Abstract: Sex and the City portrays the lives of four privileged white women and their resistance to challenging their own bigotry in favor of reinscribing hegemonies through difference. This article examines the series’ hegemonic feminist narrative by analyzing the series’ methods of addressing issues of race, gender, sexual orientation, and class.

Key words: Cultural studies, feminism, media studies, popular culture, television, women

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) now offers a course called “Sex and the Institute,” in which the HBO series Sex and the City is the topic of academic analysis and inquiry. The elective course examines “the show’s unorthodox treatment of issues such as marriage, dating, sex, gender roles, and career and family balance” (Schweitzer). Students are required to write a five-page paper discussing the show in the context of their own lives. In the context of social stratification, this article explores Sex and the City’s hegemonic feminist narratives on social stratification by examining the many ways groups are marginalized and subjugated. Viewers and readers of Sex and the City are invited to challenge and reject mainstream media’s reification of social hierarchies.

Sex and the City is an Emmy award-winning cable television program. The show originally aired on HBO for six seasons from 1998–2004. The hit television series is based on the book Sex and the City, written by Candace Bushnell. Based in New York City, the show is about four single women in their thirties and forties, navigating the often complicated and chaotic dating scene. Carrie Bradshaw, the protagonist, narrates each episode as she seeks insight and answers to relationship dilemmas. Employed as a columnist, Carrie writes a weekly article titled “Sex and the City” for the New York Star (a fictional newspaper). She is known for her designer shoe obsession and unique and glamorous fashion statements. Carrie’s on-again, off-again relationship with Mr. Big anchors Sex and the City’s primary story line.

Although Carrie provides the major plotlines, Sex and the City also follows the stories of her three friends: Miranda Hobbs, Samantha Jones, and Charlotte York. Miranda is a career-oriented Harvard Law School graduate who eventually becomes partner at her law firm. Miranda
is the first of her friends to have a baby and is a single mother for the first months of her child’s life. Miranda’s cynicism toward relationships is the essence of her character. She has a sarcastic sense of humor and usually counterbalances the views of her friends by providing what might be viewed as a voice of reason. The only character to don a short hairstyle (majority of seasons), Miranda appears to cut straight to the point in her analysis of dating. Miranda often considers both the essentialist men’s and women’s perspectives on the subject.

Often characterized by portraying a man’s view on sex and relationships, Samantha is known for her numerous sexual encounters. Confident and secure with her sexuality, Samantha could be described as promiscuous. Her disinterest in conventional relationships separates her from the other women. Employed as a successful public relations executive, Samantha is in her forties, making her the oldest of the four women. Although, throughout most of her narrative, she detests relationships with an emotional component, she does maintain a long-term, committed relationship with a man considerably younger than she at the conclusion of the final season.

Frequently offended by Samantha’s lustful views on sex, Charlotte is, by far, the most sexually conservative of the group. Charlotte works as an art dealer until deciding to end her career to concentrate on raising a family. Charlotte’s views on relationships are traditional, making her the voice of romantic love.
Over the course of the series, Charlotte divorces and remarries, struggling with the conflict between her idealized fairy-tale love fantasy and reality.

Carrie, Miranda, Samantha, and Charlotte represent a continuum of women’s views and dilemmas when it comes to sex, love, and dating. The range of perspectives may be one of the reasons why *Sex and the City* sparks so much interest, enthusiasm, and criticism. Laura Stuart, the MIT health educator who teaches “Sex and the Institute,” explained her objective for the students: “We want them to think about the issues the show presents, not just think about its entertainment value” (Schweitzer). Attending to these issues presented by the show provides audiences with the opportunity for critical media study and feminist analysis.

Camille Paglia describes the hit series as a victory for “the huge wing of us pro-sex feminists” (Maddox). *Sex and the City* was not a hit, however, for the huge wing of feminists opposed to “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (hooks “Feminism is for Everybody,” 4). *Sex and the City* unequivocally demonstrates a distinct school of feminist theory that is most often associated with liberal feminist politics and hegemonic feminist agendas.

**Hegemonic Feminist Practices and *Sex and the City***

The field of feminist theory is not monolithic and actually composites quite a diverse range of perspectives on gender and power. Second-wave feminism has been criticized for its inability to address multiple and interlocking oppressions. Chela Sandoval contends “that hegemonic feminist forms of resistance represent only other versions of the forms of oppositional consciousness expressed within all liberation movements active in the United States during the later half of the twentieth century” (10). Second-wave white feminist efforts to gain equality with white men were charged with both implicit and explicit racism, class exploitation, and homophobia. Whether the second-wave feminist movement is positioned as a time period of mass-based social movement or an epistemological shift in gender discourse or both, hegemonic feminist practices continue to be an area of contention today.

In “Current Controversies in Feminist Thought,” Mary Dietz argues that academic feminist theorizing can be characterized by an emancipatory purpose and normative content. Dietz summarizes feminism’s constitution:

> It posits a subject (women), identifies a problem (the subjection and objectification of women through gendered relations), and expresses various aims (e.g., overturning relations of domination; ending sex discrimination; securing female sexual liberation; fighting for women’s rights and interests, raising “consciousness,” transforming institutional and legal structures; engendering democracy) in the name of specific principles (e.g., equality, rights, liberty, autonomy, dignity, self-realization, recognition, respect, justice, freedom). (399)

Dietz writes about three types of feminisms (difference, diversity, deconstruction) which she describes as divergent and oppositional. By defining a feminist constitution, Dietz attempts to substantiate a common discourse among feminist theories. Yet in spite of a shared platform, feminist theories and practices are not only varied, but also at odds with one another.

How is it then, that liberatory theories can be blind to their own dominating and hegemonic tendencies as suggested by Foucault? Hegemonic feminist theory is not blind or somehow unaware of the beliefs and practices repeatedly used to oppress marginalized Others. Those dominating tendencies compromise core elements of this movement that seeks upward mobility within the existing social hierarchy and equality with and among those who currently posses more power within this structure.

*Sex and the City* provides an excellent example of how hegemonic feminism looks, how it thinks, and what it does. “White, middle-class women unwilling to be treated like second-class citizens in the boardroom, in education, or in bed” (Thompson 338) not only describes the emergence of second-wave feminist consciousness but also describes the women of *Sex and the City*. The women’s identities place them within a certain location in our social stratification—the television show centers their perspective.

*Sex and the City*, as a medium for social analysis, reflects almost exclusively the perspectives and values of white, middle-class, heterosexual women who define themselves primarily as oppressed victims of patriarchy. Carrie, Miranda, Samantha, and Charlotte are protagonists and subjects whose voices are heard. The telling of their stories centers their perspective.
Their voices and narration dominate the discourse and as viewers we comprehend their experiences through their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Are the views presented by Sex and the City representative of a hegemonic discourse or do these views represent socially constructed, apolitical perspectives? White, middle-class, heterosexual women are centered subjects, and their values and attitudes comprise the program’s underlying master narrative.

Sex and the City’s master narrative is that the women’s aim is to gain equal power to white, heterosexual, middle-class men within the existing hegemonic social structure. This reform narrative solely addresses the centered subjects. By developing the subjectivity of centered subjects, while simultaneously exploiting marginalized groups, Sex and the City sustains a hegemonic feminist discourse.

Racism, Ethnocentrism, and Sex and the City

In her assessment of the contemporary women’s movement, Audre Lorde points out that, “White women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class and age. There is a pretense to homogeneity of experience covered by the word sisterhood that does not in fact exist” (Lorde 289). Throughout six seasons of Sex and the City, viewers are introduced to tokenized racism and ethnocentrism dominant storylines. These episodes explore the women’s experiences with nonwhite and non-American-born characters whose race or ethnicity serve as the focus of their interaction.

African American characters like, other marginalized groups, are mostly absent from the hit series. When they do appear, they are cast in unimaginative, stereotypical roles. In episode 35, titled “No Ifs, Ands or Butts,” an African American brother and sister are featured. Samantha, known for her promiscuity, dates Chivon. Chivon’s sister Adeena confronts Samantha by telling her that she does not want her brother dating a white woman. Carrie, Miranda, and Charlotte dance around the stereotypical Mandingo representations of black men, while Samantha rejects their overt racism in favor of the covert type. Samantha declares, “I don’t see color, I see conquests.” Conveniently adopting the color-blind standpoint, Samantha’s character avoids appearing racist by erasing the racial dimension of his identity.

Are the views presented by Sex and the City representative of a hegemonic discourse or do these views represent socially constructed, apolitical perspectives?

On one hand, Samantha is viewed as the liberal white woman who dates interracially because she has moved beyond superficial color politics, while on the other, Adeena reads as the angry black woman who hysterically sees color and practices separatism. The power struggle or conflict is located between the white woman (Samantha) and the black woman (Adeena). The women are friendly, until Chivon, the black man, is positioned between them. When Samantha cannot “conquer” Chivon, she emasculates him by calling him a “pussy.” The passive black man and his angry sister could not be conquered, so they had to be dismissed and subjugated.

Sex and the City castrates an African American man who allies himself with an African American woman. That Adeena is Chivon’s sister, rather than an attractive single black woman, is no mere accident and further demonstrates the show’s allegiance to hegemonic feminism. It is too far-fetched to consider that a black man is more sexually attracted to a black woman than to a white woman. Family ties and the fear of a crazy black woman make more sense and are more believable to the viewer. Sex and the City is careful to employ plotlines promoting limited and racist depictions of persons of color.

An African American male sports doctor who works for New York Knicks is introduced to viewers in season 6 of Sex and the City. Dr. Robert Leeds enters the show escaping the silent and covert racist overtones of the condo association in Miranda’s building. After briefly dating, Miranda realizes that she is still in love with Steve (the white father of her baby). After Miranda ends the relationship, Robert is described by HBO’s Sex and the City episode guide as going “out of his way to make Miranda uncomfortable, leading Miranda to conclude that he’s become obsessed with her” (“Let There be Light,” episode 87). During this episode, both Robert and Miranda seem uncomfortable in the aftermath of their break up, as both independently decide to take the stairs following an awkward elevator encounter. As a result of their corresponding attempts at avoidance, we learn that “no one has ever been that deep” inside of Miranda. Sex and the City resolves all of its marginalized characters storylines by reducing them to stereotypes. Robert is no exception.

The African American male character is written off the show by propagating two sexualized stereotypes. First, viewers learn that Robert has a large penis, and in his final scene, we are led to believe that Robert is using that penis with two women in his apartment. It is important to note that these two women are both women of color (one appearing to be African American and another of Asian descent). Robert yearns for a loving relationship with a white woman and gets rejected. Meanwhile, women of color smile while they readily await their turn to be sexually exploited. Racial exploitation can be seen within these relationships. African American characters are consistently marginalized by white female centered subjects.
African Americans are not the only racial-ethnic group exploited by *Sex and the City*. When the woman giggles while taking Miranda’s take-out order, Miranda misinterprets this stereotypical laughter for negative judgments (“Cock-a-Doodle-Doo,” episode 48). The truth is, the Chinese restaurant employee simply giggles and smiles in response to any order. Miranda is relieved to learn that this Asian stereotype is actually a reality. Her self-esteem is restored through the recognition of this stereotype. Charlotte seeks out racial minorities to meet her needs when all else fails. She has a sexual affair with the tanned-skinned gardener after many unsuccessful attempts at intercourse with her husband Trey (“What Goes Around Comes Around,” episode 47). Charlotte pursues overseas adoption for a Mandarin baby as her last resort in raising a family. In her second marriage, to Harry, Charlotte sees a Chinese fertility doctor, prior to becoming pregnant. Again and again, nonwhite characters are tokenized for stereotypical story line purposes.

In search of an unlikely match for Carrie, *Sex and the City* presents the story line of Aleksandr Petrovsky, an internationally recognized artist. Carrie dates Petrovsky, whom she frequently calls “the Russian” in the sixth season. Referring to Aleksandr by his ethnic identity essentializes Petrovsky’s character as the ethnic Other. In this instance, a non-American identity is positioned as a conflict to be resolved. It is Aleksandr’s Russianness, as opposed to Carrie’s ethnocentrism, that proves to be the problem.

When his character is introduced, we watch Carrie repeatedly interrupt and hang up on Aleksandr because she’s “not interested” in some stranger with an accent, who she assumes must have the wrong number. During their relationship (lasting nine episodes), viewers are treated to lessons on cross-cultural (mis)communication. Carrie and Aleksandr never appear to have any chemistry, yet Carrie invests an inordinate amount of energy to improve communication and bond emotionally with “the Russian.” All the while, Carrie demands that Aleksandr makes her a priority in his life. Carrie even moves to Paris to maintain the relationship with Aleksandr.

**Sexism, Patriarchy, and *Sex and the City***

Gender and sex are important themes in rereading *Sex and the City*, because so much of the women’s identities is determined by their views of masculinity and its dominance over their lives. Whether one of the women is being exploited by a man or has internalized patriarchal thinking, sex and gender issues are always present. Sexism describes exploitation based on gender and sex identification.

*Sex and the City*’s centered subjects are portrayed as biological women. It serves as no surprise that *Sex and the City* positions biological women higher in the social hierarchy than transgendered women. In a patriarchal society, men becoming women will assume an oppressed position to both biological men and biological women. Men and women, as gendered constructs can be viewed as relational or even relative identities. “In other words, the mere terms ‘male’ and ‘female’ have only limited meaning until they are compared against that which they are not” (Schacht 162).

Male-to-female transitioning contributes to our understanding of sex and gender. Marcia Yudkin offers a critical perspective in “Transsexualism and Women.” In her investigation of the concept of woman, she proposes three levels of identity: biological, social, and psychological. Framing the concept of woman with levels suggests there is a hierarchy of womanness or womanhood. The biological level refers to sex organs, the social level describes the sex roles enacted or sustained, and the psychological level is the subjective identification with a gender identity. Yudkin specifies that transsexuals identify with the “opposite sex role” (101), as opposed to the opposite sex, in her analysis of Money and Ehrhardt’s definition of transsexualism: “Psychically, the conditions of people who have the conviction that they belong to the opposite sex and are driven by a compulsion to have the body, appearance, and social status of the opposite sex” (309).

The trilevel framework for understanding sex and gender reflects feminist discourses rampant within *Sex and the City* story lines. Episode 48 of *Sex and the City* ("Cock-a-Doodle Doo") features the “pre-op [operation] up my ass crew.” The preoperative transsexual males to females work the streets as prostitutes. They are loud, dirty-talking “working girls” whose late night noise disrupts Samantha’s sleep. All crew members are cast as persons of color. Following a series of back and forth battles of the divas, the transgendered prostitutes of color are eventually defeated by the embodiment of woman and assume their place in the hierarchy.

While there are intersections clearly visible within this hierarchy, it is *Sex and the City*’s view of sex and gender that is formative. Socially and psychologically, the pre-ops identify themselves as women. They demonstrate stereotypically feminine characteristics such as wearing long hairstyles, makeup, and women’s clothing. Yet *Sex and the City* writers are careful to point out that these “women” are preoperative and have not yet become biological women. The pre-op “up my ass crew” are transsexuals whose sex transition is incomplete, thus making them merely transgendered instead of women.

Further characterizing this hierarchical view of “woman,” is reflected by depicting preoperative transsexuals as prostitutes. Sex is situated as a commodity that can be bought and sold. Therefore, the centered subjects of *Sex
and the City are inherently privileged with female biological sex organs. The battle of Samantha versus the “pre-ops” is not only about the dominance of biological women over nonbiological women, but it can also be conceptualized as biological women’s triumph over biological men. The absence of female biological sex organs, renders “The Pre-ops” mere female impersonators, performing gender. They are no match for “real women.”

Confusion regarding sex and gender provide challenges for the Sex and the City women. “Evolution” (episode 23) tells the story of Stephen, an effeminate man who dates Charlotte. Stephen resides in Chelsea and is employed as a pastry chef. Charlotte is “so confused. Is he gay or is he straight?” Stephen is effeminate in mannerism and has an acute awareness of fashion and cooking. With this interest in women-associated domains, Stephen fits Charlotte’s schema of a gay man. Even after a goodnight kiss and a second date, “Charlotte wanted to be open-minded, but Stephen seemed to be making it as hard as possible.” Unable to resolve her inner conflict and inability to understand Stephen, Charlotte recruits a team of experts (Carrie and Stanford) to help her determine Stephen’s sexual orientation.

The purpose of discussing this episode in regard to sex and gender issues is to explicate the master narrative of Sex and the City. While on the surface, gender and sexual orientation are clearly intersections within this story line, a deeper understanding of this presentation shows us that patriarchal thinking is internalized within these women. Terrence Real explains that, “[p]sychological patriarchy is the dynamic between those qualities deemed ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ in which half of our human traits are exalted while the other half is devalued. Both men and women participate in this tortured value system” (ctd. hooks 32). Writers of this episode make clear that Charlotte’s quest is to discern Stephen’s sexual orientation in the face of questionable masculinity. We do not read the story as Charlotte’s inability to accept that Stephen is heterosexual, or not gay. Viewers are also discouraged from interpreting “Evolution” as Charlotte’s exploration of Stephen’s gender identity, which is what seems to be the purpose of the story line.

Instead, Sex and the City opts for a mundane discussion of an evolutionary phenomenon: “The gay straight man was a new string of heterosexuals spawned in Manhattan as a result of overexposure to fashion, exotic cuisine, musical theater and antique furniture.” This episode is powerful in that it shows us how difficult it is to move beyond our narrow frameworks for understanding gender. In fact, Charlotte enjoys Stephen’s company and a two-orgasm sexual encounter, but in the end cannot accept his feminine characteristics. “Her masculine side wasn’t evolved enough for a man whose feminine side was as highly evolved as Stephen’s.” The Sex and the City women are not attracted to men who have evolved into homosexuals, and they reject notions that they can have romantic relationships with men who display their feminine sides. Patriarchal limitations on straight men’s gender expressions are as deeply ingrained in men as they are in women.

Heterosexism, Homophobia and Sex and the City

Sexual orientation is a regular theme for Sex and the City. Stanford Blanche is a white, gay character on the show. During season four, Samantha has a “lesbian relationship” with a Brazilian artist named Maria. Sex and the City exploits nonheterosexual orientations. Bisexual, lesbian, and gay male characters are all presented in ways that marginalize their existence and reify the dominance of heterosexuality.

Bisexuality is a deeply misunderstood sexual orientation that receives little research attention. Currently, there is no specific model of bisexual identity development (Smiley). Furthermore, Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor found that many persons engaging in bisexual behavior do not label themselves as such. The lack of research, a clear
definition of the term, and invisibility contributes to our society’s adoption of myths. These misconceptions marginalize bisexuality and uphold binary systems of sexual orientation. Fairyington writes that “Bisexuality erodes the border between homo and heterosexuality, but it’s a boundary that our society is heavily invested in maintaining. Doubtless the reason bisexuality is not adequately researched or understood is because it poses a threat to straight people, first and foremost, who feel secure behind an impenetrable wall of heterosexuality.” (34)

The threat is frighteningly apparent in Sex and the City’s “Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl” (episode 34). Carrie dates Sean, a younger man, who she casually learns has dated both men and women. Carrie becomes preoccupied by trying to figure out whom he is more attracted to, men or women. She wants to understand how bisexuality works. Eventually, the focus moves away from the development of their relationship to Carrie’s persistent confusion as she tries to comprehend and fit in with Sean’s “bisexual lifestyle.” Throughout the episode, viewers are treated to a review of the myths of bisexuality.

Joy Morgenstern also outlines myths of bisexuality. One is that bisexuals are sexually promiscuous nymphomaniacs. Episode 34 (“Boy, Girl”) ends with a gathering of Sean’s bisexual friends. They are introduced to Carrie by detailing their previous romantic partnerships with each other. These bisexuals, you see, have all dated each other. A second myth of bisexuality is that bisexuals are gay people who are still in the closet. Bisexuality is then viewed as a transitional phase that will end in homosexuality or heterosexuality. This myth is sustained by the old joke, “Bisexual men and bisexual women have one thing in common. They’ll both be having sex with men five years from now” (Fairyington 32). Sex and the City builds on this myth by casting Sean’s character as younger than Carrie. Being in his twenties, Sean is still developing and transitioning. According to the myth, one day he will self-actualize and end his exploration.

And a third myth of bisexuality that we see in this Sex and the City episode is that bisexuals are indecisive neurotics who will never be sexually satisfied. Sean and his friends decide to play a game of spin the bottle at the party. Not only does this build on the characterization of bisexuality as a developmental phase, but it also lends itself to this indecisive myth. Just spin a bottle and have a sexual experience with whomever and whatever. Bisexuality is further marginalized by being cast as a game for which Carrie is “too old.” Bisexuality is regarded as the problem, rather than Carrie’s stereotypical and hegemonic views of it. As a centered subject, she chooses to relegate this sexual orientation to a status lower than that of her own. An integral component to heterosexist hegemony over all other sexual orientations is that normative centered subjects continue to dismiss and marginalize the Others.

However, Sex and the City shows us that there is more than one way to reinscribe heterosexuality’s dominant status. Charlotte, frustrated with another failed relationship, becomes immersed in the social scene of the “Power Lesbians.” They are a group of well-dressed, successful, professional lesbians, whom she meets at her art gallery. Charlotte enjoys an evening out at the G-Spot (a club) with them. “There was something relaxing and liberating about traveling through an alternate universe that contained no thought of men.” Therein lay Charlotte’s true motivation for making new friends—Charlotte has discovered a location where she can escape from the difficulties and exploitation of men.

However, Charlotte will not be able to escape the discrimination of the Power Lesbians. At a party, one of the lesbians asks Charlotte if she’s gay. Reluctantly, Charlotte admits that she is not, but explains her attraction to “such a safe, warm environment.” Charlotte’s overture is not enough to gain acceptance among the Power Lesbians. “Sweetheart, that’s all very nice. But if you’re not going to eat pussy, you’re not a dyke.” In this instance, it is the lesbians who exclude and reject Charlotte based on her heterosexuality. She is posited as the victim of circumstances beyond her control. This irresponsible portrayal of lesbians not only reinforces stereotypes of lesbians as harsh, unfriendly, and exclusionary, but it is also a distorted master narrative in which the Power Lesbians marginalize the straight woman.

Class Exploitation and Sex and the City

Lesbian feminists were among the first to foster awareness of class in the [second-wave] feminist movement (hooks 39). Envisioning lives without husbands providing financial support, they were able to analyze and critique potential problems women would con-
Issues of class and economic freedom are often overlooked in feminist critiques. bell hooks explains:

As privileged women gained greater access to economic power with men of their class feminist discussions of class were no longer commonplace. Instead, all women were encouraged to see the economic gains of affluent females as a positive sign for all women. In actuality, these gains rarely changed the lot of poor and working-class women. And since privileged men did not become equal caretakers in the domestic household, the freedom of privileged-class women of all races has required the sustained subordination of working-class and poor women. (41)

The women of Sex and the City enjoy economic privilege. As professional women, we learn that they are formally educated and able to independently support themselves. Yet their economic privilege does not exist within a vacuum. This class privilege is supported by a hierarchy that remains intact and a capitalist system that demands it. “The Caste System” (episode 22) reveals how the system—which has provided upward mobility for the Sex and the City women—continues to exploit working-class men and women.

Foreign domestic servants’ labor provides the economically privileged increased freedom, at a low cost. In “The Caste System,” Samantha separates herself from this contested feminist issue. While she, “didn’t believe in having servants, she didn’t mind dating a man who did.” Samantha’s abject stance on servitude reveals the unresolved nature of this debate within feminist discussions. Her statement reveals that she sees the value in having servants, but might experience discomfort in hiring servants for herself. The man she’s dating, Harvey Turkell, is described as a real estate giant “who made a killing in the market, turning Chelsea sweatshops into condos for the upwardly trendy.” Sum, his Asian domestic servant, initially appears servile and polite. However, when Harvey is absent, we learn that Sum is quite the opposite. Sum’s English speaking improves and she is no longer restricted in her physical range of motion. Sum has been putting on an act to appear complicit with her boss’s classist and racist views of her.

Samantha is abused by Sum and is falsely accused of assaulting her. While Sum cries to “Mr. Harvey,” Samantha rolls her eyes in disgust. She did not have to feel discomfort about hiring servants after all. Sum was actually exploiting Mr. Harvey, not the other way around. Writing class exploitation in a way that subverts and distorts the reality of domestic servitude upholds the ruling class’s ability to condone the power they maintain over manipulative domestics. Domestic servants do not just make cameo appearances on Sex and the City. In a later episode of Sex and the City, Magda, a Ukrainian, is hired as Miranda’s cleaning lady. Magda remains an employee of Miranda throughout the remainder of the series.

The ongoing presence of an immigrant domestic servant challenges viewers to consider the class dynamics that occur within a hegemonic capitalist society. Within our current system, class exploitation is maintained, and the only solution is to eradicate the divide which imbalances extreme poverty and extreme wealth. In Maid in America, Mary Romero argues that:

Hiring a woman from a different class and ethnic background to do the household labor provides white middle-class women with an escape from both the stigma and drudgery of the work. White middle-class women not only benefit from racial and class discrimination which provides them with cheap labor but actively contribute to the maintenance and reproduction of an oppressive system by continuing to pay low wages and by not providing health insurance, social security, sick pay, and vacation. (43)

Class exploitation is not only addressed among poor, immigrant women. Sex and the City also explores how class differences affect relationships between men and women.

When Miranda the lawyer, dates Steve the bartender, class issues emerge sooner than later. At first, it seems like the issue is purely financial. How can a couple resolve the nontraditional dynamic of a woman earning and possessing more money than a man? “She was so crazy about him that she let him take her out to dinner, but only to the places he could afford.” Miranda cares deeply for Steve and will not allow him to spend beyond his means. Later described as “yuppie guilt,” Miranda seems to harbor conflicting feelings about her class privilege. She wants to spend and live within his means, but she also wants the same for herself. She fails to acknowledge and accept what she truly feels, and this results in guilt. Miranda and her friends discuss the impact of class differences on her relationship:

MIRANDA: None of this matters to me. I just don’t want it to matter to him. It’s like when single men have a lot of money, it works to their advantage. But when a single woman has money, it’s like a problem, you have to deal with. It’s ridiculous. I wanna enjoy my success, not apologize for it.

SAMANTHA: Bravo, honey, bravo.

CHARLOTTE: But you’re talking about more than a difference in income. You’re talking about a difference in background and education. This guy is working class.

MIRANDA: Working class?

CARRIE: It’s the millennium sweetie. We don’t say things like “working class.”

CHARLOTTE: But you’re trying to pretend that we live in a classless society, and we don’t. (“Old Dogs, New Dicks,” episode 21)

In this instance, Charlotte is the voice of reason. Miranda wants to liberate herself from the discomfort she believes is the result of money mattering to Steve. In this instance, the problem has been misdiagnosed. Miranda has judged Steve negatively regarding his working-class background. In one scene, Miranda visits Steve’s apartment for the first time. She is visibly constricted in her reaction. She scans the apartment and sees his corduroy suit. What remains unsaid is that Miranda thinks his apartment is trash and his suit is inappropriate for her upcoming company dinner party. Miranda believes that as is, Steve is inadequate, prompting her to take him shopping for a new suit.

Miranda offers to pay, but Steve will not let her. While up to this point,
Miranda would not allow Steve to spend beyond his means, she has now decided that she “does not want to apologize for her success.” Steve’s credit card is denied, and he becomes upset with Miranda’s attempts to pay for the suit. However, he does take the suit home by charging some on credit, writing a check, and paying in cash. Steve would later return the suit, explaining that he could not afford it. He ends the relationship with Miranda on the evening they were to attend the party. Miranda believes that Steve has ended the relationship because she’s been punished for her success. When Miranda decided that Steve was not good enough and needed to be changed, it marked the beginning of the end.

Sex and the City tells us that Miranda and Steve’s class difference is the cause of their break up. This is not true. Their relationship is going well until Miranda fails to admit to herself that she is ashamed of Steve and exploits his economic status in order to avoid feeling guilty and to further uphold her social position. Miranda and Steve eventually will resume their friendship, have a child together, and get married. This, of course, occurs after Steve gains class mobility by becoming a business owner.

Conclusion

The Time cover story “Is Feminism Dead?” appeared the same month (June 1998) that Sex and the City premiered. Ann Cacoullos cited the appearance of this article in contemplating “whether feminism in its theoretical varieties has become too controversial for mainstream media in American society and culture" (81). Feminism and its theories take many forms. The presence of female subjects on television does not equate with the presence or vision of a liberatory feminism, which rejects racism and ethnocentrism; sexism and patriarchy; heterosexism and homophobia; and class exploitation. Sex and the City, with its mass-based popularity and appeal, projects powerful images to audiences. When we fail to critically read and reread media presentations, we run the risk of internalizing and reproducing our own oppression.

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