

# What can Coronation Street tell us about politics?

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*What can the 'everyday' tell us about politics and political ideology? Here, [Robert Topinka](#) suggests that soap operas have much to tell us about the importance of the 'ordinary' to our understanding of politics.*

The study of politics is often the study of war, conflict, terrorism, and statecraft, of the exceptional rather than the everyday. But political identities and ideologies also take shape in the space of ordinary life, in daily routines and banal interactions. The difficulty is that the ordinary and the everyday often elude study.

In a recent paper published in *Politics*, Alexandria Innes and I turned to popular culture as a resource for examining everyday life. We focused in particular on a 2007 storyline in *Coronation Street* about conflicts between English and Polish workers at a garment factory. Our interpretive coding of the 10 episodes featuring the storyline uncovered four key themes: race, gender, fear, and political agency. By continually returning to these themes without offering any resolution, the soap stages everyday life as a complex constellation of global forces, including those of globalisation and migration. The imagined world of *Coronation Street* supplies resources for reimagining the everyday spaces that the show's viewers occupy. As the fictional lives of the characters on *Coronation Street* unfold, the soap is a space where contesting views and perspectives are aired, inviting the audience into on-going political contestation as part of their ordinary television watching routines.

It may seem a stretch to claim that the soap opera—perhaps the paradigmatic form of lowbrow culture—could have any political significance. But the history of the soap opera is, in fact, expressly political. The first British soap was *Front Line Family* (not *The Archers* as is commonly believed). Broadcast by the BBC on American shortwave radio in 1941, the programme followed a middle-class British family struggling through World War II. It was designed to promote US participation in the war by encouraging empathy with the British public. *The Archers*, similarly, was designed with political objectives in mind. Produced by the BBC in association with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the programme provided farming tips and information about fluctuating food prices as part of a broader effort to convince the public to accept continued rationing after the war's conclusion.

Soaps have long been designed to shape the everyday space of politics, and *Coronation Street* is no exception. It first aired on ITV in 1960 at a time when the BBC was still the bastion of Received Pronunciation, the accent most commonly heard in the middle-class environs of the Home Counties rather than the industrial north. The show's creators were inspired by the work of Richard Hoggart—a major influence on the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies—and his analysis of working-class life in the North. The show adopts many of the themes that Hoggart identifies in working-class culture, including the emphasis on the strength of women and the ambivalent class position of pub landlords and others hovering at the boundaries of the petit-bourgeois (or what politicians now like to call 'aspirational Britain'). After more than a half-century of success, the show is now broadcast Australia, Canada, the US, India, Thailand, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Malta, and Korea. *Coronation Street* now connects to global cultural circuits, but its focus on ordinary working-class life is unchanged.

This focus clearly resonates in the storyline about the garment factory workers. As Polish women arrive at the factory to work the night shift, most of the daytime employees are welcoming, but Janice Battersby vociferously denounces them as 'job thieves from the nightshift, after our wages'. Between the 2004 expansion of the European Union and the storyline's airing in 2007, the population of Polish people living in the UK increased from 94,000 to 411,000. Janice draws her criticism straight from the popular press, which was then as now alive with discussion of migration to the UK. After a night of drinking, Janice impulsively calls immigration officials, who raid the factory. In a surprising twist, the Polish workers all have legal status, but Janice's friend Joanne does not: her aunt brought her to the UK from Liberia following the death of both her parents when she was eight years old, and she had never acquired official documents. Joanne is arrested because of her friend's rabid anti-immigrant stance.

Although the immigration raid is a dramatic scene, what is key to *Coronation Street* is not so much the intensity of that scene as how characters live on after it, rebuilding an ordinary sense of stability after the disruption. Sitting in the Rovers Return, the characters discuss what they might do to assist Joanne. Janice, in her typically emphatic tone, insists that they ought to ‘take action’ and call their M.P. in order to ‘make a stink’ and ‘start some campaign like.’ Sally, Hayley, and Sean are less convinced; Hayley suggests, ‘we could send her a care package’. Sally elaborates Hayley’s idea, saying, ‘maybe one of those little aromatherapy pillows with lavender in it to soothe her nerves’. Sally, Hayley, and Sean nod in agreement, but Janice is unconvinced: ‘Oh, right yeah, some poncy pillowcase stinking of some old biddy’s perfume—I mean that’s really gonna sort her out isn’t it’.

They never decide on either solution, but the significance of the scene is to sketch competing responses to Joanne’s detainment: on the one hand, a politics of care that seeks to restore her sense of security by providing her the comforts of everyday life; on the other hand, a traditional politics of direct action aimed at mobilising recognised institutions, in this case parliament. Soaps operate in between high politics and everyday life, providing a resource for its audience to imagine political possibilities in the space of the ordinary. In these post-Brexit times, with political elites blindsided by outcomes they did not expect and are unable to control, studying the politics of everyday life can provide insight into the making and fraying of political identities and ideologies.

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*Note: This blog is based on the author’s recent co-authored paper in [Politics](#).*

### **About the Author**

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