Political Pathologies from The Sopranos to Succession argues that highly praised prestige TV shows reveal the underlying fantasies and contradictions of upper-middle-class political centrists.

Through a psychoanalytic interpretation of The Sopranos, Breaking Bad, The Wire, House of Cards, Dexter, Game of Thrones, and Succession, Robert Samuels uncovers how moderate “liberals” have helped to produce and maintain the libertarian Right. Samuels’ analysis explores the difference between contemporary centrists and the foundations of liberal democracy, exposing the myth of the “liberal media” and considers the consequences of these celebrated series, including the undermining of trust in modern liberal democratic institutions. Political Pathologies from The Sopranos to Succession contributes to a greater understanding of the ways media and political ideology can circulate on a global level through the psychopathology of class consciousness.

This book will be of great interest to academics and scholars considering intersections of psychoanalytic studies, television studies, and politics.

Robert Samuels, PhD, holds doctorates in Psychoanalysis and English and teaches at the University of California, Santa Barbara, USA.
POLITICAL PATHOLOGIES FROM THE SOPRANOS TO SUCCESSION

Prestige TV and the Contradictions of the “Liberal” Class

Robert Samuels
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INTRODUCTION

The central argument of this book is that highly praised prestige TV shows reveal the underlying psychology of upper-middle class liberals. Through a psychoanalytic interpretation of *The Sopranos*, *Breaking Bad*, *The Wire*, *House of Cards*, *Dexter*, *Game of Thrones*, and *Succession*, I reveal how moderates are shaped by their need to signal their excellence and goodness by consuming high-status cultural objects. Similar to the way that higher education is used to produce and maintain class dominance through selective admissions processes, the consumption of elite TV shows represents not only an idealization of a particular type of culture but, more importantly, the form and content of these programs define itself against TV for the masses. For instance, when HBO declares it is not TV, it is playing on a clear division between elite culture and the degraded mass culture. As Pierre Bourdieu has taught us, prestige is always generated from exclusivity and social hierarchy, and in the case of prestige TV, the targeting of high-income consumers who can pay for expensive subscriptions requires producing a discourse around an idealized artistic form.

While the prestige shows examined in this book derive from a particular culture and time period, due to the role played by online streaming services, their influence is able to transcend older temporal and spatial limitations. As products of a globalizing cultural process, a new mode of elite cultural aesthetics spreads throughout the world, and even if many of the new viewers do not come from the upper-middle class or from the United States, the audience is still affected by the psychopathology and unconscious ideology of these shows. As Marx insisted, the ruling ideas of a society derive from the ruling class, and in our cultural period, it is the upper 9.9% of income earners who represent the ruling class. What I seek to elaborate is the underlying psychopathology shaping elite professionals and political centrists.

Although much of my analysis of prestige TV is derived from Michael Newman’s and Elana Levine’s *Legitimating Television*, what I add is the use of
psychoanalysis to understand the subjectivity of contemporary upper-middle class citizens, which helps to define both their politics and their media consumption habits. On the most basic level, this class is shaped by a desire to be seen as morally good in a society of extreme inequality. While they may identify as liberals, their selfish pursuit of privilege, power, and profit coupled with constant virtue signaling results in an undermining of liberal democratic institutions. As Chris Hedges argues in his *Death of the Liberal Class*, universities, journalistic institutions, and the Democratic party have all been undermined from within by the same drive of selfish careerism. From this perspective, it is often so-called liberals who have harmed liberal institutions from within, and in the case of the “liberal media,” we find the same unacknowledged process. For instance, when the head of CBS, Les Moonves, said that “Donald Trump may not be good for America, but he is damn good for CBS,” he revealed the underlying force of capitalist greed in contemporary mass media. As we shall see, this amoral capitalistic drive is at the center of many prestige TV series; however, the twist is that selfish greed is both celebrated and condemned in an obsessional narcissistic fashion.

Since contemporary moderate liberals want to see themselves as good people with good intentions, they have to repress their own anti-social desires, and one way that they do this is by projecting their drives onto others who they then both identify with and condemn from a distance. Thus, when scholars argue that a defining aspect of prestige TV shows is that they have morally complex lead characters, what they are often pointing to is the way that these cultural objects provide the audience with an opportunity to both live out fantasies of selfish greed and enjoyment while also condemning these desires from a distance. For example, Tony Soprano not only acts on his violent urges and sexual compulsions, but he also goes to therapy to discuss some of the ramifications of his actions. In short, Tony is an ambivalent, divided character catering to an internally divided audience.

Key artistic devices that help to enable this process of identification and moral condemnation are the use of irony, metafiction, and aesthetic form. In fact, what often signals the artistic pretentions of these shows is their use of strange camera angles, reflected images, and saturated colors. These non-functional devices signal to the audience that they are watching carefully thought-out art, which is not focused purely on trying to depict reality. As Bourdieu insists, this separation from reference has a class-based dimension because it is only the upper class that has the freedom, time, and resources to indulge in pure artistic contemplation. The upper-middle class then can signal their elite status by spending time and money on activities that serve no direct function, while the working class consumes culture that reflects their own focus on necessity and referentiality.

The use of pure aesthetic form also helps to create distance between what is being watched and the viewer’s own sense of identity. For example, when Frank Underwood directly addresses the audience in *House of Cards*, the program sets up a doubled reality where the plot is developed at the same time that the fictional status of the series is highlighted. This split, ironic representation enables the
audience to both identify with Underwood’s destructive careerism and condemn his selfish actions. Since the liberal audiences want to believe in their own moral goodness, they have to repress and project their own anti-social desires, and as Freud said in relation to obsessive-compulsive neurotics, they are repulsed by what attracts them, and attracted to what repulses them.12

Even though streaming has allowed many of these elite shows to reach a wider, global audience, their aesthetics and content are shaped by centrist, upper-middle class psychology. Moreover, this communication between the productions and the audience occurs on a mostly unconscious level, and so both the producers and viewers of these shows are not aware of the underlying psychopathology. My approach, then, goes against the cultural studies’ argument that the audiences are not dupes of the media they consume; instead, I argue that psychoanalysis pushes us to affirm that the real meaning and effect of these productions is often repressed and unacknowledged, and that is one reason why we need cultural critics to interpret the hidden structures and meanings. On the most basic level, obsessional narcissists seek to maintain a positive self-image by repressing their transgressive anti-social fantasies and projecting their ambivalent desires into the safe realm of fantasy and popular culture. While some would argue that this process can lead to insight, psychoanalysis tells us that the only way to discover the truth of our desires and fears is to engage in the process of tracing the repressed association and feelings connected to the material.

The Political Pathology of the Upper-Middle Class

One reason why it is important to understand prestige TV and its relation to the psychopathologies of the upper-middle class is that this group shapes and controls most of the major social institutions in liberal democracies. As Matthew Stewart documents in his *The 9.9%*, education, real estate, political parties, and parenting have been restructured by the interests of these high earners.13 This group strives to be at the very top and fears falling into the working class, and so they try to enhance their social status by making every institution work in their favor. Not only do they want to live in the “best” neighborhoods with the “best” schools, but these meritocratic elites seek to spend excessive resources on ensuring that their children end up going to the top universities. Their constant focus on what society deems to be the best also reflects on their consumer habits, and in the case of media consumption, their knowledge of prestige TV shows helps them to produce a sense of belonging to the elite as they separate themselves from the non-elites.

There is thus a perfect marriage between the media corporations seeking out people who will pay premium subscriptions for prestige TV and a social class seeking to maintain and signal its elite status. Moreover, an underlying message that we find circulating in many of these programs is that the only solution to an unequal capitalistic society is to focus on protecting the interests of yourself and those closest to you.14 Just as Tony Soprano and Walter White rationalize
their destructive greed by arguing that they are just trying to provide for their family, the upper-middle class elites justify their selfish pursuits by taking on a survivalist mentality: In a society that only benefits a select few, one has to focus on one’s own interests. Furthermore, any guilt and shame that is generated from being aware of this combination of inequality and selfish greed can be repressed and contained by turning to the depiction of destructive desires in fictional representations.

In terms of contemporary politics, it is vital to see how upper-middle class centrists have helped to produce the reactionary Right. As many have pointed out, one of the main reasons for the rise of Right-wing politics is the failure of liberal parties to help the working class. Due in part to the dominant influence of the upper-middle class, centrists have become less concerned with unions, workers’ rights, and economic inequality as they focus on education as the key to economic justice; however, institutions of education have become highly stratified and unequal, and so they function on average to decrease social mobility. Although liberal politicians should know that their preferred policies have not worked, they are so invested in seeing themselves as morally good that they simply repress the destructive effects of their actions.

Another way that centrist liberals have contributed to Right-wing politics is through the constant media depiction of failed liberal social institutions coupled with the focus on individuals who take matters into their own hands. In many of the prestige TV shows examined in this book, we see how the failure of politicians, courts, police, educators, and healthcare providers pushes the hero to go outside the law and social system. While the liberal centrist audience may ultimately condemn the actions of the anti-social criminal, we also find an underlying identification with the individual who seeks out their own freedom and justice. As an example of libertarian ideology, the male anti-heroes of these programs pursue their own self-interest at the cost of everyone else around them.

Not only are these shows dominated by men, but they also tend to depict women as nagging moralists seeking to contain the freedom and desire of their male counterparts. For example, Tony Soprano is harassed by his mother, his wife, and female psychiatrist as he seeks to provide for his family and satisfy his compulsions. Likewise, Breaking Bad’s Walter White gains the audience’s sympathy as his wife is attacked for not being more supportive of his illegal activities. Even a show like Game of Thrones, which appears to depict the rise in power of women ends up demonizing females for their violent reaction to masculine privilege. What may be happening here is that liberal centrists want to believe that our society is becoming more just and equal, but on some level, they still desire to hold onto their power and privilege.

As we shall see in our examination of The Wire, the failure of liberal institutions is coupled with a liberal mode of racism where people of color are both idealized and debased for their violence and sexuality. Since liberals do not want to admit that they may have racist beliefs, they tend to idealize people of color at the same time they condemn them for their uncivilized behavior. On
one level, we find the fantasy that certain groups of people are able to live more freely because they are less controlled by the dictates of society, and on another level, we find the dominant class vicariously enjoying the sex and violence of the unrepressed minority group at a distance. In the form of cultural slumming, the white upper-middle class finds enjoyment in watching the depiction of the imagined actions of “uncivilized” groups. Moreover, even if shows like *The Wire* are consumed now by a non-elite and non-white audience, these series are still shaped by the underlying values and pathologies of the writers and directors.

It is important to stress that TV tends to focus on the individual even when it is dealing with systemic issues like race, class, and gender hierarchies. As a way of solidifying emotional connections between the audience and the main characters of a show, it is necessary to highlight the actions of the individual, and this type of focus feeds into the individualistic mentality of the liberal upper-middle class. Even though they might pay lip service to systemic issues, liberal elites ultimately believe that it is up to the individual to sink or swim on their own. Criminal anti-heroes are, in a sense, only an exaggerated form of this hyper-individualistic liberal philosophy. Furthermore, since the audience is watching criminals, they can take a distance from their own anti-social greed and transgressive compulsions. The liberal fascination with criminality and anti-social behavior is related to the centrists’ obsession with a politician like Donald Trump. As someone who positions himself against political correctness and identity politics, Trump embodies many of the characteristics of Tony Soprano, and while the liberal audience may denounce Tony’s and Trump’s words and actions, they feed a media system that gives the people what they want, and what they want is to watch anti-social behavior. This fascination with the anti-social anti-hero not only reinforces people who identify with this ideology but it also feeds liberal fantasies.

Just as prestige TV caters to the elite by differentiating its product from the debased common culture of the masses, elite centrists alienate the working class by advertising the superiority of their knowledge and cultural habits. This sense that the liberal elites look down at the uncultured masses has helped to push the working class into the hands of the Right even when the policies of the Right do not help them. There is thus a real political effect of the cultural divide generated by the discourse surrounding prestige TV. In creating a strict opposition between the elites and the masses, the promotion of prestige TV only intensifies the sense of upper-middle class liberal snobbery.

**Defending Liberal Democracy**

To explain the foundations of contemporary centrist ideology, we have to return to the roots of the modern notion of liberalism. As a product of the European Enlightenment, democratic law and subjectivity are based on the necessary but impossible ideals of neutrality, equality, and objectivity. According to modern liberal beliefs, everyone is supposed to be treated equally by the law as one examines evidence from an impartial perspective. Even though this ideology has
a bias against bias, it still promotes particular ideas and beliefs; however, the main objective is to promote social and legal equality centered on the use of impersonal, universal laws and rights. Liberal democracy, then, is not about compromise or the privileging of individual freedom over social control—this modern ideology relies on avoiding the pitfalls of both tyranny and anarchy through the adoption of shared rules and a legal system employing the neutral judgment of empirical evidence.

Through their relentless focus on the truth, both modern science and law ideally require a clear and transparent representation of facts, and therefore personal beliefs and feelings do not play a role. One reason why I am stressing this definition of modernity is that it is vital to see how contemporary “liberals” have moved away from these guiding principles. Instead of being the representatives of science and democracy, many centrists are driven by a repressed pursuit of profit, privilege, and power. This capitalist compulsion that reveals itself in careerism and the selling out of the working class is often hidden by virtue-signaling and a superficial commitment to Left-wing beliefs.

My understanding of centrist ideology is largely drawn from my experience working in higher education. Although many still see universities as “liberal” institutions, the truth is that they often rely on generating and maintaining economic inequality. Not only do the selective admission standards of elite schools enhance the power of the wealthy and place the unwealthy in debt, but the tenured professors rely on exploiting the labor of adjuncts and graduate students. While the majority of the faculty are now denied basic rights and a living wage, the elite professors and administrators hide their greed and power behind calls for diversity and equal opportunity. This virtue signaling allows competitive capitalists the ability to repress their own complicity as they tend to blame the state for the ills of their institution.

My understanding of centrist ideology and subjectivity is in part derived from Robert Nisbet’s *The Degradation of the Academic Dogma*. Nisbet’s argument is that the undermining of the liberal public mission of universities started after World War II when federal funds poured into these institutions to conduct Cold War research. When the faculty in the sciences realized that they could increase their prestige and earnings by dedicating themselves to government-funded research, they were incentivized to devalue teaching and shared governance. In order to maintain the façade that instruction was still the core mission of these schools, responsibility for teaching shifted to untenured faculty and graduate students. What Nisbet’s narrative then teaches us is that liberal institutions were not destroyed by outside forces; instead, individuals acting on capitalistic incentives chose anti-social greed over the public good. In turn, this emphasis on prestigious careers was later hidden by the performance of progressive values, which did nothing to challenge the internal hierarchies and destructive social effects of this transformed liberal institution.

The invention of prestige TV should therefore be read in relation to the undermining of modern liberal institutions and the contradictory ideology of centrists.
who tend to produce and consume this mode of media. On a fundamental level, the professional upper-middle class is divided between anti-social careerism and a desire to be seen as having good intentions by conforming to progressive values.

**Method**

Instead of framing my analysis by a conservative, Leftist, Right-wing, or centrist view, I seek to apply universal concepts derived from the theory and practice of psychoanalysis. Part of this process entails not using the reductive frames of liberal vs. conservative or Right vs. Left. Since liberal democracy and science rely on employing shared concepts and methods in a neutral and unbiased way, one of the goals of this book is to reveal how cultural material can be examined in a scientific manner. Of course, many people see psychoanalysis as unscientific, and so it will be necessary to show how Freud’s fundamental concepts are based on empirical truth.

Since Freud insists that both the artist and the audience are not aware of the primary processes shaping unconscious material, it is essential to reveal both the content and form of cultural fantasies. In fact, because we are driven to avoid tension and conflict, we seek to repress anti-social impulses that make us feel shame and guilt. When these feelings are repressed or denied, they return through the process of projecting our own rejected thoughts and emotions onto devalued others. Thus, in order to make unconscious fantasies conscious, the focus on escape and pleasure has to be reversed.

Psychoanalysis also pushes us to ask how does the television actually affect its audience? According to this psychoanalytic approach, it is not just mirroring or identification that defines the relation between television and its audience; rather, there are often conflicting unconscious mental processes that are triggered. Much of what TV does is to reinforce pre-existing frames and associations, but it can also create new unconscious connections as it caters to particular modes of pathology. In a society saturated by media representations, all aspects of life, including politics, become influenced and shaped by cultural fantasies. Moreover, political affiliations are themselves affected by specific psychopathologies as a feedback loop is set up between the individual and culture. Therefore, if we want to understand politics today, we need to comprehend how culture influences individuals and how individuals shape the media.

My approach is against the notion that television systematically indoctrinates its audience into a particular ideology; however, I also want to insist that ideologies are reinforced and shaped by media productions. I desire to avoid the pluralistic, centrist approach that claims television is just an open market of ideas with no strong effect on the audience. This model of pluralism is a product of the centrist ideology of ironic conformity: Void of any real values, including the values of liberal democracy, the centrists seek to cater to a mass audience by circulating contradictory and conflicting ideological representations. While I do offer a criticism of contemporary prestige TV, I am not lamenting the loss of conservative traditional values.