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Introduction

Cultural Analysis and Social Change

This book grew out of an interest in television entertainment during one of the liveliest periods in its history, the 1970s, when major shifts in network policy, responding to broader cultural changes, helped produce some of the medium's most innovative programming. I was interested in the dialogue between television imagery and other kinds of interpretation of the cultural life of the 1970s in the United States. My particular concern was with the light that changing themes in television could shed on certain issues that were preoccupying cultural critics and social scientists during this period: the tendency to describe America as a culture in crisis and to fasten on family life as the troubled center of that crisis; the relationship between family and work; and more broadly changing perceptions of the boundaries between public and private spheres of everyday life.

My aim was to explore the changing social psychology of family life with respect to changing definitions of "normal families" in a fictional medium whose imagery has always been fundamentally familial. The ubiquity of television and its intensely domestic character make it an ideal narrative form in which to observe changing ideas about family. It is watched by a vast number of people in their homes; its advertising is geared to both the parts and the whole of the family unit; its images, in both news and entertainment, are stamped with the familial. Even its workplace settings are shot through with domesticity. Given the sheer breadth of its appeal, television tends to address—and help create—widely held beliefs that permeate the culture rather than the minority views at its margins.

I began my investigations with a quite orthodox Parsonian reading of the meanings of *family* and *workplace*. A family was to be understood as a network of social relations marking out the private sphere—that is, a group of people tied by blood or marriage; living under the same roof; organized by a hierarchy of authority, mutual obligation, and privilege; assuming the defined roles and statuses associated with "traditional" extended and "modern" nuclear families; and providing its members with primary supports and constraints cemented by emotional as well as economic interdependence. By contrast, a workplace embodied the secondary aspects of social life—specific occupational goals; segmented social relationships with limited emotional content; the principal site of participation in the public sphere.

As my work progressed, it became clear that more flexible definitions of the key terms were required for both television and the "real world." In the language of prime-time television in the 1970s, both family and workplace became implicated in a broader meditation on primary affiliation, an imaginative commentary on community and collective solidarity grounded in the disruptive changes of modern life in the late twentieth century. The recurring imagery of television's dominant genre, the episodic series, conferred on both family and workplace the intimacy and emotional intensity of family, albeit in significantly different ways. Chapter 4 demonstrates how in shows with explicit family settings, such as *All in the Family* and *One Day at a Time*, the home became a repository for conflict, anxiety, and fear about the fracturing of family life and the corrosive effects of social change; the haven was transformed into a place of siege. The television workplace described in Chapter 5, by contrast, assumed the warmth and solidarity, the emotional intensity and nourishment, and the protective functions of the families and communities we believe we once had, and have lost.

Taken together, the television family and workplace served to map out a social field, recasting the boundaries between private and public spheres and redefining the normative meanings within and between those spheres. The television workplaces of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *M*A*S*H*, and *Lou Grant* came to provide a more plausible terrain than the home for public and private to intersect, a haven within the simultaneously heartless and intrusive world of the corporate organization. The emergence of an ethic of

"professionalism" in television occupations, defined as a "people's advocacy" resting on commitment, cooperation, and substantive rather than formal skills, served both as a critique of corporate power and an alternative vision of desirable public leadership.

This portrayal of family and work and the relations between them differs sharply from that depicted on television in either the two preceding decades or in the 1980s. As Chapter 2 shows, the families and workplaces of prime-time television in the 1950s and 1960s served as the harmonious, well-oiled building blocks of a benignly conceived American society founded in affluence and consensus. In Chapter 6 I argue that in the 1980s television has generated a variety of family forms, presided over by the intact nuclear families of *The Cosby Show, Family Ties,* and other shows.

These shifts raise interesting questions about the relationship of television to prevailing social concerns in different periods. Television is no more a mirror to (or an escape from) the social world than any other fictional narrative. True, television's naturalism feeds our expectations of verisimilitude. Its mimetic visual form persuades us that Ozzie Nelson (of *Ozzie and Harriet*) lives on, schmoozing the day away with his neighbor across the yard; that the Bunkers (of *All in the Family*) really live in Queens; and that the Huxtables (of *The Cosby Show*) frolic day after day in a well-appointed Manhattan town house. But family life never resembled that of the Nelsons, the Bunkers, or the Huxtables, at least not in any narrow sociological sense. Like all storytelling, television speaks to our collective worries and to our yearning to improve, redeem, or repair our individual or collective lives, to complete what is incomplete, as well as to our desire to know what is going on out there in that elusive "reality." Television comments upon and orders, rather than reflects, experience, highlighting public concerns and cultural shifts.

The disjuncture between real and television families and the shifts in both also caution us to proceed with care when we interpret short-term cultural changes, especially in American television, which is by nature faddish. The sheer volume of its ephemeral output; the fierce competition between the networks; their common fear of the commercial threat from cable and pay television, and of the power of home video and other new technologies to restructure viewing habits—all these constraints

press into the routines of programming a demand for constant novelty with relatively little innovation. Even the most successful series usually lasts no longer than seven years, which, some critics argue, suggests that changes in genre or style have little significance as indices of social trends. Fads, however, are more than whims; Chapter 3 suggests that fads with staying power can tell us much about the ways people respond to social change. As advertisers and broadcasters try to second-guess the public mood (a daunting project, even if such a unitary zeitgeist existed), they pay earnest attention to what they consider to be the mirrors of public concern, namely, the media themselves. Television feeds off itself and other media, and in this way its images both echo and participate in the shaping of cultural trends. Buzzwords like *the sixties*, *the me-decade*, and *yuppies* are casually threaded through the rhetoric of television, become enshrined in programming knowledge and routines, and pass into the currency of everyday social exchange. That makes them important, however short-lived.

Short-term changes, too, may be seen as the redefinition of older concerns. Television, after all, is little more than forty years old, but it inherits the forms and preoccupations of earlier narratives and social meanings. If the television narrative is playing in new ways with commonly understood boundaries between private and public spheres, we should not assume that confusion about boundaries is new. The longer historical view reminds us that cultural forms are always in dialogue with the disruptions that social change inflicts on everyday life. If the felt shock of the new can be traced in any era, the specific caste of this concern and its framing in social thought have changed with time and place. "Histories of the arts," observed Frank Kermode in a 1986 essay, "are histories of past modernities."

The interplay of short- and long-term cultural analysis, then, suggests that television's juggling of the meanings of private and public, family and work, rehearses older questions in a new social environment. The troubled distinction between the "inner" and "outer" lives of individuals and groups has formed the backbone of nineteenth-century classical social thought and has proved seminal to the modernist sensibility of Western politics and culture since the turn of the century.[1] In the eyes of many social historians, the scale and speed of change precipitated by industrial and bureaucratic divisions of labor threatened to fragment the individual and

collective frameworks that ordered everyday life. Intellectual debate about the character of social change has tended to indulge in the broadest of conceptual and historical polarities: traditional and modern, modern and postmodern, capitalist and postcapitalist. Short-term cultural analysis can enrich the debate by lending it specificity, documenting particular themes that deepen and qualify conceptual sweeps of continuity and change. The 1970s (loosely defined as the period between 1968 and 1980) are of particular interest to cultural historians because the period is marked by an unusually intense propensity for self-scrutiny, reflected in an acceleration of the trend begun in the 1950s and 1960s for diagnostic cultural analyses offering varieties of zeitgeist for modernity. By 1968 many of these had begun to betray a pervasive anxiety, pessimism, and foreboding about the collapse of community and the growing fragmentation of social life.

This grim mood was captured in the titles and prefatory quotations of several prominent works that spanned the decade. Philip Rieff's *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (1968), an account of the replacement of religious faith with a privatized, psychologistic world view, began with a long excerpt from Yeats's poem *The Second Coming*, whose famous line "things fall apart, the centre cannot hold" has since graced the flyleaf of several volumes of cultural criticism. Philip Slater's *The Pursuit of Loneliness* (1970) was subtitled *American Culture at the Breaking Point*. Historian Christopher Lasch's two major works of cultural analysis, *Haven in a Heartless World* (1977) and *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (1979), similarly intimated a sense of crisis and social disintegration in the transition from "economic" to "therapeutic" modes of social control and aspiration.

Particularly striking in the frequency and intensity of its appearance in public and intellectual discourse was the debate about the contemporary nuclear family and the growing perception of family life as, if not the source, then certainly the central arena for the expression of social conflict. Again and again the literature pointed to family trouble as the center of modern malaise. Substantive changes in patterns of marriage and family life during this period, such as the rise in rates of divorce and remarriage, single-parent families, dual-career families, and singles living alone suggested swift and radical changes in family structure.[2] The

growing literature in research and policy on family pathology and family violence, stimulated in part by official fears concerning the growing dependence of families on welfare agencies, in part by the focus on the family as the unit of care in therapeutic institutions, was more often than not appropriated as signaling the impending collapse of family life.

Renewed interest in the sociology and history of consciousness in the 1970s, a legacy of the cultural radicalism of the 1960s, set the stage for a wave of ethnographic studies as well as more speculative essays in the sociology of culture that tried to dig beneath statistical and demographic data to examine the social psychology of family life. Among the more controversial of the latter was Christopher Lasch's *Haven in a Heartless World*. Lasch's argument built on the Frankfurt School critique, which identified the roots of current family decay in capitalist development itself. The separation of production and consumption into work and leisure in the early capitalist period was, he argued, later consolidated by the socialization of both production and reproduction. Thus a split between private and public life was introduced, according to Lasch, only to have the boundaries blurred by the intrusion of state and corporate authority. The rationalized workplace, organized by principles of scientific management, was being echoed in the domestic sphere, in the expropriation of family skills, autonomy, and authority by professional experts of the modern therapeutic state. In Lasch's view, the loss of the paternal authority so deeply entrenched in the classical bourgeois family of early capitalism eliminated the oedipal struggle between generations, which he regarded as indispensable to moral growth. The disastrous consequences he forecast for individual development and collective life were elaborated in his later books *The Culture of Narcissism* and *The Minimal Self*.

One response to the deepening sense of trouble in the family was the beginning of a call from the right for a "return to traditional values." As one prominent feminist critic noted:

> If there is one cultural trend that has defined the seventies, it is the aggressive resurgence of family chauvinism, flanked by its close relatives, antifeminism and homophobia. The right's impassioned defense of traditional family values . . . has affected the social atmosphere even in the liberal, educated middle class that produced the cultural radicals. The

new consensus is that the family is now our last refuge, our only defense against universal predatory selfishness, loneliness, and rootlessness; the idea that there could be desirable alternatives to the family is no longer taken seriously.

(Willis 1982, 150)

Other observers of contemporary domestic life took a more sanguine view of these changes. Proponents of the "new social history" sought to unmask the nostalgic myth of a solidary preindustrial extended family, emphasizing the deepening emotional coherence of modern family relationships (Shorter 1975). Mary Jo Bane's (1976) review of sociological data on the family led her to stress both the continuity and adaptive capacity of the nuclear family and conclude that the family was not disintegrating but evolving in the direction of a healthy pluralism. In the wave of family ethnographies that sprang up during this period, there was little evidence to support Bane's optimism. Most painted a far from rosy picture, pointing especially to the misery, conflict, and insecurity of working-class families under severe economic and psychic pressure.[3] At best, "cultures of resistance" were observed in strong networks of solidarity and support among women (Stack 1974).

Although there were few ethnographic studies of middle class family life in the 1970s, statistical data showed that divorce rates and other indices of family pathology, while apparently higher among low-income families, were substantial and rising in upper socioeconomic groups too. Historical context and the changing priorities of research and policy interests suggest caution in inferring significant social change from statistical shifts alone. What seems clear, however, is that during this period social problems were being framed in the public mind as family problems, not only by official agencies and social scientists, but also in the imagery of popular culture. Chapter 4 shows how, in the new domestic comedies of prime-time television, the family leaped into the foreground as a veritable circus of conflict and change. This should not be read as a rejection of family since alongside the overwhelming anxiety about family and marriage there streamed a persistent yearning for the close ties of family and community and a subtext exploring new forms and new rules for family living.

Similar concerns were surfacing in other pop-culture forms. One

of the most successful films to close the 1960s was *The Graduate*, which dealt with the counterculture and generational conflict within the frame of suburban family ennui. And the 1970s drew to a close with a wave of films like *Ordinary People* and *Kramer versus Kramer* that expressed the pain of family collapse underpinned by a longing for new ways of domestic living. The popularity of psychotherapeutic self-help manuals on best-seller lists testified to the concern with emotional relationships that Bane extolled, but it did not in itself imply increasing emotional coherence. If anything, it bore witness to a mounting sense of intractable trouble at home and a preoccupation with individual fulfillment at the expense of commitment to marriage and family. "Who can easily imagine a young son or daughter marrying or living with the same person for close to fifty years? Or with two for twenty-five years each?" wrote Elizabeth Hardwick (1978, 9) in a special issue of *Daedalus* devoted to "a new America." Indeed, throughout the 1970s "youth" became a prominent metaphor for the social divisions of the time, defined as a "generation gap" and framed within the family. One popular interpreter of cultural trends went so far as to assert that "by way of a dialectic Marx could never have imagined, technocratic America produces a potentially revolutionary element among its own youth. The bourgeoisie, instead of discovering the class enemy in its factories, finds it across the breakfast table in the person of its own pampered children" (Roszak 1969, 34). Some of the most popular television shows drew on that image, not least because, as Chapter 3 demonstrates, television programmers were beginning to pay close attention to the new generation of college-educated young people who were likely both to wield the large disposable incomes that advertisers sought to attract, and to become the cultural opinion leaders of the future.

The other demographic group that had always interested programmers and advertisers was, of course, women, who did the bulk of family buying and who watched a good deal of television. It was thus inevitable that the issues raised by the women's movement, arguably the most vigorous and broadly based survivor of the radical movements of the 1960s, would find their way into television, in the form of a "prime-time feminism" described in Chapters 4 and 5. Alongside the felt concern about increasing pressures on domestic life, feminists sought to foster a more critical

spirit toward traditional family arrangements and gender divisions and a greater openness to new, less patriarchal family forms. Some called for a reexamination of the assumptions underpinning debate about the family. Taking issue with Lasch and the "new family history" as well as the cheerful family pluralism espoused by Bane, they argued that interpretation of family pathology and conflict as well as broader speculation about the quality of family life must be grounded in an understanding of the politics of public concern about the family.

Some feminists agreed with Lasch that the separation of work and home and the imposition of capitalist work-discipline created severe stresses in family life while at the same time advancing the rhetoric of family solidarity; but they reminded those who, with Lasch, mourned the erosion of patriarchal authority that family stability (as measured by the absence of divorce or separation) was not synonymous with family health or happiness. Indeed, they argued, the patriarchal family achieved its apparent calm at the high cost of the repression of women and children. Moreover, the limited gains of more flexible, democratic family forms had merely opened a space for feminism that must be fought for constantly. In their view, the modern family continued to reproduce inequalities, not only of gender, but also of class and race.[4]

If the feminist critique offered a useful warning against romanticizing both the precapitalist and the nuclear families, it also, through its concern with stresses in the lives of working women, slowly but persistently drew attention to the links between family and workplace—a largely neglected area of research despite the growing number of government-sponsored and social-scientific studies on work and quality of life. The years following World War II had established the large corporation as the typical employer for most working adults. By the late 1960s most workers were salaried employees in rationalized, bureaucratic organizations. It was clear by this time that postwar optimism about the prospects for unlimited economic growth and affluence could not be sustained. Prompted in part by the fluctuating fortunes of the American economy, in part by the coming of age of a generation concerned with building cooperative relationships for a meaningful life at home and at work, government and academic research began to focus on worker dissatisfaction and other sources of workplace

strain—qualitative aspects of the work experience that transcended narrower criteria of productivity and efficiency.[5]

By the early 1970s the growing presence in the labor force of women and young "baby boomers" with substantial career aspirations began to raise questions of meaning in the workplace and to motivate a reassessment of older concerns about the relationship of career to family life. The concerns and outlooks of these two groups, whose prominence in the countercultural movements of the 1960s and strong representation in the workplace were helping to redefine the meaning of work, were of more than passing interest to programming executives seeking to attract affluent and influential viewers within the "mass" audience. Surveying the literature on work and family, Kanter (1977b) noted that whereas official reports tended to regard *unemployed* men as "social problems" during this period, it was *employed* women who were thus defined both in official reports and in social-scientific studies since their presence in the workplace was perceived as a threat to their responsibilities as wives and mothers. Feminist critics and activists reformulated the problem, insisting on the right of women to work and to receive the same pay as male workers while pointing to the particular difficulties faced by women, the majority of whom were working mothers in low-paying routine jobs. With the divorce rate and the number of unmarried mothers (especially teenage mothers) rising, a growing proportion were also single parents, but married women too continued for the most part to shoulder the burdens of childrearing and homemaking. Those whose partners were willing to share these tasks had to negotiate with employers who typically were far from amenable to rearranging work schedules around shared parenting. The struggle over corporate provision for working mothers through child care, flexible schedules, and other strategies continued in the 1980s.

The mass entry of women into the workplace, together with the cultural movements of the 1960s, also encouraged a shift of emphasis from individual performance and achievement to cooperation and caretaking in the workplace. As recent studies have shown, however, employers can turn the caring orientation women have brought to the workplace to their own advantage. Kanter's (1977a) research on corporate women, wives, and secretaries suggests that the "feminization" of the workplace also serves to lock

women into subordinate and exploited roles to the extent that they reproduce their traditional family roles at work.[6] Chapter 5 describes the obsessive rehearsal of this problem in television shows featuring career women.

Given these changes, the relative absence in the research literature of a sustained discussion of the connections between conflict in the family and in the workplace is remarkable. In social-scientific thought, Kanter observed, the "myth of separate worlds" was sustained by the dominance of the Parsonian distinction between work as the arena of universalistic, specific, emotionally neutral, and performance-oriented norms, and family as the preserve of particularistic, diffuse, emotional, and ascribed norms. Historically, the perceived split between work and home, between public and private domains, was established in the early period of industrial organization. But it was always a problematic division, and as corporate organization began to reach deeper into areas hitherto reserved as "private" in the twentieth century, the boundaries between work and leisure became blurred.[7] Kanter's research has shown how family life has taken on more rationalized ("home economics") and scientific ("domestic science") elements as its dependence on state and corporate supervision has grown. Similarly, organizations have tended to develop internal cultures with decidedly ascriptive and affective characteristics.

Confusion about the division between public and private spheres, and a yearning for community in public as well as private life, have thus long been articulated as concerns in public discourse. The tendency of professions to build internal cultures—"collective representations" of the world—and of professionals to seek community through work dates back at least to the late nineteenth century. In *The Division of Labor* Durkheim looked to occupational groups to provide a basis for moral community in modern societies with complex divisions of labor. And in Progressive-era America the attempt to reconcile principles of bureaucratic rationalism and scientific management with ideals of public service and community was a persistent theme among the new middle class. Studies of specific occupational milieux, as well as of broad occupational categories differentiated by social class, suggest a distinction between more and less "absorptive" occupations, between employees for whom work culture is more central and those who must

frame the meaning of work in more instrumental terms.[8] Work and family, concluded Kanter in a synthetic analysis of these studies, are probably least separate for people in "involving high human contact jobs"—notably professional, human service, intellectual, and upper-executive positions—"whose families want to be up-to-date and thus adopt values from recent social consensus" (Kanter 1977b, 77). These are precisely the demographic groups network programmers sought to attract to their shows in the 1970s.

In the United States, where work has traditionally taken precedence over private life, it is also likely that organizations intrude more into family life than the other way around, especially in absorptive occupations. Stable families may produce more reliable workers, but insofar as the family offers a competing source of loyalty and authority, it poses a threat to rational bureaucracy and organizational commitment. Faced with the dilemma of whether to co-opt, exclude, or replace domestic ties, organizations have historically shown ambivalence toward families, moving between all three strategies.

Corporations have always, to greater or lesser degrees, colonized the rhetoric and rituals of family in order to foster employee loyalty. In the early 1970s, with American industry entering a period of economic instability and retrenchment, and with the size and scale of corporate life growing ever larger, the question of organizational commitment became critical. Many industries renewed their efforts to promote family-style allegiances through the creation of "corporate cultures," an organizational buzzword during this period. To judge by the tenor of social and cultural thought on work in corporate America, this "familialization" was to be interpreted less as an index of growing cohesiveness in organizations than as a measure to shore up, not merely productivity and efficiency, but also the flagging morale and loyalty of a work force increasingly ambivalent toward organizations whose success they had once equated with their own advancement. The problem was aggravated by the entry into the labor force of an unusually large cohort of college graduates. Some, influenced by the movements of the 1960s, were critical of corporate enterprise in general. Others with substantial career ambitions could quickly become disillusioned with the gap between their qualifications and the attenuated options open to them. When Paul Leinberger interviewed some of

William H. Whyte's original "organization men" in 1986, he found among them a pervasive sense of disappointment and betrayal, whereas their children, now executives themselves, exhibited a far more segmented and contingent commitment to their employers than had their parents. Michael Maccoby's (1976) study of corporate executives portrayed a new breed of organization men, whose flimsy attachment to the corporation hinged on its capacity to sustain their self-images as "winners." Chapter 5 illustrates the variety of forms in which this crisis of commitment is clothed in the television workplaces of the 1970s.

The image of a work ethic severed from its transcendent ties to moral and social progress finds strong echoes in other pop-culture forms. Elizabeth Long's (1985) analysis of themes of success in best-selling novels in postwar America traces the gradual slide of the work ethic that lay at the heart of the American Dream into crisis and disarray. The equation of individual progress with public progress in the benignly conceived social order of the early 1950s gave way by the early 1960s to a retreat, in the face of corporate demands on personal life, to the suburban family as that haven in a heartless world whose passing Lasch was to lament a decade later. By the mid-1970s best-sellers pictured a world in full-blown crisis, with families and organizations fragmented and lacking in meaning or purpose. Long's reading of 1970s novels sketches a Goffmanian world of impression managers for whom success became a matter of personal style, of having and being rather than doing, and a cynical conformity contingent on rapid personal advancement.

Best-selling novels tend to articulate the sensibilities of their predominantly middle-class readership. Television, because of the wider sweep of its social orbit, has always been more resolutely populist. In the early 1970s, though, the industry began to carve out a constituency of middle-class viewers within its more traditional mass audience. The sheer increase in the number of television shows (especially comedies) with workplace settings by the mid-1970s may have reflected a conscious effort to appeal to this new target audience of career-oriented upscale viewers presumed to favor work over family goals. The television workplace addressed itself, too, to the crisis of authority and organizational commitment. The creation of a protective, peer-oriented enclave within an organization portrayed as filled with scheming, callous, or stupid

but powerful functionaries offered a critique of corporate and professional life that may have spoken to the disappointment experienced by many hopeful careerists at the blocking of their progress by a stagnant economy.

There was, however, a more powerful appeal in the television workplace, which began to offer itself as a caring alternative to the home, a displacement of the yearning for a fulfilling family life onto the workplace. Hence the centrality of women in shows like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* or "woman-like" nurturant father figures in *Barney Miller* and *Taxi,* who defined the meaning of work in terms of caring relationships rather than individualized achievement. It was no accident that the typical television workplace was not a gleaming corridor of power but a decrepit (if cozy) and barely functioning corner of the organizational world, in which human worth was measured by loyalty and humanistic values rather than contracts negotiated or projects completed. Indeed, for wider audiences, the warm involvement of the television workplace may have provided compensation for the dull, dehumanized workplaces so many of them faced in their everyday lives. And if the setting up of corporate functionaries, psychiatrists, and lawyers as the new television villains expressed the same fear and resentment found in cultural criticism toward the growing power of a large "new class" of managerial and professional experts, it also created a symbolic mastery of that fear.[9] Redefining the ethics of professionalism in populist terms may have subtly reassured viewers who regarded the intellectual qualifications of professionals with suspicion or skepticism that *some* professionals were on their side. Durkheim might have been entertained (more likely horrified) by the idea that his hopes for an ethical oasis within an immoral or amoral institutional world would be realized on television.

The television work-family, then, expressed a cultural dilemma: on the one hand, the yearning for meaning and community in the workplace, and on the other, the fear of the power of corporations and of professionals in corporate settings. In the imagery of television, as in much intellectual commentary at the time, this fear deepened into a vague but pervasive post-Watergate mistrust by ordinary Americans of the political and economic institutions that shaped their lives from a great distance and of the elites who dominated the corporate sector.

Diagnosing the age, cultural critics viewed the 1970s as a decade of retreat into grim survival, in contrast to the more elevated mood of the 1960s, which were often characterized as a period of limitless horizons in collective efforts for social change. Some pointed to a turning inward, a retreat into the self and a fascination with psychotherapies of various kinds in the pursuit of personal fulfillment. Social critics of the left and right deplored the spread of an individualism stripped of wider social obligation. There were those who linked the preoccupation with self more generally to the deracinating qualities of modern culture and the deterioration of communal frameworks that once embedded the individual in public life.[10]

If the prevailing tone of cultural criticism was pessimistic, it was not exclusively so. Some identified pockets of local collective organization as encouraging signs of resistance to the centralized power of corporate America (Lasch 1979). Alongside the anomie Long (1985) found in the best-selling novels of the decade, she detected a growing openness and heterogeneity, a pluralism that signaled a new flexibility in the American popular imagination, and a relativism that foreshadowed the celebration of the freedoms brought by the modern experience found in some cultural criticism in the 1980s (Berman 1982), even as it sparked a sense of foreboding in others (Bellah et al. 1985). Feminists pointed out that the erosion of the traditional family structure might be a necessary stage in the struggle for the freedom and equality of women.

In general, though, the literature in social science and cultural criticism in the 1970s points to a mounting confusion about the rules and frameworks ordering daily life in modern America, in particular the location of conflict and distress within the family and at the intersection of family and work, private and public spheres. The narratives of television, as will be seen in Chapters 4 and 5, worked on these concerns and resolved them in their own particular ways.

Taking the decade as a unit of interpretive analysis is a tricky enterprise, not least because it runs the risk of forcing the historical issues. The focus on short-term developments creates the possibility of converting continuity into change, elevating minor developments to the status of major shifts, and missing the seeds of genuine cultural change. In a 1980 Boston lecture Susan Sontag described the urge to frame social change in decades as a peculiarly modern

habit, replacing the nineteenth-century emphasis on the century as well as the more recent preoccupation with generation and reflecting a growing tendency to miniaturize time, albeit in dazzlingly macroscopic ways. To periodize an era, she argued, confers on it a mythic ideological load, attributing to it particular moods, hierarchies of significance, and conditions. In a visual culture that increasingly replaces substance with image, people like the decade because the quantification implied in the naming lends weight and objectivity to language, making life appear more real, less bewildering, and more easily controlled.

To this might be added the argument that the attribution of a particular style or mood (the "me-decade," the "culture of narcissism") implies a unitary cultural consensus, a zeitgeist that does violence to the modern experience, which is precisely fragmented and splintered, not just by the loosening bonds of communal life, but also by the sharp divisions of class, race, gender, and age. For Sontag, "decade thinking" is culturally and politically negative since it invites the packaging and containing of experience and damages the capacity to pay attention to time in different and more active ways. For the sociologist of culture, however, the decade justifies itself precisely because it is a social construct, a limited range of ways of looking at the world, whose (often unintended) consequences return to shape social life. The disjunctions between everyday experience and decade style, as defined by popular culture, are only partial. Ideas with some staying power do not spring from nowhere, and if naming a decade helps to shape it, it must also have appropriated elements within the culture. Casual and reductive as the term *me-decade* may be, it refers to the sense of social isolation and disembodied individualism that pervades many forms of cultural expression in the 1970s. Indeed, the naming of a decade (that felt sense of the quality of life termed by Raymond Williams in his earlier work the "structure of feelings"), in which mass-mediated meanings play such a central role, is a pivotal concern of this project. The whirl of cultural fashions that television promotes may be an integral part of the modern structure of feelings. By exploring the range of commonly understood meanings of family and workplace in one area of mass-mediated popular culture, television entertainment, we can add to the findings of ethnographies and other qualitative sources and deepen the debate about cultural change in the 1970s.