The Honeymooners and the American Dream:
Leslie Dale Feldman's Brilliant Analysis

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What do the moon, democracy, and the American Dream have in common? The answer is hope—the only thing left inside Pandora's box after all its evils were released into the world. The commonality that these enfold was emphasized by one of the most iconic of all 1950s television sitcoms, *The Honeymooners*, as a brilliant, insightful, and politically-prophetic book by Leslie Dale Feldman, *Blue-Collar Happiness: The Political Theory of the Honeymooners*, has amply illustrated and explored. The American Dream is the embedded hope in America that anyone can achieve success through hard work, determination, and initiative, regardless of their background. Democracy is the political system that allows for the fulfillment of the dream, which, in America is implanted in the idea that a better future can be attained through individual dedication and effort, not through the good graces of some authoritative figure or structure. The moon is the natural body that overrules the world at night, equally for everyone, suggesting symbolically that success is attainable for all, not just a select few.

The coalescence of these three symbolic structures occurred in the 1950s, producing a society-wide optimistic outlook in America, an outlook emblemized by *The Honeymooners*. This is the subtext that runs throughout Feldman's vivid portrayal of American society through the lens of this singular sitcom. The term "American Dream" was coined during the Great Depression by James Truslow Adams in his 1931 book, *The Epic of America*—an era when hope had all but dissipated from society. Adam defined it as a dream of a life that is "better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement." He went on to elaborate that "It is not a dream of motorcars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position." The Dream was seen as realizable, however,

after World War II, when hope for a better world was instilled throughout the world.

Feldman's allusion to the "moon" in the title of the sitcom, is the essence of what the dream means at different levels. The moon's waxing and waning mirror the rhythms of life, reminding us that beginnings and growth are always possible. Its light during the night offers comfort, representing hope in the face of darkness. Ultimately, it is the association of the moon with love—an ancient one that goes back to ancient astrology (Danesi 2025)—that saves the honeymooners, Ralph Kramden and his wife Alice, from their financially woeful life, as Feldman cogently and insightfully brings out in her book.

Feldman unravels the roots of American capitalism via the sitcom, which, as the sociologist Max Weber (1905) argued at the turn of the twentieth century, emerged from the religious ideology of the founding colonists who saw profit as an end in itself, and thus as a goal that must be pursued as if it were the equivalent of religious virtue. Weber went on to claim that this broke down traditional capitalism in Europe based on the ownership of businesses and economic enterprises by families, paving the way for modern corporate capitalism. Once the latter had emerged, the original religious values were no longer required, given that the "ethic" on which they were based took on a new economic form all its own. It is within this social environment that the so-called American Dream emerged, whereby material success is afforded to anyone who subscribes to the work ethic.

This ethic was espoused by the protagonist of *The Honeymooners*, Ralph Kramden, who embodied the ideals of American capitalism, representing what Feldman appropriately calls, the "blue-collar everyman" who emerged as a prototypical figure in post-World War II America. In early 1950s television, the sitcom emerged as America's storyteller, social Geiger counter, as vaudevillian comedians dominated the new screen, with hilarious buffoons such as Sid Caesar, Milton Berle, Red Skelton, Bob Hope, Jackie Gleason, George Burns and Gracie Allen, Jackie Gleason (Ralph Kramden), and others becoming some of television's first iconic stars. Throughout this golden age, sitcoms conveyed a bright view of things, with the humor aimed at typical human foibles, relations, and even the American Dream. There was no sinister, dark humor, and certainly the jibes at politics remained above board and in line with previous satirical traditions. Kramden became the working class anti-hero to Americans—a New York City bus driver who utilized a kind of street savvy to survive in his day-to-day life with his wife Alice in their humble apartment. *The Honeymooners* was, as

Feldman implies, a politically-themed sitcom reflecting the post-war economy as being open to anyone and everyone, but which still constrained blue collar workers from climbing the social ladder of success. This has always been the paradox of the American Dream—it is open to everyone but not reachable by everyone.

In 1971, all this changed, with the advent of the iconoclastic sitcom, *All in the Family*, which revolved around Archie Bunker, an outspoken radical supporter of radical right-wing politicians who railed against anyone who was not like him or who did not share his view of how people living in America should be. He was branded America's "lovable bigot," who used disparaging nicknames for his family members, including "dingbat" for his wife and "meathead" for his son-in-law, Michael Stivic, who was a constant target of Archie's verbiage, since he embodied in appearance and in his views the counterculture generation of the late 1960s. The sitcom came along at a time when America was changing, represented not only by Stivic, but also by supporting characters, such as the Jeffersons, an African American family, which lived in the house next door. The actor who played Archie, Carroll O'Connor, made the following discerning statement to the *New York Times*, after the unexpected success of the sitcom, explaining why he thought the show was so successful and why the character he portrayed was so significant to America:

> Archie's dilemma is coping with a world that is changing in front of him. He doesn't know what to do, except to lose his temper, mouth his poisons, look elsewhere to fix the blame for his own discomfort. He isn't a totally evil man. He's shrewd. But he won't get to the root of his problem, because the root of his problem is himself, and he doesn't know it. That is the dilemma of Archie Bunker.

In a way, Ralph Kramden prefigured the Archie Bunker character, but without his biases and fear of change—in fact, as Feldman suggests, Kramden was constantly screaming for change, literally, giving voice to the aspirations of blue collar workers, without blaming politics for his plight. Significantly, the sitcom was pitted against the suburban-life sitcom of the same era called *Father Knows Best*, which depicted the everyday middle class life of the Anderson family in a wholesome, romanticized Midwestern town, with Jim Anderson, the father, offering guidance and solutions to family problems. While Ralph was also the "head of the household," there is little doubt that Alice was actually running the

show, so to speak, with her acerbic irony that shed light on what was truly going on in Ralph subconsciously. The wife in *Father Knows Best* was subservient and a passive receiver of her husband's wisdom, although she too occasionally injected her own type of wisdom into an episode. The main aspirational difference between Ralph Kramden and Jim Anderson was that Ralph was constantly yearning for success, getting involved in get-rich schemes (often with the help of his neighbor Ed Norton), but never succeeding, while Jim had achieved the American Dream and was simply living it out.

The evolution of the sitcom since the 1950s has mirrored the evolution of the American Dream and the state of American politics, with radicalism becoming a central element within it, as *All in the Family* had predicted. Moreover, in a complex media world, with multiple systems (from legacy media to streaming and other types of media), the importance of the sitcom as a storyteller has diminished considerably. The days of *The Honeymooners* seem distant and nostalgic indeed, as is implicit in Feldman's analysis. Along with the evanescence of the early sitcom narrativity is the evanescence of the American Dream, leaving America mainly in the moonlight where hope still resides. As Feldman argues throughout, it is ultimately the hope and love that the moon brings that made Ralph's life meaningful, even if it was financially destitute. Love conquers everything—a message that we certainly need to hear today in an age of lies and politically-based conflicts. While Ralph continually frustrates Alice with his failed schemes and hot temper, he deeply loves her and ultimately seeks her approval for everything he does. Their playful arguments and affectionate makeups make the sitcom truly memorable—to this day.

As Alexis de Tocqueville (1841) believed—cited throughout by Feldman—the ideal of American democracy inheres in the belief in the power of individualism; and Ralph is nothing if not an individualistic thinker. Tocqueville was concerned about the potential for the state to become overreaching in a democratic society. He argued that while democracy requires a strong government to maintain order, excessive government intervention could stifle individual initiative and lead to a form of "soft despotism." The 1950s were a honeymoon period for America as a system that promoted individualism to a high degree. The *Honeymooners* showed what life in this Zeitgeist entailed, from the perspective of the "blue-caller everyman," Ralph Kramden.

In sum, Feldman's book is a must-read today, in an era of unstable politics and a deteriorating view of the American Dream. It reminds us what life during a honeymoon period is all about and perhaps how, by revisiting it, we might in

some ways retrieve it. As Feldman concludes, *The Honeymooners* was about eternal truths, which transcend social, political, and economic conditions: "Ralph may not achieve wealth and the American dream, but he has achieved the universal dream of love and friendship, which are available to everyone: for free."

References

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