Opler, Daniel. « Between the "Other" Classes : *The Nanny* and the Ideological Creation of the American Middle Class », *Cercles* 8 (2003) : 68-77 <www.cercles.com>. ©*Cercles* 2003. Toute reproduction, même partielle, par quelque procédé que ce soit, est interdite sans autorisation préalable (loi du 11 mars 1957, al. 1 de l'art. 40). ISSN : 1292-8968.

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BETWEEN THE "OTHER" CLASSES
The Nanny and the Ideological Creation of the American Middle Class[1]

Introduction

Few things are as confusing to Marxists as is the present-day American middle class. In the U.S. nowadays, one finds extreme consciousness of the existence of a middle class, but without any economic indicators common to those calling themselves "middle class." The term therefore becomes a severe challenge to any serious consideration of what class means in America today. In this study, I argue that the middle class is ideological in nature. This means, as historian Barbara Fields has demonstrated, that it must be a continuing process; ideologies must be constantly reinforced if they are to remain in existence.[2] I examine the ways in which writers and producers of American television sitcoms aid in the ideological creation of a middle class by creating cultural upper and lower classes. Through this examination of the 1990s sitcom *The Nanny*, I argue that middle-class Americans are able to create a class identity far different from the upper and lower classes they see depicted on television. This difference allows the members of the audience to create a mid-

1. My thanks to Danny Walkowitz for encouraging me to rethink the meaning of the term "middle class," and to Kimberly Quinn Johnson for her advice and encouragement.

2. For the history of the American middle class and the difficulties the term presents, see Daniel J. Walkowitz, *Working With Class: Social Workers and the Politics of Middle-Class Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), and Burton J. Bledstein and Robert D. Johnston, eds., *The Middling Sorts: Explorations in the History of the American Middle Class* (New York & London: Routledge, 2001). For the need for the continuous creation of ideology, see Barbara Jeanne Fields, "Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America," *New Left Review* 181 (May / June, 1990): 110-112.

dle-class identity, one that is separate from economic considerations.[3]

The Nanny places members of the upper and lower classes in close quarters. This is done through the concept at the heart of the show: a single upper-class father, Maxwell Sheffield, hires a lower-class woman, Fran Fine, to take care of his three children. After a long period of flirtation, the upper-class father and the lower-class nanny fall in love and marry. This rather drawn-out Cinderella story allows the audience a weekly opportunity to watch the upper and lower classes in close contact, with no identifiably "middle-class" characters interfering.

In placing the upper and lower class on the television screen, the writers of this sitcom depict the two classes primarily in terms of contrasts. The upper and lower classes depicted on *The Nanny* clash around consumption, manners, and—in some ways most interestingly—gender roles. In all three cases, there are strong distinctions, and the middle-class audience, I argue, is expected to define itself to the upper and lower classes depicted on the program. Particularly with regard to gender roles, this analysis becomes even more complicated, since the two classes also exhibit certain shared assumptions and behaviors. I argue that, by depicting gender as somewhat universal, *The Nanny* worked to naturalize gender roles for its middle-class viewers, even while the series recreated the American middle class.

Consumption between the classes

Perhaps the clearest marker of distinctions between the upper and lower classes on *The Nanny* is consumption. For a television series, supporting itself on paid advertisements for consumer goods, consumption must always be placed at the center of any analysis. Yet on *The Nanny*, the advertisements work along with the episodes of the series to create a world where people define themselves through their habits of consumption.[4]

There are numerous forms of lower-class consumption satirized in *The Nanny*. When Maxwell Sheffield's mother visits the family, consumption marks Fran as part of the lower class:

> Mrs. Sheffield: She's not of our class!
>
> Maxwell: Don't be absurd!

3. Walkowitz in particular argues that the social workers whom he studies marked themselves off from both the upper class (philanthropists and elite volunteers) and the lower-class welfare clients; see Walkowitz, *Working With Class*, 10, 290.

4. For the necessity to consider advertisements as part of the series, and the importance of "unified texts," see Matthew Basso, " 'Effect by Contrast:' White Male Audiences and the Reading of World War II Newsreels and Feature Films as a Unified Text," *Columbia Journal of American Studies* 4,1 (2000): 128-142.

> Fran (entering): You have to see this! *Hello, Dolly* spelled out in Spaghetti-O's! [laughter] ("The Two Mrs. Sheffields").

C.C. Babcock, Maxwell's upper-class business associate, also uses consumption to mark Fran as a member of the lower class. When Maxwell tells C.C. that she should get fashion advice from Fran, C.C. answers that Fran probably buys her clothes at K-Mart—a discount department store ("Deep Throat").

Perhaps the most avowedly lower-class character on the show is Sylvia Fine, Fran's mother, whose consumption patterns are constantly ridiculed. When she offers Fran "some of the crystal" to make room in her cabinets, for instance, Sylvia is referring to glasses with Flintstone characters on them ("The Grandmas"). Similarly, in the episode "Where's The Pearls?", Sylvia Fine tests her daughter's memory with a brief song to the tune of "How Much is That Doggie in the Window?" that illustrates the sitcom's use of consumption:

> Sylvia: How much is that dress in Macy's window?
> Fran (after a pause): Who cares? It'll be at Loehman's on sale.
> Sylvia: Oh, darling! (They hug.)

Loehman's, along with other discount clothing stores like it, is referenced in several different episodes in *The Nanny* ("The Car Show," "The Cradle Robbers"). But the incident quoted here is far more important than most of the other passing references to these discount stores. To Sylvia, remembering to shop at Loehman's rather than Macy's is a central part of Fran's identity—it is a mark of class, without which Fran simply would not be herself.

Like the lower class, the upper class has its own consumption patterns on *The Nanny*. When Maxwell Sheffield and C.C. Babcock are to meet at a restaurant, they do so at Le Cirque, a famous French restaurant in midtown Manhattan ("The Nuchshlep"). Similarly, when Mrs. Sheffield arrives at the Fines' home, she mentions having taken the Concord jet from England ("The Two Mrs. Sheffields"), and when C.C. and Fran have dinner, C.C. suggests sushi, which Fran has never eaten before ("Val's Boyfriend"). And, when C.C.'s father offers to buy Fran a "Big Mac," he is apparently not referring to a McDonald's hamburger, but to buying her a dress made by fashion designer Bob Mackie ("Me and Mrs. Joan").

The writers of the show invoke these contrasting styles of consumption quite consciously. Frequently, as in many of the above cases, these juxtapositions provide opportunities for some wonderful comic moments. This is perhaps made clearest on the episode "Sara's Parents," when Maxwell's first wife's parents come to visit the newly-married Maxwell and Fran. Fran suggests winning them over by inviting them for onion loaf at Wiley's Ribs, after

which Maxwell informs her that "They'd rather end their meals with a liqueur, not a Wet-Nap." Maxwell does not say, and does not need to say, that they are upper-class people. To him, as to the writers and the audience, this is evident from their habits as consumers.

The different consumption patterns are also reflected in the different outfits the characters wear. Fran, Sylvia, Fran's friend Val, Fran's grandmother Yetta, and the other lower-class women on the show are constantly portrayed wearing bright colors and relatively short skirts. The Sheffields and the Babcocks, on the other hand, are systematically placed in far quieter colors for contrast. The theme song of the series proclaims this contrast: in the Sheffield house, Fran Fine is "the lady in red when everybody else is wearing tan."

On *The Nanny*, consumption separates the upper class from the lower class, and separates both from its middle-class viewers. Unlike the upper- and lower-class people depicted on the show, the audience has access to both worlds of consumption: they purchase Spaghetti-O's, shop at both discount stores and at higher-priced stores like Macy's, purchase both Big Macs and Bob Mackies on occasion. As a result, they are neither upper- nor lower-class, but defined as members of the middle class through the separated forms of consumption depicted on the show.

But consumption played a more complex role in *The Nanny* than even this analysis indicates. It is important to remember that just as the 1990s audience watched upper- and lower-class people defining themselves as upper and lower class through consumption, commercial breaks allowed viewers themselves to purchase items: automobiles, video games, the latest snack food and beauty products. Often, viewers of these commercials watched consumers in nice suburban homes happily while away their time while enjoying the latest consumer product. These commercials gave the audience the chance to participate in the practices witnessed on the show: audience members, like the characters on the show, now had the opportunity to define their own class status through appropriate consumption.

Manners between the classes

The characters on *The Nanny* distinguished themselves as members of particular classes in many ways besides consumption. Most important among these is the rather broad category of behavior that I would define as manners. Their understandings of what constituted appropriate behavior when dealing with other people were the subjects of frequent contrasts on the series.

Perhaps the most frequent opportunity for comedy that the setup of *The Nanny* provided was in the manners and behavior of the lower-class charac-

ters on the show. Fran Fine and the other lower-class people on the show were constant sources of amusement for their lack of self-consciousness in their behavior. This behavior, this unwillingness to be ashamed, marked them as members of a class other than the middle class.[5]

From the very outset of the series, Fran's unwillingness to be ashamed or self-conscious becomes an object of ridicule. The moment Fran walks into the Sheffield mansion for the first time and is informed of the job vacancy, she begins this exhibition of her lack of shame, grabbing a lipstick and scribbling a resume with it ("Pilot"). The multiple references to Fran's nasal laugh are used to mark her class status as well. This is especially well illustrated in the episode "My Fair Nanny," where Fran decides to try to throw an upper-class party. Quickly, Maxwell and Niles come up with a list of things she has to change if she is to pass for a member of the upper class: her clothes, her hair, her voice, her walk, and her laugh.

Like these social behaviors, Fran's notions of hygiene are also frequent objects of ridicule, particularly when she attempts to pretend that she is not part of the lower class. When Fran watches her grandmothers in wonder and remarks that it's a wonder she has any class at all, she immediately discovers dental floss stuck in her hair, leading to canned laughter ("The Grandmas"). On another occasion, she loses a bandage when attempting to make breakfast, to her mild embarrassment (and more canned laughter) when the bandage turns up on someone's plate ("Sara's Parents"). In both cases, again, the laughter indicates that this behavior is inappropriate to the point of absurdity.[6]

If Fran's manners are ridiculed, so too are her mother Sylvia's. Almost every time Sylvia Fine appears on the program, in fact, there is a joke made about how loud or inappropriate she is. When Sylvia goes to a wedding and is dissatisfied, she immediately steals the flower arrangements for a centerpiece ("Here Comes the Brood"). Similarly, she is apparently willing to describe her hysterectomy to Maxwell with almost no provocation ("Fashion Show"). And when Fran wants to drown out the sound of Grace's violin playing, she immediately telephones Sylvia, whose voice can apparently drown out any noise ("An Offer She Can't Refuse"). Again and again on the series, Sylvia's loud voice and inappropriate behavior are made objects of ridicule.

The upper class has its own set of manners, some of which are ridiculed as much as Fran's and Sylvia's. In particular, the cold relationships between

5. For shame and manners in American sitcoms, see David P. Pierson, "AShow about Nothing: *Seinfeld* and the Modern Comedy of Manners," *Journal of Popular Culture* 34.1 (Summer 2000): 49.

6. Fields also notes how powerful a tool laughter can be in creating and enforcing ideology. See Fields, "Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the United States of America," 118.

the upper-class people on the series are objects of satire. Maxwell's relationships with his parents, for instance, is portrayed as highly distant. When Mrs. Sheffield comes to visit her son Maxwell, she tells him that she knows him better than he might think. As she puts it, "A mother doesn't raise her son for the four years before boarding school without learning a thing or two [laughter]" ("The Two Mrs. Sheffields"). Similarly, when Maxwell and his mother talk on the phone, he ends the conversation in a surprisingly cold way:

> Maxwell: Yes, mother. I like you very much too. [laughter]
> Fran: "I like you very much too"? When are you going to cut that umbilical cord already? [laughter] ("Pup in Paris")

The canned laughter here is again telling; after both these statements, it indicates that the audience is expected to find the distant relationship between Maxwell and his mother amusing and presumably far different from the relationships in their own lives.

C.C. Babcock, perhaps the most avowedly upper-class character on the show, represents the epitome of this sort of interpersonal distance. As C.C. describes her childhood after her parents split up, with increasing joy, "Sure, it's hard at first. You're shuttled from house to house, forced to choose who you love the most. They try to buy your love, topping each other's gifts, giving you more and more until you've got everything you ever wanted!" ("The Grandmas"). More importantly, C.C.'s relationship with her father (and her pet dog, a gift from Maxwell) are both so dreadful that both dog and father prefer to spend time with Fran rather than with C.C. ("The Taxman Cometh," "Ode To Barbara Joan"). Also, despite years of working closely with Maxwell, C.C. still has not learned the names of his three children, and when she is left to look after them, she can't even remember how many of them there are ("Here Comes The Brood"). Her often ridiculed lack of romantic ties also indicates this lack of connections with other people.

Maxwell's relationship with his children is also portrayed as extremely distant. When Fran asks the children if they believe in Santa Claus, Brighton responds that they do not, but they do believe in Edna, their father's personal shopper ("Christmas Episode"). Additionally, when the children get lice in the episode "The Facts of Lice," Maxwell does not, indicating that he is not as close to them as he should be, as Fran is quick to point out.

Many of these behaviors are of course gender-specific as well as class-specific. When Maxwell and Niles attempt to remake Fran Fine into an upper-class woman in the episode "My Fair Nanny," one of their primary jobs is to restrict marks of femininity. Her walk in particular is made the subject of humor here. When they intimate that she moves her hips too much when she walks, she says plaintively, "I never had any complaints before." Her clothes,

particularly her short skirts, are also marks of femininity that are frequently discussed on the show.

Yet, unlike other gender-specific behaviors, which occasionally unite as well as divide characters on the series, the differing notions of appropriate behavior are strong marks of difference between the two classes. As with the presentation of the two classes through consumption, the manners depicted on the show are extremes—the friendly, boisterous, and unhygienic lower class on one hand and the cold and reserved upper class on the other—against which the middle-class audience is again able to define itself.

Gender across the classes

Although they contrast sharply on issues of consumption and manners, the upper and lower classes as sketched on *The Nanny* share at least some understandings of gender. This allows the series to naturalize gender relations, to make them somewhat universal, while still allowing the middle-class audience to view itself as in between the two other classes. This depiction of gender also provides for the show's continuing plot: the romance and eventual marriage of Maxwell Sheffield and Fran Fine, uniting across the classes.

As already mentioned, many of the mannerisms already discussed are gendered behaviors. Fran's hair and clothes especially are markers of a gender system not acceptable in the upper class world of the Sheffields. Although there are few men of the lower class seen on the series, they too dress in ways that mark them as lower-class. This is particularly true of Fran's ex-fiancé, Danny, who shows up wearing a leather jacket and slicked back hair; Val's boyfriend dresses in a similar fashion on the episode "Val's Boyfriend."

More subtle contrasts around gender also exist. The lower class in particular is frequently portrayed as feminine. Fran's father is a particularly blatant example of this. His invisibility (with only minor exceptions in the last season of the series) has marked implications for the gendering of the lower class. This invisibility allows the lower-class scenes of the Fine family and friends to be populated almost exclusively by women: Fran's mother, grandmother, and best friend Val all mark the lower class as feminine.

Niles, the only other man who appears on the show regularly who might be considered part of the lower class, also frequently indulges in behaviors that the show uses to indicate femininity. When C.C. quits her job and is no longer around, Niles eats compulsively, a behavior frequently used to indicate femininity on the series ("Val's Boyfriend"). Additionally, when he encounters a soap opera star, he becomes giddy and begins giggling ("Personal

Business"). Finally, Niles's job—which includes cooking and cleaning as well as answering the door—is decidedly a feminine one.[7]

Even as many aspects of gender roles define class differences on *The Nanny*, shared meanings of gender can be used to cross class categories. Women especially are portrayed in very similar fashions on *The Nanny*, regardless of class. The writers and directors frequently play up the class differences between the two most important adult female characters, Fran Fine and C.C. Babcock. At the same time, C.C. and Fran share many qualities. Both Fran and C.C. are frequently portrayed as determined to find husbands. When she goes to therapy, Fran's reactions to a word association test tell of this determination: "Man—husband. Dr.—and Mrs. Pen—Prenup" ("Kissing Cousins"). Similarly, in the episode "The Cantor Show," Fran and her mother are seen in their temple, praying that God will find Fran a doctor, presumably for a husband. For C.C., it is her obsession with Maxwell Sheffield (and her jealousy when any other woman seems interested in him) that defines her character from the very beginning of the show ("Personal Business," "Maggie the Model,"). But there are other examples of C.C.'s determination to meet men as well. When Fran goes on a cruise, C.C. at first ridicules the idea, but then, after considering that it will be a boat full of men who can't get away from her, decides that she will follow Fran's example ("Ship of Fran's").

This shared determination to find a husband is part of Fran's and C.C.'s shared understandings of gender. This is made clearest on the episode "The Whine Cellar," where the two characters are trapped in a wine cellar and talk for hours, uniting around feminine acts: Fran demands to do C.C.'s hair, while C.C. pushes for a game of "Truth or Dare." Their conversation during the game of "Truth or Dare," taking place while Fran refashions C.C.'s hair, revolves around their shared desire to have a more romantic relationship with Maxwell Sheffield. Despite the differences between their class-based styles of femininity—in particular, Fran's decision to give C.C.'s hair more volume is played for laughs in the scene, as it is so clearly a mark of Fran's class—their time trapped in the wine cellar is a rare shared moment between these two women of different classes. And their common ground is, from this scene, their shared femininity.

7. Niles is difficult to discuss with regards to class. Like other butlers in series such as this (Geoffrey on the *Fresh Prince of Bel Air* being perhaps the other most obvious example), Niles's class status fluctuates: most of his assumptions about proper behavior are upper-class assumptions, although occasionally—as in his sharp comments ridiculing Maxwell and C.C.—he has moments of rebellion. Also, like the upper-class members of the Sheffield house, Niles dresses quite formally, exaggerating still further the contrasts between Fran and the rest of the household. In some ways, he is the closest thing to a middle-class person on the show, belonging as he does in neither the upper- nor the lower-class world.

Other women also illustrate the show's contention that there is a universal femininity. Both Fran's mother and Val assume, as does Fran, that marriage is the defining moment in a woman's life. And, in perhaps the most blatant example of universalized femininity, during the resolution of the episode "The Nanny Napper," after being accused of kidnapping an infant, Fran is able to convince the infant's mother that she meant the baby no harm by referring to a plot line in a soap opera. The mother cannot speak a word of English, but knows the details of soap operas: Fran and the mother can come together around gender in a way they cannot in any other way.

Equally telling of this universalized femininity are upper and lower-class women's shared compulsive behaviors. For the Fine family, this primarily means their incessant eating. Fran's mother is the most obvious example here: frequently, as in the episode "Kissing Cousins," her first act when arriving to see her daughter at the Sheffield residence is to demand food. And, while Fran is not portrayed as quite so obsessive about food, she too has her addictions. Not only is she also portrayed as at least occasionally a compulsive eater ("Personal Business," "Fashion Show"), but Fran at one point becomes addicted to shopping ("Shopaholic"). C.C., meanwhile, is ridiculed for her excessive drinking throughout the series (see especially "Deep Throat," "The Whine Cellar").

But by far the most important common ground between the two classes around gender is the cross-class romance. The constant flirtation and eventual marriage of Maxwell Sheffield and Fran Fine make them, in many respects, stereotypical romantic sitcom leads. From the very first season, the audience knows that they are meant to be together, to cross the class boundaries that separate them. When Fran—in the throes of delirium—tells Maxwell that she loves him, the audience is easily fooled into thinking that there are deeper meanings than simple delirium, as is Maxwell ("Deep Throat"), at least until the end of the episode.

Within the context of their different class backgrounds, the romance between Maxwell and Fran has important implications. It indicates that they share enough understandings of gender to ignore the differences between their classes. In fact, the resolution of the series—their marriage and the birth of their children—portrays the two-parent household with children as a universal, obvious, and happy ending for the series.

Like the satiric contrasts between upper and lower classes, these shared assumptions about gender are critical to the creation of the American middle class. The sorts of gendered behavior that upper- and lower-class characters share—especially the romantic relationship that cuts across class lines—all depict traits that middle-class observers laugh at because characters who are

so absurd, so distant from the middle-class lifestyle the audience enjoys, exhibit traits with which the middle class can empathize. The monogamous ending of the series is the happy ending that the audience expected, the two-parent family so often depicted in the commercials that accompany the series. The gendered assumptions that this program puts forth are assumptions that the middle-class audience, recreating itself as middle class by watching this program, can share as a collective.

Ideology, television, and class

The Nanny and other series like it serve as a set of codes for creating a middle-class identity, an understanding of self that is above the lower-class behavior of the Fines, but well below the upper-class world of the Sheffields and Babcocks. In the end, the characters in *The Nanny*, lower- and upper-class alike, reaffirm viewers' middle-class status by being outsiders, by functioning as the "other" classes against which the middle class can define itself. They do this while reaffirming the universality of the middle-class gender system, especially the romantic monogamy between two parents.[8]

As much as anything else, the ideology created by *The Nanny* is notable for its definition of class. Class on this series is not defined in an economic way. Instead, culture—including manners, consumption, and gender roles—is the primary distinguishing mark between the two classes depicted on *The Nanny*. Like the middle class that the series is meant to address, classes in *The Nanny* are separate from any economic structure. For the upper and lower-class people on *The Nanny*, "class" is a marker of cultural, not economic, status, just as it is for the American middle class today.

8. There are of course many parallels to *The Nanny* in terms of cross-class comedies. In television sitcoms, both *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* have similar messages. In feature films, both *Pretty Woman* and *Maid in Manhattan* have similar messages about the distinctions between upper and lower classes, and the eventual ability of people to cross these lines of class through romantic liaisons. On television programs like *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, while there is no overarching cross-class romance, the writers nonetheless assert universal standards of manliness, a particularly strong bond between the lower-class Will and his upper-class Uncle Phil on several episodes (see, for instance, "The Fresh Prince Project," "Will Gets a Job," and "Papa's Got A Brand New Excuse").