



“Summary of article by Mary Beth Haralovich: Sitcoms and Suburbs: Positioning the 1950s Homemaker” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 2: The Consumer Society. Island Press: Washington DC, 1997. pp. 90-92

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### **“Summary of article by Mary Beth Haralovich: Sitcoms and Suburbs: Positioning the 1950s Homemaker”**

During the post-World War II period, gender roles within the middle class family underwent a radical transformation as many women were forced out of paid employment and into suburban household management. The 1950s suburban family sitcom captured this change, creating an idealized, gendered household that became the focus of a growing consumer product industry. This paper argues that television programming, in parallel with marketing institutions and government policies, helped reproduce certain gender relations.

The middle class female homemaker was both central and marginal to the economy. She was marginalized by her activities in what was deemed an unproductive sector, the household. On the other hand, as household manager she was the focus and foundation of the product design and marketing industries. Her marginalization was alleged to be a fair exchange: give up participation in work outside the household for the suburban promise of leisure and privacy. Marketers elaborated a vision of household life full of time-saving products that would free the homemaker from domestic work.

The creation of an ideal, middle class domestic image was central to the reconstruction of the American family after World War II. Television programs like *Father Knows Best* and *Leave It To Beaver* represented this ideal, fostering normative images of domestic harmony and stability while simultaneously masking --and thus helping to reproduce -- inequalities faced by the working class and minority groups. These shows also helped realign family gender roles, entrenching the suburban mother as homemaker and attractive object, and the father as breadwinner.

The realism of suburban-based family sitcoms dramatized a social and economic arrangement that was the cornerstone of the American social economy during the 1950s. Its appeal "derived not only from the traits and interactions of the middle-class family, but also from the placement of that family within the promises that suburban living and material goods held out for it."(113)

The middle class suburban sitcom, e.g., *Father Knows Best* and *Leave It To Beaver*, contrasts in several ways with the urban working class sitcom of the same era. While working class sitcoms depended on the comedic virtuosity of individual characters such as Lucille Ball in *I Love Lucy* and Jackie Gleason in *Honeymooners*, the suburban sitcom appealed to the whole family and found humor within the family dynamic. The fictional American father was reconstituted from bumbling, technologically uncomfortable dolt living in cramped urban quarters to intelligent

sovereign living in a spacious home with a beautiful wife and children. Domestic space was used in the suburban sitcom for family cohesion; in urban sitcoms, the home environment was used as the context for jokes.

Both housing design and suburban growth contributed to the definition of the modern family. Suburban architecture displayed class attributes. The commuter father and homemaker mother embraced the gendered domains of the suburban home: fathers to den and workroom; mothers to a modern kitchen and separate laundry. An open floor design fostered family togetherness.

The government viewed suburban growth as an important key to economic health, but implemented policies that created, intentionally or unintentionally, homogeneous communities with racial, ethnic, and class barriers to entry. These policies advanced two national priorities, the removal of women from the labor force and the construction of more housing. The Federal Housing Administration (FHA) promoted suburbanization through zoning practices that excluded multi-family dwellings and commercial property through redlining practices,

in which red lines were drawn on maps to identify the boundaries of changing or mixed neighborhoods. Since the value of housing in these neighborhoods was designated as low, loans to build or buy houses were considered bad risks. In addition, the FHA published a technical bulletin titled "Planning Profitable Neighborhoods," which gave advice to developers on how to concentrate on homogeneous markets for housing. The effect was to 'green-line' suburban areas, promoting them by endorsing loans and development at the cost of creating urban ghettos for minorities. (118)

Suburban growth focused on the affluent nuclear family, excluding minority men and women of all classes and ages, as well as elderly, working and lower class white families and single white women.

The evolution of the suburban homemaker was central to the growth of and organization of the consumer product industry. The industry attempted to define the homemaker's interests and needs in creating a desirable home environment. It promised increased leisure, release from household drudgery, and a pleasing interior space. Interior designers sought to equate products with leisure, but were criticized for promoting class conformity by marginalizing other lifestyles and tastes.

By the late 1950s, intensified competition in the consumer product industry prompted market research into the alleged unconscious process of consumption. Market researchers discovered projective techniques that could elicit unconscious responses to market situations. The suburban shopping center began incorporating sales talk into packaging and product design as the shopping environment became less personalized.

*Father Knows Best* and *Leave it to Beaver* share characteristics that demonstrate cultural norms, involving interactions between class, gender and the product design and marketing industries: both shows obscure discrepancies among classes, extolling the virtues of white middle class life while ignoring the working class and minorities; both share the same open floor plan, both center

on either the family ensemble or the rearing of the younger child; for both, the narrative space is dominated by the home; they display similar tastes in wall decorations and furnishings; each home has a large living room with a fireplace; both fathers have their own private spaces, while the mothers have no equivalent; both confirm the sexuality of the mother through her dress and grooming; and each homemaker effortlessly maintains the domestic space of the home.

The latter characteristic diminishes the value of domestic labor by hiding its harsh realities and legitimizes consumer industry claims that middle-class life in the suburbs will be easier with its products. "By linking her identity as a shopper and homemaker to class attributes, the base of the consumer economy was broadened, and her deepest emotions and insecurities were tapped and transferred to consumer product design."(137)