

**The Loud Liberation:  
Family, Feminism and the First Reality Television Show**

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## Abstract:

Decades before the first tribe had spoken or the final rose was given, there was only one *Real Housewife* whose presence permeated American living rooms. My research examines the popular reactions to the 1973 PBS series *An American Family*, the first reality television show, as a lens to explore the prevailing attitudes of family and gender in 1973. The 1970s were a particularly tumultuous period in American politics and culture. Historical works on the period have focused primarily on the political conservatism which emerged in this decade. Thus, *An American Family* has most frequently been used to illustrate the pervasive fear of American decline viewed by many as the source of rising conservatism.

I challenge this particular interpretation of the significance of *An American Family*. Rather than focusing, as the majority of historians have, on the negative reactions to the show, I argue that responses to the show's main character, Pat Loud, were generally positive and reflected a growing acceptance of feminism and the possibility of alternative family structures. I analyze twenty-five reviews of *An American Family* taken from press outlets across the country. I draw upon Patricia Loud's 1974 autobiography which includes excerpts from fan letters. These responses to the show will be further supported by a variety of other works from that period dealing with issues related to the show. These issues include women, families, divorce, the role of fathers, homosexuality, and anxieties regarding the state of American society.

“I suppose what we accomplished was to sacrifice ourselves to the cause of calling the whole institution right onto the carpet. I’d never questioned the idea of family in my life, but now I know it *is* a dusty old concept; it needs to stand up and defend itself. To prove it’s worth. That’s what we did. We opened the doors in a lot of houses and blew out a lot of dust and I’ll bet we started a thousand arguments of the kind Bill and I never had. If families are going to make it, that’s how. Not with secrets, or little slots to fit into, or a lot of propaganda from parents.”

-Patricia Loud, 1974

The 1970s was long the forgotten middle child between two storied decades. The 1960s conjures up an abundance of images and associations. It was the decade of progressive idealism, civil rights mobilization, protests, and assassinations. The Democratic Party’s New Deal coalition, led by Lyndon Johnson appeared stronger than ever, so much so that one pundit remarked that President Johnson was “getting everything through Congress but the abolition of the Republican Party, and he hasn’t tried yet.”<sup>1</sup> Yet by 1980 radical transformations in the political landscape brought Ronald Reagan and the so-called, “New Right” to power. The conservative Eighties were in many respects the antithesis of the liberal Sixties. What happened in between? The “eminently forgettable” Seventies are frequently dismissed as a wasteland of bad hair, clothes, and music.<sup>2</sup> However, as recent scholarship has shown, it is in fact difficult to overstate the significance of the decade. Politically, the Seventies was the battleground from which our present political alignments emerged. Culturally, the early 1970s brought a media revolution which not only became the basis of contemporary popular culture, but created new

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<sup>1</sup> Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America*. (New York: Scribner, 2008), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society and Politics*, (De Capo Press, 2001), xi.

spaces in which the politics of everyday life could be explored. One of the most remarkable moments in which these developments intertwined was the first reality television show, *An American Family*.<sup>3</sup>

*An American Family* aired on PBS from January to March of 1973. The series followed the daily lives of the Loud family of Santa Barbara, California over the course of seven months in 1971. The white, upper-middle class Louds; Bill and Patricia, and their five children, Lance, Kevin, Grant, Delilah and Michelle, appeared at first glance to be the embodiment of the American Dream. Yet despite their “toothpaste-white affluence,” the Louds soon found themselves embroiled in a private nightmare as Bill and Pat’s fragile marriage finally collapsed with the camera rolling.<sup>4</sup> The shock of their on camera divorce was compounded by the even more startling revelation that their eldest son Lance was gay. The public disintegration of the Loud family called into question the viability of the idyllic nuclear family. Mass media and white middle-class responses to this challenge can generally be divided into two categories. The first greeted the Louds, Pat especially, as a relatable representation of American families of the time.<sup>5</sup> The second vehemently rejected this notion and jumped to position the Louds as outliers and narcissists, representative of nothing. The ensuing media discussion by those who viewed the Louds as typical, as well as those who dismissed them as exceptional, reflects the transitional nature of early 1970s, during which the previously radical values of the feminist movement gained mainstream acceptance.

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<sup>33</sup>Reality television, defined here, refers to unscripted programming which purports to display the authentic reactions of individuals to unforeseen circumstances. The recent boom in prime time reality programming is often traced to the premiere of CBS’s *Survivor* in 2000. However the earliest post-*An American Family* reality show was MTV’s *The Real World*, which premiered in 1992. According to the show’s producers, *The Real World* was directly inspired by *An American Family*.

<sup>4</sup> John J. O’Connor, “An American Family Is A Provocative Series,” *New York Times*, January 23, 1973.

<sup>5</sup> More correctly, the Louds were a representation of a white, upper-middle class family, a socially constructed ideal that did not in fact represent the average American family.

## The Traditional Family and the Evolution of the Feminist Movement

To comprehend the response to *An American Family* requires an understanding of what “the family” had come to symbolize. The popular conception of the “traditional” American nuclear family is in reality a very recent construction. This notion of the happy suburban housewife did not emerge until the end of World War II. Historian Elaine Tyler May argues that the idyllic image of the 1950s nuclear family was a product of the anxieties at the onset of the Cold War. According to May, “the home represented a source of meaning and security in a world run amok.”<sup>6</sup> Whatever progress had been made by Rosie the Riveter during the war, the “emergency situation” of communism sent women back into the home and encouraged men to reclaim their familiar roles as breadwinners. Within this context, anybody who did not follow the social prescription of early marriage and children was considered unpatriotic, deviant, and even mentally unstable.<sup>7</sup>

The feminist response to this suburban housewife ideal began with the publication of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminist Mystique* in 1963, which confronted “the problem that has no name,” the growing sense that this ideal was in fact unattainable.<sup>8</sup> The book became an instant bestseller, sparking a national conversation that would lead to the formation of the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966. NOW, led by Freidan, was the first and largest women’s rights organization. The organization’s statement of purpose expressed its goal of bringing women into “full participation in the mainstream of American society now, exercising

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<sup>6</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 26.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminist Mystique*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1963).

all privileges and responsibilities in equal partnership with men.”<sup>9</sup> NOW became increasingly powerful and eventually succeeded in getting Congress to pass the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), a constitutional protection against discrimination based on sex, which had previously been rejected by Congress on numerous occasions over the fifty years.

The early 1970s saw the high point of the movement’s power. By the end of 1973, thirty of the necessary thirty-eight states had approved the amendment. Ratification appeared inevitable. Still, despite the enthusiasm of its supporters, many others remained unconvinced. For many conservatives, the resurgence of the feminist movement represented a threat to the institution upon which social stability relied: the family. Permitting women to behave however they wished jeopardized the old social order. The anxiety this produced provoked a backlash against the Equal Rights Amendment in the second half of the decade. Led by the outspoken anti-feminist leader Phyllis Schlafly, who feared losing the privileges of ‘fairer sex’, the opposition grew, and by 1982 the once unstoppable amendment, was officially defeated.<sup>10</sup>

Although the ERA eventually failed, the late-modern feminist movement succeeded in bringing women into the mainstream of American society. The extremely rigid societal expectations of 1950s and early ‘60s loosened. Women joined the workforce and sought professional degrees in increasing numbers. Birth control became more readily available, and more and more couples chose to delay having children. When they did, they tended to have fewer children, a far cry from the “baby boom” of the 1950s. Even divorce, which in 1963 was

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<sup>9</sup> National Organization of Women, *Statement of Purpose*, 1966.

<sup>10</sup> Schlafly argued that sexual equality violated the God-given authority of men over women. As the fairer sex, women deserved certain privileges such as economic support from men, and protection from military service. From her perspective, the ERA would absolve men from their duties as breadwinners, force women into the military draft and legalize homosexual relationships.

almost unheard of, became an accepted part of life by the end of the 1970s. The Louds' divorce occurred amidst this dynamic period of cultural transition.

### **Historical Interpretations of *An American Family* and the 1970s**

*An American Family*, although frequently cited as a media phenomenon, has not been the subject of substantial historical examination. Only one book, *An American Family: A Televised Life* by Jeffery Ruoff has focused exclusively on the program.<sup>11</sup> Ruoff provides a detailed account of the show from its conception to its legacy. Ruoff highlights the vast differences between the producers initial proposal, which suggested that the show would touch upon a variety of political hot-topics, such as Vietnam, and the actual product's extremely narrow focus on the family's internal struggles. This difference is telling, for this proposal was used to secure funding from the Ford Foundation, which provided money for high-quality educational programming. It is unknown whether a narrower proposal would have qualified for this grant. Without this funding, *An American Family* could not have been made. As Ruoff points out, the show "would never have been produced by the commercial networks," which had scaled back documentary production in the competition for ratings.<sup>12</sup>

Ruoff's work, which draws heavily upon internal company documents, is particularly valuable for understanding the processes through which *An American Family* was conceptualized, filmed, and advertised. He argues that the response to the show was heavily influenced by the press packet and advertising campaign released by PBS affiliate WNET, which emphasized the emotional devastation of the show's content. This sense of catastrophe, according to Ruoff, caused reviewers to project "their fears about contemporary America onto

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<sup>11</sup> Jeffrey Ruoff, *An American Family: A Televised Life*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

the Louds.”<sup>13</sup> His book has been a crucial source for nearly every other historical work on the show. As a result, historical scholarship about *An American Family* has focused on placing the program within the context of the perceived “crisis” in the American nuclear family.

Historians have frequently accepted *An American Family* as a reflection of American society at the time. In the words of film historian Edward Miller, “Pat Loud’s request for a divorce from her philandering husband was part of a real trend in the country.”<sup>14</sup> Miller argues that the negative response to *An American Family* reflected a refusal of critics to acknowledge the validity of the show, “Many viewers and critics forgot to mention that they were looking at a version of themselves. In denial, many decided that the family was at fault, not the culture. Such a family could not represent America.”<sup>15</sup> Such a view is extremely narrow in its focus, for it concentrates almost entirely on the personal insults some reviewers tossed at the family’s individual members.

While Miller views the press reaction to the show as a symbol of American refusal to address a very real situation, Historian Matthew Lassiter argues that the press accepted the Louds as a symptom of the perceived crisis in the nuclear family. According to Lassiter, “An American Family elicited an avalanche of commentary that emphasized the exposed pathologies of suburban family life, especially the repercussions of no-fault divorce for the children caught in the middle.”<sup>16</sup> *An American Family* served as a warning about where American society was headed if nothing was done to curb the rising divorce rate. Although the “family values” sector

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, xviii.

<sup>14</sup> Edward D. Miller, *Tomboys, Pretty Boys and Outspoken Women: The Media Revolution of 1973*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 153.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 146.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew D. Lassiter “Inventing Family Values” in *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970*, ed. Bruce Schulman and Julian Zelizer, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 18.



of the “New Right” had not yet risen to its eventual position of power, it was events, such as *An American Family* which mobilized conservatives.

*An American Family* cannot be examined without an understanding of the context in which it occurred. The 1970s have only recently come of age in historical scholarship. Recent works have positioned the decade as a particularly significant period of transition out of which contemporary politics were born. The radical movements of the 1960s produced societal ruptures that began to heal in the 1970s, but even as racial and gender equality made its way into the mainstream of American society, the wounds of the previous decade continued to fester. As a result, the most common theme found in scholarship on the ‘70s is fragmentation, both social and political. This can be seen even in a cursory glance at the titles of the body of literature on the period which include “1973: Nervous Breakdown” and “Decade of Nightmares.” Political historians consistently argue that 1970s America was dominated by fears of American decline. This anxiety produced the divisions that destroyed the political consensus of the New Deal coalition and mobilized a new conservative movement. However the notion of the seventies as a period of rising conservatism has been challenged by cultural historians who frequently view the seventies as the crucial cultural period in which the radical sixties were mainstreamed, allowing women and minorities to gain power, albeit in a commercialized fashion, through popular culture.

The most obvious debate which emerges in the histories of the early 1970s is simply over what year the ‘Seventies’ actually began. Scholars agree that 1970 itself is an inadequate turning point. Historians tend to fall into two camps. The first assumes that the Seventies, as we think of them, began in earnest in 1968 with the election of Richard Nixon as President of the United States. The second believes that the Sixties continued into the early 1970s, not ending until 1973

or 1974. Rather than focusing of the rise of Nixon and the “silent majority,” this group examines the rise of the “New Right” which swept Ronald Reagan into the oval office in 1980.<sup>17</sup>

The works of Bruce Schulman and Rick Perlstein are representative of the first of these camps. Perlstein, a popular historian views American society between 1968 and 1972 as a battleground, “where two separate and irreconcilable sets of apocalyptic fears coexist in the minds of two separate and irreconcilable groups.”<sup>18</sup> Urban rioting, the ongoing conflict in Vietnam, and the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy created a divisive atmosphere that proved too turbulent for the New Deal coalition to survive. Americans increasingly believed that America had become “a sick society,” of broken homes and violent neighborhoods.<sup>19</sup> Schulman takes a similar approach to the period, highlighting examples of the “smashed remains of the old consensus” such as the disruption of the 1968 Democratic National Convention and the increasing disenchantment of America’s youth.<sup>20</sup>

The second camp is represented by Phillip Jenkins who argues that political transformations that culminated in the election of Reagan began in the social movements of 1977. In doing so, Jenkins deemphasizes the role of the civil rights movement in provoking a conservative response. Rather, Jenkins attributes the rising conservatism in the 1970s to the adoption of a more pessimistic interpretation of human behavior and a preference for a “strict moralistic division: problems were a matter of evil, not dysfunction.” Unlike Schulman and Perlstein, Jenkins questions “the wisdom of thinking about history in terms of party politics and

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<sup>17</sup> The term ‘silent majority’ was used by Nixon to represent the majority of Americans who did not participate in the demonstrations and protests of the 1960s. Nixon saw these more conservative citizens, who did not publically announce their political opinions, as being overshadowed in the media by a vocal minority.

<sup>18</sup> Perlstein, 47.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 305.

<sup>20</sup> Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society and Politics*, (Boston: De Capo Press, 2001).

presidential terms.”<sup>21</sup> It was an overall change in the attitude of the American people, not simply political leaders, which produced a dramatically more conservative majority.

In contrast, cultural historians view the early 1970s as a period of progressive cultural breakthroughs. In the words of Miller, “The 70s was conservative only if one ignores the realm of popular culture and views protest as the only way in which change occurs.”<sup>22</sup> Miller cites an increase in the appearances of professional women, gay, and minority characters on television shows, “cultural changes in the early ‘70s allotted time for Americans who until that time had been virtually invisible in the media.”<sup>23</sup> This included Lance Loud, the first openly gay person on television. Similarly, Andreas Killen argues that although the politics of the sixties faded, the cultural revolution, “the revolution in music, film, sensibilities and lifestyles,” continued to thrive.<sup>24</sup> The looks and music that had seemed radical in the previous decades became mainstreamed in the ‘70s.

### **Approach and Methodology**

This project builds upon this cultural perspective. By exploring the more positive responses to *An American Family*, I depart from the existing scholarship which has placed the program within the context of rising conservatism. In fact, my analysis of the outlets which covered the series reveals that the show provoked outcry on the part of the Left and little response from the Right. For our purposes it does not matter precisely when the Seventies

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<sup>21</sup> Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 23.

<sup>22</sup> Miller, 9.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 10.

<sup>24</sup> Andreas Killen, *1973 Nervous Breakdown: Watergate, Warhol, and the Birth of post-1960s America*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2006).

began, except to say that *An American Family* was indeed an important moment within this transformational decade and perhaps more importantly during a high point in the late modern feminist movement. Although this paper favors the perspectives of Miller and Killen, it is impossible to discuss women in the early 1970s without addressing the anxieties and political divisions which Schulman and others have quite rightly identified. These concerns will serve as the backdrop for the cultural phenomenon that was *An American Family*.

To say that this project builds from the broader cultural view of the '70s is not to say that I agree with the specific arguments made by these historians in regards to *An American Family*. As we will see, the majority of reviewers did not deny the relevance of the Loud family as Miller suggests. Further, although the argument that the show exposed a sense of dysfunction experienced in households across the country is a compelling one, historians have overemphasized the role of the Louds as canaries in the coal mine of the nuclear family. Indeed, the Louds became lightning rods in the discussion of the perceived crisis in American family life. However, their power arose, not from their exceptional qualities so much as their perceived typicality. The Louds were in fact an expression of a widespread problem which had been plaguing the country for several years.

This paper is comprised of three parts, beginning with an examination of the motives behind the show, and the widespread concerns regarding the state of marriage which may have provoked them. This is followed by an analysis of how the media responded to the Louds, both in terms of their perceived authenticity, and their role as symbols of the crisis in the nuclear family. These responses have been selected from a survey of national media discussions, the majority of which emerged from the nation's two cultural capitals: New York and Los Angeles. As a result, the findings of this project primarily reflect an educated white-middle class

perspective. Finally, I analyze the specific response to the series' central character, Pat Loud. This paper shows that, despite the claims of both the Louds and the historians who have written about them, the press generally responded to Pat with sympathy rather than malice. These reactions are extremely telling, for the issues presented in *An American Family*, most significantly divorce, were not even in the realm of possibilities only a decade beforehand. In this way *An American Family* was very much a product of the feminist movement. The response to the show was therefore not only a breakthrough in the new medium of reality television, but more importantly a product the broader social changes of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

### **35 Wooddale Lane: Marriage in Crisis**

This so called "real life-soap opera," was the first of its kind. The show was the brainchild of producer Craig Gilbert, who believed that observational cinema, or *cinéma vérité*, had the capacity to reveal universal truths about relationships in the 1970s.<sup>25</sup> Gilbert believed that the ideal American nuclear family structure - a male breadwinner and a stay-at-home mother- was becoming obsolete. He wished to capture such a family on film before the institution became extinct.<sup>26</sup> Many contemporaries suggested that Gilbert's pessimism about the state of the nuclear family was the result of his own recent divorce. Although there was no way for Gilbert to know that the Louds were on the brink of collapse before filming began, there is evidence that Gilbert had contacted family counselors in the area, perhaps looking for a family already in crisis.

Whether or not Gilbert was searching for a family in crisis, the Louds maintained that they had no idea they were headed for a televised divorce. Bill Loud imagined they would come

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<sup>25</sup> Smith, Cecil. "Finding –and Filming – *An American Family*." *Los Angeles Times*, Jan 11, 1973. H1

<sup>26</sup> Ruoff, 13.

off as the “west-coast Kennedy’s,” while Pat Loud envisioned the show as the opportunity to appear as the family she had always wanted to be.<sup>27</sup> She saw the show as her chance to bring her family together, proving their indestructability to all of Bill’s mistresses, “There we’d be...a portrait of family solidarity, all interwoven by blood and love and time and mutual need and a thousand other ties those poor things couldn’t even comprehend.”<sup>28</sup> By all appearances, Bill and Pat were committed to making a positive impression: to embody the American dream. It was in fact these motivations which made the failure of their marriage so poignant to many viewers.

*American Family* opens with its conclusion as the voice of Gilbert states “This New Year’s will be unlike any other that has been celebrated here at 35 Wooddale Lane. For the first time, the family will not be spending it together. Pat Loud and her husband Bill, separated four months ago after twenty years of marriage.”<sup>29</sup> The rest of the show is a flashback to this ending. The teleological structure of the show suggests that the Louds’ marriage was doomed to failure from the start. As a result, viewers were encouraged to analyze every action each of the Louds take as signs of what is to come.<sup>30</sup> Jeffrey Ruoff remarks that the “hierarchy of knowledge” created by this structure, may account for the “apparent smugness” of several of the show’s reviewers.<sup>31</sup>

Bill and Pat’s divorce was hardly unusual for their time. In 1970 new divorce laws which enabled no-fault divorces in California resulted in a 40% increase in the number of divorces from the previous year.<sup>32</sup> Nationwide, between 1965 and 1975 the number of divorces each year

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>28</sup> Pat Loud and Nora Johnson *Pat Loud: A Woman’s Story*. (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan.1974), 91.

<sup>29</sup> Alan Raymond, Susan Raymond, and Craig Gilbert. *An American family*, (New York: PBS Distribution, 1973).

<sup>30</sup> Ruoff, 67.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> California was the first state in the union to replace “at-fault” divorces in which one party must be declared culpable for the divorce, with “no-fault” divorces in which neither individual must be assigned blame. Since no-fault divorce statutes did not require proof of wrongdoing by either party, dissolutions became substantially easier to attain.

doubled. Newspapers were littered with articles announcing and analyzing these sorts of statistics. A sense of crisis permeated these reports as experts warned, “We are raising a generation of children from broken homes – and creating a social time bomb.”<sup>33</sup> Each week an estimated ten million viewers tuned in to watch the Loud family, who personified these unnerving trends.

So frequent were reports on rising divorce trends, people began writing in to report what they saw as an increasingly rare phenomenon: the successful marriage. In response to Newsweek’s feature “The Broken Family” which featured the Louds as the “divorce of the year,” one woman wrote, “How about a few words on a so-called non-news-related subject, the marriage that is making it? ...On second thought, with current statistics, that’s probably even more newsworthy.”<sup>34</sup> Even in 1971, while *An American Family* was still being filmed, there were efforts to counteract the rash of reports that marriage was falling out of style. In June the *New York Times* ran a feature titled “The Happy Marriage: Alive and Well in ’71” which reported that “the institution of marriage is clearly under attack, especially by the young.”<sup>35</sup> The article presented three couples whose wedded bliss contradicted well circulated claims of other writers who argued, among other things, that the result of the American nuclear family system was to make its participants “neurosis-riddled, limited, uncreative” and “inwardly cut off from feelings of self.”<sup>36</sup> This was only the beginning of a debate which would become more heated as liberalized divorce laws spread across the country over the next several years.

*An American Family*’s most direct confrontation with the idealized depictions of family seen in television shows of the time such as *The Brady Bunch* (1969-1974) and *The Partridge*

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<sup>33</sup> Paul Friggens, “If You Spoil the Marriage, Spare the Child,” *Readers Digest*, (June, 1975) 155-158.

<sup>34</sup> Bernice Klein, “Letters to the Editor,” *Newsweek*, (April 9, 1973) 6.

<sup>35</sup> Judy Klemesrud, “The Happy Marriage: Alive and Well in ’71,” *New York Times*, June 1, 1971.

<sup>36</sup> Anne Richardson Roiphe, “On the Nuclear Family and Women’s Liberation,” *New York Times*, August 15, 1971.

*Family* (1970-74), occurs in its title sequence. A cheery jingle plays as each of the family members is introduced individually with images of each member taking part in their various activities. Each person's picture is relegated to a separate box. Once everybody has been introduced the action freezes and the title *An American Family*, is superimposed. Finally the title letters shatter like broken glass, referencing the family's split.<sup>37</sup> Until the title fractures, the sequence bears a striking resemblance to the campy, cheerful introductions of the Bradys and the Partridges. The shattered letters announce that this "real-life" family shares little in common with these fictional portraits of domestic tranquility.

### **Family Realities?**

The show's challenge to these portraits provoked a widespread debate about the validity of Gilbert's creation. One the central points of contention among those who reviewed *An American Family* was whether the Louds were in fact "real." Did the show depict the authentic Louds, or were the Louds, as one reviewer put it "playing *An American Family*"? The Louds themselves openly objected to their portrayal, "If they had five happy shots and five sad or tragic or bizarre shots, they picked four negative shots for every one of the other." Bill told Steven Roberts of the *New York Times*.<sup>38</sup> To some reviewers, the show was a landmark, an unprecedented achievement in honest storytelling. To others however, it was a mockery of the documentary genre, a pretend reality which revealed far more about Gilbert's dark perspective on American society than it did the actual lives of the Loud family.

Those who rejected the authenticity of the Louds, most notably the liberal east-coast writers of *The Nation*, the *Village Voice*, the *New Republic*, resented what they saw as blatant

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<sup>37</sup> *An American Family*.

<sup>38</sup> Steven Roberts, "An American Family Sees Itself on TV," *New York Times*, January 23, 1973.



agenda pushing by the show's producers. To these writers, Gilbert was a fear monger, using an artificial representation of the family and calling it "real" to prove that the institution was on its way out. Perhaps the most negative review of this variety appeared in *The Nation* which criticized WNET for exploiting the Louds for controversy's sake: "*An American Family* was a bad idea. It is not art, because art does not use people but rather celebrates them."<sup>39</sup> Through the show the Louds had ceased to be "a human family." They had traded their real lives for a commercial "video reality."<sup>40</sup> Frederick Morton of the *Village Voice* expressed a similar concern as he wondered what kinds of adjustments were necessary for successful filming, "Did Mrs. Loud have a make-up assistant for her quite presentable pre-coffee eyes? Certainly sound booms or body mikes had to be adjusted before the director said 'Okay. Action. Be the Louds.'"<sup>41</sup> Gilbert and company had created an alternate reality and presented it as a typical American experience. To these reviewers, this contradiction was patronizing and downright infuriating.

Along similar lines, Abigail McCarthy of *The Atlantic Monthly* argued that there were three different versions of the Louds. The first and most revealing version was the Louds seen in interviews with the show's producers. The second and most charming version was the Louds experienced by talk show hosts and WNET personnel. Finally, the most unnatural version was the Louds as they appeared on *An American Family*. These Louds were "living clichés" who seemed to embody "the trite generalizations about the American family grown familiar by repetition in popular psychology and sociology."<sup>42</sup> Yet as individuals, rather than a family unit, McCarthy found the Louds seen on *An American Family*, unexpectedly compelling and real. It

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<sup>39</sup> Michael Harrington, "Spy Drama," *The Nation*, (March 5, 1973) 293.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Frederick Morton, "A Hearth in Medialand," *The Village Voice*, February 8, 1973, 17.

<sup>42</sup> Abigail McCarthy, "An American Family and the Family of Man," *The Atlantic*, (July, 1973), 72-76.

was Gilbert and WNET who had assembled the very real moments and emotions of the Loud family into a hackneyed depiction of family life.

Writing for *The New Republic* in November of 1974, Roger Rosenblatt agreed with the suggestion that the Louds had become the commercialized people *The Nation* had chastised. However he did not believe that this was the product of Gilbert's agenda, arguing that it was not the series but the Louds themselves who had produced an "artificial dramatization." The Louds had "created and managed an imitation of life passing for the real thing... The Louds were born a TV program waiting to be discovered. They had always thought of themselves as a family show."<sup>43</sup> This was not to say that all aspects of the show were contrived. Rosenblatt noted that "Never was there greater realism on television except in the murders of Oswald and Robert Kennedy" than the moment Pat informed Bill that she wanted a divorce. However, the power of that real moment was sabotaged by the commercial masks they had so carefully constructed. To Rosenblatt, because the Louds treated every event, from their divorce to their daughter's dance recital, with the same sense of melodrama, the very real divorce seemed staged.

Despite such voices of dismay, many reviewers simply accepted the Louds as genuine without comment. That prevailing attitude may be explained by the dominance of the earliest review of the series by eminent anthropologist Margaret Mead. In her review of the show for *TV Guide*, Mead famously called *An American Family* "a new kind of art form...as significant as the invention of the drama or the novel."<sup>44</sup> To Mead, the show was a historic accomplishment, for it was able to tell a captivating story, made all the more compelling because it was real. In doing so it achieved a level of profundity which was previously limited to mere glimpses in televised moments such as the moon landing and the Kennedy funeral procession. Bill, Pat and the

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<sup>43</sup>Roger Rosenblatt, "Residuals on 'An American Family,'" *The New Republic*, (November 23, 1974) 20-24.

<sup>44</sup> Margaret Mead, "As Significant and the Invention of the Drama or the Novel." *TV Guide* (January 6, 1973).

children were “neither actors nor public figures” but “members of a real family,” who allowed viewers to intimately experience their lives.<sup>45</sup>

Although no other reviewers were as explicit in their adoration for the medium of cinema verite as Mead, most followed her example in accepting the authenticity of the family and the show. A subtitle of a review in *Vogue*, for instance, read “Pat Loud and her family may prove that fact makes the best soap opera.”<sup>46</sup> Others called it, “a television landmark”<sup>47</sup> and “one of the most extraordinary documentaries on American television.”<sup>48</sup> There was no question in these articles that what was being portrayed was ‘fact.’ It was not uncommon for the authors of such reviews to cite Mead’s commentary. Television, which had brought the grisly details of Vietnam and Watergate into American living rooms, now presented the truth about the American family. It is also possible that this acceptance can be explained by the newness of the form. Since *An American Family* was the first of the category we now refer to as “reality television” viewers were not conditioned (as many are today) to be skeptical of the ‘reality’ of the genre.

It should be noted however that those who accepted the Louds as genuine did not necessarily like them. Several writers made it clear that ‘authentic’ was not a synonym for ‘sympathetic,’ or even, ‘interesting.’ The *San Francisco Chronicle* commented “Actually there is nothing at all WRONG with these people mind you, but nothing is really right about them either. They simply aren’t very interesting.”<sup>49</sup> More biting was Shana Alexander’s oft-quoted Newsweek review which referred to *An American Family* as “a glimpse onto the pit” and the Louds themselves as “affluent zombies.”<sup>50</sup> Reviews of this variety came off the harshest of all.

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Erica Brown, “An American Family; Alive on the Screen,” *Vogue*, (January 1973), 68.

<sup>47</sup> Cecil Smith, “Finding and Filming an American Family,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 11, 1973.

<sup>48</sup> Gail Rock, “All in the Real Family” *Ms.* (February, 1973), 22-23.

<sup>49</sup> “Delilah Dances,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 12, 1973.

<sup>50</sup> Shana. Alexander, “The Silence of the Louds.” *Newsweek*. (January 22, 1973), 28.

The writers who recognized the version of the Louds Gilbert presented as reality, most often launched personal attacks on the family members as individuals.

In the end however, fact and fiction are both capable of reflecting reality. Perhaps the most significant point of debate surrounding *An American Family* was not over the authenticity of the Louds, but rather whether or not the Louds were accurate representations of real American families at the time. It was this debate which provides the best lens into the prevailing attitudes about the state of American families. Historians have focused on the extremely negative criticism the Louds received. The most obvious example of this can be found in Anne Roiphe's oft-quoted nine-page review of the series for the *New York Times Magazine*. Roiphe's review is notable, both for its length and its biting commentary, which referred to the eldest son, Lance, as "the evil flower," whose "flamboyant, leechlike, homosexuality" plagued his family's daily lives.<sup>51</sup> Intensely negative statements such as this have often been interpreted as a rejection of the Louds a reflection of American society. Yet a closer examination reveals that despite the personal insults flung by many critics, the family was generally accepted, for better or worse, as a fair representation of American families.

Roiphe's work is indeed crucial to understanding the response to *An American Family*. Much has been made of Roiphe's blatant homophobia in her treatment of Lance. However the rest of her article reveals that Roiphe identified with Pat and Bill Loud every bit as much as she despised their eldest son. Speaking of her experience watching the family she said, "The Louds are enough like me and mine to create havoc in my head and I had to fight a strong desire to push away those Louds, dismiss them as unique, empty, shallow, unlike others, and yet on serious

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<sup>51</sup> Roiphe, Anne. "An American Family: Things Are Keen But They Could Be Keener." *New York Times Magazine*, February, 18, 1973.

reflection we can all learn from them...”<sup>52</sup> While by no means an endorsement of the family’s behavior, this statement flies in the face of arguments made by historians such as Miller, which suggest that the Louds were targeted by unenlightened critics who refused to acknowledge their relevance. Regardless of their tacit support for their homosexual son, Roiphe experienced the Loud family as relatable and sympathetic characters, navigating problems all too familiar to many Americans.

In a series of articles, John O’Connor of the *New York Times* attacked those who focused on the exceptional, sensational aspects of the program in a manner which “obscures the fact that the Louds are fairly ordinary inhabitants of the crowded American arena known as white middle-class affluence.”<sup>53</sup> Although the affluent and attractive Louds could not be considered “average,” O’Connor found them to be “comfortably ordinary...with innumerable variations the Louds are all around us.”<sup>54</sup> There was nothing so special about the Louds as individuals except that they were the ones being filmed. Families all over the country were falling apart over the same problems; the only difference was they suffered in private. When media outlets focused on the unique attributes of the Louds such as Lance’s homosexuality or Pat’s clothing, they ignored the very serious questions O’Connor believed the show raised.

Another frequently cited review of the show was that of Shana Alexander. Like Roiphe, Alexander’s article has been used to demonstrate the public’s extremely negative response to the program<sup>55</sup>. Indeed her reference to the Louds as ‘zombies’ was far from flattering. Yet Alexander’s article, much like Roiphe’s, expresses a belief that the crisis within the Loud family

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<sup>52</sup> Roiphe, “Things Are Keen...”

<sup>53</sup> John O’Connor, “Mr. & Mrs. Loud, Meet the Bradys,” *The New York Times*, March 4, 1973.

<sup>54</sup> John O’Connor, “‘An American Family’ Is A Provocative Series,” *The New York Times*, January 23, 1973.

<sup>55</sup> Alexander and Roiphe were both outspoken feminist writers. With this in mind it is puzzling that historians have focused so intently on their negative comments about the show.

was a crisis experienced by many people who sought to maintain “their candy-bar ideal of ‘family.’”<sup>56</sup> Alexander questioned why Americans continued to sacrifice for this ideal as it became increasingly clear that they were fighting for an impossible goal. The inability of the Louds to understand each other, which Alexander termed “the silence of the Louds,” characterized the inability of Americans to critically examine their own lives. The Louds, in Alexander’s mind, may have been unappealing as individuals but their struggle brought up extremely pertinent questions, “And so the silence of the Louds is also a scream, a scream that people matter, that they matter and we matter. I think it is a scream whose echoes will shake up all America.”<sup>57</sup> The breakdown of the Loud family called attention to the dysfunctions many preferred to ignore.

Alexander was not alone in her concern about how Americans communicated with one another. A review in *Newsweek* declared “...what poignantly emerges from “*An American Family*” is the peculiarly American trait of avoiding unpleasantness at all costs.”<sup>58</sup> Indeed one of the most striking characteristics of the Loud family was their reluctance to engage in serious conversations with one another. When their house nearly burned down in a wildfire with their daughter at home alone, Bill and Pat appeared unfazed. When Pat asked Bill to move out, his response was “Fair deal, I won’t have to unpack my bags.”<sup>59</sup> This silence was referred to as “shattering” in Stephanie Harrington’s review in the *New York Times*, which focused on the Louds’ “crucial failures to reach out to each other across the empty spaces.”<sup>60</sup> One again this problem was not considered unique to the Louds as Harrington remarked, “A desperation about

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<sup>56</sup> Alexander.

<sup>57</sup> Alexander.

<sup>58</sup> “An American Family,” *Newsweek*, (January 15, 1973), 68.

<sup>59</sup> An American Family, episode 9.

<sup>60</sup> Stephanie Harrington, “An American Family Lives Its Life on TV,” *New York Times*, January 7, 1973.

our inability to “communicate” has obsessed Americans for the last several years.”<sup>61</sup> Failure of communication was seen by these reviewers not only as the core of the Loud family’s problems, but also as an epidemic plaguing families across the nation.

Others rejected the notion that the Louds represented anyone outside themselves for two major reasons. First, it was thought that no normal person would consent to being followed around by cameras. Second, the Louds’ affluence isolated them from the rest of America. The most notable commentary on the first point came from *The Nation* and *Time Magazine*. In the words of Michael Harrington, “But the fact is that *An American Family* has cast a gloom over a nation that is already sufficiently depressed... We might have been spared the depression attendant upon having the Louds held up to us as a mirror... by saying that in this case, for once, the mirror is false.”<sup>62</sup> Harrington directly confronted Roiphe’s acceptance of the Louds, arguing that one of the most central tenets of the American value system was that family life was private. The simple fact that the Louds were “apparently eager” to give Gilbert permission to film their family life “suggests that the Louds’ ‘ways of interacting’ may in fact apply to very few of us.”

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Experts interviewed by *Time* debated whether or not a normal American family would allow cameras into the home. Psychologists at MIT and UCLA argued that American culture had shifted over the previous decade toward promoting a cultural “compulsion to confess.”<sup>64</sup> The movements of the 1960s which focused on breaking down institution driven conformity had loosened the standards of privacy. In this context, Dr. Thomas Cottle of MIT argued that “there are a lot of American families who would let this happen.” However this argument was rejected

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Michael Harrington.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> “Sample of One,” *Time*, (February 26, 1973), 51-52.

by other academics such as famed sociologist Herbert Gans who argued that the show was a “single family portrait,” nothing more, and Rutgers sociologist Irving Louis Horowitz who claimed that “any family that opens itself up, as the Louds did, has a tendency toward exhibitionism and is already on its way to becoming a “non-family.”<sup>65</sup>

The rhetoric of these articles suggests rather rigid standards about what family life should be. The ambiguous term “non-family” especially calls into question what it meant to be a family in the first place. Here one can clearly see the push back against the changing attitudes of family. Through efforts to raise awareness about domestic violence, female sexuality and other marital and family issues once considered private, feminists sought to hold family life up for public examination. Yet, according to both Michael Harrington and Horowitz, family life needed to be kept private. Opening one’s family to public scrutiny was taken as an offense against the institution. Certainly the Louds considered themselves to be a family, and continued to after the divorce. Yet it was their status as family or nonfamily that most preoccupied both their detractors and their marketers. The WNET press packet, for instance, focused on portraying the Loud family, not as individuals bound by love, but as a corporation.

The issue of narcissism was also addressed by Abigail McCarthy who argued that critics who blamed the Louds for allowing themselves to be filmed were clearly ignorant of the power television held over Americans. “...one quickly learns that everyone wants to be on television.”

<sup>66</sup> Much like Cottle, McCarthy believed that the Louds made sense within the broader cultural context. If anything their narcissism made them all the more representative of everyday Americans who would betray any sense of family privacy for a few minutes of notoriety, “...in recent months we have seen the wife of a prisoner of war allowing her husband’s first phone call

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid* 52.

<sup>66</sup> McCarthy, 74.



recorded by a television sound and camera without his knowledge.” When compared to actions such as this, the behavior of the Loud family seemed rather tame.

The second major reason some reviewers rejected the Louds as viable representations of normal Americans was their isolating affluence. The series engendered particular disdain from liberal east-coast urbanites, who saw little resemblance between themselves and the west-coast suburban Louds. Jack Friedman of the *Village Voice* chastised the Louds for appearing to be completely isolated from reality, “You wonder if they know that a war is going on, you wonder if one of them has ever read a book...The Louds are too far removed from America’s brutal contradictions for the viewer to find any generalizing power in their predicament.”<sup>67</sup> Frederick Morton referred to the Loud home as part of the “affluent vacuum of the California never-never land.”<sup>68</sup> He described the Louds as lacking in cultural context and identity, for “All such anchor points have been homogenized, mechanized, consumerized away.” Friedman was certainly correct to point out the isolation of the Louds from most of the country’s political woes. According to Ruoff, even the soap opera *All My Children* dealt more directly with contemporary issues, such as Vietnam and abortion, than Gilbert’s “real life soap opera.”<sup>69</sup> Yet apparently this fact was troubling to a relative few, perhaps because many viewed the crisis in the nuclear family as the root of the country’s other woes.

### **Mrs. Wonderful: Pat Loud and Women in Transition**

The fact that the mainstream media accepted the Loud family as a symbol of a much larger crisis in the American nuclear family makes the public response to Pat Loud all the more

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<sup>67</sup> Jack Friedman, “Every Loud Has a Silver Lining,” *The Village Voice*, January 18, 1973.

<sup>68</sup> Morton.

<sup>69</sup> Ruoff, 98.

significant. The family was, after all, a woman's greatest responsibility. In the words of Pat herself, "I was taught to believe that marriage was a vocation, the most important one you could have."<sup>70</sup> Yet it was Pat who chose to give up this most important vocation, and to ask for a divorce. In doing so it would hardly be surprising if Pat, and women like her, became the scapegoat for the broader predicament. However for the most part, people found Pat the most relatable Loud of all. This response was especially puzzling to Pat who commented, "It really makes you wonder about people. I kick Bill out of the house when he's not expecting it, while the world watches, and I'm Mrs. Wonderful."<sup>71</sup>

Women's magazines such as *Vogue* and *Ms.* hailed Pat Loud as the sympathetic protagonist of the show. Their enthusiasm for Pat suggests that these magazines assumed that her story would appeal to the majority of their readers. Erica Brown of *Vogue* described Pat as "sophisticated," "Bohemian," and "intelligent."<sup>72</sup> Gail Rock of *Ms.* went much further, stating that *An American Family* was "more than anything the story of the wife and mother, Patricia Loud. This series makes as much of a statement about the values of marriage and family and the role of a woman in the family as anything I have ever seen."<sup>73</sup> Far from scrutinizing Pat's decision to divorce her husband, Rock described Pat and Bill as trying their best to save a doomed relationship, however "They can't and it's all over." In this, Rock places the blame, not on Pat or Bill, but on the institution of the traditional marriage. The failure of their marriage was not a personal failure but a societal one. The idyllic post-war marriage, simply did not work for everyone.

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<sup>70</sup> Loud, 34.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid* 16.

<sup>72</sup> Brown, 68.

<sup>73</sup> Rock, 22.

Both *Ms.* and the *New York Times* dedicated substantial space to a transcription of Pat's explanation of her decision to end her marriage. The excerpt was taken from a conversation between Pat, her brother and her sister-in-law, which occurred only hours before her confrontation with Bill. In what *Ms.* called a "strong and moving statement,"<sup>74</sup> Pat explained that her marriage had been in terrible trouble for the previous five years after Pat discovered irrefutable evidence of Bill's numerous infidelities while organizing his office. Ever since, Bill had become increasingly careless about concealing his affairs, a behavior which Pat considered psychological warfare, "It's a game. He wants me to stop him, but I can't, I've tried and I can't. He's the boss."<sup>75</sup> Beyond the damaging psychological aspects of Bill's behavior, his affairs had also drained him physically, "I have no sex life," Pat complained, "I'm too young for that, I'm too old for Women's Lib<sup>76</sup>, but I'm too young for that."<sup>77</sup> As mentioned, viewers knew from the opening scenes of the series that Pat and Bill were headed for divorce. Until this moment, however, they could only guess why. Remarkably, this conversation was never supposed to be filmed to begin with, it was only after a heated last minute argument with Gilbert that Pat consented to have this deeply private discussion filmed.<sup>78</sup> Had she not, the public's response to her might have been quite different.

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<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *An American Family*, episode 8.

<sup>76</sup> Women's Lib is an abbreviation for women's liberation, a self-described radical arm of the feminist movement. Participants in the women's liberation movement tended to be younger than the more moderate members of NOW. Their approach was influenced heavily by the radical protest movements, especially the civil rights movement, of the 1960s. For a deeper analysis of the differences between these two branches, see Susan Hartmann's "From Margin to Mainstream" pages 56-71. In this particular instance however it is unclear whether Pat was referring specifically to the women's liberation movement, or if she was simply referencing the feminist movement in general.

<sup>77</sup> *An American Family*, episode 8.

<sup>78</sup> Pat Loud discusses this disagreement at length in her autobiography. Numerous similar arguments between Pat and Craig Gilbert are well-documented and provide a window into the process through which the Louds and Gilbert sought to control which version of "reality" the show depicted. For more information see Jeffrey Ruoff's "An American Family: A Televised Life."

Pat's story struck a chord with many women around her age who found themselves similarly situated. Her autobiography, published in 1974, contains excerpts from several of the hundreds of letters she received after *An American Family* aired. Of course, these letters were no doubt selected to suit Pat's own purposes. Without this book however, these voices would be inaccessible. Carefully used, these letters can provide insight into how ordinary citizens perceived the Louds. These women, like Pat, felt that they were trapped between their conservative upbringing and the more progressive attitudes of the younger generation. "You're right" wrote one woman, "We're too old for Women's Lib,"<sup>79</sup> yet they were too young to resign themselves to unhappy marriages. Pat Loud became the public face of this awkward transition. Another woman described her confusion after the collapse of her twenty-five year marriage, "...how I hate myself, Pat! ...all I can see is a forty-nine year old mess of a woman!"<sup>80</sup> Other writers were more positive, "...I was just past forty myself when I started asking myself why? But this why was the most spectacular thing that ever happened to me in my life, but also the most agonizing."<sup>81</sup> Pat's very public divorce gave these women the opportunity to voice their intensely private struggles.<sup>82</sup>

The messages of these letters were consistent with the expressions of support published in two seemingly unlikely places; a men's magazine and an interview with Bill Loud and his friends. It is interesting to note that perhaps the most passionate defense of the Louds was written by Merle Miller, a man, for *Esquire*. Miller confronted what he experienced as the obvious hypocrisy of many of the show's reviewers, "People I know for a fact haven't spoken to

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<sup>79</sup> Loud, 166.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, 165.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 167.

<sup>82</sup> Unfortunately it is impossible to discern the geographic background of these letter writers. The complete text of these letters, which likely include such information, have never been published.

anybody in years, have simply talked at people, gave the Louds low marks for communicating.”<sup>83</sup> He expressed deep affection for each family member, but especially for Pat, “Even when Pat is summing up her grievances against Bill, she is really only crying out her private anguish, not a murder indictment.”<sup>84</sup> To experience such pain without sinking into bitterness was extremely commendable. Miller did not experience himself as alone in his compassion for the Louds, reporting that Pat’s conversation with her brother had prompted “a perceptive and honest woman” sitting next to her to shout “That’s right. We’re all basket cases when that happens.” A year later, one of Bill’s friends expressed a similar ability to relate to Pat’s problems, “I started crying... That was my divorce, I could have written the same book by changing the names of some restaurants.”<sup>85</sup> Remarks such as this, lend credibility to Pat’s autobiography. Evidently there were indeed many women, and even men, who related to Pat on a very personal level.

Although Pat experienced Roiphe’s piece as “brilliant-awful,”<sup>86</sup> Roiphe’s writing makes clear that the disdain was not mutual. While viewers at times experienced Pat as cold or distant, Roiphe sympathetically described Pat as “a woman who is holding tight to herself, keeping the pieces intact so the rage and disappointment don’t fly out and tear others apart.”<sup>87</sup> From this perspective, Pat was not icy or aloof, she was simply managing her feelings for the benefit of her children. Roiphe praised Pat for keeping her family going throughout the separation without succumbing to self-pity. Instead of sinking into insanity, she “proceeds cautiously along the necessary path,” culminating in the dissolution of her twenty-one year marriage. Her choice to

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<sup>83</sup> Miller, Merle. “Dear Pat, Bill, Lance, Delilah, Grant, Kevin and Michele.” *Esquire*, May 1973. 239-241

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> Jon Nordheimer, “He Feels ‘Like a Kid’ Again, but His ‘American Family’ Is in Ruins,” *New York Times*, March 1, 1974.

<sup>86</sup> Loud, 161.

<sup>87</sup> Roiphe

divorce her husband did not define her so much as it revealed her inner strength. If she was indeed the public face of marital discontent, it appears Roiphe found her to be an excellent role model.

Robert Kirsch's *Los Angeles Times* review of Pat's autobiography expressed surprise at how articulate and relatable Pat Loud was. "Mrs. Loud is a bright, complex and articulate woman with no more and no fewer problems than many others of her age, state, background." Far from an exception to a happy housewife rule, "I have taught many women like Mrs. Loud in extension courses, women seeking a second chance, a second career, a chance to be recognized beyond the roles assigned them."<sup>88</sup> From the reviewer's perspective, Pat had done nothing to sabotage her marriage. The American dream had failed her, not the other way around. The suburban nuclear family ideal was simply out of reach, not only for Pat, but countless others. Pat was "the recognizable case study of the American middle class housewife."<sup>89</sup>

It is interesting to note the intensely psychological tone of the responses to the show. Whether reviewers experienced the Louds as narcissists or as victims of a sick society, the family was constantly subject to psychological evaluation. This makes sense in the context of evolving approaches to family and mental health in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The path of the feminist movement to mainstream acceptance was mirrored by dramatic changes in the fields of psychology and psychiatry. In the immediate post-war period, marital discontent, especially on the part of women was considered a sign of mental instability. According to historian Stephanie Coontz, a San Francisco Bay Area hospital went as far as using electro-shock treatments to force 'schizophrenic' women to accept the authority of their husbands throughout the 1950s.<sup>90</sup> Men

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<sup>88</sup> Robert Kirsch, "Pat Loud a Part of the Age of Exposure," *Los Angeles Times*, April 28, 1974.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> Stephanie Coontz, *The way we never were: American families and the nostalgia trap*. New York: BasicBooks, 1992), 32.

who rejected marriage were considered at best “immature” and at worst “pathological.”<sup>91</sup>

Marriage took priority over the happiness of either sex; to reject this hierarchy was socially unacceptable.

However as the feminist movement progressed, this rigid standard became increasingly flexible. By 1972, the nonfiction bestseller “Open Marriage,” written by husband and wife anthropologists George and Nena O’Neil, urged Americans to adjust their relationships to individual preferences.<sup>92</sup> Although this notion seemed revolutionary, the O’Neils were certainly not alone in their thinking. Not only did the 1970s see an unprecedented boom in the number of marriage counselors, these professionals were increasingly concerned, not with the preservation of marriage, but the promotion of individual happiness, “Save the Spouses, rather than the Marriage” announced the *New York Times* in June of 1972. In the words of Dr. Laura Singer, President of the American Association of Marriage and Family Counselors, “we know that somehow marriage stinks. We don’t know why...Now for the first time we feel free enough to say that it stinks, and to ask why.”<sup>93</sup>

The discourse surrounding *An American Family* played into these changing cultural mores. The traditional marriage, which required the repression of individual feelings for the sake of the institution, came to be seen as a psychologically damaging. Marriage was no longer expected to be a natural state of bliss. The scrutiny given to the “silence of the Louds” reflects the emerging belief that what families needed was not to suppress individual displeasures, but to communicate them openly to each other. Disagreements did not break up relationships so much

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<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, 33.

<sup>92</sup> Joan Cook, "Husband-and-Wife Team of Anthropologists Urge a New View of Marriage." *New York Times*, Feb 03, 1972.

<sup>93</sup> Martha Weinman Lear, "Save the Spouses, rather than the Marriage," *New York Times* Aug 13, 1972.

as the refusal to have them. Arguments were therapeutic. The Loud family was torn apart because they were unable to have these necessary and honest conversations.

The end of a marriage was no longer the end of the world. The public's reaction to Pat Loud exemplifies this shift in attitudes. Although many reviewers and fans sympathized with Pat, what was not said about her is perhaps the most telling of all. Whether critics loved or hated her, not a single reviewer challenged her decision to end her marriage. Whether the Louds represented all of America or only themselves, no one family member was to blame for the family's collapse. Yes, Bill Loud was a philanderer whose exploits left him with little energy to satisfy his own wife. Yet in most respects was a good husband. He did not abuse his wife, he financially supported his family, and he clearly cared about his children. As Pat's sister-in-law pointed out, in an effort to change Pat's mind before the divorce, "Patty, you've...really you have had not a bad life."<sup>94</sup> This was not enough for Pat, she needed more and the media did not resent her for it. Had the show aired only a decade earlier in 1963, the response surely would have been vastly different. For a woman to simply abandon her husband in such a way would have been unthinkable.

Indeed what is striking about the divide between the show's reviewers is that most heated debate took place, not between the liberal and conservative media outlets, but between the far-left and center, or center-left. In essence the most contentious debate took place between *The Nation*, the small, self-described "flagship of the left," and the New York Times, one of the largest media presences in the country. The harshest critiques of the show came from smaller, more progressive new outlets – not from social conservatives. This divide is interesting, for it would be logical to assume that a show centered on the issues of family and divorce would

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<sup>94</sup> An American Family, episode 8.



trigger a hugely partisan debate. Why then did the Left, as represented by the *Nation*, the *Village Voice*, and the *New Republic*<sup>95</sup>, respond so negatively to a program which appeared to be in line with their politics? The answer may lie in an effort to manage the show's radical image.

The media spectacle of *An American Family* fed into the nation-wide anxieties surrounding the nuclear family. Within the national conversation about divorce reforms and the state of the family, the Louds were the products of the most liberal reforms in the nation. California's approval of no-fault divorce put the state on the leading edge of a wave of similar laws across the country. This was in fact the very reason Gilbert selected a family from California. He believed that California represented the future of America. As he told the *New York Times*, "Any moment now, this country will become California."<sup>96</sup> This statement was extremely inflammatory, for if America was on course to become California, it would not be too large a leap to assume that American families were on course to become the Louds.

With this in mind, it would make sense for media outlets of the Left to fear that the show jeopardized the success of divorce reforms nationwide. The more realistic the Louds appeared, the greater the potential backlash. If this was indeed the case, the opposition to *An American Family* was fueled by efforts to divert negative attention from the consequences of liberalized divorce reforms. By positioning Gilbert as a fear monger and the Louds as unreal representations of family, these outlets sought to contain negative reactions against the legal structures which had made their divorce possible. Historians have been right to position negative responses to the series as a kind of defensive mechanism. However it was not an effort to defend the traditional

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<sup>95</sup> The *Nation*, the *New Republic*, and the *Village Voice* share progressive, left-leaning roots. As stated, *The Nation* self identifies as the "flagship of the left." The *New Republic* was founded in 1917 with the backing of progressive social activist Dorothy Payne Whitney. More recently in 2007, Editor Franklin Foer told the *New York Times* that the *New Republic*, "invented the modern usage of the term liberal." Similarly, The *Village Voice* was founded in 1955, it's cofounder Norman Mailer became famous for his counter-cultural essays.

<sup>96</sup> Smith, Cecil

marriage so much as to protect the momentum of the feminist movement. Indeed the feminist movement faced tremendous opposition in the years following the series, but to examine the immediate response to *An American Family* simply as an omen of events to come completely overlooks the incredible support for the feminist reforms at the beginning of 1973.

Rather, it is far more useful to examine *An American Family* as a site in which the politics of family life could be negotiated. The issues the show addressed were extremely political in terms of the changes enabled by the feminist movement but they were also deeply personal. Marriage was, and is, after all an exceptionally intimate relationship. The show's examination of family life was certainly confrontational and at times unnerving for many viewers. However, it also helped to diffuse anxiety by providing sympathetic faces to concerns which had once been anonymous. To be against divorce as a concept or to read about in a newspaper was one thing, but television allowed viewers to intimately experience the profound misery of Pat Loud. This unique property of television allowed the show to become a vehicle for public discourse. The everyday lives of these otherwise ordinary people were infused with the politics of the time and created an opportunity for others to examine their own lives through this political lens. The efforts of the Left to manage the responses to the show were part of this negotiation and reflect the power of the show to produce real political consequences.

Despite the success of *An American Family* and the celebrity which it briefly bestowed upon the Louds, it did not spawn a single immediate copycat. It would be over twenty years before MTV's *The Real World* brought "reality" back onto the television screens of a decidedly different demographic. Although it inspired the wave of *Survivors*, *Real Housewives*, and *Kardashians*, who currently dominate our cable packages, *An American Family* bears little resemblance to the current staples of our reality genre. Unfortunately, the legacy of *An American*

*Family* has no doubt been tarnished by the snide lenses through which many view today's reality programming. Yet the show was much more than a harbinger of the spectacle and narcissism that have come to define the so called "Me generation." If one casts aside the prejudices of the present and examines *An American Family* in its own time, the true import of Gilbert's creation becomes clear. The Louds opened up the once cloistered institution of family and in doing so fueled changing perceptions of marriage and gender roles, which despite the political defeats suffered by the feminist movement in the latter part of the decade would continue to evolve within American popular culture. Although the voices of the Louds themselves grew quieter as time passed, the "silence of the Louds," that soundless resignation to the status quo, would never return.

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