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*Two American Families* (review)

Adam Ochonicky

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sitcom. Still, the show—like much of popular culture—is contradictory in its progressiveness. Despite Leslie’s unwavering belief in the superiority of Pawnee, the series ultimately relies on stereotypical notions of midwestern backwardness for comedic mileage to propel the plots of individual episodes and season-long arcs.

Staci Stutsman  
SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY  
Syracuse, New York

#### NOTES

1. *Parks and Recreation*, “Moving Up,” episodes 111–12 [season six, episodes twenty-two and twenty-three], dir. Michael Schur, NBC, originally aired Apr. 24, 2014 (NBCUniversal Television Distribution, 2014).
2. Joseph Slade and Judith Lee, “Introduction,” in *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of American Cultures: The Midwest*, ed. Joseph Slade and Judith Lee (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2004).
3. Ibid.
4. Victoria E. Johnson, *Heartland tv: Primetime Television and the Struggle for U.S. Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 5.
5. Slade and Lee, “Introduction.”
6. Ibid.
7. *Parks and Recreation*, “Soda Tax,” episode seventy [season five, episode two], dir. Kyle Newacheck, NBC, originally aired Sept. 27, 2012 (NBCUniversal Television Distribution, 2012); *Parks and Recreation*, “Sweetums,” episode twenty-one [season two, episode fifteen], dir. Dean Holland, NBC, originally aired Feb. 4, 2010 (NBCUniversal Television Distribution, 2010).
8. *Parks and Recreation*, “Moving Up.”
9. *Parks and Recreation*, “London: Part 1,” episode ninety-one [season six, episode one], dir. by Dean Holland, NBC, originally aired Sept. 26, 2013 (NBCUniversal Television Distribution, 2013).
10. *Parks and Recreation*, “Win, Lose, or Draw,” episode sixty-eight [season four, episode twenty-two], dir. Michael Schur, NBC, originally aired May 10, 2012 (NBCUniversal Television Distribution, 2012).
11. Johnson, *Heartland tv*, 18.
12. *Parks and Recreation*, “Win, Lose, or Draw.”

*Two American Families*. PBS Frontline [season thirty-one, episode fourteen], originally aired July 9, 2013. Public Broadcasting Service, 2013.

“Do you feel like a failure today?” Near the conclusion of *Two American Families*, Bill Moyers poses this question to Jackie Stanley, a resilient, hardwork-

ing mother of five. Jackie somberly affirms, “Yes.” Elsewhere in the documentary, Terry Neumann, matriarch of the other titular Milwaukee family, also confesses, “And I felt, like, a sense of failure because I’ve always been able to get back up on my feet. I’ve always found a way or the money to fix it. And I just couldn’t fix it anymore.”

Like an intimate midwestern version of British filmmaker Michael Apted’s *Up* series of documentaries, Moyers has followed the Neumann and Stanley families over a twenty-two year span. *Two American Families* initially aired as an episode of *Frontline* and is the fourth PBS documentary since the early 1990s to pick up the story of these midwestern working class families. By highlighting the trials of the Stanleys and Neumanns, Moyers ultimately narrates a larger story about the changing identity of the Midwest in the decades surrounding the turn of the millennium. Moreover, *Two American Families* functions as a condemnation of the devastating effects of neoliberalism on the middle and working classes.

Moyers begins with footage from 1991, just after Claude Stanley and Tony Neumann have been laid off from union jobs at A. O. Smith and Briggs and Stratton, respectively. These two firms had been cornerstones of the Milwaukee area manufacturing industry that once provided families such as the Stanleys and Neumanns with steady employment and the means for a middle class lifestyle. As Moyers explains, though, forty thousand jobs had already been lost from the Milwaukee area during the 1980s, including four thousand from Briggs and Stratton. This reduction of full time manufacturing jobs was one of the outcomes of neoliberal economics, which accelerated outsourcing and weakened unions. Across Milwaukee, the majority of employment opportunities for laborers such as Claude and Tony increasingly consisted of lower paying nonunion manufacturing and service jobs that lacked benefits.

One of the most troubling and fascinating aspects of *Two American Families* is the way in which the documentary reveals how the neoliberal logic of success and failure has been internalized by the working class. In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005), David Harvey provides background on the ideals and policies that inform neoliberal economic theory. Harvey explains that, following deregulation and privatization, “each individual is held responsible and accountable for his or her own actions and well-being. . . . Individual success or failure are interpreted in terms of entrepreneurial virtues or personal failings (such as not investing significantly enough in one’s own human capital through education) rather than be-

ing attributed to any systemic property.”<sup>16</sup> Although the Stanleys and Neumanns often acknowledge the systemic conditions that have contributed to their hardships, they still own an unshakable sense of individual failure. This, then, is yet another insidious layer to the tragedy that Moyers brings to light: these industrious families claim, at least in part, personal culpability for their struggles within an economic system that actually produces their financial ruination.

Growing debt accompanied the families’ mutual inability to secure adequate employment and exacerbated their struggles. Over the duration of *Two American Families*, the Neumanns fight to stay caught up with the mortgage payment for their home, and they are eventually forced to vacate. By the mid-1990s, the Stanleys were trapped beneath a mound of credit card debt, in part because of medical bills that were not covered by Claude’s new nonunion job. Moyers bluntly narrates, “The Stanleys were like millions of others trying to survive the good times of the nineties. Living on credit became a way of life. Over that decade, credit card debt for the average American family increased by fifty-three percent. For low-income families, it was 184 percent. And the paychecks weren’t getting any bigger.”

Despite the dire multidecade financial situation detailed in *Two American Families*, the Neumanns and Stanleys resist government aid and charitable support when possible. Both families simply wish to work their way back to the middle class comforts they had enjoyed so recently. After Claude loses his job in 1991, he defiantly proclaims, “When I got laid off, they wanted me to go on welfare, but I could not stand in that line. I just said, ‘It’s not me. This is not me. . . . I got my strength, my health, I will find me a job.’” Following Tony being laid off, Terry confesses, “It really bothers us that we have to depend on other people. I just want to get up and do what I have to do, just go in the car and go grocery shopping and have a normal life again. I don’t like having to go and ask and say, ‘I have no food in the house or something, can you help me out?’” With high paying jobs being systematically replaced by part time or nonguaranteed positions that barely permit subsistence living, an inability to thrive is a natural outcome for families such as the Stanleys and Neumanns. Yet a sense of personal failure stubbornly persists.

Given this perception of failure, perhaps it is unsurprising that members of both families—particularly Claude and Terry—continually disavow their present status as being an authentic reflection of their identities. That is, the Neumanns and Stanleys frame the present as merely a temporary

bubble between the increasingly distant past of regular employment and the indefinitely deferred future restoration of that nostalgic idyll. Claude claimed he was “not me” when laid off in 1991; even after two decades of setbacks, however, he determinedly asserts, “I still believe there’s something for us.” These families’ disavowal of the present and persistent will to survive serve as a microcosm of the Midwest’s unsettled state in the young millennium.

As *Two American Families* illustrates, economic changes have undermined the foundation of both individual and regional identity across the Midwest. A group of relatively recent fictional films similarly address the shaken identity of the Midwest and its inhabitants. Films such as *Gran Torino* (2008), *Up in the Air* (2009), and *Bridesmaids* (2011) each depict midwesterners struggling to find stability in the face of grim economic conditions. Together, these midwestern narratives present the geographically in-between region undergoing a profound transition, as the twenty-first century Midwest is suspended midway between a rapidly vanishing past identity and an uncertain future.

Ultimately, *Two American Families* provides an insightful portrait of the Midwest’s millennial challenges, but it lacks an accompanying map for regional recovery. How does the Midwest escape late twentieth century economic “failure” brought about by globalization and neoliberalism? What new forms might midwestern “success” take as the twenty-first century unfolds? At the end of *Two American Families*, Terry predicts, “I don’t think anybody is going to be financially secure, truthfully. . . . And we’ll just work until we collapse and keel over and die.” Clearly, many questions about the Midwest’s future require answers. Even in such a dilapidated condition, however, the Midwest’s oft-repeated identity as the supposed most American of regions remains intact—after all, Moyers elevates these two unmistakably midwestern families as representatives of an entire class of American workers. As goes the Midwest, Moyers ominously suggests, so goes the nation.

Adam Ochonicky

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN—OSHKOSH  
Oshkosh, Wisconsin

#### NOTE

1. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 65–66.