# Television's Moment

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## Sitcom Audiences and the Sixties Cultural Revolution

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# Preface

This is a history of three sitcoms, and a book about how society interacted with television. The iterations of *Till Death Us Do Part* stand in for a whole range of other successful entertainment programmes that impacted on private lives and public debates in the 1960s and 1970s. I wanted to explore what difference television made, at a particular historical moment – and I hope the findings will speak to both historians and media scholars.

The writing of this book would not have been possible without the support of family, friends and colleagues. W. Daniel Wilson, Erica Carter, Robert G. Moeller and the anonymous peer reviewers read the entire manuscript and, each in their way, helped greatly improve it. Andreas Fickers, Gavin Schaffer, Norbert Grube, Craig Griffiths, Mark Glancy and Kinga Bloch provided valuable feedback on chapters. I was fortunate to benefit from Eric Hounshell's resourceful research assistance in Los Angeles. Birgit Bernard, Erin O'Neill, Gerrit Thies, Andreas Dan, Lynelle Chen and Abby Collins contributed their time and expertise as archivists and researchers. Adam Capitanio, Charlotte Mosedale and Caitlin Mahon carefully shepherded the manuscript through the editorial process. I am also grateful to those scholars who studied sitcom audiences in the 1970s and shared their recollections with me: Neil Vidmar, John Leckenby, John C. Brigham, Timothy P. Meyer, Howard F. Stein, G. Cleveland Wilhoit and Harold de Bock.

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# Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| AATV | Archive of American Television |
| ABC | American Broadcasting Company |
| AGB | Audits of Great Britain |
| AHAP | Archives of the History of American Psychology |
| ARD | Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland; Erstes Deutsches Fernsehen |
| BBC | British Broadcasting Corporation |
| BFI | British Film Institute |
| BR | Bayerischer Rundfunk |
| CBS | Columbia Broadcasting System |
| CDU | Christlich-Demokratische Union Deutschlands (Christian Democratic Union) |
| CSU | Christlich-Soziale Union Deutschlands (Christian Social Union) |
| DK | Deutsche Kinemathek |
| DM | deutschmark |
| DRAF | Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv, Frankfurt |
| DRAP | Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv, Potsdam |
| EP | extended play vinyl record |
| ERA | Equal Rights Amendment |
| EST | Eastern Standard Time |
| FBI | Federal Bureau of Investigation |
| FCC | Federal Communications Commission |
| HFF | Hochschule für Fernsehen und Film (University of Television and Film), Munich |
| HIV | human immunodeficiency virus |
| HR | Hessischer Rundfunk |

| | |
|---|---|
| IFEP | Institut für empirische Psychologie (Institute for Empirical Psychology) |
| ITA | Independent Television Authority |
| ITV | Independent Television |
| JICTAR | Joint Industry Committee for Television Audience Research |
| LP | long play vinyl record |
| LWT | London Weekend Television |
| MDR | Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk |
| MP | Member of Parliament |
| NAACP | National Association for the Advancement of Colored People |
| NARC | National Archives Record Center, Perris, California |
| NBC | National Broadcasting Company |
| NDR | Norddeutscher Rundfunk |
| NOW | National Organization for Women |
| NWDR | Nordwestdeutscher Rundfunk |
| NPD | Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands |
| NVALA | National Viewers' and Listeners' Association |
| PBS | Public Broadcasting Service |
| PCM | Paley Center for Media |
| SDR | Süddeutscher Rundfunk |
| SDS | Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund (Socialist German Student Union) |
| SFB | Sender Freies Berlin |
| SL | Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute |
| SPD | Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social Democratic Party) |
| SWF | Südwestfunk |
| SWR | Südwestdeutscher Rundfunk |
| SR | Saarländischer Rundfunk |
| TAM | Television Audience Measurement |
| TW3 | *That Was the Week That Was* (BBC, 1962–63) |
| WAC | BBC Written Archives Centre |
| WDR | Westdeutscher Rundfunk |
| WGF | Writers Guild Foundation Shavelson-Webb Library |
| WHS | Wisconsin Historical Society |
| ZDF | Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen |

# Introduction

## Negotiating the Sixties

About forty years ago, a television show caused some unlikely shouting matches in places far away from one another. On a summer afternoon in 1972, ten-year-old twins Frank and Frederick walked with their parents into a diner in Ogden, Utah, proudly sporting red, white and blue 'Archie Bunker for President' T-shirts. When the restaurant manager refused to serve them because of their 'unpatriotic and offensive' outfits, a heated exchange followed, and the family left hungry.[1] On the other side of the Atlantic, a six-year-old boy from Suffolk shouted 'bloody silly old moo' at a saleswoman upon learning that his favourite sweet was sold out. The incident caused outrage in the Rural District Council and was picked up by the London *Times*.[2] Not much later, in West Germany teenagers provoked angry reactions over the kitchen table after bestowing homemade 'Alfred awards' upon their fathers – cardboard medals honouring them as 'the most revolting, appalling, intolerant, ugly, grumpy, inconsiderate, mean father of all'.[3]

These three seemingly unrelated incidents are deeply interconnected. The boys in Utah, Suffolk and West Germany had been watching the same situation comedy – titled *All in the Family* in the United States, *Till Death Us Do Part* in Britain and *One Heart and One Soul* in the Federal Republic. They had used catchphrases and symbols from a wildly popular TV format to negotiate the generational and political tensions of their time. They were far from alone. Television blockbusters could become highly potent signifiers of cultural change during the 1960s and 1970s. This book explores the links between entertainment television and the wave of accelerated social change that swept across Western industrialised societies in the sixties.

Scholars have identified an unprecedented thrust of 'value change' from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s. In the same period, television's power as unchallenged leading medium peaked. Its wide reach coincided with a relative scarcity of channels to choose from, resulting in extremely high ratings: the era of limited choice maximised television's impact. This book is

the first historical study to test empirically the connections between these two developments. It shows that television entertainment indeed accelerated and broadened the wave of sociocultural change. The breakthrough of the sixties cultural revolution in Britain, West Germany and the United States was bolstered by TV series that, beyond mirroring what went on, were also an important agent in societal debates about the acceptance of new values. Broadcasting hastened value change, and in the process slightly deradicalised new norms.

To show how television functioned as a catalyst, accelerator and sanitiser of the sixties cultural revolution, this book makes use of historical methods, sociological data and systematic international comparison. To substantiate its claims empirically, it concentrates on one particular example: three uniquely controversial and influential sitcoms centred on a working-class, bigoted antihero and his family. The original, *Till Death Us Do Part*, had been conceived in London and was aired by the BBC from 1966 to 1975. As part of the international trade in television programmes, the format was then sold in the United States as *All in the Family* (CBS, 1971–79) and in West Germany as *Ein Herz und eine Seele* (One Heart and One Soul; WDR/ARD, 1973–76). The cockney loudmouth Alf Garnett morphed into Archie Bunker and the German 'Ekel Alfred' (disgusting Alfred).

The three series resembled one another closely, from the characters and settings down to the props and some of the jokes. Although the bigoted patriarch at the centre of the sitcom took on a distinct character in postcolonial Britain, postfascist Germany and the United States of the civil rights and women's liberation movements, the format of the comedy stayed remarkably stable. It revolved around a working-class family in which a young and an old couple collide, bound together more by dependence than by love. The head of the family (Alf, Archie, Alfred) is conservative, prudish, authoritarian and racist. His wife (Else, Edith) is submissive, dim-witted and equally uptight. Their fashionable, sexy, consumerist daughter (Rita, Gloria) still lives at home, together with her husband (Michael), who lacks an adequate income. Michael, who espouses left-wing ideas, engages in a permanent war of attrition against the patriarch, whose attitudes are thus subjected to constant ridicule. Fierce arguments about race, politics, gender roles and sexuality expose the deep social and generational divisions of the time.

Perhaps surprisingly, family strife on TV proved a sensational success with audiences in all three countries. The series shot to the top of the ratings. The British *Till Death Us Do Part* became 'the most popular comedy programme in the BBC's history',[4] reaching between sixteen and twenty million viewers with most episodes – up to a third of the entire population.[5] In the United States, *All in the Family* came to be the most successful prime-time series ever, topping the ratings for five years straight. In 1974–75, the

average episode was watched by fifty million Americans – a fifth of the population.[6] In West Germany, the nationwide channel ARD recorded ratings of 50 to 65 per cent for *One Heart and One Soul*, averaging twenty million viewers – again a third of the population.[7] These were sky-high ratings, even for the time. It was the era of limited choice, in which about 90 per cent of households owned a TV set and the daily exposure of viewers was two to five hours.[8] With few channels available (often two to three), successful prime-time programmes could count on being watched by at least 30 to 40 per cent of the entire population of a country. Television now easily reached remote locations. Groups that had traditionally been far from the epicentre of social and political change – rural communities, the uneducated, the elderly, housewives, children, some minorities – watched the same shows as their middle-class, urban, young, educated peers.

As television 'blockbusters', Alf & Co. belonged to that rare group of top hits watched even by those who would usually not be drawn to this kind of show, to its channel or to TV at all. Blockbusters are followed by (almost) all because they are the stuff of discussion at work, at school and at home, and because they occupy the best time slots. They exert unusual attraction only during a limited 'peak period', though later on they can remain a popular staple of the rerun mill. And while today's peaks are often short, they lasted years in the era of limited choice: for the shows in question, from 1966 to 1968 in Britain, 1971 to 1976 in the United States and all of 1974 in West Germany. These peak periods yield the clearest evidence of programming's impact on societal negotiations. For during this phase, the broadcasts garnered huge attention from all quarters of society. The three series were accompanied by practically immeasurable coverage in other media, and raging controversy in the press, politics and sociological research. As the format revolved around the satirical deconstruction of a monstrously bigoted hero, critics accused the programme of inciting racism, while its defenders argued that it undermined prejudice. The sitcoms also repeatedly pushed boundaries regarding sexual norms, gender roles, religious values, vulgarity and bad language. In doing so, they fuelled debate in public and disagreements within the respective television industries. In all three countries, broadcasters were challenged over scheduling and editorial decisions. The BBC's *Till Death Us Do Part* 'infuriated all opponents of the permissive society',[9] in particular Mary Whitehouse's Clean Up TV campaign. The American version became a bone of contention between the networks and the courts during the 1975–76 struggle over the 'family viewing hour'. Trying to rid prime-time programming of controversial content, the network had pushed *All in the Family* to a late evening slot. The sitcom's producer, Norman Lear, sued in response and won a landmark ruling that sank the family viewing policy for good. Similarly, the West German programme caused infighting on regional broadcasting boards who on occasion tried to keep it from being

screened. These controversies contributed to the plug being pulled, despite the show's ratings success.

Although Alf, Archie and Alfred were so contentious, their history has not yet been written.[10] This is all the more astonishing for the enormous long-term impact these shows had on the television industry. They introduced new topics and configurations to the genre of situational comedy and spawned spin-off series and copies that ran for decades.[11] They helped pave the way for 'edgier' shows by proving that controversial issues could play well with audiences without scaring off advertisers and critics. The sitcoms in question were groundbreaking in many ways. In Britain, Alf Garnett headed the first 'real' screen family: arguing, swearing, boozing, bragging and solidly working class. Never before had the BBC dared to make racism and an all-out attack on moral and religious values the subject of mass entertainment, and Alf's 'tirades set new standards for vulgar and aggressive language on television'.[12] For American TV, *All in the Family* meant the breakthrough of 'relevancy', a period in the 1970s in which prime-time programming addressed social and political realities fairly directly. Archie Bunker's was the first show to air racial epithets, the sound of a toilet flushing and 'frontal nudity' (a baby's nappy change). It was the first series to broach socially sensitive subjects such as homosexuality, impotence, breast cancer, premenstrual stress symptoms and menopause on prime time. In Germany, *One Heart and One Soul* was the first situation comedy ever aired, and also the first TV series to satirise racially and politically controversial issues. Alf, Archie and Alfred embodied the demise of the traditional family series with its harmonising, patriarchal message. They also belied the belief that prime-time entertainment needed to be escapist to succeed.[13]

During the 1960s and 1970s, television sitcoms became a battleground for the controversial negotiation of the value change wrought by the sixties cultural revolution – and as such had an impact on the outcome of those negotiations. As this argument lies at the heart of the book, the assumptions on which it is based need to be briefly sketched out. In the following, I will address the concepts of the 'sixties cultural revolution' and 'value change' before explaining why I chose sitcoms, and how the historian's approach to the methodologically thorny issue of researching mass media reception differs from, but also builds on, scholarship in media and television studies.

## The Sixties Cultural Revolution

This book connects the ways in which audiences received popular TV entertainment with an unusual acceleration of value change that swept relatively uniformly across the Western world during the mid-1960s to late

1970s. I call this period 'the sixties', 'the sixties cultural revolution' or, interchangeably, 'the lifestyle revolution'.[14] I will distinguish between 'the 1960s' as the decade from 1960 to 1969 and 'the sixties' as the era of value change throughout. A body of research on 'value change' by sociologists and political scientists, identifying and explaining this comparatively sudden thrust of transformation, functions as an important resource for this investigation.

Most contemporaries of the 1960s and 1970s felt that the pace of social change was unprecedented, placing particular stress on the society they lived in. Historians by and large agree, pointing out the 'unusual speed' and 'dramatic scope' of a social and cultural 'revolution' in the twentieth-century's 'golden age' of stability and prosperity.[15] They emphasise a number of very visible developments across highly industrialised nations. Growing affluence brought with it advanced levels of education, income and leisure time. The service sector began to dominate Western economies, and mass consumerism was on the rise. The postwar demographic explosion now translated into the emergence of trendsetting youth cultures; the juvenile became fashionable. Countercultural groups strove for independence and grassroots movements for political participation, while traditional social milieus lost much of their power and cohesiveness. Women defied patriarchal authority in organised groups and in private. Divorce rates skyrocketed, and the classic nuclear family (a married couple with children) was on the retreat, giving way to increased numbers of one-person households and 'incomplete' or 'patchwork' families. Statistics for divorces, or for single households, confirm a comparatively sudden thrust between 1965 and 1975 across the Western world.[16] The liberalisation of sexuality, a process that had been underway for decades, exploded at the same time into a veritable sexual revolution that commercialised and politicised sex as never before. Now the laws regulating sexuality were decisively reworked in most Western countries: premarital sex and homosexuality were largely decriminalised and abortion legalised. The gay liberation movement and the second wave of the feminist movement publicly questioned the established order. The political activism of minorities aimed at deepening and radicalising the ongoing attitude changes in mass society. Simultaneously, the mainstream churches faced an uphill battle against these multiple challenges to the traditional gender roles and sexual morals they upheld.

To explain where all these visible, far-reaching social changes came from, it was widely assumed that some kind of underlying, rapid transformation of individual beliefs and attitudes had taken place. Journalists, sociologists, pollsters and others speculated about the triumph of individualism, pluralism, secularisation or mass culture.[17] Many lamented the loss of traditional certainties, bourgeois values, religious morals and high culture. While some observers welcomed and others detested the trend, the diagnosis

was clear: for most people, life no longer revolved around survival and basic needs, but around a search for emotional fulfilment. To a larger extent than ever before, the individual was freed from the constraints of the community. As religious precepts and traditional models of family, authority and hierarchy faded, individuals were increasingly left to their own devices when forging their identities. They turned more and more to nonauthoritarian sources, such as mass media, consumerism, music, art and fashion. The resulting lifestyle revolution was an explosion of pluralism and a victory of popular over 'highbrow' culture.

To test these swings in 'values',[18] scholars began to devise long-term surveys from the late 1960s onwards. The best-known researcher to do so was political scientist Ronald Inglehart, who claimed that a 'silent revolution', a fundamental transformation from materialist to postmaterialist values, had affected all highly industrialised Western countries. He argued that a traditional focus on stability and economic well-being was losing ground to a new outlook on life that emphasised individual fulfilment, freedom and participation.[19] Although Inglehart's methods came in for harsh criticism,[20] his thesis was bolstered by scholars from other camps. The sociologist Helmut Klages found evidence for extraordinary attitude swings between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s, with West Germans less and less prepared to do their duty and accept their lot, and more and more keen on autonomy and self-development. Klages registered a rapid movement of previously fairly stable child-rearing values – away from duty and obedience and towards independence and free will – in the comparatively short period of a decade, with the young generation changing attitudes most quickly.[21] From similar data sets, showing a decline of the spirit of work and duty and a rise of hedonism, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann deduced a decay of bourgeois ideals in the population between 1967 and 1978.[22] International long-term value studies confirmed the picture of a relatively uniform thrust of individualism across Western Europe between 1960 and 1980, with many scholars assuming a slackening of the pace of change from the late 1970s.[23] Remarkably, accounts of value change typically point to the mass media, and especially television, as a major cause (besides affluence).[24] How exactly television contributed to value change, though, is left open – and a question we need to address.

If the 1960s and 1970s witnessed an unprecedented wave of value change, they were also very much a period of transition, characterised by the coexistence and clash of the new and the old. Many contemporaries feared the demise of values such as family, duty, common good, modesty and chastity, or worried about increasing cultural, racial and religious heterogeneity. Everywhere, a backlash formed and grew noticeably stronger during the 1970s. The timing, direction and intensity of counteracting forces varied from country to country but frequently saw conservative and

liberal opponents of change gathering strength during the first half of the 1970s – in response to governmental liberalisation policies and the economic downturn following the oil crisis, among other factors. The fate of the sixties cultural revolution differed in the three cases examined, as did its timing and – to a certain extent – its content. Not only did countercultures and the feminist and gay movements unfold at a differing pace, some concepts, such as highbrow culture, class, race and the New Left, had nationally specific meanings.[25]

In all cases, though, the sitcoms can be read as a running commentary on both the sixties cultural revolution and the counterattack. The antihero at the centre embodies the forces of backlash, while his son-in-law is a (critical) portrayal of youthful counterculture. Arguments about politics, countercultures, sexual and gender norms, religion, and fashion feed the endless conflict between the two sides. The TV series added another ingredient to the mix that, to different degrees, formed part of the sixties: race. All Western industrialised societies then faced the challenge of adapting to multiethnic realities, albeit in different forms. Though the influx of immigrants was by no means a new phenomenon, it reached new heights during the 1960s and 1970s in Britain and West Germany. Between 1960 and 1980, the share of foreigners living in West Germany surged from 1.2 to 7.2 per cent of the population (mainly as a result of the policy of hiring 'guest workers' from southern Europe and Turkey). In Britain, the debate centred on the black, so-called colonial immigrants whose numbers had tripled between 1955 and 1962 alone, following the breakup of the empire. In both countries, the refusal to define itself as an immigration country and to embark upon active integrationist policies led to increasingly public displays of xenophobia.[26] The American case was somewhat different because of the legacy of slavery and the existence of a permanent African American underclass, and because of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, which had already succeeded in framing the debate and pushing it to the top of the public agenda.

Though the historical background varied considerably, all three television series reacted to these racial issues by merging the figures of the racist and the opponent of the lifestyle revolution. Characteristically, the sitcoms were all set in working-class neighbourhoods of big urban centres with a long history of immigration (London's East End, New York's Queens and Bochum in the Ruhr region). These were the places where working-class families and newly arrived migrants (either immigrants from abroad or African Americans, many of whom had migrated from the southern states of the United States) were bound to clash, competing for jobs and housing. Alf, Archie and Alfred represented not only the traditionalist backlash but also racism, joining two issues that did not necessarily belong together. Still, the blend was convincing enough, as the series' success attests. The illiberalism,

traditionalism and xenophobia of the lead character could plausibly be traced back to the same source: fear of pluralism and hostility to social change.

## Sitcoms as Sites of Negotiation

Not only because its configuration mirrors the progressive and the traditionalist faction of the sixties cultural revolution, the format based on *Till Death Us Do Part* is ideally suited to investigate the relationship of mass audiences to social change. The best shows for such a study are broadcast nationwide with great success, inspire controversy and are series with regularly recurring episodes. Sitcoms based on a family theme are a particularly obvious vehicle for normative ideals of family and society, and family series were an established genre from the early days of television. Over several years, the main figures of such programmes enter the privacy of living rooms across the country. They offer points of identification and become part of private and public discussions as well as symbols of nationwide reach, leaving sources for the historian. Therefore, they enable us to investigate the ways in which popular television series impact social change. Four concepts will be employed to analyse such social impact: *reach*, *standing*, *framing* and *agenda setting*.

To explore the sitcoms' *reach* means to reconstruct the social and geographical makeup of the programmes' audiences, testing in particular whether reception stretched to include groups of viewers that had been far from the centre of cultural change in the pretelevision era. The other three concepts, borrowed from political science, serve to examine the ways in which the broadcasts influenced current debates about changing values in the three countries. The shows' *standing* signifies that a media message only has an impact because all actors in society believe in its impact. Contemporaries assigned considerable standing to these comedies by making their figures and props into long-lasting national symbols, museum exhibits and material for election campaigns and academic research. *Framing* points to the way contemporaries used television as a script for their own negotiations of social change; it is a mechanism by which TV provides viewers with narratives and frames into which they can insert their own personal experiences and memories of public debates. And to explore *agenda setting* means asking whether the series raised awareness of particular issues by introducing new topics or reintroducing old topics to public and political debate.

In the era of limited choice, blockbuster TV shows delivered almost universally known, endlessly returning and structurally easy to understand stories that became framing scripts through which viewers could make sense

of their world and construct their own multiple and fluid identities. In a process of continual negotiation, individuals struggle to give meaning to their lives, to relate them to larger units (such as nations or social groups), and do so in multiple ways, constructing parallel identities as, for example, citizens, workers or women.[28] As we negotiate and communicate our identities through language, we make use of the formal structures of stories: temporal and spatial order, a grammar clarifying agency, a beginning and an ending, a climax and possibly unexpected twists. Often, our storytelling relies on familiar heroes and a limited number of tropes or frames.[29] Here, TV series can provide us with vocabulary, imagery and characters to weave into our stories: heroes and villains such as the bigot and his son-in-law, fun patterns such as Alf Garnett's cockney accent, Archie Bunker's malapropisms or disgusting Alfred's jokes. Recurring catchphrases such as 'silly moo', 'dingbat' or 'meathead' worked their way into people's narratives, as did costumes, props or theme tunes from the shows. Referring to frames from a sitcom served to negotiate values in a way that was fun and removed from personal (possibly painful or embarrassing) experiences. It allowed viewers to communicate personal identities to others who also watched the broadcasts.

As television entertainment engages in the selection of frames, it sets limits to our storytelling. Television's scripts can exclude, dominate and suppress minority identities and alternative stories. There is a subtext of power relations structuring television's framing scripts, and it depends heavily on two factors: the conditions of production, including the show's staff and the broadcasting system, and the genre of programming. With respect to the first, the personalities of producers and writers confine what is possible in a given programme, as do varying forms of institutional and self-censorship that are to some extent conditional on who producers answer to and how success is measured. This study will pay particular attention to the role of historical agents – producers, writers, actors, network executives, advertisers, organised interest groups, politicians – and will thus include, but go beyond, the level of discourses and institutional structures. When scrutinising editorial, scheduling and marketing decisions, we thus need to take several factors into account: the people involved, network competition and government interference, the pressure of advertisers and the differing national broadcasting systems. It made a difference how commercialised the industry was; how far developed methods of ratings assessment, merchandising and programme export were; and to what extent the broadcaster depended on government support (say, for the raising of licence fees). We will see to what extent such political and economic factors shaped the content of programming and audience responses.

Like production conditions, genre characteristics also set limitations to TV's storytelling. Since the 1990s, media scholars have devoted a fair share

of attention to the genre of sitcom.[30] Because sitcom was seen as a 'feminine genre', similar to soaps and telenovelas, much valuable work was contributed by feminist scholars, particularly on 1950s and early 1960s shows and changing ideas of family, gender and sexuality.[31] Often, situation comedies are interpreted as inherently conservative and hegemonic. The genre conventions tend towards conservatism because every episode must have a circular structure, returning to the status quo at the end. The characters are not meant to develop: trapped in unchangeable power hierarchies, they remain reduced to essentialist types. Moreover, the domestic setting – the well-lit family home (to accommodate close shots) and the frequent repetition of situations – emphasises warmth and familiarity. The laugh track, the thirty-minute format and the demand for three gags a minute make it even more difficult to explore serious topics. The genre thus invites recourse to slapstick and, worse, 'old-school humour' targeting minorities. It has been suggested that sitcom reinforces social tensions as its jokes build on ethnic and gender stereotypes, and as it theatrically stages everyday middle-class life around nonthreatening women and domesticated men.[32] In the United States, 'domesticoms' revolving around family life are seen as particularly affirmative, as they perpetuate the myth of the American dream.[33] Some scholars claim that situation comedy generally masks social inequality and replaces class relations with imaginary social relations,[34] or that it serves as 'a symbolic refuge from … a culture characterized by excessive individualism … and a general lack of commitment to an overarching social deal'.[35]

Yet it remains contested to what extent these limitations of the genre can be overcome.[36] Because of their progressive intentions, 1970s sitcoms such as *All in the Family* and its variants seem to contradict the overall pattern. They have been branded 'revisionary' programmes or labelled a distinct subgenre, 'erudite didacticoms' or 'relevant sitcoms'.[37] Scholars disagree whether these series simply replaced one form of hegemony with another (now consolidating liberal instead of conservative ideology)[38] or whether the genre indeed grew to allow new, more progressive forms of humour.[39] The question is yet unanswered, not least because research on sitcom has neglected the issue of audience reception.[40]

## Mass Media Impact on Society

Measuring the responses of mass audiences and the social impact of mass media has long been a particular challenge. Owing to methodological problems and limited access to broadcasts and broadcasting archives, historians typically neglect television sources, though they occasionally factor TV into their arguments.[41] While historians have engaged in

productive debates about the role of media in the French Revolution, or Nazi and imperial Germany, often identifying the reception of new, leading mass media as major drivers of social and political change,[42] they have only just begun to explore ways of gauging TV's impact on social change in contemporary history. So far, their treatment of television's role has mainly been limited to the medialisation of the political sphere, and to messages rather than recipients.[43]

The field of media and television studies, by contrast, has seen long, contentious debates about mass media's impact on audiences. Early research followed a behaviouristic 'hypodermic needle' model, in which TV injects messages into the viewer with direct effects. This was quickly rejected, but until the mid-1970s, most media scholars still conceived of audiences as rather passive and at least partially receptive to media messages. They insisted that viewers' reactions were measurable and followed certain conventions. Many researchers were then working with Paul Lazarsfeld's 'two-step flow model of communication' (stressing the role of intermediary opinion leaders) or the 'uses and gratifications' approach, which asked how viewers used media to satisfy needs and generate pleasure. From the late 1970s onwards, following Stuart Hall's emphasis on the independence and creativity of viewers in 'decoding' the 'codes' offered to them in programming, most scholarship shifted to assume a principal asymmetry between intended and actual readings. The idea of different types of readings – hegemonic, negotiated and oppositional – of one and the same programme now came to dominate the profession, followed by John Fiske's notion of 'active audiences' who create a myriad of individual readings to agree with their specific social situation.[44] By now, a large part of the field had tired of the debate about media impact, and the belief in the findings of quantitative social research – surveys with representative samples, generalising questions and presumed objectivity – had waned. Instead, emphasis was placed on the unpredictability of individual readings, the multiplicity of audiences and viewing as an active, not passive process.

Wary of wading into the methodological quagmire of 'media effects',[45] most scholars interested in past programmes decided to retreat into safer academic havens, researching texts, aesthetics, genres and production rather than reception. Those who insisted on capturing audience reaction began to develop ethnographic and refined sociological methods for the contemporary programmes of the 1980s and 1990s.[46] The focus was less on predictable majority responses in mass audiences and more on participant observation, with surprising reactions and creative readings by individuals commanding particular attention.[47] How individual viewers derived emotional pleasures and negotiated identities while watching took centre stage, whereas television's impact on 'the masses' and society faded into the background. This shift in scholarship corresponded to television being dethroned as the

leading medium, bringing with it a fragmentation and dispersal of audiences.[48]

Current audience research investigates talk shows and particularly reality formats in which viewers participate by commenting or voting on the performances of ordinary people (such as *Big Brother*, *Survivor*, *Wife Swap* or *Supernanny*). Media scholars monitor audience response with interviews, focus groups and the taping of viewers as they talk back to the screen or show affects with gasps and sighs.[49] This work leads back to assuming some direct impact not only on individual viewers but also on society, as it relates television's messages to the construction of class identities, neoliberal values and gender roles.[50] Notably, these studies draw on qualitative interviews and observation of small groups of up to forty viewers, leaving quantitative surveys or ratings aside. And of course they neglect past programmes, as their methodology cannot be extended to the era of early and limited choice television.

To what extent is it possible to explore mass audience responses to 1960s and 1970s programmes, then? Television studies scholar Lynn Spigel cautions: 'The reconstruction of viewing experiences at some point in the past is an elusive project'.[51] Indeed, studies looking at prime-time TV of the late 1960s and the 1970s largely avoid investigating audience reactions. They treat television foremost as a mirror, calling it a 'barometer of changing social mores' and 'a showcase of ideological breakdown and reconfiguration'.[52] To recover television's agency and its impact on mass audiences, comprehensive sources on viewing experiences are essential. I argue that these sources are available if one digs deeper than usual and concentrates on particular types of programming. As we are confined to surviving documents and no longer able to reconstruct viewing experiences, a specifically historical approach will be applied, subjecting the material to the validity criteria of historical research: diversity of sources, critical contextualisation, the embedding of historical voices in societal developments, a longitudinal view of collective processes beyond the individual and testing findings by means of chronological and international comparison.

The mid-1960s to late 1970s are uniquely suited for the study of TV's social impact because of the wealth of the remaining documentation. Audiences' limited choice converged with empirical sociologists' discovery of television as a subject – they leaped on it with gusto, creating multiple data sets for large audience groups. In addition, broadcasters had developed demographically refined methods to measure ratings. A mountain of data exists about the exposure to TV, the choice of shows and the behaviour of different audiences – including much material on individual readings. In addition, viewers can still be asked about their encounters with particular shows, with many posting unsolicited recollections on the Web.

For the three sitcoms in question, extraordinarily rich materials on production processes, scheduling, marketing, viewers' reactions and political conflicts survive. The programmes themselves are almost fully accessible.[53] Many producers, scriptwriters, actors and television executives were interviewed and left a wide range of autobiographical and contemporary texts. The press coverage, radio and TV periodicals, independent empirical audience surveys and published as well as unpublished ratings data were consulted in specialised libraries (at least twenty-eight empirical surveys survive on the reaction of different audiences to *All in the Family* alone). Broadcasters' archives in Britain and Germany yielded the correspondence of producers, editors and actors, viewers' letters, internal audience research reports, files on production and merchandising and much more. For the United States, the producers' files were inaccessible, but a rich haul from other archives shed a bright light behind *All in the Family*'s façade: personal papers by producers, story editors and scholars; court files on Tandem's lawsuits; taped seminars at institutions linked to the TV industry; episode scripts from the Writers Guild archive; and correspondence between activists and producers, for example, in the archives of the National Organization for Women.[54] Additionally, fan literature, online fan forums, blogs, photo sharing websites and an informal email survey of viewers served to investigate long-term effects.

Such a comprehensive body of evidence is only available for certain kinds of programmes. The best shows for the historian are blockbuster series that both entertained and courted controversy, thus generating sources. Furthermore, the most influential shows employ a real-life setting, as we can learn from a multitude of worldwide governmental and charity projects. Nongovernmental organisations have long harnessed mass media power to bring about social change around the globe, typically for purposes of conflict resolution and prevention[55] or the improvement of public health. Light entertainment, particularly soap operas and drama series running over months and years, has proven most effective in gaining the following and trust of large audiences. These programmes need to be locally produced and present a 'real-life' setting far away from celebrity and high politics. They have to prioritise entertainment, weaving in current issues only in a limited number of subplots and episodes. Several surveys document the success of such real-life drama and soap series in spreading awareness of HIV, lowering fertility rates and tackling domestic violence in Ethiopia, Tanzania and South Africa.[56] The 'relevant sitcoms' of the 1960s and 1970s fit this pattern almost perfectly, except that they were comedy rather than drama programmes. They reached large audiences over several years, presented a 'real-life' setting adapted to local conditions, generated much debate and privileged entertainment while cautiously engaging in agenda setting.

To investigate television's historical role in fostering value change, we need to overcome national boundaries. The sixties cultural revolution was an international phenomenon, just as the television industry was always highly reliant on the worldwide exchange of programmes, personnel and techniques. While most historians of television still write in national contexts, media studies scholars have begun to explore the upsurge in the global trade of TV formats. Their work treats such formats as locally adapted franchises that are translated into different national cultures, connecting the global (the TV industry) with the local (audiences). But while the patterns and flows of the more recent programming trade and the localisation of travelling television texts receive much attention, pre-1980 programming and audience responses are all but ignored.[57]

The present study touches on the global trade in formats and the localisation of the sitcoms in chapter 8. However, it is more concerned with an international comparison of television's social impact than transnational linkages. It compares the three national settings to address the following questions: How were production and reception processes shaped by national cultures? What was the impact of economic systems, institutional frameworks and historically different definitions of high culture on the content, scheduling and marketing of programming? To what extent could producers stretch genre conventions, avoid censorship and push agendas? The broadcasting system in the United States was fully commercialised, Britain had a carefully regulated dual system and West Germany a state-regulated monopoly. But, surprisingly, it was the profit-oriented American industry that was most likely to respond to social change and minority activism.

Beyond an exploration of TV's impact, this book is also a history of three sensationally successful sitcoms. After a brief introduction to the actual programmes (chapter 1), the production of the British, American and West German series in their national settings will be explored (chapter 2). There were structural differences in broadcasting systems, production teams and standards of professionalism. The following chapters turn to reception processes in the 'era of limited choice', investigating television's role in the erosion of old and shaping of new values. To what extent did broadcast entertainment pioneer, accelerate and shape the lifestyle revolution? The sitcoms' social and geographical *reach* will be explored in chapter 3. Chapters 4 to 6 then engage with the processes of *standing*, *framing*, and *agenda setting* in the three sitcoms. They ask how the shows influenced current debates about sexual mores, gender roles, religious values and vulgarity in Britain (chapter 4), the United States (chapter 5) and West Germany (chapter 6). The areas in which framing and agenda setting were most controversial were racism and anti-Semitism. Therefore,

chapter 7 will investigate whether the three television bigots were successful in satirically undermining racial intolerance. Or was there an 'Archie Bunker effect' by which antiprejudicial comedy backfired, reinforcing bigotry?[58] Last, chapter 8 traces the transnational links forged by the format's export. With the exception of this chapter, the three national contexts will be dealt with separately throughout. An international comparison of the findings will be provided at the end of most chapters, with a summary in chapter 6 and the conclusion.

## Notes

1. Frederick (Fritz), 'Archie Bunker for President' (blog), 27 August 2008, http://www.fritzliess.com/2008/08/archie-bunker-for-president.html#more (accessed 10 May 2010).
2. 'Silly moo' was a catchword popularised by *Till Death Us Do Part*. *Times*, 24 May 1967, 2.
3. *Poster-Press*, 20 April 1974, in Historical Archive of Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR), 8579.
4. Donnelly, *Sixties Britain*, 82.
5. BBC Written Archives, audience research reports 1965–75 (VR series).
6. Ozersky, *Archie Bunker's America*, 67; Adler, *All in the Family*, ix.
7. Today top shows rarely break the 20 per cent barrier (Sherry, 'Media Saturation', 207–8). Infratest ratings in WDR, 8579, 8577, HF1, UF1, UF2.
8. See chap. 3. Cf. John Ellis's concept of the (longer) 'era of scarcity': *Seeing Things*, 39.
9. Marwick, *Sixties*, 477.
10. The literature is limited to popular treatments and fan books such as: McCrohan, *Archie and Edith*; Campbell, *Sitcoms*; Habel, *Ekel Alfred*; Speight, *Garnett Chronicles*; and Speight, *Thoughts* (1998). Adler (ed.), *All in the Family*, is a compilation of primary sources. There are only two articles of scholarly value about the British series (Schaffer, 'Till Death'; Schaffer, 'Race'). Studies on TV and racial relations typically devote a few pages to *All in the Family* (Means Coleman, *Viewers*; Jhally and Lewis, *Racism*; Acham, *Revolution*; MacDonald, *Blacks*) or *Till Death Us Do Part* (Malik, *Representing*; Pines, *Black and White*; Ross, *Black*; Mather, *Tears*; Newton, 'Shifting Sentiments').
11. British spin-offs included the sequels *Till Death…* (ATV, 1981) and *In Sickness and in Health* (BBC, 1985–92) as well as various one-man stage shows and one-evening television specials and the copy *Curry and Chips* (LWT, 1969). American spin-offs were *The Jeffersons* (CBS, 1975–85), *Maude* (CBS, 1972–78), *Gloria* (CBS, 1982–83), *Archie Bunker's Place* (CBS, 1979–83) and *704 Hauser* (CBS, 1994). Copies or reverse copies included *Good Times* (CBS, 1974–79) and the adaptation of the British *Steptoe and Son* series *Sanford and Son* (NBC, 1972–77). German sequels and clones took almost twenty years to develop; they include *Motzki* (ARD, 1993), *Die Trotzkis* (MDR, 1993), *Mit*

*einem Bein im Grab* (1996–97), *Lied zum Sonntag* (1998) and *Familie Heinz Becker* (WDR/SR, 1992–2003).

12. Sandbrook, *White Heat*, 625.
13. *All in the Family* was the first show based on a 'relevancy' formula to climb to the top of the ratings, although some earlier, moderately successful programmes had taken up 'relevant' issues: the drama series *Twilight Zone* (CBS, 1959–64) and *Playhouse 90* (CBS, 1957–61) screened after 9.30 or 10.00 P.M. and did not make the top twenty.
14. Speaking of a 'cultural revolution' does not mean adopting contemporary connotations of the term, as mobilised by Mao or the leaders of sixties protest movements.
15. Especially those historians engaging in large-scale comparisons of several Western nations use the term 'cultural revolution': Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes*, 8, 257–58, 320–43; Etzemüller, *1968*, 9, 13–14, 213–14, 221; Marwick, *Sixties*.
16. Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes*, 321–23.
17. Kaelble, *Sozialgeschichte Europas*, 119–31; Doering-Manteuffel and Raphael, *Nach dem Boom*, 61–65.
18. I use the terms 'values' and 'norms' interchangeably to denote 'conceptions of the desirable', that is, seen as justified and acceptable (definition by Clyde Kluckhohn in 1951). See Thome, 'Wertforschung', 6–7.
19. Inglehart, *Silent Revolution*.
20. Thome, 'Wandel zu postmaterialistischen Werten?'; Albert, *Wandel*, 84–85.
21. Klages, 'Verlaufsanalyse', 518–19. Klages and Kmieciak, *Wertwandel*, gathers the findings of numerous 1970s empirical projects.
22. Noelle-Neumann, *Proletarier*.
23. Kaelble, *Sozialgeschichte Europas*, 125–31; Albert, *Wandel*, 94; Thome, 'Value Change'. Historians have recently begun to integrate research on value change into their accounts: Dietz, Neumaier and Rödder, *Wertewandel*; Raithel, Roedder and Wirsching, *Auf dem Weg*; Rödder and Elz, *Alte Werte*.
24. Albert, *Wandel*, 90, 94; Kaelble, *Sozialgeschichte Europas*, 130; Noelle-Neumann, 'Elefant'.
25. It also has to be taken into account that the British show peaked earlier (from 1966 to 1968) than its counterparts.
26. Poutrus, 'Migrationen', 165; Sturm-Martin, 'Tradition', 116.
27. In the case of the United States, Robert Self sees the issues closely intertwined (*All in the Family*, 6–7).
28. There is no static national, gender or class identity at any one time. The ongoing negotiation of identity is asymmetrical and subject to power hierarchies. See Toews, 'Historiography', 535, 539.
29. Ibid., 551.
30. For the United States: Jones, *Honey*; Marc, *Comic Visions*; Hamamoto, *Nervous Laughter*. For Britain: Mills, *Sitcom*; Mills, *Television Sitcom*; Koseluk, *Brit-Coms*. For Germany: Holzer, *Sitcom*; Keding and Struppert, *Ethno-Comedy*.
31. Spigel, *Make Room*; Radner and Luckett, *Swinging Single*; Haralovich, 'Positioning'.
32. Quotation: Malik, *Representing*, 91, 98. See also Ross, *Black*, 99; Mills, *Sitcom*, 79; Spigel, *Make Room*, 154, 180; cf. Langford, 'Impasse'.

33. Marc, *Comic Visions*, 26; Jhally and Lewis, *Racism*, 4–5, 132–33; see also Jones, *Honey*, 6.
34. Haralovich, 'Positioning', 70.
35. Hamamoto, *Nervous Laughter*, 153. These critiques fit in well with philosophical and literary theories of humour and comedy; see Mills, *Sitcom*, 76–91.
36. See Mills, *Sitcom*, 30, 103–4.
37. Marc, *Comic Visions*, 165, 200, 209; Attalah, 'Unworthy Discourse', 108.
38. Attalah, 'Unworthy Discourse', 108–10; Hamamoto, *Nervous Laughter*, 82.
39. Mills, *Television Sitcom*, 44–45.
40. In contrast to the rich literature about soap opera audiences (see Haralovich and Rabinovitz, 'Introduction'; Brunsdon, D'Acci and Spigel, *Criticism*), the only extensive study of a sitcom's reception is Jhally and Lewis, *Racism*. See also Mills, *Sitcom*, 113.
41. Hodenberg, 'Expeditionen'; Bösch, *Mediengeschichte*, 212.
42. For the French Revolution, see Chartier, *Cultural Origins*; Darnton, *Bestsellers*. For Nazi Germany, see Ross, *Making*. For imperial Germany, see Kohlrausch, *Monarch*.
43. See Bren, *Greengrocer*; Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time*; Vogel, *Unruhe*.
44. Hall, *Encoding*; Fiske, *Television Culture*.
45. In part, this resulted from the highly charged debate on violence on-screen. See Barker and Petley, 'Introduction', 8–9; Ellis, *Seeing Things*, 49; Gauntlett, *Moving Experiences*.
46. For example Dorothy Hobson, David Morley and Ien Ang: see Wood, *Talking*, 101–5; Brunsdon and Morley, *Nationwide*.
47. Hobson, 'From *Crossroads* to *Wife Swap*', 124–25; Wood and Taylor, 'Feeling Sentimental', 147.
48. New technologies and the deregulation of the TV industry have led to the decline of mass audiences and family viewing, with users navigating media content increasingly on their own terms in 'multi-set, multi-channel and multi-media' homes. Jermyn and Holmes, 'Audience', 49–50.
49. See Wood, *Talking*; Skeggs and Wood, *Reacting*, 14, 124–25.
50. Skeggs and Wood, *Reality Television and Class* and *Reacting*.
51. Spigel, *Make Room*, 187.
52. Bodroghkozy, *Groove Tube*, 17; Spigel and Curtin, 'Introduction', 5. See also Levine, *Wallowing*; Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism*; Ozersky, *Archie Bunker's America*. A notable exception is Vogel, *Unruhe*, who explores TV's political role during West Germany's student protests.
53. All German and American episodes are available on DVD; the British series is only available for 1972 and 1974. Early episodes of *Till Death Us Do Part* survive on tape at the British Film Institute in London, as published or archived scripts (at the BBC Written Archives Centre in Reading and the Deutsche Kinemathek Berlin) or remain lost.
54. Like other scholars, I was denied access to *All in the Family* files by CBS Corporation and the independent production firm Tandem. Its head, Norman Lear, tightly controls the interpretation of his own legacy. Email communication from Ana Maria Geraldino, Act III Communications, to the author, 3 November 2009: 'Mr. Lear is writing his autobiography and so we're limiting access to

those files until that book comes out'. Norman Lear's memoirs appeared with Penguin Books in late 2014 while the present study was in production.

55. See the Search for Common Ground project, operating in twenty countries (www.sfcg.org/sfcg/sfcg_evaluations.html), and the California-based organisation Equal Access, working in Afghanistan, Nepal, Laos, Cambodia and elsewhere (www.equalaccess.org/) (both accessed 20 February 2013).
56. See the 2002–4 radio series Yeken Kignit (www.populationmedia.org/where/ethiopia/yeken-kignit/ethiopia-results/) and the South African Soul City series (www.soulcity.org.za/) (both accessed 20 February 2013). Usdin et al., 'Achieving'; Usdin et al., 'Communicating'. For Tanzania, see Vaughan and Rogers, 'Model'.
57. See chap. 8. See also Esser, 'Editorial'; Moran, *TV Formats*; Oren and Shahaf, *Global Television*. A rare historical approach is applied by Chiara Ferrari ('"National Mike"'). Imports and formats from the 1980s, particularly *Dallas*, have been studied by Silj and Alvarado, *East of Dallas*; Ang, *Watching Dallas*; Rössler, *Dallas*; Liebes and Katz, *Export*.
58. Marger, *Race*, 34, 56–57; Singhal and Rogers, *Entertainment-Education*, 157–59, 207.

# 1

# Three Sitcoms

## *Till Death Us Do Part*

From 1966 to 1968, the situation comedy *Till Death Us Do Part* was the BBC's biggest hit. The show revolved entirely around East London docker Alf Garnett, whom the producer characterised as 'a liar, a materialistic greedy bastard'[1] and a 'bigoted Conservative, arrogant in his prejudices against all forms of change'. Alf is convinced 'that all foreigners are rubbish, that Britain was utterly wrong to give away her empire … and that all modern forms of permissiveness and relaxing of erstwhile puritanical disciplines, are destruction. He therefore believes utterly in Heaven and Hell, the Conservative Party, the British empire, the British Monarchy and "Keep Britain White"'. At Garnett's side is his wife Else, 'a pleasant cow-like lady … of slow mentality, unread and unintelligent … anchored by marriage'. In their tiny row house set in a working-class district, they are joined by daughter Rita – 'mini-skirted to a degree' – and unemployed son-in-law Mike. The Liverpool-born Mike 'has very long hair and wears fairly outrageous clothes as a symbol of the young person's revolt against authority'. Thus, the format relied on 'a true life situation set in the heart of London's cockney East End dockland with social undertones'.[2] This was the backyard of 'swinging sixties' London, where the less well-off and immigrants lived side by side with an affluent metropolitan youth with its penchant for fashion, pop music and partying.

The opening credits contrast the symbolic glory of the British nation with its miserable reality and economic decline. An aerial view of the ornate Houses of Parliament is juxtaposed with the brick façade of Alf's pitiful two-up, two-down Wapping domicile. The underlying instrumental music is a majestic theme with Big Ben's chiming bells, which slowly disintegrates and

ends on a flatulent tuba note. The episodes themselves remain largely confined to the small sitting room, encapsulating the family's entrapment in an unbearable situation (figure 1.1). Here, a succession of shouting matches between Alf and Mike unfolds: 'no plot – lots of lovely chat', as producer Dennis Main Wilson put it.[3] Author Johnny Speight used Mike and Rita 'as the spokesmen for intellectual socialism, humanism and the needle which goads the father Alf into his outrageous statements and behaviour'. Thus, the young generation argues against the older, conservative against socialist, taking on 'any subject under the sun … be it God and Jesus versus Atheism, be it the Colour Bar versus Semitism, be it Liverpool Football team versus Borussia Dortmund, be it the life story of the Duke of Windsor – everything comes out stark, brash vulgar and very, very real'.[4] The cockney dialect, the furnishing and the props made it unmistakeable that this family is at the lower part of the social spectrum, and that Alf is stuck in bygone days. Winston Churchill and the Duke of Windsor smile down on the Garnetts from above the sideboard. Throughout, the stodgy old couple's 'ethic of scarcity' is contrasted with the flamboyantly dressed young couple and their consumerist attitude.[5]

Figure 1.1. The Garnetts on the set of *Till Death Us Do Part*. Reprinted by permission of BBC Photo Library.

All early critics acknowledged that the series, with Alf and Mike constantly at the top of their lungs, was unusually noisy – and also that it was 'desperately funny', 'rolling us … in the aisles'.[6] When the show screened in the mid-1960s, it had considerable shock value. Contemporaries were stunned by *Till Death*'s irreverence in religious, sexual and political matters. Fierce arguments developed over the use of four-letter words, blasphemy and insults to the Queen and prime minister. Speight's comedy named and shamed politicians and commented regularly on current political affairs. In 1968, for example, Alf Garnett discussed 'the Nation's problems. Little things like devaluation, General de Gaulle, Nasser, darling 'arold [Wilson] and all the other "bloody bolsheviks"'.[7] Equally controversial was the way in which the programme addressed racism. Alf's ire was directed against black and Asian immigrants as well as Jews, the Irish and everything foreign, and he assaulted these taboo subjects from a working-class perspective. Mass audiences particularly enjoyed the antimoralist, antielitist thrust of the sitcom. A typical 1966 episode 'electrified' viewers because it offered 'offence to practically anybody who was prepared to take it', ridiculing 'Tories and Socialists' as well as 'the Royal Family and God'.[8]

The report cited above was referring to an instalment in which the Garnett family is having Christmas dinner, becoming increasingly drunk and loutish. The scrooge Alf, having given no presents, complains about the 'substandard' socks and cigars he has received. Raucous fights develop over the table, starting with Mike mocking Alf for standing to attention while the national anthem plays on the radio. Alf urges respect for the monarch, whereas Mike outs himself as a 'republican'. Alf insults Mike as a 'hairy nellie' and an 'ignorant misbegotten lying layabout socialist scouse git'. Thereafter, Mike and Alf heatedly disagree about whether there is a heaven. Mike insists the Bible is 'not history' but 'mythology' and maintains that religion's purpose is to make poor people accept their lot. At Else, stuffing her face and occasionally trying to silence the raging arguments, Alf directs a 'Shut up, you silly moo!' Finally, Alf pours his pint over Mike while Mike throws the Christmas pudding at him.[9] This show was seen by 40 per cent of the British population, who overwhelmingly enjoyed it as 'very funny' and 'true to life'.[10] It also produced 'over 130 letters complaining that it was crude, blasphemous and full of bad language'.[11]

Other episodes concentrated on government policies, sexual morals or racism. A June 1966 programme, for example, depicts Alf at a football match, shouting abuse against foreigners. As a consequence, he loses his voice and has to visit the doctor, who happens to be black. Alf insults him, calling him a 'coon', 'sambo' and 'nignog'. Mike weighs in that the doctor is English, as he was born in Manchester, and turns the tables on Alf, whom he labels a 'Yid' because his grandfather's name was Solly Diamond.

According to the BBC, this show was 'acclaimed by the critics of the National Press as a courageous script exploring the theme of racial prejudice'. But it also received 'a half-dozen letters from various types of foreigners – i.e. Scots and Jewish, who protested that the programme was in bad taste'.[12]

*Till Death*'s peak period lasted until its cancellation in February 1968. After a four-year hiatus, the show came back in 1972 for another three years. Now, the novelty appeal was lost. 'Two in five reporting viewers, many of them admitted erstwhile fans', were disappointed, complaining that the programme was 'running out of ideas'.[13] The producer blamed the show's tiredness on filming in colour ('which I think softened it and made it vaguely yet another sitcom') and the cast being 'now famous as opposed to anonymous characters'.[14] But above all, the times had changed. What Alf stood for still resonated with a mass audience but was no longer a provocative, exceptional, must-see television experience.

## *All in the Family*

Initially, the American version drew substantially on the British scripts, which producer Norman Lear had bought together with the rights to the format.[15] Contrary to what is often suggested, the pilot and early episodes of *All in the Family* were remarkably similar to the original, copying not only characters' names but also storylines and jokes. But although Lear had read the scripts and seen a few British episodes, he aimed at 'doing it 180 degrees removed… . I was doing an American situation comedy, and what they did was an argument on a subject … for a half hour'.[16] Thus, the format was swiftly localised, substituting specifically British traits for American features. As Archie's conservatism could obviously not draw on Queen, church and empire, he instead supported President Nixon and the Vietnam War while opposing civil rights and women's liberation. Mother Edith, compared to the original Else, resembled 'a beauty contest winner' and was neither lazy nor abusive but a devoted household goddess.[17] The son-in-law morphed from a Liverpool layabout into a son of Polish immigrants and a student of sociology. He studied hard, graduated and over time pulled himself up into the middle class by becoming a professor, fostering the perennial myth of the American dream. Another characteristic change to the format was the introduction of African American neighbours. Exponents of other social groups who challenged Archie's closed mind – such as hippies, Jews, feminists, draft dodgers, swingers, gays and transvestites – dropped in from time to time.

Figure 1.2. The Bunkers on the set of *All in the Family*. Reprinted by permission of MPTV/ Camera Press.

With these additions to the mix, the show's setup reflected accurately the crisis American society was going through (figure 1.2). By making the son-in-law a student, story editors could weave in campus radicalism. Mike Stivic embodied the white youth radicalised by the Vietnam War, the draft (in effect since 1969) and the massacre at Kent State University in May 1970. And with African American neighbours, the series made racial tensions a continuous topic. Archie, the hard hat, stood for the ethnicity revival among the white working classes. Like many working-class whites in 1971, he felt his interests squeezed by an alliance of white liberals and nonwhite minorities. He was enraged by what he saw as attempts to pacify minorities with welfare expenditure. The divide between hard hats and middle-class liberals – there had in fact been violent street clashes between construction workers and student peace protesters in New York in May 1970 – was taken up in Archie and Mike's relationship.[18] In the show's second episode, Archie wrote a letter to President Nixon, commending him for defending hard hats against liberals.[19]

The shouting matches between young and old in the Bunker household mirrored the agony many families experienced at the time. TV critics noted 'the almost constant hysteria, the rapid pacing set to the sounds of argumentative shouting' measuring in at a disturbing peak of sixty-one decibels six times in thirty minutes.[20] The Bunkers' frenzied arguments were a reflection of the seething anger and violence that rocked American society in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Ghettoes burned, prison inmates rioted, university students battled police. 'Nobody thinks of 1968 and 1969 as being fun', one observer recalled, and another added: 'It was traumatic … the late 1960s were great if you were young and were having a lot of fun, but for the majority it was the scariest time ever. America seemed to be falling apart'.[21]

In response to the upheaval, a nostalgic wave swept the lower middle classes and conservatives during the early 1970s. *All in the Family*'s producer Lear rode the wave by making Archie the fossil of a bygone era. The antihero's regressive longing for national glory and consensus was an element of the British format that translated well into the American setting. The wistful theme song ('Those were the days') and the sepia colour scheme emphasised that the Bunkers were stuck in the past. Here were Edith and Archie at the piano, opening every episode with a song harking back to the days of Herbert Hoover, when 'guys like us we had it made', one 'didn't need no welfare state' and 'girls were girls and men were men'. The narrow set with its tired, unfashionable furnishings matched Archie's narrow, washed-out, backwards-looking mind. Yet, presenting Archie as a relic of the 1930s did not mean that the show promoted everything the young generation stood for. As Lear explained, 'the son-in-law is often just as uninformed and narrow-minded with his liberal viewpoints as the diametrically opposed old man'.[22] During the first two seasons, Mike was portrayed as a cardboard liberal, Gloria spouted women's lib slogans she did not understand and the hippies visiting the Bunker house were grotesquely overdrawn figures of ridicule.[23] The costumes reflected critical distance to youth subcultures, too. The wardrobe designer made Mike 'really despicably looking … with these tie-dyed awful shirts … everybody's nightmare son-in-law'. And Gloria was to be merely 'a wind-up doll' with her 'fashionable little shirts and … little flippy skirts'.[24]

Contrary to the press reaction, which remained fixated on racism, the production team always stressed the show was 'not about bigotry' per se, but rather about the real problems of working-class families.[25] Scriptwriter Mel Tolkin explained the basic pattern of the series as 'a moment of crossroads, of cultural revolution, cultural change. That moment, when the ordinary worker, uneducated worker was in trouble, when that worker would have to be under a woman, or befriend a gay, a whole world which he was unprepared for … that was the basic joke'.[26] The intention was to showcase 'a lot of very real things'. 'It's just blue collar, low income in Queens, and how an average

family lives there.'[27] 'Everything is carefully considered in terms of … does this happen in New York, are those the traffic regulations in New York?' Likewise, director John Rich insisted the actors really ate food in dinner scenes and wore clothing appropriate to the changing seasons.[28]

At the core of the show's design was working-class reality. From Archie's beer belly to his cheap cigars, the details underlined his uneducated, lower-class identity. Set in a low-earning household, the programme departed from the typical suburban affluence of prime-time entertainment. What in the British version had been a small terraced house with a twelve-square-foot front room, a scullery and an outhouse in the back was transformed into a much larger semidetached house. But it had only one bathroom, no car and, crucially, was in an urban area where blacks were moving in. Bunker's lines mirrored 'the language of the school yard and the language of the parking lot'.[29] 'This is lower class New York. This is a man who works on a loading platform. When he gets angry, sometimes he says hell or damn', head writer Michael Ross explained.[30] Archie was to read the tabloid *New York Daily News*, while his upwardly mobile black neighbour, George Jefferson, would peruse the *Wall Street Journal*.[31] The wardrobe designer developed a 'nostalgic, sepia, family album look' for costumes and furnishings. The set and props were designed 'to keep bright colors from popping', and almost all clothes were overdyed. The idea was 'to open everybody's family album … it was everybody's family confronting the issues of the day'. In search of 'odd, old textures', wrinkly cotton and battered hats, Rita Riggs toured the junk shops of Pasadena's poor neighbourhoods. Archie's outfit symbolised 'the American working man out of the thirties who believed he was the class equal of everyone in our country'. He embodied the lower class without blue-collar gear, wearing a fedora instead of a working man's cap. His off-white shirts had to look so well-worn that 'you knew Edith Bunker ironed those every day'.[32] In keeping with the class theme, the Bunker household was supposed be slightly dirty and in disarray.[33] And while Archie and Edith were held hostage by their class status and lack of education, they were surrounded by characters who aspired to higher things. The young couple were 'people of *Kultur*', going to concerts, museums and (in Mike's case) university.[34] The Jeffersons were 'moving on up', and Aunt Maude was an envoy from affluent suburbia. Whenever a storyline suggested Archie flirting with middle-class characteristics, Norman Lear pulled the brakes. He stridently opposed the idea of Archie buying the corner pub during the eighth season, and kept his distance from the spin-off *Archie Bunker's Place* (CBS, 1979–83).[35] The working-class context saturating *All in the Family* was highly unusual for American television. The networks habitually presented middle-class and upper-class characters, since they had learned that shows stressing class distinctions were 'killjoy television' bound to fail: it was safer to display society as classless. In the case of *All in the Family*, this meant that public