The Cosby Show: Representing Race
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Abstract: Few sitcom families in television history have been as widely loved as the wholesome, wealthy, black family of *The Cosby Show*. Christine Acham re-examines the politics of *The Cosby Show* in the historical context of the Reagan-Bush era, in conjunction with the comedic persona and politics of star/creator Bill Cosby.

On April 30, 1992, I tuned in to watch the last episode of *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 1984–1992). The LA riots had begun the day before, and news coverage of the ongoing chaos was broadcast during the commercial breaks. With the Rodney King verdict and the reaction of African Americans to continuing racism in American society televised twenty four hours a day, why would anyone choose to watch what seemed in 1992 to be an antiquated sitcom about a wealthy black family? I grew up with *The Cosby Show* and could recall vividly the earliest of episodes, such as when Rudy’s fish dies or when Denise makes a horrible replica of a designer shirt for Theo. While I had not watched the show regularly in years, it seemed appropriate to bid farewell to what was one of the most significant representations of a black family seen on U.S. television thus far. *The Cosby Show* was the top-rated program on television from 1985 to 1989, beloved by a cross section of the American audience, yet a battle over the meaning of blackness expressed in the program had raged since its debut on September 20, 1984.

Television’s images of African Americans reveal a convergence of factors, including the legacy of black representation in American media, the ideology of the producers, and American social realities. *The Cosby Show* is a product of this amalgamation. In order to have a more nuanced understanding of *The Cosby Show*, it is essential to survey the social, economic, and political history from which this show emerged, while remaining cognizant of the comedic history of Bill Cosby and the influence he would have over the creation of the program.
The late 1970s found the United States in the midst of an economic crisis, the cause and solution of which became major points of contention between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan in the 1980 presidential election. Reagan’s slogan “Let’s Make America Great Again” symbolized the rhetoric and reasoning of the campaign. The voter was meant to ask, what caused the downfall of this great nation? Reagan placed the blame squarely on the shoulders of the Carter administration and its investment in progressive social welfare programs. His flawed premise was that the liberalism of the post–civil rights era resulted in inflated government-supported entitlements, given to so-called undeserving minorities who were allegedly draining the economy.

Since his 1976 bid for the Republican nomination, Reagan began to coalesce this cultural image of the undeserving minority with that of black people. One of Reagan’s favorite stories was that of a Chicago “welfare queen” who abused the system and lived a wealthy lifestyle. During the election period, Reagan used such hyperbolic anecdotes to appeal to whites struggling in a failing economy, suggesting that whites were the victims of reverse discrimination and being negatively impacted by such policies as affirmative action.

The rhetoric of Reagan successfully cemented the strong racial division within American society, and his policies as president reversed many of the gains the black population had made in the post–civil rights era. With the support of television news, which emphasized stories of the failing black family, welfare cheats, and inner city-crime, blackness was increasingly demonized and criminalized in the Reagan eighties.

*The Cosby Show* seemingly offered the perfect antidote for a black image in crisis through its presentation of a wholesome and wealthy black family led by the well-known assimilationist comic Bill Cosby. While his early routines used some racially based humor, he evolved in the 1960s into a monologist who told stories of, amongst other topics, his childhood and family life without overt markers of race. Television was seen as the way to truly cross over to mainstream audiences, and in 1963 Cosby had that opportunity with a successful appearance on NBC’s *The Tonight Show* (1954–present) that led to other television appearances and an article in *Newsweek*.

Cosby’s early success came at the specific time in African American history when black frustration with the lack of social progress triggered the rise of the Black Power Movement. Many African American artists and public figures spoke out about the injustices in American society, but the social and political milieu had little overt impact on Cosby’s comedy. Indeed, in a 1963 interview on the Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC), Cosby related a story that illustrates his political outlook: he was an athlete travelling with his team through the South when he and another black player were refused service on the patio of a
restaurant and were told to eat in the kitchen. While they first refused, they eventually ate in the kitchen, and it turned out to be the best meal they ever had. On the way back they stopped at the same restaurant, and this time the coach demanded that they be allowed to eat on the patio with the rest of the team:

COSBY: Well of course we didn't want to eat on the patio knowing what the kind of meal we were going to get in the kitchen. The punch line of the whole story is that we boycotted the place.

INTERVIEWER: (laughing) Because they wouldn't let you eat in the kitchen.

This joke is problematic on many levels, yet instructive to the type of comedy Cosby was known for in the 1960s. While countless African Americans struggled for their basic civil rights, that Cosby could so easily make a joke that depoliticized the meanings of the lunch counter boycotts is disturbing.

As African American historian Mel Watkins argues, “Cosby’s outward congeniality was crucial to his quick ascendency. At a time when racial confrontations were escalating in the streets, his relaxed, chatty style and surface image of a clean-cut, sanguine black man was the antithesis of the menacing figures on the street.” In 1965, this image was parlayed into his first acting role, one part of an undercover duo with white actor Robert Culp on I Spy (NBC, 1965–1968). Cosby’s character was a Rhodes scholar who was not only proficient in martial arts, but also spoke seven languages. Cosby’s portrayal was uplifting, especially considering that the African American roles on television had thus far generally been stereotypical, laughable buffoons and put-upon servants.

As Cosby’s career continued in television, he took control over his own image. When he signed on to do The Bill Cosby Show (NBC, 1969–1971) and the cartoon Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids (syndicated, 1972–1985), he made sure that he was the executive producer, a role that no other African American had attained thus far. He was consequently able to hire actors and shape the storylines. Cosby would take this hands-on approach to The Cosby Show, the most significant program of his career. How would Cosby’s personal politics impact The Cosby Show? Would the show, which began in the midst of the Reagan era of the 1980s, address blackness, especially considering Cosby’s direct decision to avoid the issue throughout his career?

The Cosby Show tells the story of husband and doctor, Heathcliff (“Cliff”) Huxtable, wife and lawyer, Clair, and their five children. This upper-middle-class black family was unique to American television. Previously, mostly working-class, single-parent, and often poor black families were portrayed in programs that were abundant in the 1970s, such as Good Times (CBS, 1974–1979) and What’s Happening! (ABC, 1976–1979). From the initial planning stages for The Cosby
Show, Bill Cosby’s control and influence were evident in his roles as star, executive consultant, co-creator, and co-producer with direct control over every script. The scripts were based on a Cosby-developed scenario, which he would share with the writers who would then create a script around his ideas. Cosby hired Alvin Poussaint, an African American psychiatrist from Harvard University, as a consultant on the show, “to review the show’s scripts for psychological consistency, racial authenticity, and freedom from unintended insult.”

Considering that in the Reagan era, black images on television and within the American imagination were commonly demonized, The Cosby Show presented an oppositional narrative. Here was an upstanding, independent, and hard-working family contrasting the numerous perceptions of welfare families who were said to be draining the American economy. Unlike black-cast sitcoms of the 1970s, such as Sanford and Son (NBC, 1972–1977) or The Jeffersons (CBS, 1975–1985) that relied on race-based humor, The Cosby Show chose to ignore the impact of race on the family. When Cosby was forced to address the question of race in interviews, he suggested that the very question was flawed: “Some people have said our show is about a white family in blackface. What does that mean? Does it mean only white people have a lock on living together in a home where the father is a doctor and the mother is a lawyer and the children are constantly being told to study by their parents?”

The comedy presented on The Cosby Show corresponded with Cosby’s stage persona, and the show portrayed characters and storylines that white Americans could accept and more importantly empathize with. Co-star Phylicia Rashad (then Ayers-Allen) reflected Cosby’s sentiment:

Our show is not about black people, it is about human beings . . . I’ve been at press conferences with him [Cosby] and I noticed that people kept trying to narrow what he had to offer to an ethnic group. Well, he’s bigger than that . . . He doesn’t concoct humor that only one group of people can identify with. He deals with human circumstances. I don’t blame him for getting annoyed when people try to make his humor less universal.

These narrative qualities and ideas of universality were evident from the beginning of The Cosby Show and can be seen in the pilot episode (September 20, 1984). Most of the episode revolves around the challenges of parenting a lively bunch of children—for example, how to get the kids to stop teasing each other, and how Cliff will react to daughter Denise’s date. However, the primary crux of the episode is son Theo’s poor report card and Cliff’s handling of the problem. Theo states that he might not go to college and instead be a “regular person.” Cliff then tries to teach Theo the reality of living on a limited salary by giving
him Monopoly money, then taking it away as Theo acknowledges expenses that he would have, until Theo ends up with nothing. Theo realizes he will not have enough money but says to Cliff in a touching speech that while his father is a doctor and his mother is a lawyer, they should love him even if he is just a “regular person.” Cliff responds, “That’s the dumbest thing I ever heard in my life. It is no wonder you get D’s in everything . . . I am telling you, you are going to try as hard as you can and you’re going to do it because I said so. I am your father. I brought you into this world. I’ll take you out.” In this episode there is an understated but clear commentary on class. One of the great American myths is that anyone who just tries hard enough will succeed, that if one just pulls oneself up by the bootstraps, one can achieve the American dream. Cliff wants his son to do better than “regular people,” who hold jobs like bus driver or gas station attendant. While Theo suggests he can get such a job if he does not go to college, Cliff needs Theo to understand that there is a better life for those who try harder.

Other episodes emphasized the similarity between the Cosby clan and mainstream American society, regardless of race. In “Is that my Boy?” Cliff is excited when his son tries out for the football team, although it turns out that Theo is far from the star quarterback. In “Goodbye Mr. Fish,” Rudy’s fish dies, and the family has a funeral in the bathroom, and in “How Ugly is He?” Denise dreads bringing her boyfriend home to meet her father who she is convinced will ruin her relationship.

While clearly appealing to a universal audience, *The Cosby Show* was still a black show. Beyond the cast’s race, this was evident primarily in setting, but also in terms of some storylines and the casting of guest roles. Paintings by African American artist Varnette Honeywood—copies of paintings from Cosby’s own residence—hung in the Huxtable home. There were also framed pictures of African American historical figures such as Martin Luther King and Frederick Douglass. In the children’s rooms were posters of 1980s-era African American youth icons such as Michael Jackson, Prince, Mr. T., and Whitney Houston. The Huxtable home was often filled with jazz music, and even the children would refer to African American authors and poets such as Richard Wright, Toni Morrison, Jamaica Kincaid, and James Baldwin. African American artists such as Lena Horne, Stevie Wonder, and Sammy Davis, Jr., were a few of the show’s significant guest stars.

The success of *The Cosby Show* during the first season indicated a working formula that Bill Cosby intended to follow in the upcoming seasons, building on the upper-middle-class black family’s appeal to audiences. At the start of the second season, series director Jay Sandrich indicated in an interview that he would, “like to deal a little more with what is really happening in some schools today. I would like to deal a little more with prejudice. They don’t acknowledge that they’re a black family.” Questioned by the reporter for the same article, Cosby wondered
why the Huxtables should have to deal with issues that other sitcom families did not have to and responded, “Everybody knows that they’re black; why does this family have to deal with that?” A spokesman for Cosby later described the incident as “a case of preference not a source of tension.” Nonetheless, this difference in viewpoint does illuminate one of the key points of contention over *The Cosby Show*’s representation of blackness. Should this show, with its worldwide appeal, challenge the mainstream audience to deal with the question of race, even if only occasionally? After all, black people were struggling, with the unemployment rate for blacks more than twice that of whites in 1985. Bill Cosby’s answer was a clear “no.”

While Bill Cosby was not willing to use *The Cosby Show* as a platform for a dialogue on race, conservatives eagerly manipulated the meanings of *The Cosby Show* in their own agenda on race. For example, in May of 1986, when Gary Bauer, Education Undersecretary and Chair of the Working Group on Family in Ronald Reagan’s administration, addressed a group of Wisconsin educators, he noted that

> The Bill Cosby show and the values it promotes may ultimately be more important to black children’s success than a bevy of new federal programs. . . . The set of character traits, which we refer to as the Protestant work ethic has been ridiculed and debunked by self-proclaimed intellectuals. But the facts clearly show that it works for minorities and poor children as well as the children of the suburbs.

Bauer’s words are frightening on a few levels. First, for everyone who would argue that it was just a TV show, here was a man in the administration of the government who not only referred to a TV show in a speech on policy, but also suggested how it could in essence replace federal programs for the poor—programs that were already in political jeopardy. By drawing parallels between *The Cosby Show* and the positive outcome for minorities and the poor who exhibited a strong work ethic, Bauer used *The Cosby Show* and its black family as evidence to make a comment on race and poverty in American society. As the fictional minorities on *The Cosby Show* seemed to indicate, if you just worked hard enough you could achieve the American Dream. While Bill Cosby wanted his series to ignore race, it was inevitably a part of the American dialogue on race and class throughout its tenure on the network.

By 1990, however, the television landscape had changed, and the presence of two popular sitcoms, *Roseanne* (ABC, 1988–1997) and *The Simpsons* (FOX, 1989–present), drew the audience’s attention to issues of class. In the seventh season, *The Cosby Show* opened its doors to a cousin of Clair’s from the inner-city neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant and finally took a chance at addressing
class differences in black society. In the episode “Period of Adjustment” (October 11, 1990), Pam moves into the Huxtable home for the foreseeable future as her mother must go to California to stay with Pam’s grandmother, who is ill. Pam is clearly taken aback by the size of the Huxtable house and tells Clair that they could fit her entire apartment into one half of the Huxtable living room. Pam also marks her name on her food to make sure that no one eats it. She hangs out with friends from her old neighborhood—these teenagers speak with some black vernacular and an urban cadence—and thus the audience gets a glimpse of what black life looks like outside of the idealistic Huxtable doors. In “Attack of the Killer B’s,” Pam deals with the high cost of college, and in “Pam Applies for College,” she has to face the fact that her poor grades before entering the Huxtable home may prevent her from going to the same college as her best friend. It is significant to note that Pam’s guidance counselor makes it abundantly clear to Pam that she cannot use the fact that she is from a disadvantaged neighborhood and the product of a single-parent household as excuses for not making good grades. Many students from her neighborhood, like her best friend Charmaine, she is told, are going to good schools—they just worked harder. Although *The Cosby Show* seemingly broaches questions of race and class, the conclusions drawn in the episode indicate an unwillingness to challenge the conservative dialogue on race, suggesting that one’s class status is solely a matter of individual choice rather than the result of a systemic problem.

Outside of the incorporation of Pam’s character, *The Cosby Show* did not change very much in terms of the ideological stance established in its first season. Critics of the show highlight the potential impact *The Cosby Show* could
have had, if it had chosen to say something concrete about race and class in U.S. society, especially at a time of such political backlash against black progress. This point was illuminated in a 1992 study that was ironically funded by a Bill Cosby grant to his Alma Mater, The University of Massachusetts, Amherst. The authors of the study concluded that while *The Cosby Show* superficially promoted an attitude of racial tolerance amongst white viewers and brought pride to many African Americans, “Among white people, the admission of black characters to television’s upwardly mobile world gives credence to the idea that racial divisions, whether perpetuated by class barriers or by racism, do not exist. . . . The Cosby-Huxtable persona . . . tells viewers that, as one respondent put it ‘there really is room in the United States for minorities to get ahead, without affirmative action’.”

Bill Cosby held on to the belief that his show should not engage with the political and social realities of race. What he did not take into account was *The Cosby Show’s* very existence in the highly racialized climate of post-civil rights America, in which these representations could never be separated from race.

That much of mainstream America responded with surprise at the rage of the LA riots at least partially indicates the power of the illusion of race created by *The Cosby Show*. The images of the LA riots brought the unvarnished reality of race and class back to American television, disrupting Cosby’s fantasy of post-racial harmony that had dominated the Nielsen ratings for years. The presence of these stark oppositional images on television the same night—one fictional, the other documentary—is a reminder of the powerful role that television plays in mediating Americans’ perceptions of such key issues as race and class on a daily basis.

**Notes**

8. Ibid.

FURTHER READING