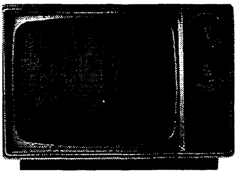

The Personal is Professional on TV

Introduction

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One of the oldest TV rumors is still circulating today. Between 1950 and 51, Detroit's waterworks were mysteriously depleted every Tuesday shortly after 9:00 PM. This civic mystery was solved when the time slot in question was revealed to be directly after Texaco Star Theater, starring Milton "Mr. Television" Berle. The show was so popular that the waterworks suffered from what amounted to a massive post-Berle bathroom break. Watching TV had affected the material infrastructure of a city, and not for the last time.

This tale speaks to the vast (and sometimes disturbing) power that TV holds over Americans, particularly in the privacy of their own homes. Television is perhaps the most ubiquitous form of media in the United States, and for this reason its content is often the occasion for public hysteria, national bonding, and even, it would seem, the occasional group exodus to the bathroom. Although a typical TV show may seem harmless and fluffy enough, television's ability to exert control over everything from our private moments to our political opinions has led critics since the late 1940s to interrogate the role this medium plays in society.

In its attempt to map the vast and contradictory landscape of broadcast television, TV studies has been loosely constituted out of a wide range of disciplines. Television theorists, heavily influenced by psychoanalytic and narrative/semiotic film theory, explore everything from the structure of credit sequences to fetishism in *I Love Lucy* (cf. Allen). Historians of television such as Jeff Kisseloff and Eric Barnouw look at the industry's development from the first radio broadcasts to cable television, and explore how the medium itself has

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changed radically over the past fifty years (Kisseloff, Barnouw). Some theorists have viewed television as an instance of what Frederic Jameson calls the "political unconscious," finding in its repetitive, expansive fantasies the ideological obsessions and bad faiths of mainstream culture (Jameson; cf. Mellancamp, Spigel, and Williams). Combining questions of representation with cultural analysis, such inquiries have led to meditations on how TV in the United States is marketed in South America, and how programs like *The Cosby Show* and *Roseanne* can be understood in terms of the intersections of race, class, and gender identities. Analyzing viewers themselves, TV reception critics look to television audiences and the communities they form, suggesting possible ways that TV consumers are taking active roles in their pleasure by forming fan groups, writing stories about their favorite television shows, or satirizing bad television in the alternative media (cf. Penley, Fiske, Kellner, Jhally and Lewis).

Although the essays we present here draw inspiration from TV studies generally, they are most indebted to approaches that focus on the social impact of particular television programs. We start with the conviction that the stories that network television brings into our domestic spaces "for free" are meaningful, not only because of the format in which they are delivered, but also because of the particular qualities that distinguish them from other programming. To this end, we provide close readings of individual television shows: *ER*, *The X-Files*, *90210*, and *Friends*. Focusing on TV shows that are still on the air, we seek to demonstrate what it would look like to analyze television as a conglomerate of contemporary United States social fantasies about work, identity, and interpersonal relationships.

In making the decision to consider TV from this perspective, we confront long-standing questions about the overall effect of television as a technology. Does it matter how television depicts characters or narratives, and if so, how does it matter? Does television technology influence our behavior, or simply reflect back what is already in our culture? What does it mean to have our lives either effected or reflected by a technology? Some believe that television necessarily shapes the viewer: Todd Gitlin argues that television acts "as a school for manners, mores, and styles—for repertories of speech and feeling, even for the externals and experience of self-presentation that we call personality" (Gitlin, 48). For Gitlin, this influence appears negative: television cultivates a subject which possesses surface without substance, displayed in a "glib" and "knowing" persona (Gitlin, 54).

Others acknowledge that television has a presence in our lives, but with more positive potentials. Though he includes the qualification that television could be harmful to the "vulnerable" viewer (i.e., those with very restricted access to other sources of information), Frank McConnell argues that anybody "with a little intelligence, self-awareness, or irony can manipulate TV rather than be manipulated by it"(McConnell, 64). Both of the above arguments act as more complex mediations of two poles of debate about television; debate that, crudely stated, pits television as a drug holding us captive versus television as a benign form of relaxation over which we have agency (Fowles, McConnell).

This technology debate constitutes the backdrop against which our essays take shape. *ER* and *The X-Files* portray characters who are so embedded in worlds of either medical or intelligence technologies that they have drastically dysfunctional or non-existent personal lives. In these two shows the technological world appears to dwarf the development of "private" personal lives. Conversely, *90210* and *Friends* portray characters whose lives seem nothing but personal. These characters remain perpetually stuck in the private sphere, and yet never seem to develop any depths beyond the surfaces disseminated by the technologies of popular culture. In the body of debate about how television technology may stunt, disfigure, or soothe the personal life of its viewer, our readings consider how the medium itself represents the personal development of a late-twentieth-century subject whose technological savvy is more of a problem than a solution.

The theme linking each of these papers is "the personal is professional," a title that references the well-known slogan from the 1970s U.S. Women's Liberation Movements: "the personal is political." While the feminist slogan was initially used to acknowledge that individual experiences of oppression can only be fully understood and addressed when articulated within a political framework, we argue that the current political climate in the United States instead suggests to some populations that the solution to "personal" dissatisfaction is not politicization but professionalization. The four TV programs we consider each depict instances of two concurrent trends. On the one hand, they foreground anxieties about the ways in which "personal" identities—inflected as they are by gender, race, class, and sexual orientation—are being renegotiated within the professional realm; on the other hand, they reveal how hard it is becoming to distinguish between what is "personal" and what is "professional." While attempts to shore up the distinction between the public and private sphere have rightly been critiqued as perpetuating sexist, racist, and classist assumptions about the separation of work and family life, the blurring of the boundaries between personal and professional life does not necessarily indicate that society has changed for the better.

While the slogan "the personal is political" is now often exclusively associated with 1970s United States feminists, the idea, if not the exact formulation, has a much longer history. At least from Aristotle onward, Western philosophers have argued that individual personhood is inextricable from the larger political context. What feminists have long pointed out, however, is that even the very notion of "personhood" is deeply gendered. Unfortunately, the current popular understanding of the 1970s slogan "the personal is political"—that women's "liberation" rested upon consciousness raising groups, and by linking personal dissatisfaction with political oppression—masks a more complex history. As Sara Evans argues, the slogan emerged from the Civil Rights and "New Left" movements of the 1960s, and was as much about class and race as it was about gender and sexuality (Evans). Indeed, the first written formulation of the slogan by Carol Hanisch in her essay "The Personal is Political" actually critiqued the notion that women's oppression can be addressed solely through consciousness raising groups (Hanisch). The more starkly gendered formulation of the slogan that circulates today thus effaces the ways in which it originally drew upon and referred to political struggles that were explicitly relational.

In reformulating the slogan and in considering how middle class twenty- and thirty-something characters on *ER*, *The X-Files*, *90210*, and *Friends* negotiate their interpersonal relationships on prime-time TV, we wish to build upon this relational understanding of "the personal is political." Our goal is to challenge the easy conflation of gender with the "personal." We proceed from the conviction that categories like gender, race, class, and sexual orientation are defined, not in isolation, but in relation to one another. The "personal" does not stand outside of the "political" or the "professional," no matter how much we are encouraged to believe that it does. Our essays attempt to understand how "the personal" functions within specific television programs.

As we have already noted, the TV programs we examine here are representative of a time in which the "professional" has come to appear as an alternative to the "political." This holds true whether the professional manifests itself in the form of a personalized workplace—as we see on *ER* or *The X-Files*—or a personal life that is treated like a profession—as we see on *Beverly Hills 90210* or *Friends*. Yet it must be remembered that the 1990s have also witnessed intense debates about the claim that "everything is political." While these debates have been especially prominent in the academy, particularly where questions about the value of cultural studies have been raised, they have regularly made their way into the mainstream media. In fact, a good portion of the animus that conservative pundits like Charles Sykes, Dinesh D'Souza, and Rush Limbaugh have directed at "radical" scholars over the past decade derives from their conviction that the politicization of culture poses a danger to American society (Sykes, D'Souza, Limbaugh). How then are we to make sense of the ways in which the professional has become a substitute for the political?

It is worth recalling that the word "professional" has a history of its own. Few terms are more closely bound up with the construction of a scholarly discipline. Although physicians, lawyers, and administrators have been around for centuries, we owe our understanding of their labor as "professional" to the rise of sociology in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. When thinkers like Max Weber and Georg Simmel looked back on the nineteenth century, they found inadequate the binary oppositions with which most philosophers and historians had tried to make sense of social structures and the complexities of modern society (Weber, Simmel). To give the most obvious example, the division between bourgeoisie and proletariat that Karl Marx had insisted on did not appear to leave room for coming to terms with the unprecedented development of professional organizations. As a consequence, these sociological "pioneers" developed different models for what we now call the "professional" as part of a broader project to move beyond "either-or" distinctions. Although our own use of the term is considerably different, it builds on their legacy. In both cases, the "professional" contributes to a more differentiated picture of society.

While the concern to consider modern societies in their complexity remains an abiding concern of social theory, those societies themselves have been powerfully transformed. When turn-of-the-century sociologists looked at the world of the professional, they saw a world made up almost exclusively of upper class and upper-middle class white men supported by the clerical labor of white women and men of lower class standing. In the United States, this divide came to be considered in terms of the distinction between "white collar" and "pink collar" labor, both of which were set off against the "blue collar" labor of the industrial proletariat on which Marx had pinned his hopes for a revolution (cf. Mills, 1951). For decades, however, the changes within this world of the professional were less dramatic than one might have expected. It wasn't until the aftermath of the 1960s, with the institution of affirmative action programs and the concomitant valuing of "diversity" as an end in itself, that the composition of the professional class started to undergo significant transformation. Although white men remained in the majority, for the first time women and minorities began to advance into managerial positions.

We have witnessed a powerful backlash against these developments over the past few years. Social programs that survived the Reagan Revolution, such as welfare and affirmative action, are now being dismantled throughout the United States. The four TV shows we analyze must be read in relation to this backlash, not because of their advocacy of a particular political position, but because of the different ways in which they take for granted that the professional classes include not only white men, but also white women and, to a lesser extent, men and women of color. On this point, there are major differences among the four programs we analyze. Whereas *ER* portrays the racial and ethnic diversity of the workplace, the only people of color on *Friends* are peripheral to the action. What the four programs share is a sense that anyone can undergo professionalization, regardless of the work they do.

Shows like *ER*, *The X-Files*, *90210*, and *Friends* may reinforce the belief that social remedies like affirmative action are no longer necessary. Our close-readings seek to show how thoroughly stories about the professionalization of everyday life have saturated contemporary popular culture. At a time when increasingly few people are sure of who they are, professionalization holds a powerful appeal. We do not often equate the workplace with the stage, but there is one sense in which they are remarkably alike: both demand role-playing. If "the personal is professional" is an appropriate slogan for our era, perhaps it is because we are most comfortable treating our lives like a job. Whatever their strengths and weaknesses, the shows we examine in these essays provoke us to consider the consequences of this trend. They call us to reflect on a society in which people have a hard time defining themselves without a job description.

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