

From home to the workplace: *Mad Men* or the irresistible rise of women

Nicole Rudolph

Mad Men is often viewed as the ultimate sexist TV series. Through an analysis of the behavior of men and women at work and at home, Nicole Rudolph shows, to the contrary, that this series is instead more an illustration of the failure of men in both places. Is it ushering in the era of women in the contemporary city?

Spoiler alert! This article reveals key elements of all episodes broadcast to date.

Much has been made of the misogyny at the heart of the American melodrama *Mad Men*, which features the foibles and cocktails of 1960s-era urban advertising executives. The period costumes and period manners (men no longer stand when women enter the room) seem to create a critical distance from which we can tsk-tsk over the “bad old days” of rampant sexism, as well as pervasive homophobia, antisemitism and racism. Like the voyeuristic pleasure of watching women behaving badly in the British television series *Absolutely Fabulous*, a frisson of moral superiority runs through viewers as we watch men drink themselves senseless and pregnant women smoke like chimneys. “Weren’t we foolish back then?”, we muse.

Sexism then and now

Feminist journalists haven’t been fooled. Writing for the e-zine *Tout ça*, Sarah Lemarié (2010) suggests that the show reveals the tragedy of interiorized sexist gender roles and proposes that *Mad Men* is a reminder to women to be aware of the ways in which contemporary misogyny continues to affect women’s choices. Alyssa Rosenberg (2011) comments on Anglo-American television’s “new nostalgia for sexism”, citing *Mad Men*’s influence on imitators like *Pan Am*, *The Playboy Club* and *The Hour*, all of which integrate sexist power relationships into plots set in the 1950s and ’60s. Rosenberg observes that the distance between then and now is not so stark:

“What’s both depressing and powerfully nostalgic about these shows is not necessarily that sexism was so virulent – though that’s certainly upsetting – but that we failed to capitalize on the nascent momentum that all of these shows explore. Some of those failures, like the inability to pass the Equal Rights Amendment, are a testament to the persistence of sexism in American society.”

The relationship of past misogyny to present sexist practices is most clear in the revelation by Robin Veith, one of the series’ story editors, that much of the sexism that takes place in the Sterling Cooper offices has its roots in experiences the show’s female writers had in the 1980s and 1990s (Doyle 2010).

Matthew Weiner, the series’ creator, has insisted that *Mad Men* is feminist precisely because it doesn’t gloss over the painful and punishing aspects of 1960s-era sexism (Matlack 2009); in that sense, historian Stephanie Coontz (2010) applauds the series for offering “a much-needed lesson on

the devastating costs of a way of life that still evokes misplaced nostalgia”. Veith and her colleagues are, despite their experiences, successful Hollywood professionals, and without reducing the sexism inherent in *Mad Men* to inconvenient obstacles that plucky females can overcome – one wouldn’t want to dismiss Peter Campbell’s rape of his neighbor’s au pair, or Greg’s violation of his fiancée, for example – one might argue that it is the series’ male characters who suffer the most.

Weiner suggests as much when he speaks of the impulse behind the series’ creation: “[W]hat I really wanted to do was a story about someone who was like me – who was 35 years old and who had everything and was miserable” (Herman 2010). In fact, *Mad Men* highlights the poverty of the male experience. The sexism practiced and internalized by men results in diminished spheres of activity, a fact made more apparent by the comparison of their workspace and their domestic spaces.

The poverty of the male experience at work

The workplaces of Sterling Cooper (Seasons 1, 2 and 3), then of Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce (Seasons 3 and 4), reflects many workplaces today: while the central core of secretaries typing at desks has been replaced by cubicle-workers on their desktop computers, the private office with a door remains the symbol of workplace hierarchy. Men inhabit the majority of those offices (Peggy Olson becomes the exception at Sterling Cooper), but women are the gatekeepers; to penetrate into an executive’s inner sanctum, one must pass muster with the secretary. And if these secretaries acquiesce in office party games in which their skirts are literally chased, women are also presented as sexual agents in the workplace. Hildy, Peggy and Megan Calvet have all initiated sex in those private offices. Hildy and Megan have flings with married men, then reassure the adulterers the following morning – if only to protect their jobs – that “it didn’t mean anything”. If some, such as Draper’s emotional secretary, Allison, are fired afterward, others, like Jane Siegel and Megan, end up engaged to those they have seduced.

More pertinent is the fact that, even if they inhabit the private offices, men are just as disposable as women in the gendered workplace. For every fired secretary, there is an alcoholic copywriter (Freddy Rumsen) let go by the bosses, or a sexually harassed gay art director (Salvatore Romano) sacrificed to a major client. After an alcohol-induced temper tantrum, Duck Phillips is forced to leave the company just after he has been instrumental in arranging the agency’s merger with British firm Putnam, Powell and Lowe. Chief financial officer Lane Pryce defects to the new upstart firm only after his London bosses announce they are sending him to Bombay, confirming that he is a mere pawn in the PP&L hierarchy of decision-makers.

The move from Sterling Cooper headquarters to the Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce (SCDP) offices signifies an accrual of women’s power through the production and appropriation of workspace. First, the defection threatens to become a bust, since no one knows where anything is, least of all the agency’s leaders, Roger Sterling or Bert Cooper. They will be lost until Roger rings Joan, who, though not exactly a hero on the cavalry lines, nonetheless arrives to save the day much like Mary Poppins. Poised and smiling, she briskly locates the necessary records to effect the *coup d’état*. She becomes, nearly literally, the producer of space, arranging for temporary headquarters for the new agency at The Pierre hotel. She then proceeds to lay out the ground rules for how business will be conducted in the interim, announcing that no business meetings should be taken at the bar or in the hotel lobby.

For her contributions, she receives her own office at the permanent home of Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce. Significantly, her male replacement at Sterling Cooper, office manager John Hooker, is left in the lurch by Lane Pryce’s departure, never to be seen again. By Season 4, however, both Peggy and Joan have secured private offices, and Peggy has at least one man (Joey) working directly for her, whom she subsequently fires on the basis of his sexist behavior in the workplace. Women are moving on up at SCDP.

The poverty of the male experience at home

Meanwhile, what is happening in the domestic sphere? In keeping with 1960s norms, men are largely absent from the home, and nowhere is this more obvious than at the Drapers' residence. Though Betty, redecorating the family's suburban home, asks for her husband's aesthetic opinion in a nod to his professional expertise, he must be persuaded to take an interest, after which Betty ignores both his advice and her decorator's, ordering a gaudy antique chaise longue. Furthermore, much of the Season 3 dynamic hinges upon Betty's discovery, while doing the laundry, of the desk drawer key that unlocks Don's secret identity. Her responsibility for the domestic realm thus leads to his undoing. It is telling that in the final scene of Season 3, while Betty is flying to Nevada (to seek a quickie divorce) with her new baby and her boyfriend, her other children are left in the care of their housekeeper, Carla. Don remains in a hotel room. He has no real relationship to his home, which explains why it is not an option for him to move back in while Betty is gone for a few weeks. In fact, once Don moves into a new apartment in Manhattan, he quickly acquires a new housekeeper, Celia. Not only is Don incapable of maintaining even a bohemian bachelor pad, his weekend custody of his children seems to require that a woman create a home for them.

Other homes – even the urban ones – aren't markedly different. Trudy Campbell is queen of the Manhattan apartment she shares with account exec Pete, an apartment he flees during the Cuban Missile Crisis, preferring to await the nuclear apocalypse alone in his office, rifle in hand. Presaging the era of the second shift for working women, Joan prepares soup at home for her medical-resident husband, after a long day managing the office. Even the unmarried women are successful in the domestic realm: in Season 1, Helen Bishop, doubly critiqued by Betty's suburban coterie for being a divorcée and a working mother, saves the day by rushing over a frozen cake for young Sally's birthday party when Don (drunk again) fails to return from the bakery with the cake Betty had ordered. The series' quintessential career girl, Peggy, has also taken pains with her tiny apartment, earning her compliments on the decor from successful agent and talent manager Bobbie Barrett.

The eclipse of men

Disposable at the workplace, invisible in the homespace, men's recourse to sexism appears for what it is: an attempt to reinforce notions of self-worth through diminishing and demeaning competent women, attributing to them instead a host of gendered traits that reinforce notions of female inferiority. The series, by exposing the shallow goals and stunted emotional lives shared by the principal male characters while tracking the upward trajectories and increased agency of the key female leads, hints at what has been posited most recently by Hanna Rosin (2010) in her popular and controversial 2010 article for *The Atlantic*: "The End of Men". In her article, Rosin argues that a shift from manufacturing to the knowledge economy, coupled with young women's superior academic performance, points to a sea change in the respective statuses of men and women. American women have bypassed equality, Rosin suggests, and are becoming the dominant sex. Women compose 57% of all college students, are the primary holders of jobs in 13 of the 15 professional categories predicted to grow in the coming decades, and make up 51.4% of managers and professionals. Women are also more frequently choosing to postpone or refrain from marriage, whether or not they have children; 40% of mothers are the primary breadwinners for their families. Rosin adds that popular culture representations of men reflect their demise, with male lead characters painted as clueless clods, infantile omega boys rebelling against alpha supermoms.

Mad Men, while offering more nuanced and thoughtful characters than, say, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, foreshadows the eclipse of men. It is telling that, as Peggy pursues a career as a copywriter, she moves from her outer-borough home into the heart of it all, Manhattan, where she, like Don before her, goes to bars, parties with reefer-mad bohemians downtown, and conducts affairs in hotel rooms. The "Mad Women" are beginning to assert their right to the city, which will lead to their becoming 53.1% of the population of Manhattan by 2010. Today's Peggy Olsons – young, female

New Yorkers – earn 117% of what their male cohort makes (Roberts 2007). Perhaps this is another reason why 21st-century viewers aren't more offended by the sexism at Sterling Cooper: Draper and Co. seem to us to be so many American Neros, fiddling while macho Madison Avenue burns.

References

- Coontz, Stephanie. 2010. "Why *Mad Men* is TV's Most Feminist Show", *The Washington Post*, 10 October. URL: <http://www.stephaniecoontz.com/articles/article51.htm>.
- Doyle, Sady. 2010. "*Mad Men*'s Very Modern Sexism Problem", *The Atlantic*, 2 August. URL: <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2010/08/mad-mens-very-modern-sexism-problem/60788>.
- Herman, Karen. 2010. Interview with Matthew Weiner, *Archive of American Television*, 11 October and 12 November. URL: <http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/matthew-weiner>.
- Lemarié, Sarah. 2010. "*Mad Men* et la misogynie", *Tout ça*, 7 November. URL: <http://tout-ca.com/2010/11/07/mad-men-et-la-misogynie>.
- Matlack, Tom. 2009. "Is *Mad Men* a Feminist Show?", *The Huffington Post*, 13 July. URL: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tom-matlack/is-imad-meni-a-feminist-s_b_230097.html.
- Roberts, Sam. 2007. "Women Are Winners", *The New York Times* podcast, 20 July. URL: <http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/07/20/podcast-women-are-winners/#more-394>.
- Rosenberg, Alyssa. 2011. "TV's New Nostalgia for Sexism", *Salon*, 19 September. URL: http://www.salon.com/2011/09/19/back_to_the_sixties/singleton.
- Rosin, Hanna. 2010. "The End of Men", *The Atlantic*, July/August. URL: <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2010/07/the-end-of-men/8135/1>.

Nicole Rudolph is a historian and assistant professor of French at Adelphi University in New York. Her work focuses on French domestic architecture from 1945 to 1975; she is also a member of the editorial team of the journal *French Politics, Culture & Society*.

To cite this article:

Nicole Rudolph, "From home to the workplace: *Mad Men* or the irresistible rise of women", *Metropolitiques*, 14 March 2012. URL : <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/From-home-to-the-workplace-Mad-Men.html>.