

“The end of racism and the last family: *The Cosby Show's* (1984-1992) Fukuyaman neo-liberal children”

Both popular and academic discourses on *The Cosby Show* have focused on the eponymous family's post-racial representation. Challenging historically negative television and film depictions of the African American as an exotic and/or savage 'Other', the program's upper middle-class professional family presented 1980s white America with an image of blackness that had been fully assimilated into hegemonic culture. Academic analyses of this acculturation have considered both the impact of this ostensibly positive depiction of the black family for white audiences,<sup>1</sup> and the subtle traces of African American social and cultural experiences which appealed to black audiences.<sup>2</sup> Discourses about the show's children have also positioned the characters' relationships with their white contemporaries within a post-racial context,<sup>3</sup> so that they undergo the same kind of *bildungsroman* angst and trajectory as other, whiter, 1980s coming-of-age narratives, without any particular experience rooted in racial difference.

This essay situates the show's children within a wider post-racial context that dominated American political and social culture during the period 1984-1992 when the show ran. This was the era of triumphant Reaganomics, punctuated by the fall of the Berlin Wall, and bookended with Francis Fukuyama's influential panegyric to neo-liberalism's victory over every other possible form of ideology, *The End of History and the Last Man*<sup>4</sup>. *The Cosby Show's* professional American nuclear family is post-racial not only because of the gradual impact of socio-cultural and legal developments emanating from the Civil Rights movement. Even more fundamentally, the enormous popularity of the show's Huxtable family, amongst both black and white audiences, in America and beyond,<sup>5</sup> encapsulates Fukuyama's color-blind ideological model – a celebration of hard work and cooperation leading to the enjoyable consumption of plenty, with any inconvenient impediments to this vision, such as race, class, gender or sexuality, overcome through virtuous labor and consumption. The show's children, inheritors of the End of History, are the central drivers and beneficiaries of this process.

### **Fukuyaman neo-liberalism**

Fukuyama's claims that neo-liberal capitalism and democracy constitute a system which was in the process of making all alternative economic and social structures unviable and eventually unimaginable has been controversial since its publication. His thesis has been criticized for its perceived historical inaccuracies,<sup>6</sup> for its predictions about the future, which have perhaps been disproved by subsequent events,<sup>7</sup> and for its alleged misogyny<sup>8</sup> and misrepresentation of continuing racism.<sup>9</sup> However, even critics such as Jacques Derrida<sup>10</sup> position Fukuyama's claims within the specific atmosphere of a particular historical epoch: the capitalist West's triumph over its collapsing communist rivals at the end of the Cold War. The optimism of the era may have been precipitous, but Fukuyama identifies the end of the Cold War with what Derrida describes as the illusion of "victorious capitalism in a liberal democracy which has finally arrived at the plenitude of its ideals".<sup>11</sup>

Fukuyama identified a number of key elements that combine to constitute capitalism's victorious End of History. These are the failures of neo-liberalism's rivals, universal equality, democratic participatory citizenship, dignified labor, and instrumentally virtuous consumerism. Each of these is a thematic, narrative and aesthetic concern in *The Cosby Show*. The first of these elements, underpinning all the others, is Fukuyama's contention that "[a]s mankind approaches the end of the millennium, the twin crises of authoritarianism and socialist central planning have left only one competitor standing in the ring as an ideology of potentially universal validity: liberal democracy, the doctrine of individual freedom and popular sovereignty".<sup>12</sup> It is liberal democracy's triumph, which, in a Hegelian sense, brings about the End of History because the failure of rival ideologies means that there can be "no further progress in the development of underlying principles and institutions".<sup>13</sup>

### **Post-racial neo-liberalism in *The Cosby Show***

*The Cosby Show's* ostensibly post-racial middle-class popularity, which for Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis is a "paradox" in "a society in which many white people have treated (and continue to treat) black people with contempt, suspicion, and a profoundly ignorant sense of superiority",<sup>14</sup> fits squarely into this discursive context.

The family does not resist hegemony because it is a successful part of it, and the nature of any such resistance is almost inconceivable in the Reagan era's neo-liberalism. The family's blackness, then, makes a virtue out of what, in previous generations, would have been an example of American democracy's limitations – even the previously oppressed can contribute towards, and enjoy the rewards offered by participatory democracy and capitalism. This Fukuyaman context does not invalidate previous academic analyses of the show, but it does alter their perspective. So, for example, Mark Crispin Miller argues that “Cliff [Huxtable]’s blackness serves an affirmative purpose, [...] implicitly proclaiming the fairness of the American system: ‘Look!’ he shows us. ‘Even *I* can have all this!’”<sup>15</sup> This initial position, however, has been used to conceptualize how audiences relate to race issues in a very direct sense, at the expense of the broader neo-liberal context. For Mike Budd and Clay Steinman,<sup>16</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr.,<sup>17</sup> and Jhally and Lewis, this fictional equality serves a cathartic function: “In an era when most white people have moved beyond the crudities of overt and naked racism, there is a heavy burden of guilt for all concerned. *The Cosby Show* provides its white audiences with relief not only from fear but also from responsibility”.<sup>18</sup> Jhally and Lewis’ ethnographic audience analysis concludes that the fictional family’s economic and social status encourages a kind of post-racial complacency which they call *Enlightened Racism*: “Most white respondents [...] were quite unaware of the existence of widespread or structural racism, and the rejection of policies like affirmative action was a logical consequence of this unawareness”.<sup>19</sup>

In this context, the defining feature of the show’s celebration of fictional racial equality relates to how the ideology encoded into the program actually legitimates factual racial inequality. Jhally and Lewis conclude their analysis with the contention that “[i]f we are to begin any kind of serious analysis of racial divisions in the United States, we must acknowledge the existence of the class barriers that confine the majority of black people”.<sup>20</sup> I would not want to argue against this claim. However, the show’s ideological encoding goes further even than a legitimation of racial inequality. In celebrating the economic and social achievements of an African American family, the program closes off the possibility of any economic and social solutions to that inequality (or any of the other inequalities inherent to capitalism) other than those offered by the very system, liberal democracy, which constructed

and which perpetuates those inequalities. A sitcom about a successful white middle-class family would also demonstrate, to a lesser extent, the plenitudes of neo-liberal capitalism. But a similar sitcom, about a similar middle-class family who just happen to be black, demonstrates two integral and interrelated components of the Fukuyaman discourse – its equality, and its singularity. All are included, for all alternatives have Ended.

### **Participatory democratic neo-liberalism in *The Cosby Show***

The Huxtable family is deeply interpellated into “principles and institutions”<sup>21</sup> which demonstrate how neo-liberalism facilitates ostensible equality. To a large extent these connections are made through education, which is addressed below, but the parents’ careers, which are the *telos* of the children’s educational development, also demonstrate neo-liberal values and institutional affiliations. The father, Cliff (Bill Cosby), is an obstetrician, and thereby a facilitator of the next generation. The mother, Clair (Phylicia Rashad), is even more institutionalized through her role as a lawyer. By positioning the parents into roles with important social responsibilities, the show demonstrates how ostensibly post-racial neo-liberal democracy can overcome legacies from what Fukuyama perceives as atavistic remnants of prior ideologies. He argues that “earlier forms of government were characterized by grave defects and irrationalities that led to their eventual collapse”, while, in liberal democracies, any “injustice or serious social problems [...] were ones of incomplete implementation of the twin principles of liberty and equality on which modern democracy is founded”.<sup>22</sup> Fukuyama can thus claim that “black poverty in the United States is not the inherent product of liberalism, but is rather the ‘legacy of slavery and racism’ which persisted long after the formal abolition of slavery”.<sup>23</sup> The Huxtable family’s institutionalized transcendence of these pre-liberal legacies is thereby an example of the more complete “implementation of the twin principles of liberty and equality on which modern democracy is founded”.<sup>24</sup>

The family demonstrates one of the central components of this modern democracy, voting, when it comes to making difficult and contested decisions. Crucially, voting is an arena in which the children can be subject in both senses of the word – the subject of the matter which is being voted on, and the active subject who does the

voting. When the eldest child, Sondra (Sabrina Le Beauf), for example, wishes to take her vacation with friends in Paris, Cliff's initial response is that of the gruff patriarch, described by the mother Clair as a "cyclops".<sup>25</sup> Since there is no clear unanimity the family votes on the matter, with a form of universal suffrage that extends even to the youngest child, Rudy (Keshia Knight Pulliam), about five years old at this point. Cliff loses the plebiscite, with only his own vote going against the vacation. Given Fukuyama's "crises of authoritarianism"<sup>26</sup> the "cyclops" has to give way to the voice of the majority. But there are two more fundamental Fukuyaman elements to this domestic form of democracy. The first of these is the demonstration of an African American engagement in voting at the familial level, with the potential alternative form of decision-making, patriarchal authoritarianism, gently countenanced (Clair describing the cyclops as a "cute cyclops"), but peacefully and easily displaced through the solidarity of the children. Everyone, by this logic, subscribes to Fukuyama's claim that democracy is a universal value, since there is no viable working alternative. Secondly, the fact that family suffrage extends to the children demonstrates the degree to which neo-liberal democracy is something disseminated through consent rather than through coercion. The vote is described as a "family forum", and when it is called Rudy, unaware, asks what it is. The act of practicing democracy is therefore also, at the same time, an education in democracy. The role of children's learning is central to this.

The attitude towards education instilled in the children is fundamentally neo-liberal. Fukuyama claims that "in the developed world social status is determined to a very large degree by one's level of educational achievement. The class differences that exist in the contemporary United States, for example, are due primarily to differences in education. There are few obstacles to the advancement of a person with the proper educational credentials".<sup>27</sup> This statement is almost directly echoed by Bill Cosby's own understanding that "[t]his is an American family – an *American* family – and if you want to live like they do, and you're willing to work, the opportunity is there".<sup>28</sup> As mentioned earlier, existing academic discourses position the family's blackness as fictional success at the center of analysis. Jhally and Lewis, in this vein, claim that the show's approach to education "provides the viewer with an explanation for the comparative failure of most other black people: if they had only tried harder in school, maybe they would have succeeded".<sup>29</sup> Education in *The*

*Cosby Show*, however, extends beyond determining whether life will be lived in or outside of poverty. It also buttresses two important Fukuyaman values: democratic participatory citizenship, and consumerism.

The first of these values is discernible in the relationship between education and family democracy. Fukuyama claims that “[t]he effect of education on political attitudes is complicated, but there are reasons for thinking it at least creates the conditions for democratic society”.<sup>30</sup> Both the broad school/college education which the Huxtable parents encourage in their children, and the children’s participation in domestic democracy contribute towards these conditions. The family’s third child, Theo (Malcolm-Jamal Warner), is most central to this. One of his school projects is a history report on the March on Washington.<sup>31</sup> After getting an initial C grade his parents and grandparents help him to get an A by describing their own experiences on the March. In so doing they educate Theo about the two intertwined neo-liberal values of education for education’s sake (turning a C into an A), and of education in participatory citizenship. They espouse post-racial sentiments, describing the various races of the participants. Cliff exchanged buttons with many of these participants, and Clair laughs at how these expressed the statements “kiss me I’m” Irish, Polish and Japanese. They discuss the peaceful, collaborative nature of the day, and position their organization within a context which is important for Fukuyama, who writes that “citizenship is best exercised through so-called ‘mediating institutions’ – political parties, private corporations, labor unions, civic associations, professional organizations, churches, parent-teacher associations, school boards, literary societies, and the like”.<sup>32</sup> Cliff’s father Russell (Earle Hyman) mentions that they waited for the bus to take them to the March on a church parking lot, situating their citizenship, and the lesson it imparts to the next generation, within the contexts of one of Fukuyama’s “mediating institutions”.

The participatory nature of the March, and particularly its association with Martin Luther King Jr., is repeated in another episode<sup>33</sup> where, again, the lessons of the elder generation are imparted to the children, although in this case via the youngest child. The family’s second and fourth children, Denise (Lisa Bonet) and Vanessa (Tempestt Bledsoe) are arguing about a sweater that was borrowed without permission. At the end of the episode, still not yet reconciled, the sisters, and their

parents, enter the living room where Rudy is watching King's "I have a dream" speech on television. The rest of the family pause, sit and watch, Clair settling Rudy on her lap. Inspired by King's message, Vanessa mouths a silent 'sorry' to Denise, who smiles back. Again, the family's shared participatory investment in post-racial democracy, signaled by reaction shots in the television sequence showing white as well as black activists, and by a closing long shot of the re-united family, over which King's final line "free at last" rings, is passed from one generation to another. Rudy, the family's youngest member, and perhaps thereby the member most fully inculcated into the End of History, seems to have preempted her older siblings' need for this educational message about democratic activity aiming at (and eventually delivering, for one fictional family at least, according to the final long shot) "individual freedom and popular sovereignty".<sup>34</sup>

Theo is the child who comes closest to challenging the laborious element of Cosby's claim that if "you're willing to work, the opportunity is there".<sup>35</sup> His very minimal form of resistance, and that of his school friend Cockroach (Carl Anthony Payne II) are overcome through two Fukuyaman principles: the dignity of labor, and the promise of consumption as a reward for that labor. The Huxtable parents are joined in their efforts to instill these values by Theo's geometry teacher, Mrs. Westlake (Sonia Braga), whose own racial, economic and social status demonstrates neo-liberalism's universality.<sup>36</sup> She is a Brazilian immigrant, who had to work as a taxi driver and as a waitress in a diner whilst attending college. She therefore shares the Huxtable parents' (and Fukuyama's) focus on self-improvement. The links between Brazilian and African American integration into this neo-liberal project are stressed by two shared forms of non-English (or at least non-conventional English) language. Clair chats in passable Portuguese with Mrs. Westlake, and when the latter's husband (Matt Williams) mentions that her attempts to integrate by learning English led her to develop unusual diner expressions such as "Adam and Eve on a raft", Clair responds that this means "two poached eggs on toast", which she knows because she also worked in a diner. Mrs. Westlake's virtuous immigrant labor not only led eventually to her social and economic success via her career, but also led to domestic success, as she met her white American husband when he hailed her taxi, further integrating her into America's universal color-blind neo-liberalism.

Mrs. Westlake's personal labors inform her educational mission –as she tells Theo, “I knew that if I worked hard I could be whatever I wanted. That's why I make *you* work so hard”. Theo worries that his efforts will result in poor grades, but Mrs. Westlake is pleased to dispel these fears. Theo's friend Cockroach, however, is not so fully aware of the labor required in education. He fails the test which Theo worried about, but even though he cannot learn the specific geometry lesson, he is still able to learn the more fundamental lesson about the value of hard work. When Mrs. Westlake goes to Cliff's hospital to give birth, Theo and Cockroach's class has a substitute teacher.<sup>37</sup> The class take advantage of the sudden lack of discipline, but it is Cockroach who champions the previous regime's order and discipline, admonishing the class for their irresponsibility, and ordering them to prepare for the test which Mrs. Westlake organized prior to going into labor.

### **Instrumental consumption in *The Cosby Show***

Theo's more complete allegiance to neo-liberal labor is the result of his interpellation into Fukuyama's second neo-liberal virtue: consumption. In the show's very first episode,<sup>38</sup> Theo answers his father's criticisms about his grades by saying that he has no intention going to college, but would rather work in a gas station, or drive a bus like “regular people”. Cliff tests his son's preparedness for such a lifestyle by giving him a “regular” person's monthly wage in monopoly money, and taking away each bill for taxes, rent, a car, clothes and food. Cliff initially takes \$100 for clothes and food, but Theo gives him \$200, saying that he wants to “look good”. With \$200 left for the month at the end of the process, Theo is confident that his life choice will work out, before Cliff delivers the scene's punchline – “do you plan to have a girlfriend?” and takes the remaining money. Thereafter Theo might agonize about his grades, or underachieve at first, as in the two examples given above, but each time succeeds. His motivations, as articulated in the lesson learnt via his father's game with the monopoly money, are forms of consumption such as a car, nice clothes and, somewhat misogynistically, a girlfriend.

Consumption is an important element of Fukuyama's End of History, and not just because it provides a motivation against poverty, as demonstrated in the example with the monopoly money. This is not just because “capitalism has proven far more

efficient than centrally planned economic systems in developing and utilizing technology, and in adapting to the rapidly changing conditions of a global division of labor”,<sup>39</sup> but also because of the role that consumption plays in supporting the kind of democratic equality which has already been identified within the show. Fukuyama articulates this most explicitly in relation to how capitalism and democracy developed in Japan in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century:

More important is the contribution Japan has made in turn to world history by following in the footsteps of the United States to create a truly universal consumer culture that has become both a symbol and an underpinning of the universal homogenous state. [...] Desire for access to the consumer culture [...] has played a crucial role in fostering the spread of economic liberalism throughout Asia, and hence in promoting political liberalism as well.<sup>40</sup>

Consumption, then, as well as labor, has instrumental value for Fukuyama. Hence Theo’s desire for a car, nice clothes and girlfriend can underpin his later lessons about civil rights and responsibilities. The show has two further confluences of consumption and civil responsibility, and both are again linked to lessons taught between generations. The distinction between the two, however, operates in terms of which generation is doing the teaching, and which generation the learning.

When the parents teach consumption to the children they make clear connections to democratic rights and responsibilities. When Clair announces that she wants to attend an auction to buy an expensive painting which used to belong to her grandmother,<sup>41</sup> Elvin (Geoffrey Owens), Sondra’s boyfriend, articulating sexist sentiments which he had already expressed in more general terms, asks whether Cliff gave her permission for the purchase. Clair takes the opportunity to teach this less enlightened example of the next generation the importance of the connection between the Fukuyaman values of consumption and equality, stating that “In your mind it’s ok if Dr. Huxtable buys this painting because he works and he’s a man, right? Well, I work, and it’s ok if I buy this painting too, but not because he says so, but because it is so”. Spending \$11,000 on the painting then demonstrates both the pleasures of consumption derived from work, and the emancipated status of women within such patterns of consumption, conforming to Fukuyama’s claim that “[i]n its

economic manifestation, liberalism is the recognition of the right of free economic activity and economic exchange based on private property and markets".<sup>42</sup>

In the same episode, Cliff attempts to teach Elvin to cook, so that he can impress Clair and her daughters with his new masculine credentials, despite expressing the idea, earlier on, that cooking is women's work. This lesson in equality is also a lesson in consumption, as Cliff reveals that the "Dr. Huxtable's secret spaghetti sauce" which he will help Elvin make is merely a jar of "Mrs. Farmer's hot and spicy barbeque sauce". When Elvin complains that this is "not really cooking", Cliff replies that what makes it cooking is the addition of more ingredients. These should be purchased not for eating, but to create an illusion of cooking in another pot. Elvin goes out to purchase these products which, despite their uselessness, are given very specific qualities – the stalks still on some unspecified vegetables, the parsley specifically Italian etc. As with Elvin's lesson from Clair, Cliff teaches neo-liberal equality via a lesson about neo-liberal consumption.

When the children teach consumption to an elder generation there is an increased focus on its pleasures at the expense of its associated civic equality. The family's youngest children are the locus of this specific element of the End of History. When her step-great-grandfather Russell babysits,<sup>43</sup> Olivia (Raven-Symoné) and her friend Marlon (Carlton Beener) are entranced with a video game. Russell genially enquires about their game, unsuccessfully joins in for a while, and suggests another. He produces a box of pick-up-sticks, with the incredulous children asking where the rest of the game is, and where the batteries go. Crucially, the lesson learnt, by the end of the episode, is not the simple pleasures of the earlier game – the children are at no time shown playing it. Instead, in the final scene Cliff, returning home, calls through from the kitchen telling the children to put the game on the muter. When he enters the living room, however, it is Russell who sits, alone and rigid, before the video game. Cliff demonstrates both how well his father is doing, and his own familiarity with the game, when he comments that Russell has reached the twentieth level, and gives him some advice about avoiding enemies. The children have therefore taught the elder generations the pleasures of a more expensive, electronically connected form of entertainment consumption, which is frequently updated through obsolescence, such as a video game, over and above the more simple and

inexpensive pleasures of the pick-up-sticks game. There is no suggestion about any form of social and/or political civic duty in this lesson, such as in the parent-to-child lessons discussed previously. Indeed, Russell is so focused on his game that he does not respond to Cliff's questions about where Olivia is or whether he sent Marlon home. Instead, the focus on this generational exchange from the youngest to the oldest members of the family is on a more self-centered form of pleasurable entertainment consumption. The adults teach the children an adult-like form of consumption associated with equality and emancipation, whereas the children teach the adults a child-like form of consumption associated with a focus on the self at the expense of social responsibilities.

### **Historical consensus in *The Cosby Show* versus historical conflict in *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990-1996) and *Family Ties* (1982-1989)**

One of the recurring features of these lessons about civic duty and consumption is the way that "correct" forms of behavior are contested only at a very minimal level, without any underlying structural factors, such as economic status, race, or gender as impediments to consensus. This, again, is central to Fukuyama's claims about neo-liberalism's triumph. Indeed, it is the impossibility of any alternate model to this consensus that constitutes the End of History. Fukuyama claims that the victory of neo-liberalism over its rivals, at the end of the Cold War, "did not mean that the natural cycle of birth, life, and death would end, that important events would no longer happen. [...] It meant, rather, that there would be no further progress in the development of underlying principles and institutions, because all of the really big questions had been settled".<sup>44</sup> *The Cosby Show* presents the "really big questions" about "underlying principles and institutions" not as a source of contested conflict, but as clearly "settled". Thus, in the previous example of Clair teaching the sexist Elvin that she has as much a right as a man to work and consume as she pleases, the lesson is not delivered as part of a subjective discourse or perspective (specifically "not because he [Cliff] says so") which might be subsequently challenged and overturned, "but because it is so". The principle of "the recognition of the right of free economic activity and economic exchange based on private property and markets"<sup>45</sup> here is not just asserted, with Clair claiming something along the lines of "because I say so", but because the right is stated as an empirical,

observable, inalienable fact. It is also important that Elvin does not resist this fact. In discussion with Cliff, he does not assert that he articulates a viable alternative to Clair's "free economic activity",<sup>46</sup> but instead recognizes that he often says "something stupid", and that his efforts to learn to cook are part of an attempt to become more "understanding and sensible", as he should be at the End of History.

The show also positions race which is, as already mentioned, the main subject of the program's academic analyses, within the context of a "really big underlying question" which has, at the End of History, been "settled".<sup>47</sup> The examples relating to Civil Rights, mentioned earlier, fit with this approach. During the heyday of this movement the question was unresolved and a source of conflict, albeit one which produced a vision, via King's "I have a dream" speech, of the problem's resolution which would be post-racially universal in Fukuyaman terms. By the era of the show's broadcast, the conflict underlying the question of Civil Rights is settled, at least in narrative terms. As mentioned, the family can sit watching King's speech basking in the delivery of the statement that they are "free at last". Perhaps the clearest example of race as a question which has been settled comes, though, as with the example of King's broadcast, through the family's youngest member, Rudy. After her first day at school she complains to Cliff that a boy called her a name.<sup>48</sup> Pausing briefly, Cliff rolls his eyes to the ceiling – perhaps, here, the question which motivated his own participation in the March on Washington is still not settled. But when asked what the boy said to her, the daughter responds that she was called "Rudy Huckleberry". The audience's laughter at this punchline is truly cathartic, with the expected racial slur replaced with a mispronunciation of the family's last name, and with America's racist past replaced with a new generation of children, even bullies, oblivious to its evils. The optimism of this moment's eradication of racial bigotry mirrors Fukuyama's claim that "black poverty in the United States is not the inherent product of liberalism, but is rather the 'legacy of slavery and racism' which persisted long after the formal abolition of slavery".<sup>49</sup> Like Fukuyama, the show presents the earlier problem of racism as an example of the "incomplete implementation of the twin principles of liberty and equality on which modern democracy is founded".<sup>50</sup> The Huxtables' repeated demonstrations of these twin principles reveal that once they are fully implemented, the underlying "question" of racism is "settled".

Conflict about these questions, then, is resolved either almost immediately, or was settled by a previous generation, as in the Civil Rights example. Theo's brief resistance to Cliff's middle-class lifestyle is resolved through a single lesson with toy money. His friend Cockroach's longer resistance is also overcome through an exemplar of virtuous hard work, Mrs. Westlake. Her introduction is also set up in terms of a brief conflict that will be overcome. Theo describes to Cliff, and performs a replica of, how she stands, arms folded at the front of the class, her hair in a tight bun, "her glasses on the tip of her nose so she can look down on us". This image of an unforgiving tyrant is soon overturned, in the sequences described above, in which Mrs. Westlake wears her hair down, without glasses. When she gives Theo his grade, however, she puts her hair up, and dons her glasses, re-adopting the costume of the tyrant. But this, again, is only temporary, as the grade is good, and the trans-racial empathy between Mrs. Westlake and the family quickly overcomes Theo's brief, incorrect, image of a non-collaborative relationship.

The quick resolution of this image of conflict at the expense of co-operation perhaps explains the phenomenal success, in terms of ratings, of the show, particularly in relation to other sitcoms which deal with somewhat similar issues, but without the same focus on consensus. The extent of this success is worth briefly mentioning here to highlight the distinctions between *The Cosby Show* and other somewhat similar and contemporaneous sitcoms. Timothy Havens, for example, has discussed how the show "rewrote the rules on syndication when Viacom required stations to bid for the privilege of airing the show, [generating] \$600 million syndication revenues".<sup>51</sup> Perhaps even more significantly, the show was even more successful internationally. Whilst *Family Ties*, which is addressed in more detail shortly, was its "perennial challenger in the US ratings, [...] *The Cosby Show* outpace[d] *Family Ties* [...] dramatically on the world scene".<sup>52</sup> Havens concludes that "[r]ace is perhaps the only salient difference between these two shows that might account for their differential export patterns and international success".<sup>53</sup> It could also be, however, that *The Cosby Show's* focus on consensus rather than conflict more closely aligns with the Fukuyaman settling of History's "really big questions".<sup>54</sup> The spread of Fukuyama's universal neo-liberal values into the international markets where *The Cosby Show* most clearly outperformed its competitors demonstrates the discursive power of

dramatic narratives dealing with settled questions, rather than those with continuing conflict over them.

Theo's quickly resolved impression of Mrs. Westlake "looking down on us", for example, stands in contrast to class and racial hierarchical representations in a sitcom like *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, which ran from 1990 to 1996. Whereas *The Cosby Show* disavows class and racial conflict and difference, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* structures its humor around these conflicts and differences, which are never resolved. The eponymous Fresh Prince, Will (Will Smith), is sent to the black middle-class Banks household in Bel-Air by his mother who fears he will become embroiled in gang conflict in working-class West Philadelphia.<sup>55</sup> This conflict and translocation is repeated at the beginning of every episode in the rap and accompanying images of the opening sequence. The image of the pompous overbearing tyrant which Theo briefly invokes runs throughout the course of *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, in the form of Will's middle-class uncle Phil's (James Avery) repeated disapproval, cousin Carlton's (Alfonso Ribeiro) preppy costume and mocked sensible behavior, and in particular in the butler Geoffrey's (Joseph Marcell) exaggerated upper-class English accent which accompanies an almost permanent expression of head-tilted superiority similar to Theo's caricature of Mrs. Westlake. In *The Cosby Show* this image is quickly dispelled, so that Theo can recognize education as a benevolent rather than a malevolent force. *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* consistently mocks these images of 'misplaced' black middle-class superiority, without the sympathetic and trans-racially collaborative American Dream trajectory which humanizes Theo's inaccurate understanding of Mrs. Westlake.

*The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* represents American society as divided along class and racial lines, whereas *The Cosby Show* represents an America where these problematic questions have been settled. After Will and Carlton are arrested by white traffic police,<sup>56</sup> for example, Carlton attempts to forget about the incident, saying that the police were "just doing their job". Will, however, points out that their only crime was either driving too slowly, or being black in anything other than "a burnt out Pinto". *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* even directly addresses the issue which for Jhally and Lewis underlies the *Enlightened Racism* of *The Cosby Show's* white audiences; affirmative action.<sup>57</sup> When an old friend from Phil's Civil Rights past accuses the

Banks patriarch, now a judge, of selling out on their youthful values,<sup>58</sup> Phil replies that “now I have a family, and I choose not to fight in the streets. I have an office to fight from, and I have fought and won cases for fair housing, affirmative action, health care”. In *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* racial and social inequalities are still existing injustices to be battled, whereas the Civil Rights movement, in *The Cosby Show*, was a fight that has been won, with its underlying problem settled.

*The Cosby Show*'s invocation of the Civil Rights period prior to the resolution of this question sets up a particular form of addressing the underlying (and ostensibly settled) problem of racism in America which can be, again, juxtaposed with how *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* deals with this issue. If Martin Luther King Jr. provides *The Cosby Show*'s answer to the question of racism, then *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* selects a more divisive figure from the Civil Rights era to demonstrate that the question remains unanswered during the period when the program ran. This figure is Malcolm X, present through Will's posters and T-shirt slogans, and in an episode where he attempts to disrupt his snooty school with a class on black history.<sup>59</sup> *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* focuses on what Malcolm X called “a clash between the oppressed and those that do the oppressing”,<sup>60</sup> whereas *The Cosby Show* presents King's fulfilled dream about “little black boys and little black girls” who are “able to join hands with little white boys and little white girls as sisters and brothers”. This image of childlike racial harmony is particularly demonstrated, again, through the Huxtables' youngest child, Rudy, in her friendship with the white neighbor Peter (Peter Costa).

*The Cosby Show* only references un-settled racism when such racism clearly and unambiguously accompanies an “incomplete implementation of the twin principles of liberty and equality”<sup>61</sup> after the ostensibly complete implementation of those principles in America. Jhally and Lewis,<sup>62</sup> for example, have discussed how network executives briefly, and unsuccessfully, attempted to get Cosby to remove the anti-apartheid sign in Theo's room. But, aside from these executives, few would think that anti-apartheid sentiments such as this, or the naming of Sondra's twin children Nelson (Gary LeRoi Gray) and Winnie (Monique Reynolds), after Nelson and Winnie Mandela, constitute any controversy. In Fukuyaman terms, this is partly because “the indignation that people around the world have felt against the apartheid system [...]

arises because the victim of racism is not being treated with the worth that the person feeling indignation believes they are due as human beings”.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, for Fukuyama apartheid was in the process of failing, during the period when the show was broadcast, for neo-liberal reasons as much to do with economics as to do with equality. In its attempt to prevent racial intermingling by separating rural black housing from the white urban neighborhoods where the black proletariat worked, the apartheid system was “seeking to reverse and prevent the urbanization of South Africa’s blacks that is the natural concomitant of any process of industrialization”.<sup>64</sup> The apartheid system, then, not only “denied the liberal premise of universal human equality”,<sup>65</sup> it also demonstrated the “impossibility of defying the laws of modern economics”.<sup>66</sup> Theo’s anti-apartheid sign, then, demonstrates a neo-liberal approach towards racism that only nervous network executives and the more extreme members of South Africa’s white supremacist movement could disagree with – the intertwined nature of equality and economic pragmatism. For the rest of the Western world, which at the End of History extends even so far as economically pragmatic reforming South African leaders like F.W. de Klerk, apartheid could only be an example of a “legacy of slavery and racism” rather than “the inherent product of liberalism”,<sup>67</sup> and another example of those “really big questions [which] had been settled”.<sup>68</sup> It is significant, again, that the connection made between America’s previously settled racial issues and South Africa’s contemporaneously settled racial issues is organised through the family’s children, Theo and Sondra. The parents’ and grandparents’ generations addressed the issue when it ostensibly pertained to America: that is, in the past. The children address the issue when it pertains to South Africa, where it is ostensibly limited to, in the present.

The extent of the Huxtable family’s consensus on these issues is most clearly demonstrated in contrast with another contemporaneous sitcom, however. *Family Ties*, which Ella Taylor calls *The Cosby Show’s* “white obverse”<sup>69</sup> is also replete with the Fukuyaman principles of civic democracy and consumption, but sets these principles up in opposition to one another, without The End of History’s consensus. It is crucial, too, that *Family Ties* does this through generational conflict, so that its protagonists’ values and beliefs are molded by specific, and different historical circumstances. The very first scene from the pilot<sup>70</sup> utilizes one of the central driving forces which for *The Cosby Show* settled one of History’s previously unresolved

issues: the peaceful social protest movements of the 1960s. *Family Ties* begins with images from an anti-war demonstration, rather than a Civil Rights march, but as in the scene discussed earlier in *The Cosby Show*, here again two participants of the era's social movements which in *The Cosby Show* settled existing historical questions, Elyse (Meredith Baxter) and Steven (Michael Gross) Keaton, now parents, share their experiences with their children. They show photographs, on projected slides, of moments when they took part in History, to their children Mallory (Justine Bateman), Alex (Michael J. Fox) and Jennifer (Tina Yothers). The two shows' children's responses are very different, however. Whereas the Huxtable children sit enraptured, motivated to resolve their petty quarrels, the Keaton children respond with embarrassment. "You guys look ridiculous. [...] What were you protesting, good grooming?" asks Alex, while Mallory demands "promise me you'll never show this when my friends are here". Even the youngest child, Jennifer, who offers the attempted praise "Mommy, you look so pretty, like an Indian Princess", is told "That's your father, dear", with the camera then showing a slide of the younger, long-haired Steven. The underlying issue of social progression, settled by the parental generation of Huxtables, and bequeathed to their grateful children, is not resolved by the parental Keatons, whose children refuse a History-ending consensus. Indeed, *Family Ties* positions these specific generational conflicts in an explicitly historical context – Elyse telling the children that the slides capture "history in the making", and commenting later to her husband "I recognized that glazed look in Alex's eyes. Same look I used to get when my father talked to me about The Depression".

*Family Ties* has a similarly conflict-centered approach to two other issues which are settled in *The Cosby Show*: class and race. Following his rejection of his parents' aesthetic values, Alex demonstrates a rejection of their social values. He brings home a date, Kimberly (Cindy Fisher), who embodies continuing class distinctions in American society. Before she arrives Alex fusses about how the house looks, and what his siblings and parents are wearing. Alex answers the door apologizing that "our butler's off tonight". The absence of a butler here, as with the presence of a butler in *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, symbolizes the extent of distinctions between classes. As Kimberly eats with the family, discussion turns to vacations. Alex expresses fabricated plans to sail around the world, telling his parents that Kimberly

sailed to France the previous year. Jennifer embarrasses her brother by revealing that the Keatons went to Cleveland the previous year, and that, instead of flying, “there was a bum on the bus”. The issue of race is adjoined to this class conflict when Alex, later, announces that he is accompanying Kimberly to the Carlton Country Club. Steven immediately protests that this is a “restricted club”, with Elyse explaining that it “doesn’t have any members that are black or Jewish or Hispanic or any other group that didn’t come over on the Mayflower”. Alex’s response to this is “I just want to go to a party, mom. I don’t want to change the world”, demonstrating the extent to which *Family Ties* separates civic equality and pleasurable consumption, which are so closely intertwined in *The Cosby Show* and in Fukuyama’s *End of History*.

Steven’s eventual attempt to resolve this conflict echoes the generationally-specific perspective articulated earlier by Elyse. He tells Alex that “my father [...] was a very unemotional man. [...] I didn’t know he cared. He didn’t show it. I guess I overreact because he didn’t react at all”. This historically-specific approach has the intended effect of a temporary accommodation between fundamentally opposed generations, with the father and son recognizing their differences with a hug. But these differences can never be resolved in themselves – “Think this kind of thing is going to happen again?” Alex asks. Steven’s response that “I don’t know” sets up the fact that all subsequent episodes will revolve around generational conflict in which Fukuyama’s tight bundling of universal civic duty and consumption, which is so central to *The Cosby Show*, is repeatedly separated into historically-conditioned and unresolvable binary opposites.

In contrast, the various Huxtable generations are shown to be essentially the same, and not only in terms of the commitments to civic equality and consumption discussed above. Even their foibles demonstrate shared experiences. When Cliff admonishes Theo for getting his ear pierced,<sup>71</sup> Russell tells his grandson how the fifteen-year-old Cliff burnt off his hair whilst trying to straighten it, with the same motivation, attempting to impress a girl. The grandfather’s sense of superiority over these foolish acts of male bravado is quickly extinguished when the grandmother, Anna (Clarice Taylor), reveals that in an attempt to impress her, the young Russell acted in a similar manner, tattooing her name across his chest. Each male member

of the Huxtable family, then, acts much like the other, with the same motivations, and with the same lessons learnt from their clumsy attempts to negotiate the spaces between childhood and heterosexual adulthood. Historically specific generational difference and conflict, so central to *Family Ties*, is another issue which is quickly disavowed in *The Cosby Show's* universality.

## Conclusion

The era when *The Cosby Show* ran, then, was one in which ideological conflict around class, race, citizenship and consumption practices was not, as Fukuyama claimed, overcome. As *Family Ties* demonstrates, this conflict is structured around historically-specific conditions which can be represented by the contrasting values of different generations. But the era was also one in which an optimistic discourse about the resolution of these conflicts was articulated. For Derrida, Fukuyama provides “the finest ideological showcase”<sup>72</sup> of this discourse at the academic/intellectual level. *The Cosby Show* provides an analogous “ideological showcase” at the aesthetic/narrative level. The relationships between different generations, which are historically specific demonstrations of History’s continuance in *Family Ties*, are the central drivers of *The Cosby Show's* transcendence of History. The Huxtable parents patiently instill in their children the Fukuyaman values that will ensure their happiness. The family acts as instructor in democratic processes, with the children granted voting powers equal to that of their parents whenever difficult decisions need to be resolved. The family also acts as instructor in the equally neo-liberal duties of labor and consumption, with the children themselves frequently the teachers of consumption, whenever a member of an elder generation attempts to cling to a historical form of un-capitalized entertainment austerity. This intergenerational intersection forms the synthesis of Fukuyama’s democratic laborer/consumer, with the parental/grandparental generations teaching their children the duties of participatory citizenship and work, and the children teaching their parents/grandparents the equally important virtue of capitalist consumption. That American (and other neo-liberal countries’) television audiences have these neo-liberal virtues represented by a middle-class African American family demonstrates the triumphalism of Fukuyama’s universal vision. Any alternative, specifically racialized ideology is obsolete under neo-liberalism, and the Huxtable

family's joys and sorrows, conflicts and catharses, are the same as those of any other Last Family partaking in the End of History.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis. *Enlightened Racism: 'The Cosby Show', Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Havens. "The Biggest Show in the World': Race and the Global Popularity of 'The Cosby Show,'" in *The Television Studies Reader*, ed. Robert C. Allen and Annette Hill (London: Routledge, 2004), 442-56.

<sup>3</sup> John D.H. Downing. "'The Cosby Show' and American Racial Discourse," in *Discourse and Discrimination*, ed. by Geneva Smitherman and Teun A. van Dijk (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), 46-73.

<sup>4</sup> Francis Fukuyama. *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> Havens, "Biggest Show", 449-50.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel P. Huntington. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> Robert Kagan. *The Return of History and the End of Dreams* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Su Maddock. *Challenging Women: Gender, Culture and Organization* (London: Sage, 1999), 52.

<sup>9</sup> Stanford M. Lyman. "The Race Question and Liberalism," in *Racial Classification and History*, ed. by E. Nathaniel Gates (New York: Garland, 1997), 279-344.

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Derrida. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>11</sup> Derrida, *Specters*, 56.

<sup>12</sup> Fukuyama, *The End*, 42.

<sup>13</sup> Fukuyama, *The End*, xii.

<sup>14</sup> Jhally and Lewis, *Enlightened Racism*, 2.

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- <sup>15</sup> Mark Crispin Miller. "Deride and Conquer," in *Watching Television*, ed. by Todd Gitlin (New York: Pantheon, 1986), 183-228.
- <sup>16</sup> Mike Budd and Clay Steinman, "White Racism and 'The Cosby Show'," *Jump Cut* 37 (1992): 5-12.
- <sup>17</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr., "TV's Black World Turns – But Stays Unreal," *The New York Times*, November 12, 1989.
- <sup>18</sup> Jhally and Lewis, *Enlightened Racism*, 8.
- <sup>19</sup> Jhally and Lewis, *Enlightened Racism*, 88.
- <sup>20</sup> Jhally and Lewis, *Enlightened Racism*, 132.
- <sup>21</sup> Fukuyama, *The End*, xii.
- <sup>22</sup> Fukuyama, *The End*, xi.
- <sup>23</sup> Francis Fukuyama. "The End of History?" in *The Geopolitics Reader*, ed. by Gearóid Ó Tuathail, Simon Dalby and Paul Routledge (London; Routledge, 1998), 114-24, 118.
- <sup>24</sup> Fukuyama, *The End*, xi.
- <sup>25</sup> *Bonjour, Sondra* (*The Cosby Show* Season 1, Episode 10), directed by Jay Sandrich (1984).
- <sup>26</sup> Fukuyama, *The End*, 42.
- <sup>27</sup> Fukuyama, *The End*, 116.
- <sup>28</sup> In Jhally and Lewis, *Enlightened Racism*, 95.
- <sup>29</sup> Jhally and Lewis, *Enlightened Racism*, 95.
- <sup>30</sup> Fukuyama, *The End*, 116.
- <sup>31</sup> *The March* (*The Cosby Show* Season 3, Episode 6), directed by Tom Singletary (1986).
- <sup>32</sup> Fukuyama, *The End*, 322.
- <sup>33</sup> *Vanessa's Bad Grade* (*The Cosby Show* Season 2, Episode 14), directed by Jay Sandrich (1986).
- <sup>34</sup> Fukuyama, *The End*, 42.

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- <sup>35</sup> In Jhally and Lewis, *Enlightened Racism*, 95.
- <sup>36</sup> *Mrs. Westlake* (*The Cosby Show* Season 2, Episode 12), directed by Jay Sandrich (1986).
- <sup>37</sup> *An Early Spring* (*The Cosby Show* Season 2, Episode 21), directed by Jay Sandrich (1986).
- <sup>38</sup> *Pilot* (*The Cosby Show* Season 1, Episode 1), directed by Jay Sandrich (1984).
- <sup>39</sup> Fukuyama, *The End*, 91.
- <sup>40</sup> Fukuyama, "The End?" 118-9.
- <sup>41</sup> *The Auction* (*The Cosby Show* Season 2, Episode 13), directed by Jay Sandrich (1986).
- <sup>42</sup> Fukuyama, *The End*, 44.
- <sup>43</sup> *For Men Only* (*The Cosby Show* Season 8, Episode 9), directed by John Bowab (1991).
- <sup>44</sup> Fukuyama, *The End*, xii.
- <sup>45</sup> Fukuyama, *The End*, 44.
- <sup>46</sup> Fukuyama, *The End*, 44.
- <sup>47</sup> Fukuyama, *The End*, xii.
- <sup>48</sup> *The First Day of School* (*The Cosby Show* Season 2, Episode 1), directed by Jay Sandrich (1985).
- <sup>49</sup> Fukuyama, "The End?" 118.
- <sup>50</sup> Fukuyama, *The End*, xi.
- <sup>51</sup> Havens, "Biggest Show", 442.
- <sup>52</sup> Havens, "Biggest Show", 449.
- <sup>53</sup> Havens, "Biggest Show", 450.
- <sup>54</sup> Fukuyama, *The End*, xii.
- <sup>55</sup> *The Fresh Prince Project* (*The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* Season 1, Episode 1), directed by Debbie Allen (1990).

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<sup>56</sup> *Mistaken Identity* (*The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* Season 1, Episode 6), directed by Jeff Melman (1990).

<sup>57</sup> Jhally and Lewis, *Enlightened Racism*, 88.

<sup>58</sup> *Those Were the Days* (*The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* Season 2, Episode 20), directed by Rita Rogers (1992).

<sup>59</sup> *The Ethnic Tip* (*The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* Season 1, Episode 17), directed by Jeff Melman (1991).

<sup>60</sup> Malcolm X, *By Any Means Necessary: Speeches, Interviews and a Letter by Malcolm X*, comp. George Breitman (New York: Pathfinder, 1970), 37.

<sup>61</sup> Fukuyama, *The End*, xi.

<sup>62</sup> Jhally and Lewis, *Enlightened Racism*, 4.

<sup>63</sup> Fukuyama, *The End*, 171-2.

<sup>64</sup> Fukuyama, *The End*, 20.

<sup>65</sup> Fukuyama, *The End*, 20.

<sup>66</sup> Fukuyama, *The End*, 21.

<sup>67</sup> Fukuyama, "The End?" 118.

<sup>68</sup> Fukuyama, *The End*, xii.

<sup>69</sup> Ella Taylor. *Prime-Time Families: Television Culture in Postwar America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 163.

<sup>70</sup> *Pilot* (*Family Ties* Season 1, Episode 1), directed by Asaad Kelada (1982).

<sup>71</sup> *Independence Day* (*The Cosby Show* Season 1, Episode 14), directed by Jay Sandrich (1985).

<sup>72</sup> Derrida, *Specters*, 56.

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