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Fathers of the nation

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PROPOSITIONS

Fathers of the Nation:

U.S. Gender History, Racial Capitalism and White Fatherhood in Contemporary American TV Series (2001-2016)

1. Earlier ideals of U.S. masculinity such as the “self-made man” (Kimmel, 2006) have been substituted over the course of the twentieth century by the white, heterosexual breadwinner, who features prominently in these complex TV series and becomes a means to address socio-cultural changes and struggles in neoliberal capitalism at the beginning of the twenty-first century.
2. Moments of socio-economic and political change in societies are registered in changing dramatic media forms (Williams, 1954) like the originally produced cable TV series of the early-2000s and 2010s.
3. While there is a high risk of getting lost in multilayered crisis narratives (of the TV industry being in a crisis, masculinity crisis, financial crisis, climate crisis), one should not fear acknowledging how these crises are all bound to the capitalist system. This is not an overemphasis of capitalism’s power over our cultural and socio-economic reality, but should be understood as a first step towards productively rethinking necessary, intertwined structural changes.
4. Both crisis tendencies (Connell, 1987) and misogyny are written deeply into the system of traditional gender ideals due to that system’s binary separation of spheres of industrial production and social reproduction.
5. Notwithstanding the rise of polarized politics in the U.S. (and beyond) in the early-2000s and 2010s, nostalgia for the white, male breadwinner-led nuclear family can be found both in Left intellectual thought and in conservative, right-wing populism.

6. The ideal of the white, male breadwinner that features so prominently in TV series of this era represents a link between the “fantasy of the good life” (Berlant, 2011) of post-World War II prosperity and the nuclear family-centered narrative that accompanied the rise of neoliberal capitalism in the USA in the 1980s.
7. The working class, just like the white, male, breadwinning father, has become an image of nostalgic longing for a lost masculine past over the course of the twentieth century, both in U.S. pop culture and political rhetoric.
8. Visions of a new caring fatherhood as set out in the image of the “New Man” in the 1980s and family oriented Hollywood movies like *Mrs. Doubtfire* (dir.: Chris Columbus, 1993) can only become reality if the intertwined nature of capitalism and gender ideals is understood and socioeconomic realities (i.e. health care, parental leave, kindergartens, flexible work hours) created that allow for such a disruptive change.
9. Cultural products such as fictional texts form an essential element in envisioning and promoting a change in values and societal self-perception (Gramsci), but political and socio-economic structural changes are also needed to enable such change to become reality.
10. In times of change, we should pay close attention to “morbid symptoms” (Gramsci, 1971) associated with appeals to nationalism and traditional values, but as cultural studies scholars we should also understand these as an invitation to reassess, test against each other, combine and think more deeply about critical cultural works of the past to help better understand the present moment; only this clearer understanding of the complex nature of structures and values will ultimately enable new visions and structural change.