

Affirming Inaction: Television and the Politics of Racial Representation

with Justin Lewis

Introduction

One of the abiding concerns in contemporary North America culture has been the many attempts to deal with race and racial inequality. Since racism is often understood as a perception dependent upon negative or stereotypical images, debates about race have often centered around the issue of representation, with analytical glances increasingly cast toward television, as the main image-maker in our culture.

In order to make sense of the many competing claims about the way black people are represented on TV, we carried out an extensive study based upon a content analysis of primetime television together with a series of 52 focus group interviews (made up of 26 white, 23 black and 3 Latino groups) from a range of class backgrounds. The interviews were designed to probe attitudes to race and the media representation thereof. To facilitate these discussions, each interview began with the viewing of an episode of *The Cosby Show*.

The Cosby Show was chosen because it has, in many ways, changed the way television thinks about the portrayal of African Americans. During the time it took for *The Cosby Show* to go from being innovative to institutional, African Americans became a fairly common sight on network television in the United States. And not just any African Americans: our content analysis confirmed that we now see a plethora of middle and upper-middle class black characters populating our screens. Major black characters—from *ER* to *Sportsnight*—are now much more likely to be well-heeled professionals than blue collar workers. In this sense, Bill Cosby can be credited with spurring a move towards racial equality on television. Fictional characters on U.S. television have always inclined to be middle or upper-middle class—since the late 1980s, black people have become an equal and everyday part of this upwardly mobile world.

The Cosby Show was, in this sense, more than just another sitcom. It represents a turning point in television culture, to a new era in which black actors have possibilities beyond the indignities of playing a crude and limited array of black stereotypes, an era in which white audiences can accept TV programs with more than just an occasional "token" black character. There is, it seems, much to thank Bill Cosby for. He has, quite literally, changed the face of network television.

At first reading, our study suggested that the upward mobility of black representation precipitated by *The Cosby Show* was an unambiguously positive phenomenon. It appeared, from

our focus groups, to promote an attitude of racial tolerance among white viewers, for whom black television characters have become ordinary and routine, and to generate a feeling of pride and relief among black viewers. But *The Cosby Show* and the new generation of black professional on U.S. television are caught up in a set of cultural assumptions about race and class that complicate the political ramifications of such a trend.

It is true that, in recent decades, the size of the black middle class in the U.S. has grown. This much said, the social success of black TV characters in the wake of *The Cosby Show* does not reflect any overall trend towards black prosperity in the world *beyond* television. On the contrary, the period in which *The Cosby Show* dominated television ratings—1984 to 1990—witnessed a comparative decline in the fortunes of most African Americans in the United States. The racial inequalities that scarred the U.S. before the civil rights movement could only be rectified by instituting major structural changes in the nation's social, political and economic life—an idea informing Great Society interventions in the 1960s and 1970s. Since the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, both Republican and Democratic Administrations have generally withdrawn from any notion of large-scale public intervention in an iniquitous system, committing themselves instead to promoting a global, free enterprise economy. This *laissez faire* approach has resulted in the stagnation or gradual erosion of advances made by black people during the 1960s. For all the gains made in the fictional world of TV, by almost all demographic measures (such as education, health, levels of incarceration, income and wealth) the United States remains a racially divided society.

As William Julius Wilson has documented, maintaining these divisions are a set of socio-economic conditions that keep most people in their place (Wilson, 1987). The "American Dream" of significant upward mobility is an aspiration that few can or will ever realize. It is an idea sustained by fictions and by anecdotes that focus on the exceptions rather than the rules of class division. If we are to begin any kind of serious analysis of racial inequality in the United States, we must acknowledge the existence of the systematic disadvantages that exclude most people on low incomes in poor neighborhoods—a condition in which black people in the US have disproportionately been placed—from serious economic advancement.

Left unchecked, it is the laws of free market capitalism—rather than more overt, individual forms of racial discrimination—that reproduce a racially skewed class structure. Most major institutions in the U.S. have officially declared themselves non-racist, and invited black citizens to compete alongside everyone else. This is important but insufficient. If three white people begin a game of monopoly, a black player who is invited to join the game half-way through enters at a serious disadvantage. Unless blessed by a disproportionate degree of good luck, the black player will be unable to overcome these economic disadvantages and compete on equal terms. This is, in effect if not in intention, how the United States has treated most of its black citizens: it offers the promise of equal opportunity without providing the means—good housing, good education, good local job opportunities—to fulfill it.

There is a wealth of evidence about the operation of these structural inequalities (see, for example, Wilson, 1987; Hacker, 1992). What is remarkable about our culture is that it refuses to acknowledge the existence of class structures, let alone understand how they influence racial inequalities. And yet, at certain moments, we *do* accept these things as obvious. We expect rich white children to do better than poor black children. We expect it, because we know that they will go to better schools, be brought up in more comfortable surroundings and offered more opportunities to succeed. And our expectations would, most often, be proved quite right. The child who succeeds in spite of these odds is a glamorous figure in our culture precisely because

they have defied these expectations. Unfortunately, our culture teaches us to ignore these social structures and offers us instead a naive obsession with individual endeavor. Instead of a *collective* war on poverty, we have welfare reforms that increase poverty and homelessness in the name of *individual* responsibility.

We would argue that U.S. television—and popular culture generally—is directly culpable for providing an endless slew of apocryphal stories that sustain a cultural refusal to deal with class inequalities and the racial character of those inequalities.

The Upscale World of Television Fiction

Television in the United States is notable in creating a world that shifts the class boundaries upward. If the path to heaven is more arduous for the rich than the poor, the opposite can be said of entry to the ersatz world of television. Data from the University of Pennsylvania's Cultural Indicators project suggests that in recent decades television gives the overwhelming majority of its main parts to characters from middle and professional class backgrounds, while significant working class roles are few and far between (Jhally and Lewis, 1992). This is in notable contrast to the norms of other English speaking television programs from countries like Britain and Australia, where working class characters are much more commonplace. In the U.S., the TV world is skewed to such an extent that the definition of what looks normal on television no longer includes the working class. This bias is neither obvious nor clearly stated: on the contrary, television's professionals are generally universalized so that the class barriers that divide working class viewers from upper-middle TV characters melt away. As some of our working class viewers said of Cliff Huxtable, he may be a doctor, but he's not as aloof as some the real doctors they encounter in the non-TV world. As these two respondents put it:

"I guess he doesn't really seem professional, you know, not the way a doctor would be. The ones I meet are very uppity and they really look down on the lower class."

"They don't play the status they are in the show. You expect them to be living a much higher class, flashing the money, but they're very down to earth."

Television's characters are thus well off but accessible. These are pictures of the American Dream, and they are paraded in front of us in sitcoms and drama series night after night. On television, most people, or most people with an ounce of merit, are making it.

But surely, it's only television, isn't it? Most people realize that the real world is different, don't they? Well, yes and no. Our study suggests that the line between the TV world and the world beyond the screen has, for most people, become exceedingly hazy. Many of the respondents in our study would shift from immersion in television's world to critical distance in the same interview; praising *The Cosby Show* at one moment for its realism and criticizing it at another for its lack of realism. Thus, for example, one respondent began with an endorsement of the show's realism:

"I think that Cosby is much more true to life; you can put yourself right into the picture. Just about everything they do has happened to you, or you've seen it happen."

At a later point in the interview, the same respondent argued that:

“It’s totally a fantasy to me, a fairy tale... I think if you bring in the real humdrum of what really life is all about, it would be a total bore. I would much prefer to see a little bit of fairy tale and make-believe.”

We watch, it seems, at one moment with credulity and at another with disbelief. We mix skepticism with an extraordinary faith in the television's capacity to tell us the truth. We know that the succession of doctors, lawyers and other professionals that dominate television's stories are not real, yet we continually think about them as if they were. We have thereby learned to live in the dreams of network executives.

Exceptions to this—perhaps the most notable in recent television history being *Roseanne*—become conspicuous because (at least until the last series when the family wins the lottery) they defy this norm. Simply by being sympathetic and assertively working class, the characters in *Roseanne* stood out from the sea of upscale images that surrounded them. In the U.S. there are nearly twice as many janitors as all the lawyers and doctors put together, and yet, on television, the legal or medical professions are run of the mill, while to portray a major character as a janitor seems *ostentatiously* class-conscious. The negative response to *thirtysomething* in the 1980s was, in this context, extremely revealing. Here was a show that dealt, fairly intimately, with the lives of a group of middle and upper-middle class people. In demographic terms, these characters were the standard fare offered by network television, where most characters of any importance are middle or upper-middle class. Why, then, was this show in particular invariably described, often pejoratively, as a yuppie drama?

The answer tells us a great deal about the way class is represented on television. The show *thirtysomething* was unusual *not* because it was about young professionals, but because it was *self-consciously* about young professionals. It was difficult to watch an episode without being aware that this was a group of people that were, in class terms, fairly privileged. Here was a show that was conspicuously and unapologetically class conscious. When most TV characters display a liberal concern for the poor or the homeless, we are invited to applaud their altruism. When characters on *thirtysomething* did so, we were more likely to cringe with embarrassment at the class contradictions thrown up by such philanthropic gestures. Thus *thirtysomething's* principle sin was not that it showed us yuppies, but that it made them appear part of an exclusive world that many people will never inhabit. With its coy realism, *thirtysomething* was killjoy television, puncturing the myth of the American Dream.

Although we see echoes of this class consciousness on shows like *Frasier*, they are represented in ways that tend to elide rather than confirm class distinctions. It is not just that *Frasier* and Niles Crane's high cultural, upper-middle class affectations are often parodied, but the constant presence of their working class father reminds us that class background is unimportant.

The prosperous, comfortable world in which most television characters live is generally *welcoming*, and it is into this world that upscale black characters—from the Huxtables onward—fit like the proverbial glove. It is, we would argue, hard to under-estimate the significance of this in the politics of representation. Thus we can say that in order to be "normal" on television—the prerequisite for a "positive image"—black characters are *necessarily* presented as middle or upper-middle class. Indeed, *The Cosby Show* itself used two of television's favorite professions—what, after all, could be more routine than a household headed by a lawyer and a doctor? But unlike *thirtysomething*, it also had to *look* normal, to portray these wealthy professionals as a regular,

"everyday" family. The respondents in our study suggested that the show was particularly skillful and adroit in absorbing this contradiction, indeed, its popularity depends upon this combination of accessibility and affluence. Professionals and blue collar workers can both watch the show and see themselves reflected in it. Social barriers, like class or race, are absent from this world. They have to be. To acknowledge the presence of such things would make too many viewers uncomfortable. Television has thereby imposed a set of cultural rules upon us that give us certain expectations about the way the TV world should be.

The bombardment from this image world makes it very difficult for people schooled in the evasive language of North American television to seriously comprehend the world around them. If a serious analysis of class structures is generally absent from our popular vocabulary, then that absence is confirmed by a television environment that make upwardly mobility desirable but class barriers irrelevant. As a consequence, when our respondents tried to make sense of class issues thrown up by a discussion of *The Cosby Show*, many were forced to displace the idea of class onto a set of racial categories. This was often the case for our black respondents, who often became enmeshed in the debate about whether the show was "too white" (an idea that, incidentally, the great majority repudiated). And yet, we would argue, the very terms of such a debate involve a misleading syllogism: one that declares that since black people are disproportionately less *likely* to be upper middle-class, if they become so they have not entered a class category (upper-middle class) but a *racial* one (white). One of our black middle-class respondents revealed the confusion involved in this way of thinking when he said: "What's wrong with showing a black family who has those kind of values? I almost said *white* values, but *that's not the word I want*" (our emphasis). The context of portrayal like *The Cosby Show* is not so much "white" culture (whatever that may be), but *upper-middle class culture*. It is partly by echoing the stilted discourse of U.S. television that many of our respondents found it difficult to make such a distinction.

In creating *The Cosby Show* Bill Cosby can hardly be blamed for playing by the rules of network television. Indeed, what our study makes clear is that it was *only* by conforming to these cultural limitations that he was able to make a black family so widely acceptable to white TV viewers. The discomfort or distance that most of the white viewers in our study expressed about black television characters was articulated *not only* in racial terms, but—albeit indirectly—in class terms. What many white viewers found off-putting about other black sitcoms was not blackness per se, but *working class blackness*.

*"I mean it's not a jive show, like **Good Times**. I think those others shows are more jive, more soul shows, say as far as the way the characters are with making you aware that they are more separate. Where Cosby is one of American down the line thing, which makes everybody feel accepted."*

*"I remember that it (**The Jeffersons**) was a little bit more slapstick, a little bit more stereotypical. They were concerned with racial issues. And it was much more interested in class, and the difference between class, middle-class versus working class."*

"They talk with the slick black accent, and they work on the mannerisms, and I think they make a conscious effort to act that way like they are catering to the black race in that show. Whereas Cosby, you know, definitely doesn't do that. He's upper middle class and he's not black stereotypical. There's a difference in the tone of those shows, completely."

The Price of Admission and its Political Consequences

While there may be dimensions to this race/class inflection that go beyond television, the difficulty some white viewers have in inviting black working class characters into their living rooms is partly a function of television's class premise, in which normalcy is middle/upper middle class and where working class characters are, to some extent, outsiders. In terms of the politics of representation, our study raises a difficult question: if black characters must be upscale to be accepted into this image world, is such an acceptance worth the price of admission? In order to answer this question, we must consider the broader consequences of this representational move.

Among white people, the repeated appearance of black characters in TV's upwardly mobile world gives credence to the idea that racial divisions, whether perpetuated by class barriers or by racism, do not exist. Most white people are extremely receptive to such a message. It allows them to feel good about themselves and about the society they are part of. The many black professionals who easily inhabit the TV world suggest to people that, as one of our respondents put it, "there really is room in the United States for minorities to get ahead, without affirmative action".

If affirmative action has become a hot issue in contemporary politics, it is because the tide has turned against it, with states and universities (including our own) buckling under pressure to abandon the policy. As Gray suggests in his analysis of the Reagan years, Conservatives are able to use their opposition to such policies as a way of mobilizing white votes (Gray, 1996). Indeed, our study reveals that the opposition to affirmative action among white people is overwhelming. What was particularly notable was that while most white people are prepared to acknowledge that such a policy was *once* necessary, the prevailing feeling was that this was no longer so.

"I think I've become less enamoured of it. I think that when the whole idea was first discussed, it was a very good idea... In recent years, I don't think it's necessarily getting anybody anywhere."

"I think in a lot of respects it's carried too far and that it results in reverse discrimination because you have quotas to meet for different job positions and that kind of stuff, it's like, a white person no longer has equal opportunity towards a job because you have to fill a quota."

"Well, I think it has gone too far, where the white people don't have the opportunities. I think it has come to a point where people should be hired now, not because of their color or their race, but because of what they're able to do. I mean there are people who are much better qualified but can't get hired because they are white, and I don't think that's right. Maybe in the beginning, they needed this...but it has gone too far."

There are, of course, circumstances in which a qualified black person will receive a warm reception from employers concerned to promote an "equal opportunities" image. Any cursory glance at social statistics, however, demonstrates that this is because employers are sheepish or embarrassed by current levels of inequality in the workplace. Almost any social index suggests that we live in a society in which black and white people are not equal, whether in terms of education, health, housing, employment or wealth. So why is affirmative action suddenly no longer necessary? Partly, we would suggest, because our popular culture tells us so.

During our content analysis of the three main networks, we came across only one program that offered a glimpse of these racial divisions. What was significant about this program, however, was that it did not take place in the present, but in the past, during the early days of the civil rights movement. TV was only able to show us racial divisions in the U.S. by traveling back in time to the "bad old days". Most of the black characters in television's here and now seemed blissfully free of such things. Attempts by Hollywood to deal with racial inequality adopt the same strategy. Racism, whether on *Driving Miss Daisy*, *The Long Walk Home* or *Amistad* is confined to the safe distance of history. There are some notable exceptions—such as Spike Lee's work—but the general impression is clear: the social causes of racial inequality are behind us.

Television, despite—and in some ways because of—the liberal intentions of many who write its stories, has pushed our culture backwards. White people are not prepared to deal with the problem of racial inequality because they are no longer sure if or why there is a problem. In their survey of contemporary American belief systems, James Patterson and Peter Kim found that:

In the 1990s, white Americans hold blacks, and blacks alone, to blame for their current position in American society. 'We tried to help', whites say over and over, 'but blacks wouldn't help themselves'. This is the basis for what we've called the new racism. Everything flows from it. It is a change from the hardcore racism that existed in our country's earlier years. It is also a dramatic contrast to the attitudes of the 1960s, when many whites, from the President on down, publicly stated that black people were owed compensation for centuries of oppression." (Patterson & Kim 1992, p.183)

The use of upscale black television characters, our study made increasingly clear, is an intrinsic part of this process. Television becomes Dr. Feelgood, indulging its white audience so that their response to racial inequality becomes a guilt-free, self-righteous inactivity.

This has saddled us, as Patterson & Kim suggest, with a new, repressed form of racism. For while television now portrays a world of equal opportunity, most white people know enough about the world to see that black people achieve less, on the whole, than white people—a discourse emphasized by television news (Entman, 1990). They know that black people are disproportionately likely to live in poor neighborhoods, drop out of school, or be involved in crime. Indeed, overall, television's representation of black people is bifurcated—a Jeckyl and Hyde portrayal in which the bulk of ordinary working class black Americans have few images of themselves outside of those connected with crime, violence and drugs.

Media Images: Accentuating the Positive and the Negative

The most striking aspect of the interviews with black Americans in our study was the ubiquity of comments about the role that media images play in how white America looks at them—of how stereotypical images of blacks as criminals impacted upon their own everyday interaction with white society and institutions. As one person put it "Nobody can believe that you can actually have the intelligence, the fortitude, the dedication and determination to go out and

earn a decent living to afford you some nice things. The mentality today is that if you're black and you get something, you either got it through drugs or through prostitution." The role that the media played in the cultivation of this perception was clearly understood. As another of our respondents stated, "We seem to be the only people in the world that TV tries to pick out the negative to portray as characteristic of us. What television is doing to us, I think, is working a hell of a job on us."

For minority groups then, living in the kind of residential and social apartheid that characterizes much of contemporary America, media images are vital, as they are the primary way that the broader society views them. Black America, after all, is well aware of what white perception of black males in particular can lead to. In the Rodney King case, an all-white suburban jury acquitted four LAPD officers for a brutal beating on the basis that the person receiving the beating was, in the words of one of the jurors, "controlling the action." When your image of black people is as subhuman criminals, muggers, drug addicts, gang members and welfare cheats then even when a black man is lying hog-tied on the ground he is still dangerous, and any action to subdue him becomes justified.

It is not surprising, in this framework, that Bill Cosby's self-conscious attempt to promote a series of very different black images was so well-received by the black respondents in our study. But if it is a kind of representational rescue mission, it is one with an almost fairytale script. Thus we can move from news images of black criminals to fictional images of black lawyers and judges in a matter of network minutes.

In this way media images turn real and complex human beings into crude one-dimensional caricatures, which then come to define minority populations for the majority. Perhaps the apotheosis of this bifurcated imagery was the figure of OJ Simpson. If many white Americans were bemused by the degree to which black Americans felt they had a stake in the innocence of a rich TV celebrity, it was because they did not understand the representational issues at stake. The rush to a judgment of innocence was a mechanism of self-defense against a popular culture that offers a limited and bifurcated view of black life, one that can be symbolized by two characters in the recent history of black representation: Bill Cosby and Willie Horton.

The Cosby Show epitomized and inspired a move in network television toward the routine presentation of black professionals in drama and situation comedy. The flip-side to this is the world of the news or so-called reality programming like (like *Cops*), where it is blacks as violent criminals, drug-dealers, crack-heads, and welfare mothers that dominate the screen. Perhaps the embodiment of this side of the story is Willie Horton, the image used by the Bush Presidential campaign in 1988 to scare white America away from voting for Mike Dukakis. (In a now infamous TV campaign ad that is credited with turning the election around, Horton was represented as a crazed murderer, whom the Dukakis prison furlough program, in a moment of foolish liberal do-goodery, allowed out of prison).

These are the two predominant images of black Americans with which the majority of white people are familiar. The OJ case was pivotal as Simpson came to be located precisely at the juncture between the two. He *was* Bill Cosby (affluent, friendly, smiling, cultured). If he was guilty of a brutal double murder, he would *become* Willie Horton. The representational identity of black America as a whole, given the incredible visibility of the case, was the prize at stake. As writer Anthony Walton comments on what is at stake in these battles over representation:

I am recognizing my veil of double consciousness, my American self and my black self. I must battle, like all humans, to see myself. I must also battle, because I am black, to see myself as others see me; increasingly my life, literally depends upon it. I might meet Bernard Goetz in the subway...the armed security guard might mistake me for a burglar in the lobby of my building. And they won't see a mild-mannered English major trying to get home. They will see Willie Horton. (Walton, 1989,)

In this context, it is little wonder that black Americans took the Simpson case so *personally*. His innocence would, in some ways, maintain the representational progress forged by Bill Cosby, while his guilt would tilt it back to Willie Horton. He *had* to be innocent because African-Americans, like all people, want the world to recognize their humanity and their dignity. In a context where their identity is at stake, the "evidence" had little relevance. Any story—however implausible—of conspiracy and racism would eradicate the forensics and the DNA tests, etc. That is precisely what Johnny Cochran offered the jury and black America, and it was accepted with thanks.

But for white viewers, how can sense be made of this bifurcated world? How can black failure in reality programming be reconciled with television's fictions, so replete with images of black success? How to explain racial inequalities in the context the racial equality of television's upscale world? Without some acknowledgment that the roots of racial inequality are embedded in our society's class structure, there is only one way to reconcile this paradoxical state of affairs. If black people are disproportionately unsuccessful, then they must be disproportionately less deserving. While few of our respondents were prepared to be this explicit (although a number came very close), their failure to acknowledge class or racial barriers means that this is the only explanation available. The consequence, in the apparently enlightened welcome white viewers extend to television's black professionals, is a new, sophisticated form of racism. Their success casts a shadow of failure across the majority of black people who have, by these standards, failed. Television, which tells us very little about the structures behind success or failure (Iyengar, 1991), leaves white viewers to assume that the black people who do not match up to their television counterparts have only themselves to blame.

In a rather different way, the effect of *The Cosby Show* on its black audience is also one of flattering to deceive. The dominant reaction of our black viewers to the show was "for this relief, much thanks". After suffering years of negative media stereotyping, most black viewers were delighted by a show that portrayed African Americans as intelligent, sensitive and successful:

"I admire him. I like his show because it depicts black people in a positive way. It's good to see that black people can be professionals."

"Thank you Dr. Cosby for giving us back ourselves."

The problem with this response is that it embraces the assumption that, on television, a positive image is a prosperous image. This dubious equation means that African Americans are trapped into a position where any reflection of more typical black experience—which is certainly not upper-middle class—is "stereotypical". As one of our black respondents said, even though he was painfully aware that *The Cosby Show* presented a misleading picture of what life was like for most black Americans: "There's part of me that says, in a way, I don't want white America to see us, you know, struggling or whatever." On TV there is no dignity in struggling unless you win.

This analysis of stereotyping dominates contemporary thought. It is the consequence of a television world that has told us that to be working class is to be marginal. Thus it is that viewers in our study were able to see the Huxtable family on *The Cosby Show* as both "regular" and "everyday" *and* as successful, well-heeled professionals.

For black viewers, this deceit amounts to a form of cultural blackmail. It leaves two choices. Either to be complicit partners in an image system that masks the deep racial divisions in the United States, or else forced to buy into the fiction that, as one respondent put it, "there are black millionaires all over the place," thereby justifying *The Cosby Show* as a legitimate portrayal of average African American life.

The Structural Confines of Network Television

If our study tells us anything, it is that we need to be more attentive to the attitudes cultivated by "normal" everyday television. In the case of representations of race, these attitudes can affect the way we think about "issues" like race and class and, in so doing, even influence the results of elections.

As we have suggested, it doesn't have to be this way. There is no reason why TV characters cannot be working class and dignified, admirable—or even just plain normal. Bill Cosby's more recent sitcom—*Cosby*—is one attempt to do this, although his enormous popularity as a performer gives him a license that other shows, such as the short-lived *Frank's Place*, do not have. Other television cultures have managed to avoid distorting and suppressing the class structure of their societies, why can't we manage it in the United States?

The American Dream is much more than a gentle fantasy, it is the dominant discourse in the U.S. for understanding (or misunderstanding) class. It is a cultural doctrine that encompasses vast tracts of American life. No politician would dare to question our belief in it—any more than they would publicly question the existence of God. Even though politicians of many different persuasions pay lip service to the dream (it is, in conventional wisdom, "what's great about America"), it is not a politically neutral idea. It favors those on the political right that say that anyone, regardless of circumstance, can make it if they try. In such an egalitarian world, the free market delivers a kind of equity, making public intervention and regulation an unnecessary encumbrance. For government to act to eradicate the enormous social problems in the United States is to defy the logic of the dream. Intervention implies, after all, that the system is not naturally fair, and opportunity is not universal.

The American Dream is, in this context, insidious rather than innocent. It is part of a belief system that allows people in the United States to disregard the inequalities that generate its appalling record on poverty, crime, health, homelessness and education. It is not surprising that the more fortunate cling to the self-justifying individualism the dream promotes. One of the saddest things about the United States is that sometimes the less fortunate do too.

The ideological dominance of the American Dream is sustained by its massive presence in popular culture. The television and film industries churn out fable after fable, thereby reducing us to a state of spellbound passivity in which decades of stagnating incomes for many Americans have been accepted with little protest. The success we are encouraged to strive for is always linked to the acquisition of goods, a notion fueled by the ubiquitous language of advertising, in which consumers do not usually see themselves in commercials, they see a vision of a glamorous

and affluent world they aspire to. Underlying the preponderance of middle and upper-middle class characters on display is the relentless message that this is what the world of happiness and contentment looks like. In this context, ordinary settings seem hum drum or even depressing. Not only do we expect television to be more dramatic than everyday life, but, in the United States, we also expect it to be *more affluent*. We don't just want a good story, we want a "classy" setting.

"I liked the background. I like to look at the background on a TV program, I enjoy that. The setting, the clothes, that type of thing. I don't enjoy dismal backgrounds."

"This is nice, it looks good and it's kind of, you accept it; they have a beautiful home and everything is okay."

This is the language of advertising. It is also, now, the discourse of the American Dream. This language is now so much a part of our culture that these attitudes seem perfectly natural. It is only when we look at other television cultures that we can see that they are not.

Few other industrial nations leave their cultural industries to be as dependent upon advertising revenue as they are in the United States. In the U.S., very little happens in our popular culture without a commercial sponsor. This takes place in a lightly regulated free market economy where cultural industries are not accountable to a notion of public service, but to the bottom line of profitability.

Apart from tiny grants to public broadcasting, the survival of radio and television stations depends almost entirely on their ability to sell consumers (viewers or listeners) to advertisers. Moreover, broadcasters in the United States are required to do little in the way of public service. There are no regulations that encourage quality, diversity, innovation or educational value in programming. This means that the influence of advertising is two-fold. Not only does it create a cultural climate that influences the form and style of programs that fill the spaces between commercials, it commits television to the production of formulaic programming. Once cultural patterns are established, it is difficult to deviate from them without losing the ratings that bring in the station's revenue.

This is not merely a tyranny of the majority and the logic of the lowest common denominator. A ratings system driven by advertising does not so much favor popularity as the quest for the largest pockets of disposable income. The 1999 season of *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Women* was cancelled by CBS *even though* it was regularly the most popular show on television during its Saturday night timeslot. The problem was simply that its viewers were generally not wealthy enough to be of interest to advertisers. The ad-driven chase for well-heeled demographics thereby gives network television an in-built class bias, creating a climate in which portrayals of working class black characters may make good television but is an unlikely way to attract television's most sought after demographic group.

Which brings us back to the many representational off-shoots of *The Cosby Show*. In order to be successful and to stay on the air, *The Cosby Show* had to meet certain viewers' expectations. This, as we have seen, meant seducing viewers with the vision of comfortable affluence the Huxtables epitomize. Once television has succumbed to the discourse of the American Dream, where a positive image is a prosperous one, it cannot afford the drop in ratings that will accompany a redefinition of viewers' expectations. TV programs that do so are necessarily short-lived. Programs like *Frank's Place*, *Cop Rock*, or *Twin Peaks* all deviated from a norm, and, while still watched by millions of viewers, did not attain the mass audience required

to keep them on the air. This puts us on a treadmill of cultural stagnation. It is a system where the bland repetition of fantasies tailored to the interests of wealthier viewers makes sound business sense.

In such a system, *The Cosby Show's* survival depended upon meeting the demands of a formula that pleases as many people as possible and *especially* its more upscale audience. And our study suggests that it did so with consummate success, pleasing black and white people, blue collar workers and professionals, all in slightly different ways. The more blue collar *Cosby* has been less universally embraced, and in this context we should applaud Bill Cosby's attempt to use his popularity to offer audiences a less upscale image.

When our book, *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences and the Myth of the American Dream* was first published in 1992, we were widely credited with holding *The Cosby Show* responsible for promoting the routine fiction of effortless black success. But this was not the thrust of our argument. *The Cosby Show* and the many black professionals portrayed in its wake are genuine attempts to make television's upscale world more racially diverse. The problem is not with *individual* instances of black success, but with a television environment whose structural conditions make a wider array of images less profitable.