working class buffoon, but he was a multifaceted conglomerate of ambiguities – the lovable bigot or detestable bigot, the stereotype purveyor or stereotype buster, hero or

villain? These opposing forces enhanced the realness and relevance that Lear sought and at least hinted at the complex mindset of a working class man in a time of cultural transformation in America. It was a mindset that had been ignored by both television and the larger culture for some time.

The show's success strongly suggested that audiences might prefer to see themselves in the harsh light of reality rather than as a shiny idealized version. Viewers seemed to embrace the confrontation and shrug off the need for escape as it had been conventionally construed by television. Rather than keeping the world outside, the world entered the Bunker home where work and family merged. In the supposed bunker of his home, however, Archie was at once safe but also vulnerable, a situation that in itself earns him a fair assessment as a realistic representative of the working class.

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¹ Ralph Kramden (Jackie Gleason) of *The Honeymooners* (1955-1956 CBS); Chester Riley (Jackie Gleason, William Bendix) of *The Life of Riley* (1949-1950; 1953-1958

DuMont, NBC); Jake Goldberg (Philip Loeb, Harold J. Stone) of *The Goldbergs* (1949-1956 CBS, NBC, DuMont)

² *Newsweek*'s Joseph Morgenstern argued that *All in the Family* is realistic only in relative terms, that it “pretends to deal with current events” but in a “clearly pretend way...And few viewers are likely to confuse *All in the Family* with the 6 o'clock news” (Morgenstern, reprinted in Adler 1979, 111).

³ Carroll as well as Cowie (2010) and Ehrenreich (1989) particularly discuss the disaffection of the white working class.

⁴ The term was first used to describe Archie in a January 13, 1971 *Variety* review and was commonly used thereafter.

⁵ Adler (1979) includes excerpts and reprints from a good number of critics' and audience reactions.

⁶ If these data points were collected, they were not summarized in the published articles. Adler (1979, 123-180) reprints several of these reports, e.g. Vidmar & Rokeach and Brigham & Giesbrecht.

⁷ Most of the action takes place downstairs in these two room partially due to “economic and production benefits of using a single set as well as by dramatic and ideological concerns” (Miller 2000, 148).